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## **Cultural acclimatisation: Foreign students studying in a private educational institution in Singapore**

Chor Khoon Chey  
*Edith Cowan University*

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**CULTURAL ACCLIMATISATION: FOREIGN STUDENTS  
STUDYING IN A PRIVATE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION IN  
SINGAPORE**

**EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY  
LIBRARY**

**Chey Chor Khoon  
Student Number: 3033565**

**This Portfolio is presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of**

**Doctor of Education**

**Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Services**

**School of Education  
Edith Cowan University**

**December 2006**

## USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

## **ABSTRACT**

This Portfolio aims to examine the problems of acclimatisation and coping strategies of such foreign students. A sample of twelve students was chosen from Chinese students studying at one private educational institution in Singapore. Drawing on the findings of Furnham (1997) and Murphy-Lejeune (2002), among others, the present study looks at the reasons why the participants decided to travel overseas, why they chose Singapore as their destination, what problems they encountered while here, and how they coped with these problems. They were also asked what specific problems they encountered with the schools they enrolled in. It is the contention of the present study that school has a major influence on their overall acclimatisation. Suggestions were sought from the participants on ways they thought the school could help make their stay here more successful.

The in-depth interviews found that the main problems encountered by the Chinese students were with accommodation, student agents, school, language, and the attitude of the local populace towards them. To cope with their problems, they relied on friends and family for support and information, and used modern technology for communication. They expected the school to help them find suitable accommodation and practise higher standards of service.

The present study concludes with recommendations for further actions needed by schools and government and areas for future research.

## DECLARATION

I certify that this Portfolio does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

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Chey Chor Khoon

10 December 2006

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 Background to the Portfolio**

The number of students who venture out of their home countries in pursuit of higher education has been growing over the last few years. In a September 2006 report entitled 'Education at a Glance' the OECD noted a doubling in the overall number of students going overseas for tertiary education – increasing to 2.7 million from 1995 [http://www.oecd.org/document/7/0,2340,en\\_2649\\_34515\\_33712135\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/7/0,2340,en_2649_34515_33712135_1_1_1_1,00.html) (p303) (Accessed on 19 October 2006). This growing trend has reinforced academic interest in the experiences of the foreign students in their new environments. Papers have been published that look into the problems concerning cross-cultural adjustments to a different climate, diet, language (just to name a few); how the foreign students cope with these problems; and the factors (personal or otherwise) that affect the extent to which the foreign students are able to handle the new environments.

Most of these studies are focused on the US and European contexts, where the majority of the foreign students go, and few scholarly studies exist that look at their experiences in the Asian context. This is unsurprising, given that more than half of these students chose to study in just four countries – the US, Britain, Germany and France (The Straits Times, 30 August 2004). A survey of the literature shows that even less has been written about the experiences of foreign students in Singapore. As will be explained later, understanding the problems of these sojourners and the coping mechanisms they adopt to overcome or resolve these problems is an important first step in the strategy to position Singapore as a world-class centre for education.

## **1.2 Purpose of the Portfolio**

This portfolio will focus on surveying the experiences of students from China who study in Singapore. A primary objective of the present study is to identify the problems of adjustment faced by the Chinese students in the institution where the researcher works as a lecturer, a private commercial school.

The second objective is to find out what problems the students faced concerning school. It is proposed that problems associated with school must have some impact on the well-being of students.

The third objective of the present study is to identify the coping mechanisms used by students. Experiences researched in other countries will be reviewed to analyse similarities and differences.

## **1.3 Significance of the Portfolio**

The Singapore Government's Economic Review Committee (ERC) in 2002 identified the education industry as one of the services industries to be developed and promoted as a key driver of the Singapore economy going into the new millennium. (The ERC was set up by the Singapore government and headed by then-Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to look into and suggest strategies for growth.)

Following the report from the ERC, the government surveyed the education industry in Singapore and found that there were about 2400 establishments in the education industry in Singapore in 2001, excluding government schools and government universities (Singapore Dept of Statistics, 2002), contributing 1.9 percent (about S\$3 billion) to the GNP.

The ERC estimated that there were some 50,000 foreign students in Singapore as at September 2001. (Report of the ERC, 2002) The Star, a sister-publication of The Straits Times group in Malaysia, reported that the proportion of foreign students in universities in Singapore has risen from 10% (3,200) in 1997 to 20% (7,700) in 2004. In the engineering and computing schools, the ratios ran as high as 40%. At

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polytechnics, they rose from 7% in 1997 to 11% (8,000) in 2004. At the junior colleges (where students prepare for GCE A level), about 100 of the 820 students in the elite Raffles Junior College were foreigners. At Hwa Chong (Chinese High), another premier institution, the proportion was at least twice the rate.

These statistics point clearly to the importance of the education industry in Singapore. Notably, the Singapore Economic Development Board hopes to woo 150,000 students here by 2012 (ST, 10 September 2004). With this achievement, the education sector is expected to contribute 5 percent to the economy, more than double its present contribution of 1.9 percent. Progress in realising this ambition is already evident. Newspapers regularly report on new foreign universities opening up campuses here; new tertiary education programmes are constantly being offered; the school syllabus, assessment modes, and curriculum are regularly tweaked to be more acceptable to parents, students and employers alike. (ST 2 November, 2004; ST 30 October, 2004; ST 29 October, 2004; TNP 9 October, 2004; ST 7 September, 2004; ST 15 September, 2002; ST 28 July, 2001). Several weighty names in the tertiary education field have already opened in Singapore: John Hopkins in 1998, INSEAD in 2000, and the Chicago Graduate School of Business. More are on the way: the University of New South Wales will open the first foreign private university campus in Singapore in 2007 (Duhamel, 2004).

However, the competition for the US\$2.2 trillion world education market is increasing, with even Malaysia and Thailand wanting a slice of it (ST, 10 September, 2004). Synovate Business Consulting estimated that globally, there are two million foreign students studying abroad (Duhamel, 2004). Close to 20,000 Singaporeans studied in Australia, Britain and the US the previous year, which have traditionally been the three most popular overseas study destinations among Singaporeans.

With the positioning of Singapore as an educational hub in Southeast Asia, the influx of foreign students is expected to increase. Currently, the Singapore government's stand is to encourage the influx of foreign students, not only for the immediate economic benefits that they bring, but also, more importantly, to give Singaporeans a wake-up call (Seah, 2004). According to Seah (2004), 'students posting messages on the Internet say that Singaporeans have grown collectively lazy, self-indulgent, and slothful, squandering the wealth Lee Kuan Yew's generation had built.'

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Seah (2004) went on to assert: 'The foreign students are harder working, many are brighter, and if they settle in Singapore after their studies, they may prove to be the next wave of migrants that bring prosperity to the nation.'

Globally, China is the single biggest source of foreign students (15.2% of the total), with India a distant second at 5.7% (Duhamel, 2004, p308). According to this report, only about 200,000 Chinese students studied in overseas universities just five years ago. This number is expected to exceed 750,000 by 2010 and cross the three million mark by 2025. In recent years, the number of students who come to Singapore from Mainland China has noticeably increased. The Straits Times in a special report dated December 3, 2006 estimated the number of Chinese students in Singapore at 33,000. They form the single largest group of foreign students, ahead of the Malaysians (8,000), Indonesians (8,000), Indians (4,000), Vietnamese (4,000), Burmese (1,800), Koreans (700) and others. According to the Chinese embassy in Singapore, there are 10,000 Chinese students in 400 private schools in Singapore (Streets, 15 September, 2004). If this is true, then the Chinese now makes up a fifth of all the international students studying in Singapore.

Given such attention on the education front, more information is needed about this important group of people. For example, there is no clear official information about the composition of the foreign student population. Statistics concerning the number of students on dependent passes (their parents are working and/or living here) or on student passes are not publicly available. Another gap in information concerns the areas of study that these foreign students undertake. The report from the Department of Statistics on the education industry (2002) focuses on the players in the market, e.g. how many establishments, courses offered, country of origin of ownership, etc, but not on the particular areas of study the international students pursue. There is also no information on the duration of stay of these students. For example, it is not known how many foreign students return home or go elsewhere without completing their studies here.

Looking beyond the statistics, what must be of concern to many educators in Singapore is the adaptation of these foreign students to our local environment. Their ability to adapt quickly to the new environment should, *prima facie*, have an effect on their studies. This is borne out by the literature available on the subject in other

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countries, notably Australia, Britain and the US, all of which attract huge numbers of overseas students every year. The foreign students in Singapore, who are mainly from China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Vietnam and others, have probably never been abroad for long periods. The extent to which they can adjust to their new environment undoubtedly has a major impact on their academic performance. Against such a backdrop, the need for such a study of foreign students in Singapore becomes even more pertinent.

#### **1.4 Objectives of Research and Questions Selected for Exploration**

The objectives of this study are to identify the problems of adjustment faced by the Chinese students; the problems they faced concerning school; and to identify their coping methods. Secondary objectives are to enquire into their views on what they think the school can do for them, and to make recommendations for the school administration and the government to facilitate adjustments and coping.

To achieve these objectives, the following research questions will be posed and answers sought:

1. Purpose of coming to Singapore.
2. Problems faced upon first arrival in Singapore.
3. Emotional and cognitive responses to these problems.
4. Ways of dealing with the problems encountered.
5. Whether students felt they had adjusted to life and study in Singapore.
6. Level of satisfaction with the support given by the school in adjusting to life here.
7. Wish list of ways and means by which the school can help them.



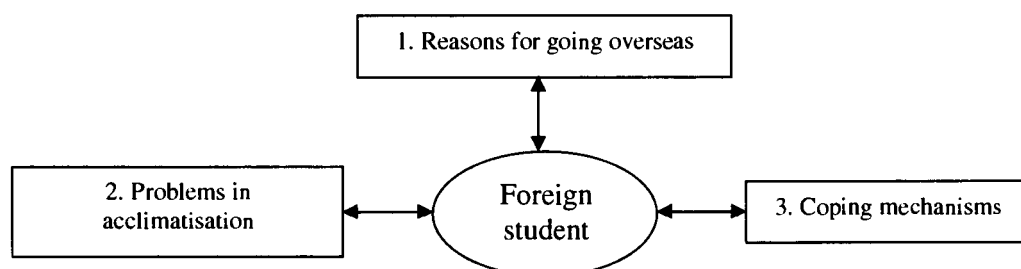
## 1.5 Methodology and Conceptual Framework Used

The conceptual framework developed for this study is derived primarily from the works of Furnham (1997) and Murphy-Lejeune (2002). Both authors explored the problems that foreign students faced when in a new environment, and also described the ways these students adopted to cope with their problems. In the interest of completeness, the first part of the conceptual framework used for this present study will cover the reasons for going overseas, specifically for coming to Singapore.

The second part of the conceptual framework is based on four major themes that emerge in a survey of the literature on problems faced by foreign students. These will be explored in detail in Chapter 2, but are summarised here to allow for an overview of the conceptual framework to be used in this portfolio. They are External environmental factors (Climate and living conditions; Study conditions; Social/interpersonal/cultural issues) and Internal factors (Personal well-being).

The third and final part of the conceptual framework is a survey of the coping mechanisms adopted by foreign students to acclimatise to the host country conditions. Chapter 2 will also cover the literature on these factors. These can be grouped into two broad categories: (a) External resources: social support (maintaining contact with family and friends back home); use of the mobile phone and Internet; keeping objects such as photos, and others; develop interpersonal skills to make friends; and (b) Internal resources: learning the local language (presumably English); acknowledging self-worth; religion; exercise; self-examination or introspection; and exercise.

In summary, the conceptual framework used in this portfolio can be diagrammatically presented in Figure 1 below.



*Figure 1. Conceptual framework.*

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A sample of twelve current students from China who are studying in a private institution will be selected for interview. This sample will comprise six boys and six girls, making a total of twelve in the sample. A profile of these students will be created to ensure that all of them have stayed in Singapore for more than one year, and are above the age of 18. The length of stay of minimum one year is used as this is subjectively considered to be the amount of time needed to discover and experience most if not all of the problems that foreign students face, and to learn to cope with them.

Personal in-depth interviews will be conducted on school premises, outside classroom hours, on an individual basis.

**1.6 Definition of Terms Used in the Portfolio**

Throughout this portfolio, the following terms will be used with the given meanings:

Acclimatisation:	adaptation, ability to cope, adjustment to life in a new environment, living life with the same degree of ability as in the old environment
Foreign students:	migrant students, international students, and overseas students
Private educational institution:	school run by private individuals or corporations for the purpose of making a profit; in Singapore, the collective term is 'private education organisation' or PEO
Host country:	destination country where the students land in for their studies

## **1.7 Nature and Order of Presentation**

This Chapter 1 presented the background to the portfolio. The purpose and significance of the portfolio have also been explained. The methods of collecting information and the conceptual framework were described. A short list of defined terms used in the portfolio was presented.

In Chapter 2, a brief overview of the education industry in Singapore will be presented. This will be followed by a review of the literature on problems that foreign students face and their coping mechanisms.

Chapter 3 will explain the methodology employed to collect information that informs this paper. The research objectives, sampling plan, data collection method and collection instrument will be covered.

The findings of the survey will be presented and discussed in Chapter 4, with a brief description provided of the respondents. This will be followed by a concluding Chapter 5 on recommendations concerning what foreign students, institutions and governments can do to alleviate the problems faced.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Overview**

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the primary objective of this study is to identify the problems of adjustment faced by the Chinese students. Therefore this chapter will focus on the second and third parts of the conceptual framework adopted for this portfolio, which is to survey the social and cultural problems faced by foreign students, and the ability of foreign students to cope.

There is extensive literature on the coping mechanisms adopted by the foreign students. For the sake of simplicity, international students, students participating in exchange programs, students studying overseas, etc will collectively be described as 'foreign students' in this paper.

Murphy-Lejeune (2002) identifies three categories of foreign students in academic discourses on the subject. The first category of foreign students is to consider them as a 'social problem linked to ethnic migration' (p7). The second category is to treat them as 'a political and educational issue' (p7). This approach studies the issues of the foreign student that impact on government educational policy. The third category is to perceive them as 'an economic concern, with particular interest in the economic contributions that foreign students bring to the host countries, as well as the costs' (p7). The second category, that of foreign students as a political and educational concern, will be the subject of interest in the context of this present study.

As Furnham (1997, p21) notes, foreign and exchange students have been the topic of academic research for a very long time (Bock, 1970; Brislin, 1979; Byrnes, 1966; Furnham & Tresize, 1983; Tornbiorn, 1982; Zwingmann & Gunn, 1963). Much of the material concerns the experience of foreign students who study in the US and Europe. Murphy-Lejeune (2002) examines the experience of students who spent a year abroad in a European country. Using a subjective and qualitative approach, she explores the sociology of the 'stranger-student' in a foreign land between 1993 and 1996. Her

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narrative style, 'giving voice' to the real experiences of 50 students, provides a deeper appreciation of the social status of the 'traveller'.

Murphy-Lejeune (2002, p136) identifies four stages in the process of the traveller: departure, moving in, taking part, and going home. Each of these four stages are characterised by different feelings and expectations. Similarly, Harris (1997) proposes a life-cycle approach to the experiences of the foreign student. This approach consists of three stages: prior to arrival; the moment of arrival and the stay abroad; and finally the return home (p37-40).

Furnham and Tresize (1983, p13-29) suggest that problems facing the foreign student are threefold:

- Problems of living in a foreign culture (racial discrimination, language problems, accommodation difficulties, separation reactions, dietary restrictions, financial stress, loneliness, among others);
- Problems of late-adolescence/young adults asserting their emotional and intellectual independence; and
- Academic problems associated with higher educational study.

This present review will focus on the first and third sets of problems that Furnham and Tresize (1983) identified (those related to living in a foreign culture), at the second and third stages of Murphy-Lejeune's traveller-process (moving in and taking part), and the second stage in the Harris life-cycle approach (the moment of arrival and the stay abroad).

## **2.2 Problems of Living in a Foreign Culture**

### **2.2.1 *Loneliness***

Qian Ning (2002) wrote about the experience that some Chinese students encountered when first arriving in America. He reported that Chinese students who had grown up poor were 'heavily bombarded in America by the lure of Western materialism' (p67). He further noted that Chinese students, while enjoying their newfound personal freedom, also felt lonely and helpless (p79).

Lacina (2002, p21) presents a discussion on the social challenges that foreign students face in the US. The article cites studies that found that some students experienced loneliness, due to unfamiliarity with American customs and values, and loss of the social status that they might have enjoyed at home. Language discrimination, cultural differences in terms of gender roles, religion and customs were major challenges. This sense of loss is echoed in the findings of Murphy-Lejeune (2002), who writes that loss or disorientation is 'triggered by the change in spatial, social and cognitive position' of the 'stranger' (p112). While disorientation is common to every traveller, student travellers who leave their familiar settings and have to study a foreign language have additional difficulties, such as having to reorganise their lives, having to look for accommodation, getting acquainted to new rules of behaviour such as having to say 'grace' before meals, types of clothings that are permissible, and so on. (p113).

### **2.2.2 *Stress***

Another American study conducted by Poyrazil, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timimi (2004, p73) examines the factors that contribute to the stress experienced by foreign students in adapting to the cultural environment, and the extent to which demographics and social support helped to alleviate the stress. They studied 141 foreign students in US colleges, and found that social support and English language proficiency made a significant difference to the stress levels experienced by the respondents. They also found that students who primarily socialised with non-Americans and students from Asian countries experienced more acculturative stress compared with other sub-groups.

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In yet another cross-cultural study, Shenoy (2000) examines the differences in the ways three groups of students from different ethnic origins expressed symptoms of stress. The sample consists of 115 graduate students enrolled at Virginia Tech (45 American students, 35 Chinese students and 35 Indian students). Symptoms of stress can be manifested somatically (i.e. bodily) or psychologically (i.e. anxiety and depression). The study is interesting because it disproves earlier hypotheses that American students showed stress symptoms somatically while the Asians showed theirs psychologically. However, there were differences between the two Asian groups (Indian and Chinese) studied. The author also proves that there was no difference between American and Asian students in attributing styles (external – attributing blame on others; internal – attributing blame on oneself). Sex was related to anxiety symptoms (i.e. females tended to report higher anxiety than males), but not to somatic symptoms. Level of education was found to be related to somatic symptoms. Understandably, Doctoral students reported greater somatic symptoms, than Masters students.

### ***2.2.3 Living Conditions and Accommodation***

Myburgh, Niehaus, and Poggenpoel (2002, p107) explore the experiences and coping mechanisms of eighteen PhD students from ten different countries enrolled in universities in three states of an unidentified first-world country. The authors of this study were members of the faculty of Education and Nursing of Rand Afrikaans University, South Africa. The aim of this study is to explore how international learners find studying and living in a foreign country. It contains a very limited review of the literature. Data was collected using face-to-face, group, phenomenological, in-depth interviews lasting on average one and a half hours each. Much of the findings were transcribed and reported verbatim. Respondents identified four themes when discussing their experiences living abroad: climate and living conditions, study conditions, social/interpersonal/cultural issues, and personal well-being. Such experiences ranged from having to deal with unfamiliar climate, food, language, to the lack of friends, lack of respect from the locals, and missing home.

#### ***2.2.4 Homesickness and Cultural Shock***

As Lacina (2002, p22) and Myburgh, Niehaus, and Poggenpoel (2002, p107) noted, homesickness is a major problem faced by foreign students. Fisher investigated the causes and correlates of homesickness (Fisher et al, 1985; Fisher and Hood 1987), and compared students who reported homesickness with those who did not. She found some factors that were good predictors of homesickness. For example, she found that students who reported homesickness lived further from home; the university they were attending was not their first choice; were less satisfied with their current residence; and were less satisfied with present and past friendships, than students who did not report homesickness. She also found that students who reported homesickness also had a greater number of cognitive failures, had poor concentration, handed in work late and declining work quality.

Furnham (1997) writes that 'the key psychological features of homesickness appear to be a strong preoccupation with thoughts of home, a perceived need to go home, a sense of grief for the home (people, place and things) and a concurrent feeling of unhappiness, dis-ease and disorientation in the new place which is conspicuously not home' (p20). He goes on to distinguish between homesickness and culture shock (p21). He notes that while culture shock nearly always involves movement to another country, homesickness does not. Culture shock is usually unanticipated whereas homesickness is not. Culture shock is pervasive whereas homesickness is less so. There are fewer long-term benefits from experiencing homesickness as culture shock. Homesickness is nearly always conceived of negatively while culture shock is sometimes a pleasurable experience. People experiencing culture shock may or may not be homesick. Equally, the homesick need not be in a foreign culture to feel the longing to be back home.

Brewin et al. (1989, p470) finds that men and women suffer from homesickness to the same extent. However, women are much more likely to discuss their feelings with others. They also tend to respond to homesickness by being more affiliative. The more people suffer from homesickness, the more they confide in others. Homesick male students were more likely to seek out others, the more common they perceived homesickness to be.



### **2.3 Acclimatisation and Adjustment to Living Abroad**

Much of the literature focuses on the ways by which foreign students cope with living abroad. In this review, the words 'acclimatisation', 'adjustment', 'adaptation' and 'coping' will be used interchangeably.

Furnham (1997) describes 'adaptation' as the 'process whereby individuals reduce acculturation stress and learn the "grammar" of the new culture' (p21). He advocates a comprehensive framework, combining psychological, socio-cultural and external (socio-economic) variables, to explain the 'complex phenomenon' of cross-cultural transition (p23). Researchers have studied the adaptation patterns by different types of 'sojourners' (Berry et al., 1987). Others study the adaptation patterns by groups of sojourners that vary in cultural distance to the host country (Ward & Kennedy, 1993a,b). However, Furnham (1997, p23) believes that there is no such thing as a universal adjustment pattern for all cultural transitions.

According to Anderson (1994, p295), 'adjustment' is the reduction or satisfaction of short-term drives, while 'adaptation' is that which is valuable for long-term survival. Adaptation involves adjustment and learning. It is cyclical, continuous and interactive. The process of adaptation involves affecting cognition and behaviour, one of learning, development and competence, in response to new challenges. The experience of adaptation can be both positive and negative. She offers four models used to understand adaptation:

1. The recuperation model – this model focuses on the recovery from shock as the mechanism for accommodation to life in the new strange land.
2. The learning process model – focuses on the learning of new skills. Communication theorists and social skills trainers focus on the acquisition of insights and behavioural patterns as the key to adaptation.
3. The psychological journey model – focuses on the stages and features from being at the fringe of a culture to being at the centre.
4. The equilibrium model – adaptation is seen as a dynamic and cyclical process of tension reduction and change.

Ward (1990) argues that there are two types of adjustment or adaptation during cross-cultural transitions: psychological, which refers to feelings of well-being and satisfaction, and socio-cultural, which refers to the ability to 'fit in' or negotiate interactive aspects of the host culture. Ward and Kennedy (1993, p230) suggest that different types of variables predict psychological and socio-cultural adaptations. Psychological adaptation is measured by mood, whereas socio-cultural adaptation is measured by social competence. Psychological adjustment depends on the 'fit' between the sojourner's personality and host culture (Ward and Kennedy, 1993a, b). Variables that predict socio-cultural adjustment include culture distance (Furnham & Bochner, 1986, cited in Furnham, 1997, p25), command of language and general knowledge about the host culture (Ward & Kennedy, 1993a, p135). All adjustment variables can be further distinguished into culture-general ones and culture-specific ones. Culture-general variables are those that predict adjustment in all settings, and culture-specific variables are those variables that are more culture-sensitive. For example, locus of control, life changes, and social support are variables that are culture-general, while personality (e.g., extraversion) and host national contact are examples of culture-specific variables (Ward & Kennedy, 1993a, p140).

Adapting is not adopting the host country's culture, but feeling 'comfortable' or 'at home' (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002, p209). This usually refers to the situation when problems are solved, and social contacts have been established.

As noted by Chiu (1995), how people react when they live in a new cultural environment depends on various factors, including their personalities, age, gender, fluency in the language of the host country, as well as the degree of interaction with people of the host country (p2).

### ***2.3.1 Factors Leading to Culture Shock and Poor Adaptation***

According to Furnham and Bochner (1986) (cited in Furnham, 1997, p25), there are at least eight possible explanations for culture shock and poor adaptation:

1. Loss, grief and mourning – going to a foreign land involves being deprived of specific relationships or significant objects such as family, friends and occupational status, not to mention other important physical factors ranging from food to weather patterns. The loss may be followed by grief (a stereotyped set of psychological and physiological reactions, biological in origin) and mourning (conventional bereavement behaviour determined by the mores and customs of society).
2. Fatalism (locus of control) – fatalism is the generalised expectation that outcomes are determined by forces such as powerful others, luck or fate. Theoretically, migrants from a country whose religion is fatalistic (low locus of control) should have more difficulty in adjusting than migrants from a country where people believe that one is able to manage and control one's own future (high locus of control). It suggests that people who come from cultures or societies of high locus of control tend to adapt faster and more successfully.
3. Selective migration – when people are selected for a new environment to which they are particularly suited, they will cope better than others who are not so well matched.
4. Expectations – the more accurate, objective and comprehensive a sojourner or migrant's expectations of the visited country, culture, university, the more successful that adaptation. According to Furnham and Bochner (1986) cited in Furnham (1997, p27), most of the research has suggested that high expectations that cannot and are not fulfilled are related to poor adjustment and increased mental illness.
5. Negative life-events – have been associated with responses as varied as depression neurosis, tuberculosis, coronary heart disease, skin diseases, hernias, and cancer.

6. Social support networks: reduction in social support – according to Furnham, ‘the available evidence suggests that social support is directly related to increased speed and quality of adaptation as well as breaking the clear links between stress and illness’ (Furnham, 1997, p28). He suggests that ‘a relationship does exist between social support and psychological disorder; suggesting that the various types of support provided by interpersonal relationships play a crucial role in determining a person’s general adaptive functioning and sense of well-being’ (p28). When a person migrates, he or she leaves behind family, friends, colleagues and neighbours. As a result, sources of social support are reduced ‘and there is a consequent increase in physical and mental illness’ (p28).
7. Value differences – the differences in values that exist between many cultures have also been used to try to account for the misunderstandings, distress and difficulties experienced by cross-cultural travellers. Sociologists and psychologists since Merton (1938) have seen a link between deviance, delinquency and mental disorder, and a conflict in cultural values. Three variables should be taken into consideration: the quality and quantity of difference in salient values between the hosts’ and migrants’ societies; the tolerance for varying cultural value systems within the same society; and individuals’ cognitive complexity, ability and motivation to change their cultural system. Value systems, then, may be a useful predictor of both how much strain travellers feel and how they cope with the strain.
8. Social skills – people who are new to a culture will not have been socialized in the rules and routines of behaviour pertaining to that society, and will therefore, at least initially, be socially unskilled in their new environment. This means that they are incompetent in, or incapable of, certain verbal exchanges; unable to accurately interpret or perform non-verbal signals; may not have mastered the social conventions of the society at large, and may also be unaware of many of the rules of social behaviour pertaining to their own particular sub-group (Furnham, 1997, pp20-28).

Chiu (1995) found that people who have been exposed to a moderate amount of information concerning a new environment prior to coming into physical contact with it ('stress inoculation') appear to be better able to cope with it, compared with people who have a lot more or a lot less information (p15). Her findings supported the view that students (in her study, the subjects were 39 Asian students who studied in Stanford University in the US) who have naturally high anxiety ('anticipatory fear') benefited from receiving more information about the destination country.

## **2.4 Coping Mechanisms**

For Asians, having stayed longer in the country in question did not necessarily result in better adjustment. Chinese students as a group were found to have the greatest adjustment problems to college (and therefore stress symptoms) than the Indians or Americans, perhaps due to having to learn a new language (Shenoy, 2000). Qian Ning (2002) tells of students who said they needed a sense of belonging to feel happy. Chinese students who were used to a collective lifestyle and care provided by government, turned to other groups when they came to America, e.g. the church (p80).

Church's work (1982) identifies potential areas of difficulty such as monetary problems, language difficulties, adjustment to a new educational system, and social adjustment to the new milieu. It also quotes works on predictors of adjustment by Searle & Ward (1990), Ward (1995), Ward & Searle (1991), Ward & Kennedy (1992, 1993a, 1993b, 1994), such as cultural distance, acculturation, language difficulties and coping strategies. It notes that psychological problems in relation to cross-cultural adjustment have not been widely studied, and that little is known about the adjustment problems or stresses that foreign students experience in comparison to the local student population in the host country.

In terms of coping mechanisms, Myburgh, Niehaus, and Poggenpoel (2002) focus on two themes: use of external resources, and reliance on internal resources. They studied the experiences of a small sample of eighteen doctoral students in an unnamed host country. Respondents maintained contact with family and friends back home, making extensive use of modern technology like the telephone and Internet. They also used their interpersonal skills to get accepted in local social and religious circles, cognitive skills to learn the local language (presumably English), and acknowledging

their personal efficacy and self-worth by pampering and treating themselves frequently. The authors offered suggestions on how foreign students and host organisations (including lecturers) could help each other. The study is interesting in that it offered personal perspectives of experiences and coping mechanisms, but its limitations are that its sample is only eighteen, and is confined to mature students (PhD level) only. Furthermore, the reason for not identifying the host country was not explained, as this is an important variable in understanding the cultural adaptation of students.

Two foreign students enrolled in Kansas State University were interviewed by Tseng and Newton (2002) on their perceptions of the sources of their well-being. Both respondents were male, with one being an African aged 23 and the other an Asian aged 38, married with two children. Informal, open-ended and semi-structured interviews were conducted at the respondents' residences to collect the data. Both respondents perceived 'well-being' to include physical health, happiness, joy and pleasure, harmony of body, mind and soul, feeling of security, sense of satisfaction, fulfilment or achievement, and feeling as if their life is meaningful. Having a successful and meaningful study abroad was also important in shaping well-being. The study identified tactics for gaining general well-being, and coping skills for adjustment to studying abroad. Among the tactics mentioned by the respondents to gain general well-being were: religion, exercise, self-examination or introspection, adapting to one's thought, and seeking help from others. Coping skills cited were: make friends, build relationships with advisors and instructors, become proficient in the English language, and "letting go". This study contained a useful but brief description of the literature on adjustment problems and issues of international students. The weakness of this study is the small sample size.

#### ***2.4.1 Social Support and Friendship Networks***

Much has been written about how social networks and social support can help to reduce stress (Cobb, 1976, p300-314). Some of the studies cited earlier in this chapter also alluded to the importance of social support and friendship in the acclimatisation and adaptation process. Such factors provide the individual with emotional, financial and moral support, as well as supply him or her with information about how to cope with the new environment. Furthermore, Cobb (1976) suggests that 'social support provides a person with three sorts of information: namely that they are cared for and loved; esteemed and valued; and that they belong to a network of communication and

mutual obligation' (p302). While social support and friendship networks have received a lot of attention in the literature, however, the extent to which these can help the international student to cope with a strange and new environment has been the subject of little scrutiny (Church, 1982; Cobb, 1976; Bochner et al., 1977; and Furnham, 1985). Questions that need answers include whether friendship networks can buffer international students against culture shock; would being in a community with a large number of students from the same area (country, region, linguistic area) successfully prevent the international student from suffering culture shock; etc. Furnham (1997, p18) argues that foreign students with a strong and supportive friendship network may be happier and better adjusted than those without such a network.

In a report on their study of foreign students in Hawaii, Bochner, McLeod and Lin (1977, p280) suggest that sojourners belong to three distinct social networks. The first is a primary network consisting of close friendships with other students who belong to the same cultural background. Such a network provides a setting in which ethnic and cultural values can be rehearsed and expressed. The second network consists of bonds between sojourners and significant host nationals such as academics, students, advisors and government officials. The third network is a multi-cultural one of friends and acquaintances. This last network provides companionship for recreational, non-cultural and non-task oriented activities. It is arguable that how well the sojourner interacts with others, and the number of social networks he or she forms, will influence the satisfaction level he or she feels about the sojourn (Sewell and Davidson (1961, p126-135).

As mentioned earlier, confiding in others about one's anxiety and depression associated with homesickness is another common coping mechanism (Brewin et al, 1989, p470).

#### ***2.4.2 Training for Inter-Cultural Skills***

One of the frequently mentioned ways of coping with the problems of staying abroad is that of training for inter-cultural skills. For example, Brislin (1979) identifies five such sorts of programmes: self-awareness training (in which people learn about the cultural bases of their own behaviour); cognitive training (where people are presented with various facts about other cultures); attribution training (where people learn about the explanation of behaviour from the point of view of people in other cultures);

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behaviour modification (where people are asked to analyse the aspects of their culture that they find rewarding or punishing); and experiential learning (where people actively participate in realistic simulations).

The point about such inter-cultural skills training is to provide the student with sufficient culturally-relevant information about the host country before departure, so as to sensitise him/her to the cultural peculiarities of the host country, as well as to avail him/her of opportunities to practise the skills acquired (learning by doing). As Furnham notes, such intercultural (social) skills training, to be effective, requires the identification of the specific social situations which trouble that particular sojourner, and then give the individual specific training in those skills that are lacking (Furnham, 1985, cited in Furnham, 1997, p30).

## **2.5 Ethnic Origins**

One interesting area of research is whether the ethnic origin of the students has any effect on their ability to cope as well as on their coping mechanisms. Studies of the acculturation of minority groups yielded some interesting information in this area. It is believed that minority ethnic groups shy away from social interactions with the majority ethnic groups of the host countries (Mohamed, 1997, p166). For students of minority ethnic groups, the need to succeed so as not to bring shame to their race is particularly strong (Mohamed, 1997, p167; Trueba and Zou, 1994, p58). For example, in a study of students of the Miao tribe of southwest China who went to America for further studies, Trueba and Zou (1994) found that the students' strong sense of belonging to a minority nationality group, together with the social support they receive from teachers, administrators and peers, allows them to surmount considerable obstacles and succeed in school. From this study, Trueba and Zou developed a theory of social identification and achievement motivation that makes three propositions. Firstly, knowledge of home language and cultures allows minority students to retain a strong self-concept and affiliation to the larger ethnic group, 'and thus to draw on this affiliation for an increased motivation to achieve academically' (p131). Secondly, a strong ethnic identity empowers minority students as they struggle to master a second language and acquire the social skills necessary to survive in new learning environments. Thirdly, a strong



sense of belonging to a family and to a community 'most certainly increases ethnic students' desire to succeed in school' (p131).

Mohamed (1997) proposes a four-stage development process to describe the learning adjustment of Southeast Asian students studying abroad. The first stage, 'orientation and autonomy', lasts about two to three months, and is characterised by excitement, then homesickness and loneliness, and a sense of profound ambivalence. The second stage, 'transitions of self-worth', lasts between three and six months. This is the most stressful stage, with the student resisting and yet complying with new demands. During the third stage, called the 'consolidation of role identity stage', social interactions are slowly gathered and emphasis is placed on collaboration with others in the ethnic group. The last stage, which is 'competence and integrative maturity', is characterised by the development of hope and confidence. Here, the students share their successes and failures with newer arrivals. While this model takes into account of the uniqueness of the adaptation process of minority students, no empirical studies have been cited to support it. Also, the stages are not necessarily clearly distinct from each other.

Since the focus of interest of this portfolio is the adaptation and coping mechanisms of Chinese students in Singapore, particular attention is given to students of this ethnic group. The literature on the experiences of Chinese students is abundant. This is especially true in the case of experiences in Australia, where many Chinese students go. Some of the studies done are reviewed below.

Leung (2001) examined the psychological adaptation of 382 overseas and migrant students attending various universities in Melbourne, Australia. The main group of students of interest in this study was the Chinese. It looked at the degree of success in adaptation in the light of individual variables like social self-efficacy, locus of control, loneliness, age, sex and acculturating group membership. The report contains a brief survey of the literature on factors relating to adaptation, and the cultural and acculturating group differences. The study used the interview method of data collection, with a questionnaire containing five scales and a section on demographic information. The results showed that, depending on the ethnic differences, students adapted in varying degrees to their new environment. Among the findings was that supportive social relationships were vital for the psychological and academic adaptation of foreign students. The study concluded with suggestions for more support being given to

students in adapting to the social customs and educational systems of the Australian society. It pointed to future research into the reasons why particular cultural groups acculturate at a quicker or slower rate than others.

Another study, involving Asian students in Australia, was done by Ryan and Ogilvie (undated). Their preliminary paper highlighted the different ways migrant students used to adapt themselves to their new environments. The study used the place attachment framework to understand the experiences, intentions and feelings of overseas students studying in Australia. Twenty-two students who were going home for semestral break in June/July 1999 were given disposable cameras to take photos of important aspects (places, people, things, landmarks) of their home and surroundings. On returning back to Australia, the students had to do the same for their new home in Australia. Students were then interviewed about their photos, using photo-elicitation techniques. The authors found support for Wyman's (1985) work about the interchangeability or substitutability of experiences in relation to recreation activities, finding that this interchangeability was reflected in places, people and objects. Examples of places included a quiet corner, a favourite spot on the beach, all of which were a special tranquil place that was 'restorative'. As the authors pointed out, finding and creating such restorative places in their new surroundings are vital in helping the migrant students to adapt effectively. In terms of people, the need for strong social attachment was particularly evident with Asian students, either studying in Australia or Singapore. Having close bonds with family and friends gave the migrant student a feeling of security. Keeping and displaying in the new environment photos of loved ones back home, adopting a substitute 'mother figure', and remembering significant social events from home were reassuring and gave a sense of dependence and belonging. Finally, objects such as photos, altars, comics, CD collection, pillows, were all cited as examples of how migrant students created an environment of familiarity offering a sense of peace and security, creating a feeling of being at home in their new environment, and offering lifelines to reduce stress. The authors recommended that migrant students should be encouraged to bring with them special objects or possessions that they were attached to, and schools could help to recreate familiar places and people in the new environment.

Ying (2002) wrote about the formation of cross-cultural relationships of Taiwanese foreign students in the United States. While this longitudinal study was not concerned with cross-cultural adaptation per se, it is nevertheless useful as it tried to

identify the factors that facilitate the formation of cross-cultural relationships. Such relationships have been cited elsewhere as being an important coping mechanism for foreign students. The author studied 155 Taiwanese students before, and 14 months after, they arrived in the US. About half of the students were male, and 85% were single. Mean age was 25. All of them came to the US to pursue post-graduate studies. Three different questionnaires were used to assess demographics, personality, stressors, resources, emotional well-being, and adaptation. The study found that extraverted students, positive attitude towards understanding the culture of the host country (the US) and towards friendship formation with Americans were strong predictors of formation of cross-cultural relationships. A better ability to understand the English language and having fewer Chinese students on-campus helped to facilitate cross-cultural relationships. The study concluded with a suggestion that programmes to promote knowledge of the US, enhance positive attitude towards friendship formation with Americans, and strengthen communication skills should be implemented as early as possible pre-departure or immediately post-arrival.

Although written more than ten years ago, the article entitled 'Psychological Adaptation of Chinese Sojourners in Canada' by Zheng and Berry (1991) still seems relevant today. This interesting study compared the psychological adaptation of 68 Chinese sojourners (students and visiting scholars from China and Hong Kong) with that of 28 Chinese immigrant and Chinese-Canadian students, 30 Chinese students and scholars in China, and 33 non-Chinese Canadian students. They were asked questions concerning health beliefs and behaviours; problems and ways of coping; social contact and acculturation attitudes; psychological and physical health; and subjective adaptation. The study found that the different groups had different ideas about the concept of health, what caused good or poor health, and how to keep healthy. The Chinese sojourners experienced more health problems, but did less about their problems, than the other groups. It found that the Chinese sojourners reported lower English fluency, less ease in making friendships, more adaptation and communication problems, and lower subjective adaptation than the other groups. Compared with the Chinese-Canadian students, the Chinese sojourners experienced less desired and actual contact and less assimilation. In coping with their problems, the Chinese sojourners had less wishful thinking and self-blame, and tended to seek more support than non-Chinese Canadian students. Although this study was published more than ten years ago, its relevance is still applicable today. By focusing on mature students of a common

Chinese ethnicity but brought up in different cultural settings, the study showed the differences in attitudes and life-views. These were demonstrated to have differing impact on students' adaptation to an alien cultural environment.

To overcome these challenges, Lacina (2002) suggested cross-cultural counselling; setting up of foreign student centres that organise social events for international students; websites; student volunteers/mentors who provide advice on housing, academic classes, transportation, shopping, and friends; movie clubs to help promote friendship; etc. The article concluded with a comment that foreign students were attractive to US universities and colleges for the high tuition fees they paid, and for their contribution as serious, dedicated students.

## 2.6 The Singapore Context

While much has been written about the experiences of foreign students in other countries, the literature on their experiences in Singapore is woefully deficient. A few short works can be found in the Chinese language, but even then, none can be found that is based on a rigorous research methodology. Examples of Chinese language literature on this subject include MaYufeng's Jie du Xinjiapo "Chinese students in Singapore" (1997); and Qi Wei (2003) on "Chinese students Singapore". The most recent piece of writing is a compendium of narratives recorded by Yu Miaomiao (2006) entitled '*Ren sheng li cheng cong ci bu yi yang*', published by Candid Creation Publishing, Singapore. In this compendium, Yu, who studied in the National University of Singapore in 1998 and stayed behind to work in the computer industry for three years, interviewed 14 students from China who studied in the National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. Most of these students came at a very young age and stayed for many years, studying in secondary schools and going on to the universities. Using a narrative style, and without attempting to draw conclusions or theorise, Yu focused on the interviewees' reasons for coming to Singapore, and recorded their impressions, lessons learned, and aspirations about their future. Among other things, the interviewees vocalised the difficulties they experienced attempting to master the English language, the prejudice they encountered from Singaporeans who thought of them as being backward, coarse, and materialistic, the problems they initially faced with the local food (too bland), the weather (too humid), and accommodation (too expensive). All of them said they felt lonely, with few local

friends at the beginning, and having to learn to be independent very quickly. Some of the interviewees expressed happiness over having so much freedom and independence, to live the lives they wanted, the studies they wanted to pursue, to move about and mix around. Some were scared of this new-found freedom at first, but all of them said they grew to accept and enjoy this freedom. Besides socialising with the local people, they depended a lot on the networks they formed among the Chinese students themselves – for information, advice, and emotional support.

Apart from the published literature, the daily newspaper is another source of information on the subject. In a special report on foreign students in Singapore entitled “A Class Apart”, The Straits Times (December 3, 2006) wrote that some of the students griped about homesickness, loneliness, being shunned by Singaporeans and being treated like outcasts. It quoted the experience of a student from Madagascar whose attempts to chat up Singaporeans on the bus and MRT were always spurned. Others, particularly male students from India, had to be careful to dress up smartly to avoid being mistaken as labourers or construction workers.

## **2.7 Summary**

The studies reviewed above prove that there exists a rich tradition of research into the problems encountered by foreign students. These problems are wide ranging, and can be grouped into problems of living in a foreign culture, problems of growing up, and problems with academia. The studies make the point that the degree of success that such students have in adjusting to their new environments have a direct impact on their studies, and their personal psychological well-being. They are also concerned with the coping skills of the students.

While the body of research in this area is mainly focused on experiences of foreign students in Western countries (including Australia), the literature on the situation in Singapore proved rather skimpy. Little, if anything, has been written about the experiences of foreign students in Singapore. By focusing on the situation of some of the Chinese students in a private educational institution in Singapore, it is hoped that the present study can add an Asian perspective as well as fill a gap in the knowledge of how foreign students live in Singapore.

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In the next chapter, the method used to collect information about the experiences of the foreign students in a private educational institution will be explained.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHOD**

#### **3.1 Overview**

This chapter will present the research problem and the resultant objectives, followed by the various options in choosing a research design. The qualitative method as the chosen design will then be elaborated on. This will be followed by an explanation of the sampling plan. The method of collecting information from the target respondents will be given next. To conclude this chapter, the method of analysing and discussing the collected information will be explained.

### **3.2 Statement of the Problem**

It is evident from the review of the literature in Chapter 2 that more needs to be done to understand the problems foreign students face in acclimatising to the Singapore environment, as well as how they cope with the challenges. The purpose of this study is to investigate into this important area and thereby make a meaningful contribution to institutional efforts to help these students achieve positive adjustment quicker.

### **3.3 Research Objectives**

Chapter 1 highlighted the objectives, and they are recapitulated here. The first objective of the present research is to identify the reasons for coming to Singapore. The second objective is to identify the problems of adjustment faced by the participants. The third objective is to discover what the coping mechanisms are among the participants.

### **3.4 Conceptual Framework**

From a review of the literature, discussed in Chapter 2, it is clear that foreign students have a host of factors that influence their ability to acclimatise to their new environment, as well as many ways to cope with the problems of acclimatisation. These factors are arranged in a conceptual framework that will guide the present research. The conceptual framework used in this study consists of three parts. The first part is the reasons for coming to Singapore; the second part concerns the problems faced by the participants in adjusting to their new social environment, and the other is the means of coping with these factors. A diagrammatical representation of this conceptual framework is shown in Fig. 3.1 overleaf.



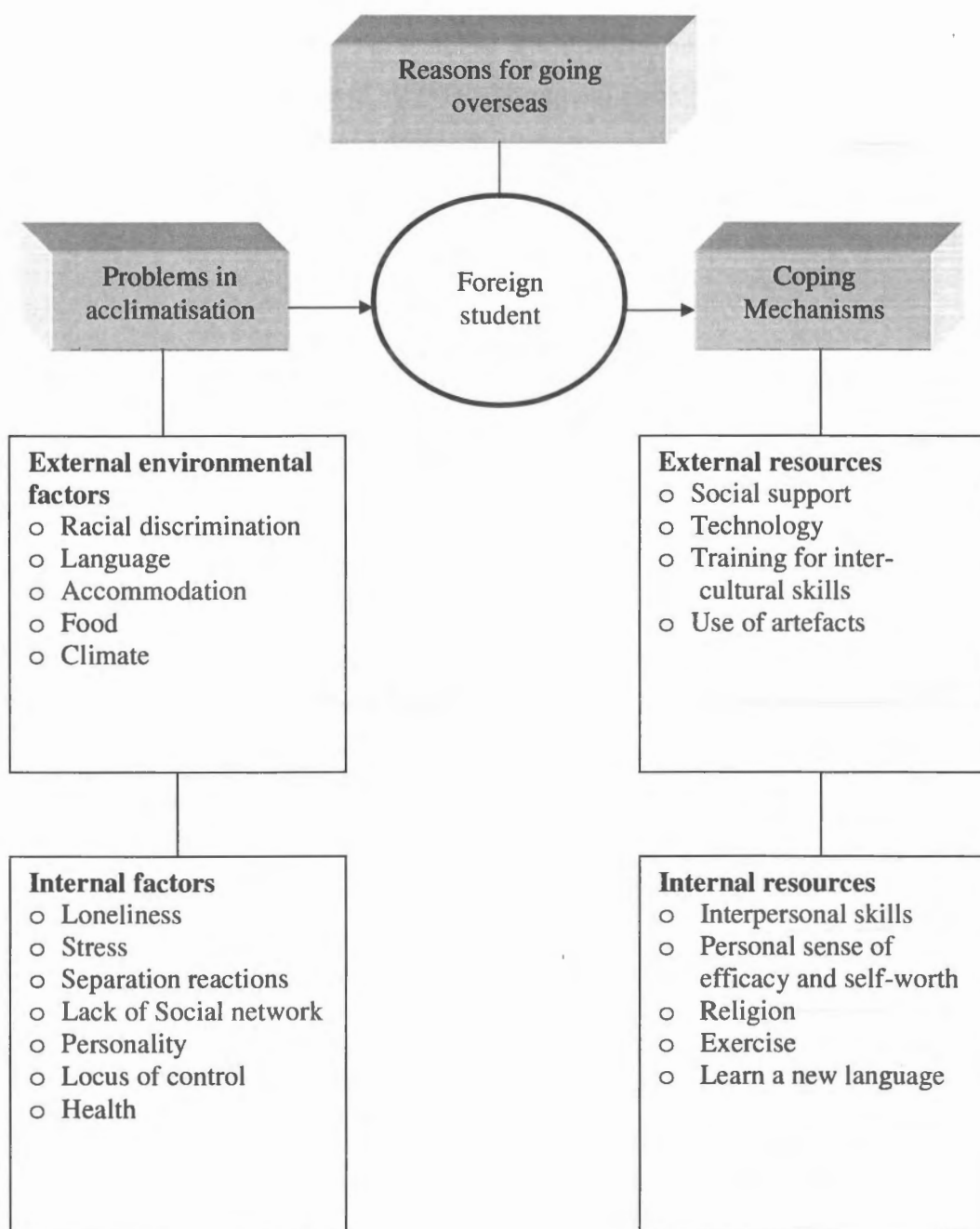


Fig. 3.1. Conceptual framework of acclimatisation of international students.

### **3.5 Research Questions**

The proposed research is designed to answer the following questions:

1. What were the problems faced upon first arrival in Singapore?
2. How did they deal with the problems encountered?
3. How have they adjusted to life and study in Singapore?
4. How could the school have helped them adjust more to life in Singapore?

### **3.6 Research Design**

#### ***3.6.1 Research Approaches***

Hopkins (2002) argues that if one were to adopt the broad meaning of research as being ‘a family of methods which share the characteristics of disciplined inquiry’ (p40), then it is possible to identify three traditions in educational research. The first is the traditional research that teachers conduct in the classroom. He calls this ‘teacher research’, in which ‘teachers do research in their own classrooms for the purpose of improving practice’ (p40).

The second research tradition that Hopkins (2002) identifies is social research, in which the researcher ‘attempts to understand a social situation and to derive hypotheses from that effort of appreciation’ (p42). Examples of such a tradition are social anthropological, ethnographic, phenomenological, naturalistic and illuminative research. Three major paradigms dominate social research: positivism, interpretive, and critical (Candy, 1989). Briefly, the positivist approaches believe that scientific methods must be used to collect hard data, and that knowledge can only be derived from the analysis of such empirical data. The objective of research is to discover universal laws. The interpretive approaches, on the other hand, believe that human behaviour cannot be understood in terms of universal laws, but rather, should be interpreted in the light of individual motives and reason. The critical approach takes the position that ‘simply observing human behaviour is not enough, that the social researcher has to look at the

underlying factors that influence behaviour' (Candy, 1989, p1). The choice of which approach to use depends on 'goodness of fit'. After all, 'no one methodology can answer all questions and provide insights on all issues.' (Rist, 1977, cited in Candy, 1989, p2).

The third research tradition is known as action research (Hopkins, 2002, p42), the beginning of which is traced to Lewin in the immediate post-war period. Action research is a 'spiral' of 'analysis, fact-finding, conceptualisation, planning execution, more fact-finding or evaluation, and then a repetition of this whole circle of activities' (Hopkins, 2002, p44).

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) identify four methodological frameworks that are widely used in qualitative studies. These are (1) symbolic interactionism, (2) phenomenological description, (3) constructivist hermeneutics, and (4) critical studies.

In 'Symbolic Interactionism', the researcher uses observations, interviews and participation to understand the experiences and interactions of people who live in groups. By understanding the group, the researcher hopes to understand the individual (Blumer, 1969).

Phenomenological description is the study of 'human phenomena without considering questions of their causes, their objective reality, or even their appearances' (Wilson, 2002). This framework demands that the researcher discovers phenomena and human experience 'as experienced by those involved in it' (Wilson, 2002). To do this, the researcher has to 'get as close as possible to what the participants in the behaviour of interest are experiencing' (Wilson, 2002) using any of the four 'ideal' types of sources: the eyewitness, the insider, the analyst, and the commentator.

Constructivist hermeneutics goes beyond phenomenological description in that it does not merely seek to describe phenomena, but recognises the researcher's own standpoint and interpretation. The observer constructs his/her interpretation of the phenomena before him/her, such that what is 'real' is still subjective (Wilson, 2002). 'Meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting' (Crotty, 1998, p.42).

Critical Studies are concerned with research into social issues of class, race, gender and language. Two branches of critical studies predominate: the social branch,

and critical textual analysis. While the former focuses on the methodology employed in the study of social issues, the latter enquires into language constructions (Wilson, 2002).

After reviewing the various research traditions and theoretical frameworks, it is now appropriate to state the research framework to be used in this present work. The research plan proposed here takes the position that there is no incompatibility between the quantitative (positivist) and the qualitative (interpretive) approaches (Howe, 1988). In this plan, the action cycle began with a review of the literature. Based on this, the research problem will be defined. The research objectives are stated, followed by a plan for data collection. This includes a sampling plan and description of the data gathering methods and the data collection instruments. Findings and evaluation come next. After that, decisions are made based on reflection of the findings, which may necessitate another cycle of research. (Hopkins, 2002).

### ***3.6.2 Location***

The location of the research area was in Singapore, specifically in the premises of a private educational institution.

### ***3.6.3 Population and Sample***

According to the latest statistics from the Chinese embassy in Singapore, there were about 10,000 Chinese students in 400 private schools here (Streets, 15 September, 2004). The population under consideration in this study was the students from China, both male and female, who were enrolled in a fulltime course of study in a private educational institution in Singapore. At the time of conducting this study in the middle of 2005, this population consisted of about 300 students, equally spread between the two sexes, and all aged between 18 and not more than 25.

Sampling is “the process of obtaining information from a subset of a larger group” (Sudman, 1976, p50). Using sampling, information can be collected quicker and cheaper than through any other means. There are basically two sampling designs: probability and non-probability. In probability sampling, “each sampling unit will have a known, nonzero probability of being included in the sample” (Sudman, 1976, p50). A

strict selection procedure to avoid bias is followed so that sampling error can be computed and included in the results to obtain an accurate analysis. In non-probability sampling, “the probability of selection of each sampling unit is unknown.” (Sudman, 1976, p50). Therefore, the sampling error cannot be measured. Furthermore, the degree of representativeness of the sample to the population is unknown. Therefore it may not be possible to project the findings to the population. In spite of these limitations, however, non-probability sampling is much less expensive than probability sampling and the data is faster to obtain.

There are four methods to choose from in non-probability sampling (Sudman, 1976, p52):

1. Judgment sampling – the researcher selects the participants based on the subjective belief they can represent the entire defined target population.
2. Quota sampling – the researcher selects the participants based on ‘some pre-specified quotas regarding demographics, specific attitudes or behaviours.’
3. Snowball sampling – the researcher selects some participants initially who then in turn help the researcher to identify more people to be selected.
4. Convenience sampling – the researcher selects the participants at his convenience, on the assumption that the population is homogeneous and the participants share characteristics that are similar to the population.

In order to obtain information quickly and inexpensively in this study, the convenience sampling method was employed. A convenience sample was drawn from the Chinese students who studied in the private educational institution where the researcher is employed. A sample of six boys and six girls from China who were studying in this school was selected for interview. As the characteristics of the sample closely resemble the population of the Chinese students in the private educational institution, the sample size of 12 students is believed to be adequate.

The researcher knew all the participants. They were selected after screening to ensure that they met with the research requirements that they had stayed in Singapore for more than one year prior to the interviews being conducted, and that they were above the age of 18. The one-year stay is an arbitrary time period that the researcher

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believed is the length of time needed to experience the problems and to learn to cope with them. The age of 18 is also imposed as a criterion for participation as this is the minimum age of consent.

#### ***3.6.4 Data Collection***

The research procedure was individual face-to-face interviews lasting about one hour each. The face-to-face interview was chosen as the technique for data collection instead of a self-administered written survey because this allows the researcher to explain clearly the purpose of the study, to probe for responses and thereby improve the quality of the responses (Creswell, 1998, p103).

The interviews were conducted on-campus, but outside normal class hours over a period of about one month in the middle of 2005. Permission was obtained from the principal of the school. The researcher conducted the face-to-face interviews personally. Each conversation lasted approximately an hour. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin to facilitate participants' understanding and fluent expressions. The conversations were recorded by means of a tape recorder and the main points of the participants' answers were also written down onto a record book. Permission of the participants was sought before the recording is done on tape. If permission was refused, then the plan was to use only the handwritten record. In the event, none of the participants refused permission to tape record the conversations. The interviews were recorded on a Sony digital voice recorder, and notes were taken with the knowledge and consent of all the participants. Transcripts of the conversations are attached in Appendix 4. The names of the students were not recorded. A list of the interview questions is given below.

1. When did you first arrive in Singapore?
2. What are the problems that you faced when you first arrived in Singapore?
3. How did you cope with these problems?
4. Have you adjusted to life and study here?
5. How satisfied are you with the support you are getting from the school in adjusting to life here?
6. What would you like the school to do to help you?

### **3.6.5 Data Analysis**

Data collected from the participants will be presented according to the conceptual framework shown in Fig. 3.1, with quotations from the transcripts to 'give voice' to the participants (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002, p45). The statements from each respondent will be tabulated in a spreadsheet under headings reflecting the research questions. The themes that emerge are then compared with the literature to look for similarities and differences.

## **3.7 Validity and Reliability**

It is recognised that data are collected using only the face-to-face interview data collection method, and that the exclusive reliance on one method can lead to bias. On the other hand, using different methods of data collection can lead to the production of different results and hence inconsistency. One way to minimise this is to use ask the same questions in the same way and in the same sequence. This helps to 'check the consistency of different data sources within the same method' (Burns 2000, p.419).

The following guidelines provided by Burns (2000, p.418) will be used to enhance reliability:

- Reasons for the research will be clearly outlined.
- The key question to be addressed in the research will be identified.
- The different perspectives on the question held by those involved in the research will be explained and clarified and biases will be stated.

Data-gathering procedures including relationships with subjects and categories developed for analysis will be clearly explained. Each respondent was interviewed separately and alone, so as to prevent them from influencing one another.

### **3.8 Ethical Considerations**

The participants may feel obliged to answer the questions posed by the researcher. This is because the participants are or were students in the same school as the researcher although not necessarily taught by him personally. To overcome this potential fear on the part of the students that they have to participate to please the researcher or perhaps to stay out of trouble, the researcher explained the nature of the research to the participants in the Information Letter, and assured them that non-participation posed no risk to the respondents. They were assured that they were free not to participate and also free to withdraw at any time during the interviews without any risk of damage to their standing with the researcher.

No photographs or video recordings were made. The students, the school and the students' families were not named or identified in any way. No real names of the participants were used. All data were rendered non-identifiable on collection. All data were kept within the school and locked in the office of the school principal. All original material was shredded after the findings have been tabulated. No one beside the researcher had access to the transcripts and the tape recordings.

Approval for conducting the research was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee of Edith Cowan University. This required the completion of relevant forms, copies of which are attached in the Appendix:

1. Application to undertake research involving human research;
2. Student participation in the study: Information for parents and guardians;
3. Consent form completed by the participant;
4. A covering letter to the principal;
5. Consent form completed by the principal.



### **3.9 Limitations of This Study**

There are a few areas of limitations in this research. The sample size is small (only 12 participants), which may not be representative of the population of Chinese students in the private institution, not to mention the population of Chinese students in Singapore. Hence the findings have significant limitations in terms of applicability to the population. A common deficiency inherent in most interviews is the problem of participant bias. They may give answers that favour themselves. Due to the sensitivity of the personal issues, the participants may also have reservations in their views and comments. Although the researcher knew the participants as students, and there already existed some teacher-student relationship between him and the participants, they might still be unwilling to fully reveal their real feelings and thoughts. Finally, the interviews had been conducted only once as a necessity to complete this report on time, hence there was insufficient time to conduct post-checks to verify data, or to obtain comparative data from alternative sources as a means of triangulation.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **4.1 Overview**

The results of the interviews are presented and analysed in this chapter. First, the participants' profiles are shown in Table 4.1. Then, a summary of the key responses is shown in tabular form, ranked in order of frequency of mention. The responses will be discussed with reference to the literature. The chapter concludes with a summary of all results found.

The questions asked in sequence were as follows:

1. When did you first arrive in Singapore?
2. Why did you come to Singapore?
3. What are the problems that you faced when you first arrived in Singapore?
4. How did you cope with these problems?
5. Have you adjusted to life and study here?
6. How satisfied are you with the support you are getting from the school in adjusting to life here?
7. What would you like the school to do to help you?

## 4.2 Participant Profile

The profiles of the twelve participants are briefly presented in Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1.  
*Participant Profile*

Name	Year arrived	Years here	Age on arrival
<b>Female</b>			
Fiona	Dec-01	4	18
Pauline	Dec-01	4	22
Wei	Jan-02	3	18
Ma	Dec-02	3	22
Chen	Dec-02	3	18
Wang	Dec-02	3	18
<b>Male</b>			
Li	Apr-01	4	18
Liu	May-01	4	20
Xu	Sep-01	4	19
Tian	May-02	3	21
Zhou	Sep-02	3	19
Wu	Feb-03	2	20

Table 4.1 above shows a summary of the twelve participants divided into two groups, female and male, simply for convenience. Within each group, the names of the participants are arranged in ascending order of the year of arrival.

The mean number of years that the participants have been staying in Singapore is 3.33, with the median and modal number of years at 3. The mean age of the participants on first arrival in Singapore is 19.4 years, while the modal age is 18.

Having stayed in Singapore for an average of about three years, the participants should have enough time to experience many events that one would associate with going and staying abroad. This length of time should also be sufficient for them to learn to acclimatise to the 'new' environment.

In analysing the responses from the twelve participants, it is noted that there were no perceptible differences in problems or coping strategies between those who were older upon first arrival, and the younger ones. Neither were there many differences in the problems concerning acclimatisation between those who had been here longer, and those who were newer arrivals. Males saw the problems in the same light as the females, and coped in almost similar ways. In other words, this study found that the problems of acclimatisation and the coping methods were universal among the Chinese participants.

4.3      **Reasons for Coming to Singapore**

Table 4.2a.  
*Reasons for Going Overseas*

Motivation for overseas travel	Number of responses
To study English	9
To obtain better/more recognised qualifications	5
To obtain a degree	1
To study	1
To experience life outside	1

Studying English is clearly the most common reason for wanting to study overseas. This reason was cited by nine of the participants. As one of them, Ma, said, ‘I was also interested in improving my English, so I thought Singapore would be a good place to learn English in a Chinese-speaking environment.’ The next most common reason (5 responses) is to obtain ‘better’ qualifications that are recognised by multinational organizations so that job-seeking will be easier when they are back in China. Zhou said, ‘My main concern was getting a qualification that could help me get a job back home.’ Added Li: ‘I came with the purpose of obtaining an internationally recognised higher qualification, i.e. a degree.’ The business opportunities that this presents to the government and private schools are clear.

Table 4.2b.  
*Reasons for Choosing Singapore*

Why choose Singapore	Number of responses
Safe and clean	4
Chinese-speaking environment	3
English-speaking environment	2
Cheaper than Western countries	2
Nearer/similar to home	2
Business-oriented environment	1
Stepping stone to another country	1

Four participants cited safety and cleanliness as the main attractions of Singapore over other destinations, followed closely by its Chinese-speaking environment. These two factors were particularly important to parents who were sending their only daughters to faraway places. For example, Wang, who was 18 when she arrived in Singapore in 2002, said, ‘As to why I chose Singapore, this was because I heard from friends that this place is very safe and secure for girls like me. It is safe to walk along the streets, go home late at night, and there is law and order. It is also not far from my hometown in southern China.’ Another girl, Wei said, ‘My parents decided that Singapore was the right place based on advice from their friends. They told my parents that Singapore was safe and Mandarin speaking.’

While Wei may have chosen for its Chinese-speaking environment, others like Pauline had their sights firmly fixed on Singapore’s attraction as an English-speaking environment. Pauline said, ‘Singapore is very different from my hometown. Here, people speak mainly English. And that is why I chose to come here.’

The competitive advantage of Singapore being safe and clean as well as being an English- and Chinese-speaking environment must therefore be preserved. To successfully attract and retain students from China, the Singapore Government and the

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private educational institutions must therefore work together to maintain the dual language environment, and to ensure a strong business education curriculum.

Others like Li liked Singapore for its proximity to China. He said, 'Before I came, I was considering various other places, namely UK, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. I finally settled on Singapore because of the proximity to China, and also because it was more economical here.' While there is nothing anyone can do about Singapore's geographical location, ease of travel to and from China, and the comparatively lower costs of studying here, can and must be maintained.

**4.4 Problems Encountered While Staying in Singapore**

Table 4.3.

*Problems Encountered*

Types of problems	Number of responses
Accommodation	11
Unfriendly / uncaring People	7
Dissatisfied with school	7
Problems with changing schools	5
Food	5
Language problem / communication	5
Homesick / miss home	4
Problems with agent	4
Money not enough	3
Things expensive	3
Boring / nothing to do	2
No chance to practise English	2
Feeling lost	2
Getting around	1
Climate / weather too hot	1

**4.4.1 Accommodation**

As noted in Chapter 2, various authors including Furnham and Tresize (1983), Murphy-Lejeune (2002), and Yu (2006) highlighted accommodation as a problem for international students. However, except for Yu who specifically detailed this problem of accommodation as ‘too expensive’, none of the others had actually discussed the nature of this problem. Here, details of what is meant by accommodation being a problem will be discussed.

With only one exception (Tian, who had no problems with accommodation because he stayed in an aunt’s house), all the other 11 participants experienced problems with accommodation. Like Fiona said, one of the problems was finding cheap accommodation. Several participants felt that they had been misled into paying excessive rentals for accommodation and facilities that were below expectations. Of course, cheap accommodation was not the only problem. Most chose to stay in private

apartments rather than hostels, indicating clearly that price was not a major concern, but comfort was. Even so, there were complaints about overcrowding, with as many as four sharing a room. In Ma's case, her apartment in Orchard Road was 'like a private hostel, with 9-12 rooms and with three people in a room.' There were horror stories concerning landlords, roommates, and the use of facilities.

Having a stay-in landlord was a major problem. Besides the lack of privacy, there was nagging over the use of utilities, cooking, and cleanliness. Naturally, a stay-in landlord was undesirable. Some landlords forbade the use of the air-conditioning, the fridge, the washing machine, the kitchen, and even the amount of water consumed (Lin). Others frowned on the use of the television, phone, etc. There was also the problem of landlords who did not refund deposits. Little wonder then that Zhou thought that the first two landlords he had seemed to dislike Chinese people. 'Maybe they had bad experiences with other Chinese people before me,' he speculated. There could very well be a situation where landlords had had bad experiences with tenants from China, and therefore treated such tenants shabbily.

Roommates also posed problems for our participants. Wu moved house 10 times over a period of two and a half years, due to issues with roommates who were noisy, smoked, and played online games. The others also recalled moving many times. Although Pauline claimed not to have problems with her roommates due to her personality, she admitted that her flatmates could not get along with each other. For Xu, who shared a master bedroom with three others, the room was always dirty.

These problems meant that these participants spent much time and effort resolving issues of accommodation rather than focusing on their studies. They undoubtedly contribute to their stress. Given all that they had experienced with accommodation, their enjoyment of the period here was severely marred. Many of the participants expressed that they felt 'very unhappy'. Being constantly on the move was their way of getting out of the sense of helplessness. Finding a 'home' away from home was no easy task.



#### ***4.4.2 Unfriendly / Uncaring People***

Yu (2006) told of the prejudice that Chinese students encountered from Singaporeans who thought of them as being backward, coarse, and materialistic, so much so that all of the Chinese students that she interviewed said they felt lonely, with few local friends at the beginning, and having to learn to be independent very quickly.

Furnham and Tresize (1983, p13-29) cited racial discrimination, while Lacina (2002, p21) mentioned language discrimination as well as cultural differences in terms of gender roles, religion and customs. Poyrazil, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timimi (2004, p73) highlighted social/interpersonal/cultural issues as problems that faced foreign students. Zheng and Berry (1991) compared the Chinese sojourners with Chinese-Canadian students, and found that the former experienced less desired and actual contact and less assimilation.

Despite Singaporeans' well-known reputation for being friendly, many of our participants reported negative experiences with the local populace. For example, Ma said, 'Maybe it is just me, but I seem to have difficulty making friends with local people here. I find that many of them treat me in a condescending manner, as if I came from an undeveloped place, and know nothing. Perhaps they are right about my not knowing much, but surely there is no need for them to feel superior, right?' Another participant, Wang, said, 'The Chinese in Singapore have a superiority attitude; they treat us from China as backward, inferior. People here have no warmth in their interpersonal relationships with us. Very cold.' A third participant, Zhou, put it this way: 'They seemed to look down on me, not that they didn't understand what I said.' Wu said, 'I cannot make friends with Singaporeans. They look down on us Chinese. I don't understand why they have this attitude.' Thus we can see that not only were the encounters less than happy, but also the participants generally did not understand why they were being treated this way. Ma's question, 'why do people here have such a poor opinion of us?' was a constant lament.

There were also some harsh words for Singaporean colleagues at work. Xu said, 'I have some Singaporean acquaintances in my place of work. I find them mercenary, materialistic. I don't have a sense of intimacy with them.'

When these comments are seen against the earlier reports concerning horrible landlords, one may be led to speculate that the bad treatment the participants received from landlords may perhaps be related to the negative attitude that Singaporeans seem to have towards Chinese sojourners generally.

What could possibly contribute to the so-called 'negative' attitude Singaporeans have towards students from China? There are a few possible reasons. In Chapter 1, we saw Seah's (2004) view that 'foreign students are harder working, many are brighter, and if they settle in Singapore after their studies, they may prove to be the next wave of migrants that bring prosperity to the nation.' Could Singaporeans therefore think of them as 'threats'? Or is it because Singaporeans feel superior to other people from Asia? A special report in *The Straits Times* (December 3, 2006), cited in Chapter 2, wrote that foreign students felt they were shunned by Singaporeans and treated as outcasts. Male students from India had to be careful to dress up smartly to avoid being mistaken as labourers or construction workers. Both reports as well as the experiences of our participants seem to support the feeling that Singaporeans generally display an attitude of superiority towards other Asians.

#### **4.4.3 School**

Poyrazil, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timimi (2004, p73) identified study conditions as one of many factors that affect the well being of international students. In our present study, participants mentioned dissatisfaction with the school they attended, and changing school, as some of the major problems they faced while studying here.

After attending a commercial school, Wei found that her command of the English language actually declined because there were only Chinese students in that school and she had no chance to practise speaking English. When she wanted to change school, she encountered 'a lot of hassle'. Pauline discovered that the language school that she attended was 'not up to my expectations. I found the language school to be very small, with few students. It had business classes, but the lecturers only joked in class.' In the case of Li, he thought that the language school he attended when he first came to Singapore did not appear to be a proper school, being very small, and because it did not issue textbooks. He added, 'The quality of the teachers was also not up to my

expectations.’ The second school he attended was little better. According to him, the lecturers were ‘not very experienced’.

The other related problem was changing schools. To Fiona, changing school was ‘the most problematic’. Chen wanted to change school because she found her school to be very different from what she had expected. Not only that, but she had to go to many schools to check out their programmes by herself. For Pauline, changing school was a very big issue. She claimed that she wasted a lot of time looking for a new school. ‘The school didn’t help me; I had to compare the schools on my own,’ she said. And finally, Li said that one of the worries he had was with changing school. ‘It was quite stressful,’ he said. Only Xu among the 12 participants did not seem to have problems. He was quite happy with the English language school that he attended for eight months. ‘There were many foreign students; it was quite a good school. The fees were acceptable,’ he said.

The high incidence of dissatisfaction with the quality of the schools is a cause for concern not only for the schools’ administrations, but also for the government whose goal of turning Singapore into an international educational hub is in danger of getting bad press. Quality must be upheld, and students must be treated as customers whose post-purchase dissonance must be effectively reduced and managed with efficient ‘goods return’ policies.

#### **4.4.4 Food**

Yu (2006) noted that her interviewees found local Singaporean food to be too bland for their liking. Furnham and Tresize (1983) mentioned dietary restrictions as an issue with foreign students.

The present survey found similar issues with five of the participants. Wang found the food here ‘very oily’. She complained that there were ‘not enough vegetables in the cooked food that we eat in the food-courts’. This is a bit surprising considering that the Singapore government has for a long time encouraged food stallholders to increase the amount of vegetables in the cooked foods that they sell.

Liu said that he could not get used to the taste of the food here. Another participant who complained about food being a problem was Tian, who said that the

food here was 'very unpalatable, and limited in variety'. Zhou said he did not have major problems with food except that 'I found the food here unappetising'.

A different problem was mentioned by participants like Zhou, who said that when he bought ready-cooked food, the quantity was usually insufficient: 'The portions were too small for me.' Another participant, Liu, voiced a similar complaint: 'The quantity of food was also too little for me, so I was often hungry,' he said. This is probably a factor contributing to the perception among many foreign students that the costs of living in Singapore are high.

In contrast, some other participants did not face the same problems with food. For example, Wu said that the food here was ok, and Li said he had no problem with the food. Even Liu, whose unhappiness with food was mentioned in the preceding paragraph, admitted that the food in Singapore was not much different from that in his hometown in Shenzhen. Nevertheless, this research has found support for the findings of other researchers like Yu (2006) and Furnham and Tresize (1983) who identified food as a problem for foreign students. The importance of food as a primary need is such that if foreign students cannot find a suitable resolution to their dietary concerns, then it is imaginable that they will not treat this country as a long term abode, but will move on instead in search of a place they can truly call 'home'.

#### ***4.4.5 Language and Communication***

According to Zheng and Berry (1991), Chinese sojourners reported lower English fluency and more adaptation and communication problems compared with the Chinese-Canadian students. Yu (2006) also reported that her subjects experienced problems trying to master the English language. In the present study, language and communication was mentioned by five participants as a problem, while not having the chance to practise English was mentioned by two participants.

Not understanding the English language was Tian's biggest problem. In the case of Ma, her first few days in Singapore were rather traumatic. She said, 'At first, I could not understand what people were talking. The English that people used here did not seem to be the same as what I learned in school back home. I had to speak to people in Chinese and ask them to speak to me in Chinese too.' Wang also faced the same

problem. She thought that what she learned back home in China was the 'pure' type of English (Queen's English), so it was something of a shock for her when she could not understand the English that people in Singapore spoke. 'We also could not understand the English spoken by the Vietnamese and the Indians,' she added. Up to the time of the interview, she admitted that she 'still have some difficulty with language'.

Although almost all of the participants cited learning English as their main reason for coming to Singapore, not being able to communicate in English and not having enough opportunities to practise it were cited as problems. For example, Ma felt that her objective of learning English 'was not entirely achieved'; while Wei said that there was no chance for her to practise English because there were only Chinese students in the school she attended upon arrival here. 'After attending the commercial school, my command of the English language declined,' she added.

Wang and Zhou offered an insightful explanation into why this might be the case. Wang said 'the reason we don't speak English among ourselves is because we feel it is strange to speak in a foreign language among ourselves'. Zhou reflected a similar sentiment when he said, 'Among my Chinese friends, we spoke only Mandarin. Why should we speak any other language when we are among our own kind?' This is a rather strange situation that merits examination, whether it holds among other students in general. If their avowed intention is to learn English, then are the students creating the problem for themselves by not practising speaking English among their friends? Or is the feeling of intimacy and closeness so strong as to push them into retreating into their Chinese language comfort zone?

#### **4.4.6 Homesick / Miss Home**

As noted in Chapter 2, many researchers including Furnham and Tresize (1983), Qian Ning (2002), Murphy-Lejeune (2002), Fisher et al, (1985), Fisher and Hood (1987), and Yu (2006) reported homesickness and missing home as a major problem experienced by international students. For example, Qian Ning (2002) reported that while the Chinese students he studied seemed to enjoy their 'newfound personal freedom' studying in America, they also felt lonely and helpless (p79).

In the present study, Chen said that she was homesick often, so much so that she went home many times. 'I admit I miss my family very much, especially my mother,' she added. Wang also missed home. 'I cried everyday. I didn't call home because I didn't want my family to worry about me,' she said. In the case of another participant, Pauline, it was her boyfriend that she missed most. She said, 'I missed my boyfriend very much. I frequently phoned him, but could only see him once a year.' The physical separation proved too much for her boyfriend, who suggested giving up on their relationship. But instead of feeling a sense of loss that would immobilise lesser people, Pauline took the break-up in her stride, going window shopping, chatting with other friends, and going to Sentosa (a resort island south of Singapore that is a popular tourist spot), instead of fretting over the relationship. So much for missing a loved one.

In the present study only four participants specifically mentioned feeling homesick and missing home. This is a surprisingly low number considering how frequently homesickness has been mentioned in the literature. Noteworthy is that three of the six female students admitted to feeling homesick, whereas only one of the male students said as much. This disparity between the sexes in terms of homesickness may be attributed to the commonly held belief that males are less attached to the home than the females.

Fisher and Hood (1987) compared students who reported being homesick with those who did not, and concluded that the former group of students lived further from home, could not attend the university of their first choice, were less satisfied with their current residence, and were less satisfied with present and past friendships, than students who did not report homesickness. Although the present study is not designed to test Fisher and Hood's findings, the responses from our twelve students do not appear to be aligned with their findings. For example, all twelve participants are from China and

one of the reasons most of them chose to come to Singapore was its proximity to home. All of them could choose the educational institution they attended. Almost everyone had complaints about accommodation. Lastly, the majority of them claimed to have problems with the people (landlords, Singaporeans in general, agents) that they came into contact with.

#### ***4.4.7 Problems with Agent***

A survey of the literature did not uncover any mention of problems with agents. A Straits Times report on 1<sup>st</sup> December 2006 gives some background information on this phenomenon of the student agent. According to the report, student agents are middlemen who help place foreign students in local schools in exchange for a service fee. They also receive a commission from schools for every student they get enrolled. The process works this way: After deciding to study overseas, the student approaches a student agent to help him apply for a place in a school in the destination country. The agent quotes him a price, which can range from S\$50 to S\$20,000 with the mean at S\$5,000. This price usually includes the cost of applying to the school, airport pickup and transportation, orientation and an accommodation search. The bill is rarely itemized and the money is paid upfront and in full. When payment is made, the agent proceeds to apply to the school chosen by the student. If he is accepted, the student pays for air travel to the location of study. The agent then prepares travel papers. Upon arrival, new agents, who are usually partners with agents from the student's country, pick up the student at the airport and arrange for accommodation and other required paperwork. The process is complete when the student receives his student pass.

Participants like Pauline explained how such student agents affected her. An agent in China helped her to enrol in our school. She said, 'He didn't tell me much about it. In fact, the agent didn't explain very much the circumstances in Singapore.' The agent in China also arranged her accommodation. 'This was also below my expectations,' she added. Wu related that an agent found the schools in Singapore for him. He griped: 'Agents always recommend the schools that paid the highest commission, not necessarily the best schools.' His agent went as far as giving him wrong information about employment prospects here: 'The agent told me that I could get a part time job, and that the school would help to look for a job for us after graduation, on a 3-year contract.' Another participant, Xu, tried to gain admission into

the polytechnics. 'The agent didn't do anything. I visited the polytechnic and did all the applications myself, with the help of a friend,' he complained.

Li was not satisfied with his agent because his agent arranged excessively expensive accommodation for him. 'One cannot rely on the words of the agent too much,' he mused. Wu also mentioned the dangers of trusting agents with money. He said: 'I had felt a sense of financial insecurity. For example, the agent who helped me look for accommodation took money from me to help look for accommodation. I felt cheated. I paid 8 months x S\$300 pm rental, and didn't get any money back.'

Given the huge amounts of money that foreign students pay for the services of the agents, it is little wonder that expectations are high and any shortcomings on the part of these agents do negatively impact on the students' sense of wellbeing.

#### ***4.4.8 Not Enough Money / Things Expensive***

Three participants cited money as a concern. Pauline admitted that the biggest problem for her was financial. 'I had to learn to control my spending,' she said. Wang thought that things were expensive here. Wu had a sense of financial insecurity. 'We cannot work part time; things are expensive,' he noted. Comparing Singapore with his hometown of Shanghai, Wu complained that he had 'to pay five times more for everything'. For the others, however, money was not a major problem. For example, Zhou and Li said that they did not have much of a financial problem. 'I don't have worries over money. I can control my expenditure,' Li said. Those like Wang who considered things expensive here had to learn to curtail spending to the most necessary. 'We learn not to buy unnecessary things. The most we indulge in is some clothes. By being prudent in our spending we have managed to get by,' Wang said. Even participants like Wu who complained about things being expensive here also grew used to high prices after a while. 'Things are very expensive. However, I got used to the high prices here after the first 6 months,' he said. Students like Tian are lucky to have family-relations here to turn to. He had no problems with the cost of living because he stayed with his aunt.

Anecdotal information suggests that students from China usually come from families with sufficient financial means to see them through school. The strict



regulations in Singapore prohibiting students from taking on even part-time jobs ensure that those who come on student passes can support themselves. In any case, the present study suggests that the findings conducted previously concerning financial stress (Furnham and Tresize, 1983) may no longer be as relevant today given the rise of China as an economic power and the concomitant increase in spending power of its people.

#### ***4.4.9 Other Factors***

The literature surveyed in Chapter 2 described other problems of acclimatisation including cultural differences in terms of gender roles, religion and customs (Lacina, 2002, p21); loss or disorientation, having to reorganise their lives, getting acquainted to new rules of behaviour such as ‘having to say grace before meals’, types of clothings that are permissible, etc. (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002, p113). The many cultural similarities with the Singaporean Chinese meant that the participants should have experienced lesser problems than students from some other countries, say, Nigeria or Russia. This is borne out in our present study: none of the participants mentioned problems in terms of gender roles, religion and customs, and types of clothings.

Instead, participants mentioned issues like they found life was ‘boring’ and that they had ‘nothing to do’. Zhou said: ‘In terms of social life, there is nothing much. Life is boring here. There is nowhere to go, after you have been to one place, you won’t want to go again.’ Wu shared a similar sentiment. He said: ‘There is nothing to do in Singapore. We cannot work part time; things are expensive.’ In his case, it appears that what one could or could not do was dependent on how much money one had. This is likely to be true for others as well.

Two participants said they felt ‘lost’, while one had problems getting around initially. Ma told of how, on the day she arrived, ‘there was nobody at the airport to receive me.’ Chen recalled that she did not know anybody then, she had ‘to do so many things all by myself’. Getting around was a problem for Li at first. ‘I had to rely on the MRT (Mass Rapid Transit train) and friends to bring me to places,’ he said.

Real or imaginary social and cultural barriers could have reinforced the sense of being lost and alone. For example, even an outgoing person like Xu initially resisted reaching out to others in his loneliness. He said: ‘I had thought of mixing with other

foreign students, but I feel a kind of a barrier between us. I feel that very few people mix around with foreign friends.'

Climate presents problems to some foreign students (Poyrazil, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timimi, 2004, p73). Yu (2006) also reported that her interviewees complained that the weather in Singapore was too humid. This finding is substantiated to a small extent by the present study. Only two participants claimed that the climate in Singapore is a problem affecting their wellbeing. For example, Li said that the weather here is hot and humid, and except for this factor, 'living in Singapore is OK with me'.

To summarise this part of the chapter, the problems that our participants encountered can be broadly grouped into two categories – one to do with living, and the other to do with studying. The former includes accommodation, relationships with people, food, climate and internal factors like the sense of loneliness and feeling lost. The latter group includes getting into a school of their choice, transferring to another school, lecturers, school environment and student agents. Except for the last (student agents) the same problems have also been identified by other researchers, to different extents. There were a lot more issues with accommodation and school, and a lot less mention of homesickness and loneliness, food and culture, than discussed in the literature. There was a great deal of unhappiness with student agents, something that previous researchers had never mentioned before. There was also no mention of problems related to religion. The findings therefore suggest that the country of origin of the participants (China) and the destination (Singapore) have direct relationship with the type and severity of the problems that foreign students face.

4.5 Coping

Table 4.4.  
*Coping Methods*

Coping methods	Number of responses
Friends	12
Contact with family	8
Mobile phone	8
Internet connection / MSN chat	7
Library	2
Religion	1

For the sake of simplicity, the various techniques, strategies, instruments and tools used by the participants in the present study to cope with and handle the problems of acclimatisation are collectively called ‘coping methods’. Since the coping methods are used to deal with more than one problem, it makes sense to discuss the methods instead of listing the individual problems and then discussing the coping methods for each one.

4.5.1 Friends

All of the twelve participants mentioned friends as being important in helping them not only to cope with problems but also to improve the quality of their stay here. This finding is in line with other researchers (Poyrazil, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timimi, 2004; Qian Ning, 2002; Leung, 2001; and Yu, 2006). However, in delving deeper into this coping method, one would identify that there are two issues to consider: nationalities, and utility.

All the participants in the present study had close friends who were also Chinese, with few who had close friendship with people from other countries, even the host country, Singapore. As Fiona put it, ‘although I have friends and classmates from other countries like Indonesia and Vietnam, we were never really close, maybe because of the language barrier.’ Ma echoed the views of the other participants: ‘I don’t remember making any friends among the locals here. Some students from other countries are quite friendly, like those from Indonesia, but not enough for me to share

my problems with.’ This could be due to their belief that their sojourn in Singapore was only temporary. As Liu said, ‘among friends here, I get the feeling our relationships are not as intimate as with my friends in China, maybe because we have this realisation that our relationship is not really permanent, only temporary. I can say it is even a bit superficial, casual.’

One curious finding is the lack of deep interaction between the participants and the Singaporeans. This could be due to what had been discussed earlier, that the participants felt that Singaporeans had a superiority complex against the Chinese visitors. As Ma said: ‘As a result of the negative perception among the locals about Chinese students, most of us keep to ourselves, and build a wall around us, really to have this feeling of solidarity and safety in numbers.’ Tian said he did not have any Singaporean friends ‘firstly because there are not many Singaporean students in our school, and secondly, those few that I meet appear to be aloof.’

The value and utility of having friends are practical and emotional. They include sharing problems, going shopping together, eating out together or sharing food at home, helping with schoolwork, playing games, going to the cinema, chatting, obtaining information about accommodation, and even help in overcoming a break-up with a boyfriend. As Ma said, ‘If not for my Chinese friends that I had met here, I don’t think I would have survived a year here. I would definitely have packed up and gone home.’ There is no particular preference of gender, as long as the friendship is close so that ‘we can be open with each other’ (Wang). Pauline found that her friends were very important in helping her overcome loneliness and problems. ‘Through them I had overcome the failed relationship, and also the thought of giving up my studies and going home,’ she said.

One problem that the participants faced mixing around with people from other countries was that of language. Zhou recalled how he got acquainted with some (non-Chinese) students but did not dare to speak up initially because he spoke only Mandarin. This problem may have forced them to stick to students from China, as Tian acknowledged. ‘Because I was not strong in English, I tended to stick to my circle of Chinese friends and schoolmates,’ he said.

Cobb (1976) observed that ‘social support provides a person with three sorts of information: namely that they are cared for and loved; esteemed and valued; and that

they belong to a network of communication and mutual obligation' (p302). Leung (2001) found that supportive social relationships were vital for the psychological and academic adaptation of overseas students. Yu (2006) found that, besides socialising with the local people, her interviewees depended a lot on the networks they formed among the Chinese students themselves – for information, advice, and emotional support. The present study confirms these findings. According to Bochner, McLeod and Lin (1977, p280), sojourners belong to three distinct social networks. The first is a primary network consisting of close friendships with other students who belong to the same cultural background. The second network consists of bonds between sojourners and significant host nationals such as academics, students, advisors and government officials. The third network is a multi-cultural one of friends and acquaintances. According to the authors, this last network provides companionship for recreational, non-cultural and non-task oriented activities. The findings in the present study do not appear to support the contention for this last network.

#### **4.5.2 Contact With Family**

Contact with family was one of the most important ways for our participants to cope with their problems, a fact that few researchers identified. Only Poyrazil, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timimi (2004, p73) made specific mention that maintaining contact with family and friends back home made a significant difference to the stress levels experienced by the respondents in their research. Leung (2001) mentioned that supportive social relationships are vital for the psychological and academic adaptation of overseas students.

In the present study, 8 out of the 12 participants mentioned calling home and / or going back home for visits as an important coping mechanism. For example, Fiona told of how the visits that her mother made to Singapore to see her 'was a very big factor in helping me cope with life here. She was a great source of comfort to me'. Fiona herself also returned to her hometown regularly, about 4-5 times over the last two years, 'because I needed to see my parents'. Ma said she made many calls home to her parents. She even kept a photo of her parents, and would take it out of her purse to look at it occasionally. 'I don't look at it very often, but whenever I do, I get a nice feeling,' she added. The other female participants also had similar feelings. Chen admitted she

missed her family very much, especially her mother, and said she would try to go back home to her family at least once a year. 'So, seeing them is very important to help me cope with the hardships here. Luckily my parents have the means to pay for my trips home; otherwise I won't know what to do.' In Wei's case, she would call home whenever she could to speak to her parents. 'The conversations are not very long, but just hearing their voices give me a sense of love and belonging,' she said. If one thought that the longer the participants stayed away, the less contact there would be with home, then that would be a mistake. Pauline said she went back to China only once in the first year, but went back more frequently, twice a year, after that.

The close attachment to home is not restricted to the female participants. The males were not necessarily less attached. Tian said he called home about once or twice a week to his parents. 'We usually speak just a little while, and my calls are really to assure them that everything is all right with me,' he said. Liu admitted that he was very close to his mother. He said: 'I do think of her, of home a bit, but since I have weekly contact with her, it is not so bad.' Xu also called home quite often, and would normally speak to his mother, and sometimes to his father as well. Among the male participants, only Wu did not feel the need to call home frequently, although he would sometimes call home 'more out of politeness.'

The one-child policy in China means that children (in particular boys) are highly treasured. Parents are known to spare no efforts to give the best to their only son or daughter. It is therefore a mistake to exclude the family from the social network expounded by Bochner, McLeod and Lin (1977, p280). It is also not accurate to say, as Qian Ning (2002) asserted, that Chinese students who were used to a collective lifestyle and care provided by government, turned to other groups when they came to America, e.g. the church (p80). Instead, the present study found that participants turned back to their families for support.

#### **4.5.3 Mobile Phone**

The role of the mobile phone in helping the international student cope with staying overseas has not been well researched. This could be because its importance has so far been underestimated. The present study found the mobile phone to be of crucial importance. To Fiona, the mobile phone was very important in helping her socially. She said: 'At first I had resisted buying a mobile phone for myself, but my friends talked me

into buying one.’ Zhou had a similar experience. He said: ‘at first when I arrived here, I did not find the mobile phone necessary. But now, it is very essential.’ Li was even more emphatic: ‘the mobile phone is very important in helping me cope with life here. It is essential to have it; it is the most basic must-have.’

The high cost of buying and using a mobile phone did not deter the participants. The benefits obviously far outweighed the costs. Ma, for example, said: ‘The mobile phone was expensive and calls were not cheap, but it helped me to overcome many moments of loneliness and low points.’ Others like Wang, while acknowledging the efficiency of having a mobile phone, were not particularly obsessed with it. To him, whether a mobile phone or a fixed line phone, it is very important to use it for contacting friends and family people in China.

#### ***4.5.4 Internet Connection / Webchat***

The use of ICT did not receive much attention in the literature. However, in the present study, this tool was mentioned by seven participants, who used email and MSN chats to connect with family and friends, and surfed the World Wide Web for information.

The participants revealed one specific website, [www.sgchinese.com](http://www.sgchinese.com) which they often used to source for information on everything from accommodation to schools, friends, jobs, and so on. According to one participant, Chen, Chinese students and workers in Singapore use this website to exchange information and alerts about things that concern them, for example, which schools have problems, problem landlords, etc. It is like a gossip page of the newspaper. ‘I think having such an information source helps to break down the feeling of being lost and being alone in this world,’ Chen said.

#### **4.5.5 Library**

Another means of coping with the problems identified in the present study is the use of the library. This reaches within the person rather than reaching outwards to others, or, as Poyrazil, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timimi (2004, p73) said, reliance on internal resources rather than the use of external resources. This may sound strange as a library surely is an external resource? Viewed from the perspective of its being a means of escaping loneliness and finding something to occupy time or to indulge in introspection, however, then it does not seem so strange after all.

It is also a good way to beat the humidity in the weather. One participant, Wu, said: 'I try to focus on my studies. I go to the local libraries a lot, and read the magazines, newspapers and books on things that interest me. This way, I saved a lot of money, and also kept myself out of the hot weather outside. I cannot stay at home because it is just noisy and crowded there.'

Another participant who found refuge in the library, Zhou, said: 'To overcome this (loneliness) I spent a lot of time in the library, and buried myself in books, magazines, comics, to while away my time outside school.'

#### **4.5.6 Religion**

Only one participant turned to religion for support. Pauline said that the church she attended helped her 'to learn moral values, English, and living in Singapore'. She added: 'Fellow churchgoers have been very helpful. It is not enough to have friends just in school but we also need friends outside school.'

It is common knowledge that China as a communist state discourages the practice of religion, and as such, its younger citizens have probably little exposure to religion. It is likely that those like Pauline who know of religion probably come into contact with it only outside China. The importance of religion in providing support is therefore minimal.



#### ***4.5.7 Coping With Problems Concerning Accommodation***

Although the participants did not mention specifically how they coped with this most vexing problem, it is clear that moving house was the preferred way. As described earlier in this chapter, some of the participants moved many times, with one (Wu) moving as many as ten times over a period of two and a half years. The stress can only just be imagined.

Exchanging information with friends and knowing that others faced similar problems probably helped to reduce the tension and dissonance arising from being dissatisfied with one's accommodation. Hence, social networks and accessing the Internet must surely be important coping mechanisms.

#### ***4.5.8 Coping With Student Agents***

As with accommodation, there was also no specific mention of how to cope with errant student agents, except to suggest that the schools take some kind of action. Of course, the absence of mention could be due to the fact that the problem with agents was not a daily problem in the same manner as accommodation and food. It is not possible to change the agent after having paid for the services upfront. Thus, there appears to be a common pattern of grouching about it but not really doing anything about it. 'Choosing a good agent is crucial for a good start, said Wu, and this could well be the best solution. Without doubt, the participants in this present study must have relied on social support (Cobb, 1976; and Yu, 2006) and social networks (Bochner, McLeod and Lin, 1977) for information in this respect.

#### ***4.5.9 Coping With the Food Problem***

One would expect that young people like our participants should be able to adapt quite easily to a different diet. But the present study shows that coping with the food problem is a bit more challenging. Wang was one of those who still could not get used to the food here. Notwithstanding having been here since December 2002, Wang said that she ‘still cannot adapt to the food here’.

To overcome this, she and her friends usually eat together (sharing the pain?) and to cook their own meals even if ‘that is a hassle for us’. Somehow eating with friends probably made the nasty food more palatable. Perhaps, as Wang admitted, the alternative is worse, which is to ‘eat instant food all the time’ at home. Ma also shared the same experience. After studying in the school for a few weeks, he made friends with a few other Chinese students, and had lots of meals together. ‘Often we would cook for ourselves in our places,’ he said.

The lesson that can be learned from them is that friends provide the support to cope with food problems.

#### ***4.5.10 Coping With Money Problems***

As Table 4.2 shows, only three participants mentioned money as a problem. Fiona said that the cost of living for her was about S\$1000 per month. This is not a small sum of money. Assuming this figure to be the norm among students, it is easy to imagine the stress that having insufficient money could have posed to the participants.

To cope, participants said they were careful in controlling expenses. For example, Fiona said she had to be careful in her spending, and that ‘we must study enough to make it worth our while.’ Xu was also conscious of the need to be careful with money. He said: ‘I don’t spend money on many things apart from the rental for my room, transport, food, and pay for my mobile phone charges. I always try to live within the budget set for me by my parents.’

There was no mention by any of the participants of working to earn some money. This is likely because students who are here on student passes are prohibited by the government from working in any form unless it is industrial attachment arranged by

the school. There was also no mention of borrowing from friends and others. This may be due to the social stigma attached to borrowing money, so nobody talks about it. Nevertheless it is not inconceivable for students to borrow money from friends to tide over a tight period.

#### ***4.5.11 Coping With School***

Another surprising finding is the absence of any mention of how the participants coped with problems with studying (as opposed to finding and changing schools). Considering that school takes up a good part of the daily life of the participants, it would have been reasonable to expect some discussion of how to handle the problems at school. Possible explanations for this silence may be the absence of trust and respect for their lecturers, and the lack of a well-established and recognised system of pastoral care and tutorial support for students within the school. For example, Li said that he found it ‘very tough’ studying the UOL (University of London) programme at a local private educational organisation. He said the subjects were very difficult, and the lecturers there were ‘not very experienced’ and ‘not very responsible’, so much so that he found ‘no point asking the lecturers to explain, as the time taken would be too long. I might as well solve the problems myself.’

Another participant felt that lecturers had no role to play in their private lives. ‘Some lecturers are very friendly but they could only help in terms of academic matters. Why would I want to ask them for help in my personal problems? They are my teachers,’ Wei said.

The cynical view held by students about lecturers has implications for school administration. The pre-eminent role of friends in helping foreign students cope with problems of acclimatisation cannot be denied, but a climate of trust for academic as well as administrative staff needs to be actively cultivated to provide students with another avenue of help.

4.6 Adjusting

Table 4.5.  
*Have You Adjusted To Life Here?*

Answers	Number of responses
Yes	5
Yes, but not the weather	4
Yes, but not the food	3
Not intending to stay here	6

4.6.1 *Yes, but...*

The present study found that all the twelve participants answered positively to the question of whether they have adjusted to living here in Singapore. Some like Pauline said they had grown familiar with the culture here, and had learned to adapt to some if not all aspects of life here, e.g. the food, the transportation system. Wang said: ‘I suppose I can say that I have adjusted to life here to a large extent. I don’t cry anymore. In fact I laugh a lot more nowadays. I have also learned to accept the school the way it is.’

However, a slight majority (7 out of 12) qualified their answers. There were still problems with food (3 responses) and the climate (4 responses). For example, Ma said the food was different from what she was used to. ‘I still can’t get used to it,’ she added. Wei added a sentimental touch when she said that ‘after three years here, I guess I can safely say I have adjusted to life here. However, that is not to say that I really enjoy it here’. Wu still could not get used to the humidity here. ‘I can say that I have adjusted to life here. Only the weather is unbearably hot,’ he said. Another participant who expressed mixed feelings was Fiona, who said: ‘I suppose I can say that I have, to some extent, considering that I feel happier now, (and) have a husband’, but she still missed the food in China, ‘the familiar things in my hometown...I miss the seasons too.’

According to Furnham and Bochner (1986) migrants from a country whose religion is fatalistic (low locus of control) should theoretically have more difficulty in adjusting than migrants from a country where people believe that one is able to manage and control one’s own future (high locus of control). If one accepts Furnham and

Bochner's definition of 'fatalism' as 'the generalised expectation that outcomes are determined by forces such as powerful others, luck or fate' (cited in Furnham, 1997, p25), it is possible to think of the Chinese as being generally fatalistic. If so, then this will explain why some participants find it difficult to acclimatise to the food and climate here.

#### ***4.6.2 Not Intending to Stay Here***

A sobering finding from the present study is the common feeling among the participants that their stay here is but a temporary stopover. Fiona's sentiment is typical: 'But if you ask me if I will settle here for good, I suppose at this moment I won't. I still look forward to going home'. Chen felt the same way. She said: 'I think deep down inside me, I still cannot feel that this is home for me. As for living here, I will definitely not want to live here for long. If I don't go straight home to China, I will probably go to Australia or even America to further my studies.' As for Wei, the sooner she got out of here, the better. She said: 'I just look forward to the day I get my degree, and then I will go home first before deciding what to do next.'

The male participants shared similar thoughts. Tian said that as far as studies and school was concerned, he could say that he had been able to adjust. However, he added that 'this is only one phase of my life, and I will move on to another country or back home to China once I obtain my degree'. In the case of Li, who had been in Singapore for four years, he felt he had enough experience to be able to cope with life here as well as with his studies. But he said that after completing his studies, he would go to Australia or the US for further studies, and hopefully get some working experience before going home to China.

In concluding this section, it is quite obvious that the participants have acclimatised to living and studying here, either with a sense of stoic acceptance or resignation and passive tolerance of factors that they could not control. This could be due their strong belief in the temporary nature of their sojourn, of better things to come, not here, but elsewhere. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the Singapore Government's goal of attracting and retaining talent from other parts of the world should take this into consideration if it is to be achieved.

**4.7      Satisfaction with school**

**Table 4.6a.**  
*How Satisfied Are You With the Support You Are Getting From the School in Adjusting to Life Here?*

Answers	Number of responses
Not satisfied	12
Problem with support	7
Problem with sales staff	3
Problem with fees	2
Problem with lecturers	2
Student pass issues	2
Problem with student councillors	1

**4.7.1    Not Satisfied**

The participants were unanimous in expressing unhappiness and dissatisfaction with their school or schools. (Note: the school that participants referred to does not necessarily mean the institution that they are currently studying in.) Dissatisfaction arises from several factors that are listed overleaf.

Table 4.6b.  
*Reasons For Being Dissatisfied With School*

Reasons
1. The school has not done anything much to help us settle in.
2. The school did not turn out to be what I expected.
3. The school couldn't seem to do what it was supposed to do.
4. The school is not effective in helping us.
5. The school does not seem to be able to do what it promised to do.
6. Nobody seemed to be in charge. There was apparently no management. The whole place was out of control.
7. People had a 'couldn't care less' attitude. When you ask a question, you get many different answers from different staff.
8. Frankly speaking, both the schools I attended had been disappointing. It also did not help with checking on our welfare.
9. People sit at their places, looking very busy, and not wanting to talk to us.
10. I don't get the feeling that we students are treated as number one in importance.
11. The focus of the school is to sign us up as students, make us pay our fees, and go through the exams. Their focus is not on whether we can cope with living here, our accommodation, our transportation, and our general well-being.
12. The perception among my fellow students is that we cannot depend on the school for our personal needs. The school is like government (bureaucracy), no point asking it for help.

It is evident from the long list above that the key factors concern expectations of performance and perceived delivery. Participants thought of the school as being uncaring and careless, and not delivering what was promised. One interesting area mentioned by a participant was in the school's advertising. Tian noted that 'the advertising and what I see in reality are divergent. There is a big difference between what is advertised and what we get. E.g. the computers in the classrooms are so old'. These factors have doubtlessly added to the stress that foreign students experienced during their stay here.

#### **4.7.2 Problems With Support**

As noted earlier in this chapter, study conditions affect the well being of international students (Poyrazil, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timimi, 2004, p73). It is possible to envisage school support as being part of the 'study conditions' that these researchers talked about. The support staff mentioned by the participants refers to the customer service staff who handle enquiries and student matters. The complaints centred on the lack of sufficient time given to the participants, lack of information, the poor attitude, and lack of attention.

For example, according to Wei, 'the staff just sit there. I cannot recall any real support that stood out. The service people seemed all so busy.' Another participant who complained about the service staff being too busy to attend to them was Wang, who said, 'the staffs in the school appear to be too busy to talk to us'.

Apart from complaints of busy staff was the grouse about not receiving information in a timely manner, or not receiving information at all. Wang said: 'There is no information from the school, only when they want us to pay money. There is no information about the exams, term breaks, nobody informs us. Nobody told us about semester openings.' To make things worse, she received 'different answers from different staff members'.

Tian felt that customer service attitude was very poor, especially the staff in the International Students' Services. 'Their attitude showed they were not interested in us, he said. Liu also felt the same way. He said: 'In terms of support for adjusting to life here, there is actually not much support. The International Student Services is really all about processing our student passes, nothing more.'

Staff turnover apparently led to lack of follow-up on things. For example, Zhou complained about missing records of fee payment. He said: 'There are many problems with the administration of the school. With such high staff turnover, a lot of follow-up is missing. I paid my fees, but I was told there was no record of that.' Chen provided another example of the lack of follow-up. 'Nobody told me about the school's opening term because I had already gone home for a visit. Somebody was supposed to mail the student visa to me, but I waited two months until the air ticket expired,' she said. This lapse could have been due to staff turnover.



The bottom line is that the service support provided by the school or schools is below expectations and has thus lost the confidence of the participants. As Wu griped, 'Support? The school had no support at all to help us settle in.' A feeling of resignation seemed to have pervaded the minds of at least one participant, who remarked: 'So far, I don't think there is much to say about this, because the support is minimal. What can you expect from them?' (Xu)

#### ***4.7.3 Problems With Sales Staff***

The issues with sales staff range from inconsistent information, to distrust and downright cheating. For example, Wei related what she experienced when she made enquiries about school fees. She said she visited a school and spoke to a sales person, and obtained some information about the school fees. 'Later when I visited the school again, I spoke to another sales person, I was told another set of fees. I was confused. I went back a third time, found the first sales person I had met, and asked him why there was a difference in the fees, and he said there was a promotion going on. I really felt upset that school fees could have promotional price. This is a school and not a supermarket. I cannot trust the sales people,' Wei said.

Tian spoke of a similar experience. He said: 'This school is OK, but in some respects is abnormal. For instance, the sales consultants – they make me very confused. They can quote different prices for the same course. I find it very strange that different consultants can quote different prices for the same course.'

Another example of problems with sales staff is even more shocking. Wang related how a sales consultant cheated her of her money, and then resigned. She said: 'I complained but got no response from the school. I had to pay higher fees because of the laptop promotion.' (Note: in this promotion, a free laptop computer was offered to students who signed up for certain programmes of study). In her case, as she explained it, the sales consultant took the school fees that she had paid but did not deliver the money to the school.

Considering that sales personnel often act as advisors and trusted confidantes of foreign students (Trueba and Zou, 1994; Tseng and Newton, 2002), their lack of integrity must be a major source of disappointment for students.

#### **4.7.4 Problems With Fees**

In the fight for a bigger share of the education market, schools have resorted to cutting prices and using traditional promotional gimmicks like special offers and discounts to lure students to sign up for courses. However, the effect of this on the perception by students is often overlooked.

Zhou cited the example of a school that tried to price its programmes in the upmarket range, but gave discounts at the same time. He said: 'The school increased its fees, and no reason was given to us. The content of the course is the same, the quality has not improved, so why is there such huge increase in fees? We can negotiate fees with our sales consultants. This is ridiculous. The school must have standard school fees for everyone, not like a marketplace. This is bad for the image of the school and bad for the image of Singapore. If there is no improvement, Chinese students will want to go to Australia.'

The use of pricing as a tool in the marketing mix is a well established one in marketing literature (Kotler, 1997). However, the same literature also contains sound advice on the need to ensure an integrated communication strategy in which all elements of the marketing mix are combined together to present the customer with a clear and distinct message about the quality of the package (Kotler, 1997, p561 – 587). Thus, having pricing and promotional strategies that do not fit in with the image of a school with best practices and quality will not only confuse the students but also harm the reputation of the school.

#### ***4.7.5 Problems With Lecturers***

Two participants voiced unhappiness with the quality and performance of the lecturers. Wang said: ‘Some lecturers speak too softly. Some are good, but there does not seem to be any specialisation. They teach everything. They cover too many subjects. There are too few lecturers. How is it possible for a lecturer who teaches marketing to also teach human resources subject?’ Another participant cited the quality of lecturers as another problem. Zhou felt that the contents of the lectures were not ‘meaty’ enough, and that he did not think he learned much by listening to the lectures.

It is a well-known fact that many schools are attempting to save costs by reducing the number of lecturers and getting the remaining lecturers to teach as many subjects as possible, often outside their core competencies. This has adverse implications for the reputation of the school. It also has repercussions on the wellbeing of the students. As Tseng and Newton (2002) note, one of the ways that foreign students use to acclimatise themselves to their new environment is to build relationships with advisors and instructors. Therefore, schools should take active measures to avoid the situation of having students lose trust and confidence in their lecturers.

#### ***4.7.6 Student Pass Issues***

The fear of having their student passes cancelled or not renewed is a source of worry for many students. This situation arises when and if students do not fulfil the minimum attendance requirements or are caught working when they are not permitted to do so. Application and renewal are done by the school on their behalf, with adequate proof of class attendance that satisfies the Immigration authorities. It is therefore a little comforting that only two participants mentioned this as something of a problem in their relationship with the school. The major gripe concerns the length of time taken to renew their student passes. ‘We had to wait a long time for it to be renewed, and the school could have done it for us much earlier,’ complained Pauline.

#### ***4.7.7 Problems With Student Councillors***

The student council is a body consisting of students who are supposed to represent the interests of students and to whom the rest of the student population can turn to for assistance. Councillors are either elected by the students themselves or are appointed by the school management. They serve a limited period of usually one year.

Student councillors can be a major resource for students having problems acclimatising to their new school environment. Indeed, they are part of the social network that researchers like Poyrazil, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timimi (2004), Qian Ning (2002), Cobb (1976) and Bochner, McLeod and Lin (1977) had in mind when discussing some of the ways foreign students cope with adjustment to a strange new environment. However, in the present study, the experience of at least one participant had not been an entirely happy one. Tian claimed that the student councillors (none of whom were from China) ‘don’t understand us, and we don’t know what they are talking about. I don’t really know what they are doing. All I see is they walk around with a superiority attitude and name tags hanging around their necks.’ Tian went on to explain how such councillors had been of help in his high school in China: ‘When I was in high school, we would approach the student councillors whenever we had problems, but here, we wouldn’t do that.’ When asked why he and his fellow Chinese colleagues did not participate in council work, he replied: ‘Anyway, there is no money to be paid to councillors, so why bother to stand for election. There is no meaning in participation. And we are here for a short time only.’

The value of the student council as a means of helping foreign students acclimatise should be fully recognised. A wider representation of nationalities may have to be implemented. The pride and prestige of being a student councillor ought to be emphasised so that more of the student population will participate.

4.8 Expectations From School

Table 4.7.  
*What Would You Like The School To Do To Help You?*

Answers	Number of responses
Jobs	7
Accommodation	6
Student services	6
Academic	5
Agents	2
Student council	2
Fees	1
No expectations	3

In an excellent article, Lacina (2002) gave many examples of how a school can prepare international students for a successful social experience in higher education. The examples cited include cross-cultural counselling; setting up of international student centres that organise social events for international students; websites; student volunteers/mentors who provide advice on housing, academic classes, transportation, shopping, and friends; and movie clubs to help promote friendship. Our participants echoed almost similar suggestions, and their comments are discussed below.

4.8.1 Jobs

The one suggestion that was made by the most number of participants was that for jobs. The general feeling among the participants was that the school should help them get jobs or at the very least, help them by giving information about employment opportunities. This popular request is no doubt due to the desire by many if not most foreign students to get some working experience before going home. By doing so, they hope to enhance their market value to future employers.

Ma suggested that job placements should be made part of the curriculum, especially at the degree level. ‘Even if the job placement is for a very short time, like say three months, it is still better than nothing,’ she said. The value of such job placements cannot be overstated. Not only do the students themselves get to learn

something of practical value, it is also 'good for the school as a selling point for its programmes' (Liu).

#### **4.8.2 Accommodation**

According to the findings, accommodation ranks as the most problematic issue for the participants. Hence it is only to be expected that many of them suggested that the school do something to help them in this area. Ma felt strongly that 'the first and most important thing the school can help us with is regarding our accommodation.'

Chen thought that at the very least, the school should have people to offer information about accommodation, and maybe even help them to make contact with reliable agents. Liu suggested that if the school could not provide hostels and living quarters, 'the least it should do is to give us a list of approved agents who are reliable and experienced. Post the names on the school's website.'

What is crucial to many students is the point of entry. For example, Wei noted that finding suitable accommodation upon first arrival in Singapore was a big problem. 'Most of us feel totally lost on the first day or week here. We are completely disoriented, so a good place to stay is very important.' Ideally, 'the school should have accommodation already planned for us before we arrive here,' said Wang.

Others proposed that the school provide hostel facilities on-campus. Ma expressed the wish to stay in the campus, 'enjoying life with other students, being young. I want to enjoy the atmosphere of hostel life that is not overcrowded, stressful. So the school should seriously consider building an in-campus hostel for foreign students like me.' Xu supported this suggestion, and argued that it would 'be best if there is a hostel in the campus. The atmosphere is different. Now there is no feeling of a university. Back in China, this would be unacceptable. A university must have a campus, and its own buildings.'

This desire for the school to help in whatever form with solving the headache of accommodation is a strong incentive for the school. Not only may the accommodation problem be relieved somewhat (it does not mean that students will be satisfied with the hostel facilities), but more importantly, the relationship between the student and school should see some improvement.

#### **4.8.3 Student Services**

The types of services provided for students can go a long way to help students enjoy an easier transition to a new life here. They also reflect the level of commitment to students on the part of the school administration. Conversely, poor quality and delivery of student services can be detrimental to the students' welfare as much as it can damage the reputation of the school. Our participants made several suggestions for improvements in student services, and these are discussed here.

Zhou suggested the setting up of a department dedicated to student problems. He said: 'We have agents cheating us, landlords bullying us; the school doesn't help us with any of these problems. In Australia, schools have a department that helps overseas students with such problems.'

Speaking from her personal experience on her arrival in Singapore for the first time in December 2002, Ma felt that being met at the airport would have been 'a nice welcome to a strange new place.' Hence she suggested a Meeting Service for new arrivals. The psychological effect of such a welcome would have been very positive for the student.

Another type of service suggested was an information service that gives students all the information they need. Wei thought that such a service could be in the form of a website like [www.sgchinese.com](http://www.sgchinese.com), containing a lot of information that is relevant to living here, such as accommodation, bus services, places for food, etc. from the school's point of view, it could be used as a tool for communication like an Intranet. A search of the websites maintained by the major private educational institutions in Singapore showed that most of them contain links to various government and non-government organisations that provide such information. Perhaps the desire to avoid duplication of effort and the tedious work involved in updating such information may have precluded the private educational institutions from offering anything more than the most basic information.

Other suggestions to improve the services offered by schools include concessionary discounts for mobile phone calls, bus and MRT fares, cinema tickets, etc; factory visits; a buddy system in which every new student is matched with another student who has been here earlier, 'who can show me around the campus, explain some

things like rules and regulations to me, bring me to places for food, the local library, and so on' (Chen).

#### ***4.8.4 Student Council***

As was discussed earlier, some participants felt dissatisfaction with the amount of help that the student council gave to students. Tian, who offered the idea that there should be 'a council for Chinese students run by Chinese students', made one suggestion that sounded rather parochial. According to his argument, 'with non-Chinese representatives, there is a communication gap'. However, another participant, Zhou, pointed out that 'the Chinese students are not united and not interested in joining the council'. As such, according to him, 'the school should ensure that all major nationalities are represented on the council'. If a student council were viewed as an instrument to help students acclimatise to the new environment, then an inclusive, mixed-race, grouping would appear to offer more opportunities for cross-cultural understanding.

#### ***4.8.5 Academic***

The suggestions offered by participants in respect to improvements in the academic dimension of the school included employing foreign (presumably white-skinned and therefore better?) lecturers, giving more homework to students, providing more subject variety, and offering (English) language classes.

Xu thought 'it is better to use foreign lecturers for degree programmes, since they are foreign degrees. It is not so credible to use only local lecturers. Chinese students place great weight on a foreign certificate.' Wu proposed that three hours of study per day were too little. 'The school should keep students busy. Give them homework; make homework count towards the final assessment. Make class presentations count too,' he said. Zhou opined that private schools here had little variety. 'All of them offer the same subjects, in business, IT, not much to choose between them,' he said. Lastly, Wang felt that more should be done to help students who are weak in English by conducting more English language lessons. This last



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suggestion is perhaps the most relevant to helping foreign students to acclimatise to the Singapore environment, which to a large extent is English speaking.

#### ***4.8.6 Agents***

Two participants specifically mentioned ways to overcome the problem with rogue student agents. Wu proposed that the school should appoint reliable agents ‘who must take responsibility for the total welfare of the students.’ Liu said that if the school could not provide students with hostels and living quarters, ‘the least it should do is to give us a list of approved agents who are reliable and experienced. Post the names on the school’s website.’ Being on the ‘approved’ list is a sort of accreditation for the agents, and should be welcomed by bona fide agents. Students would also appreciate such a measure since it should help to reduce the complaints about errant agents who ‘over-promise’, cheat, or make false promises.

#### ***4.8.7 Fees***

As was discussed earlier in this chapter, some participants reported encountering situations where different sales personnel quote different fees, and of sales personnel absconding with the money that the students had paid. As Li said, when the school quotes variable fees, this would cause a lot of confusion among students. And when the school disclaims any responsibility for what its employees do, the ones who suffer are the students.

The simple solution is firstly to standardise school fees, and secondly to separate the sales function from the handling of money.

#### **4.8.8 *No expectations***

A telling response from students who have endured poor service and disappointment is that they have ‘no expectations’ of getting any help from the school. Fortunately in the present study, only three participants expressed resignation over the state of affairs that they face in school. Students who are unhappy and do not express any expectation of help or improvement will likely not be loyal to the school nor are proud of being part of it. It is akin to the unhappy customer who does not complain but simply go elsewhere and, worse, warn others against joining the school. If left unchecked, the ill effects of the silent killer will show up in terms of lower enrolment and poorly adjusted students. Thus, as Tian advised, ‘The school should think hard about how to help itself.’

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **5.1 Overview**

This chapter revisits the background and rationale for this portfolio, and provides a concise summary of the major findings of the study. Key new learnings are highlighted. Implications of the study are discussed, with recommendations for government and private educational institutions summarised in a checklist. The chapter concludes with a statement of the limitations of this study, and some recommendations for further research.

## **5.2 Rationale for Portfolio**

A recent survey conducted by Synovate Business Consulting estimated that globally, there are two million foreign students studying abroad (cited in Duhamel, 2004). The Singapore government estimated that there were some 50,000 international students in Singapore as at September 2001 (Report of the ERC, 2002). It hopes to turn Singapore into a global education hub by achieving a foreign student intake of 150,000 by the year 2012 and have a significant share of the US\$2.2 trillion world education market (The Straits Times, 10 September 2004).

According to a report in a local newspaper (Streets, 15 September, 2004), while only about 200,000 Chinese students studied in overseas universities just five years ago, more than 750,000 will do so by 2010, and this number will reach three million by 2025. The Straits Times in a special report dated December 3, 2006 estimated the number of Chinese students in Singapore at 33,000. According to the Chinese embassy in Singapore, about 10,000 of these Chinese students were studying in 400 private schools here (Streets, 15 September, 2004).

A survey of the literature found that the experiences of foreign students in Singapore have not received as much attention from researchers as they deserved. Hence this portfolio set out to uncover the problems that foreign students, specifically from one important market, China, faced when newly arrived in Singapore. A secondary objective was to understand the ways by which these students coped with such problems. One major thesis of this portfolio being that problems associated with school must have some impact on the well-being of students, another objective was to find out what problems the students faced concerning school.

### **5.3 Conceptual Framework**

Using a conceptual framework adapted from Furnham and Tresize's (1983, p13-29) model, problems facing foreign students can be classified into external and internal factors, and coping mechanisms can also be classified into external and internal mechanisms. A graphical representation of the conceptual framework used in this study was shown in Fig. 3.1 of this paper.

External factors are environmental factors that are usually beyond the control of the students themselves: racial discrimination, language, accommodation, food, and climate. Internal factors are those that are usually within the control of the students, and these include loneliness, stress, separation reactions, lack of social network, personality, locus of control, and health.

The second part of the conceptual framework is about the coping mechanisms adopted by foreign students. These can be grouped into external resources and internal resources. External resources include social support, use of technology such as the Internet and the mobile phone, religion, exercise, learning a new language, training for inter-cultural skills, use of artefacts, while Internal resources include acknowledging self-worth, self-examination or introspection.

Twelve Chinese students (six male and six female) were chosen through personal contact. They had a mean age of 19.4 years when they first arrived in Singapore, and had been staying in Singapore for an average of 3.33 years at the time of the conversations. They were interviewed in-depth outside normal classes over a period of about one month in the middle of 2005. The conversations, in Mandarin, were recorded on tape with the knowledge and permission of the participants. The transcripts were then translated into English.

The participants were asked what problems they faced when they first arrive in Singapore; how they coped with these problems; whether they had adjusted to life and study here; whether they were satisfied with the support they got from the school in adjusting to life here; and what they would like the school to do to help them.

#### **5.4 Major Findings**

In analysing the responses from the twelve participants, it is noted that there were no perceptible differences in problems or coping strategies between those who were older in age upon first arrival, and the younger ones. Neither were there many differences in the problems concerning acclimatisation between those who had been here longer, and those who were newer arrivals. Except for the feeling of homesickness males saw the problems in the same light as the females, and coped in almost similar ways. In other words, this study found that the problems of acclimatisation and the coping methods were universal among the Chinese participants.

The main reasons why the participants came to Singapore were primarily to learn English and to obtain better paper qualifications. Singapore was chosen as the preferred destination primarily because of its reputation as a safe and clean place with a multi-lingual environment. Its Chinese-speaking environment also makes acclimatisation supposedly easier. Singapore's proximity to China was also an attraction to the participants. These findings present opportunities for the government and private schools.

When answering the question on the types of problems they faced when they first arrived in Singapore, most participants said they experienced problems with accommodation. Other major problems include negative experiences with the local populace, dissatisfaction with the school they attended, and having to change school. Inability to communicate fluently in English and not having enough opportunities to practise it were also cited as problems. Another notable problem was with student agents. Other lesser problems concerned the quantity and quality of food, homesickness and missing home. Money was not a major concern. Neither was religion, probably because of the open and free attitude of Singaporean society towards religion. The findings generally support what previous researchers like Furnham and Tresize (1983), Murphy-Lejeune (2002), Yu (2006), Lacina (2002) and Poyrazil et al (2004) also found. What could be different in this study are that agents and school were identified as being problematic, while accommodation was probably cited more often than in other studies.

In terms of coping strategies and mechanism, social support, in particular friends among their own Chinese, were the most frequently cited way of handling the problems of acclimatisation. Moving house was the preferred way of coping with the problems of

accommodation. Few of the participants had close friendship with people from other countries, not even from the host country, Singapore. Contact with family was another frequently mentioned way of coping. The role of technology was clearly important in helping participants cope with problems of acclimatisation. In particular, participants mentioned the mobile phone, email and MSN chats to connect with family and friends, and surfing the World Wide Web for information. One website, [www.sgchinese.com](http://www.sgchinese.com) was mentioned as an important source for information. The library was cited as a means of escaping loneliness and finding something to occupy time or to indulge in introspection, as well as being a refuge from the humidity in the weather. Little mention was made of religion as a means of coping.

On the issue of coping methods, the present study also supports the works of others (Poyrazil et al, 2004; Qian Ning, 2002; Leung, 2001; and Yu, 2006) who found friends and social networks as important. This should not be surprising considering that the collectivistic culture of the Chinese (Hofstede, 1994, p263) encourages communal sharing of problems and their solutions. The present study does not support the theory of Bochner, McLeod and Lin (1977) who propose that the third network of multi-cultural friends and acquaintances provides companionship for recreational, non-cultural and non-task oriented activities. Instead, the present study supports Yu's (2006) thesis that Chinese students depend primarily on the networks they formed among the Chinese students themselves.

The present study clearly established that the mobile phone and the Worldwide Web are the pre-eminent tools in helping participants to maintain contact with friends and family. While other researchers (Qian Ning, 2002; Furnham & Bochner, 1986) found artefacts and religion to be important means of moderating the problems of acclimatisation, very little mention of these were made by the Chinese participants in the present study.

In response to the question of whether they felt they had acclimatised to life here, participants gave a qualified affirmative answer. Food and the climate remained factors that still posed difficulties. These uncontrollable factors are handled by own cooking and eating with friends, in the case of food, and finding refuge in air-conditioned places like the library, in the case of the climate.

Since the purpose of coming to Singapore was to learn English and to acquire marketable qualifications, this study devoted much space to understanding the problems of school and how the Chinese students coped with such problems. In this respect, the present study found that participants were unanimous in having less than satisfying experiences with the schools they attended. As with other problems, participants turned to their friends and family rather than their lecturers or school staff for help. Their suggestions for improvement of the quality of support given by schools revolve more around providing jobs or information about jobs, and less about their current problems like accommodation and rogue agents.

Dissatisfaction with the school was rampant. The main reasons were poor service, untrustworthy sales personnel, and unsatisfactory academic performance. Suggestions were made by participants for improvements, such as providing students with jobs and job placements, improving overall service levels, providing hostel facilities or at least information about suitable accommodation, and exercising more control over student agents.

School plays a major role in helping the student to acclimatise to the new environment. Trueba and Zou (1994) suggest that 'the social support that students receive from teachers, administrators and peers allows them to surmount considerable obstacles and succeed in school.'(p131)

From the present study, it is clear that the participants were unhappy with the overall level of support provided by their schools. Discontent was expressed over a wide range of service and quality issues, including perceived absence of attention to the students' needs, inability to fulfil promises, lack of time to attend to the students, poor attitude towards service, and poor performance from sales and academic staff. As one of the participants said, 'With the kind of pricing schemes, the attitude of its sales people and customer service people, I think students will get turned off.'

Under such circumstances, it is easy to imagine that students will hardly turn to the school and its staff for the social support that they need. If so, it will be such a pity that the opportunity for the school to help students acclimatise to life here is missed.



## **5.5 Implications**

The present study places more weight than had other researchers on the problems of accommodation and schooling. It finds student agents to be a new issue not previously identified as being a major problem. It lends support to the findings of other researchers concerning the crucial role of social networks of family and friends in providing support and information for foreign students. The present study points in the direction that such social networks tend to be uni-cultural and ethnocentric rather than multi-cultural. Religion and the use of artefacts do not appear to figure prominently among the ways of coping with problems of acclimatisation. Conversely, the present study highlights the importance of technology in helping foreign students to stay connected to friends and family and to obtain information that helps them to improve their lives.

The present study also offers lessons for school administrations and government decision-makers. Good student service and high academic standards are competitive strengths of our country that must never be compromised. Both school administrations and the government have to know the needs of foreign students in order to achieve the stated goal of 150,000 foreign students by 2012. Another goal of the government is the long-term increase in the population of Singapore so as to sustain its economic wellbeing as a nation. To achieve this goal inward migration of qualified migrants is needed, and in this respect Singapore is competing with many other nations such as Australia. The present study uncovered the common feeling among participants that their stay here is but a temporary stopover. If this thinking is prevalent among foreign students in Singapore, then it bodes ill for the nation.

5.6 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the present study and lessons learned from the literature, an eleven-point checklist summarising the key recommendations for action is provided in the Table below, with more detailed discussion of the key recommendations subsequently.

Table 5.  
*Recommendations for action*

Checklist of action items
<i>For School Administration:</i>
1. Provide pre-arrival information.
2. Provide Meet-and-Greet services.
3. Introduce a ‘buddy’ scheme for all newly arriving foreign students.
4. Provide on-campus hostel facilities.
5. Greater use of information and communication technology (ICT).
6. Compulsory English language classes for all newly recruited students.
7. Arrange job attachments and internships for all students.
8. Ensure all academic staff are fully qualified and properly deployed.
9. Introduce a student council with appointed members.
<i>For Government:</i>
10. Lease land at subsidised rates for private educational institutions for campus facilities.
11. Further tighten current regulations governing private educational institutions to ensure best practices.
12. Maintain an open door policy with regards to foreign educational institutions seeking direct entry into Singapore.

### ***5.6.1 Pre-arrival information***

As Chiu (1995) noted, providing authoritative information to students well before they arrive in the host country can go a long way to alleviate people with high ‘anticipatory fear’. Drawing from this learning, it is recommended that all applicants for school places should be given full and up-to-date information about as much about Singapore and the school as possible.

Essential information would include accommodation costs, travel expenses, languages used, and other cultural ‘shockers’ that can be gleaned from students who have been through the process.

### ***5.6.2 Meet and Greet services***

As the present study found, foreign students appreciate having someone to be on hand when they first arrive at a strange land. It is like having a nice warm cup of coffee waiting when one comes in from the cold outside. The school can give the foreign student a good start with a warm welcome in the form of a well-trained and friendly greeting service.

All foreign students arriving at Singapore’s Changi International Airport should be met by a representative of the private educational institution, day or night. This will ensure that new arrivals will be partly cushioned against the trauma of landing in a strange new environment with no friends or acquaintances. The meet-and-greet service may be outsourced to a professional outfit who will be appropriately remunerated. The quality of their service should be monitored through a feedback form to be completed by the newly arriving student.

After meeting and receiving the student at the airport, the greeter should bring the student to the latter’s place of residence, be it the school hostel, or the student’s own accommodation. The second stage of the greeting process is to arrange for a time to bring the student to the school to meet his ‘buddy’ or, if the student declines the need for a buddy, to meet the student services staff. After handing over the newly arrived student to his/her ‘buddy’ or student services staff (as the case may be), the entire meet-and-greet process is completed. The student (or staff) signs off on a form to

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acknowledge satisfactory completion of this process so that the greeting service will receive remuneration.

The effectiveness of the meet-and greet service can and should be monitored continuously through the feedback form submitted by the foreign students.

### **5.6.3 *Buddy scheme***

The purpose of the ‘buddy’ scheme is to provide newly arriving students with a friend to whom they may turn for advice and companionship in the first few weeks of their arrival in Singapore. Therefore the ‘buddy’ has the role of helping the new student cope with issues of settling into the new environment.

The buddy scheme involves a relationship between a second- or third-semester student giving assistance to a new student for a period of three months. It is a purely voluntary system. The school will maintain a register of buddies and new students who request for this service, and ‘match make’ the two parties. Alternatively, this role can be devolved to the Students’ Council.

‘Buddies’ are student-volunteers who have been in Singapore for more than one year. Each volunteer must agree to look after at least one new student for a minimum period of three months. At the end of the ‘buddy period’, both the buddy and the new student will sign off on a form that describes the degree of each other’s satisfaction with this helping service. In recognition of his/her contribution, the buddy will receive a Letter of Commendation (or Testimonial).

On the part of the newly arrived student, he/she may sign up for this buddy scheme at the time of application for admission to the school. He/she is free to opt-out of this scheme anytime.

#### ***5.6.4 Hostel facilities***

Since one of the most critical problems faced by foreign students is that of accommodation, it is suggested that on-campus hostel facilities be provided for all foreign students. Space should be allocated for this purpose, and the necessary infrastructure should be set up to administer this complex and potentially problematic service that brings with it separate challenges.

However, an informal check with the teaching staff in the school showed that the provision of hostel facilities would bring with it attendant problems of discipline, rent collection, hygiene, utilities usage, and so on, to the extent that most staff members were unwilling to shoulder the onerous responsibility of managing the hostel. 'No, not even for more pay,' said one male colleague.

Furthermore, not all new students will require nor wish to stay on-campus, and it is also not always possible to provide this service. Thus the school should tie-up with accredited real estate agents who provide consultation services on accommodation at special 'student' concessionary commission rates.

#### ***5.6.5 Information and communication technology***

Information and communication technology (ICT) tools are intended to facilitate the learning process. It is useful firstly to be clear about what ICT is. ICT in education covers a wide range of products including computers, digital cameras, LAN, the Internet and World Wide Web, CD-ROMs, DVDs, as well as software applications (Blurton, 1999). This term covers computer-mediated communication (CMC) which refers to the use of the computer and the Internet and electronic mail (email) to communicate with others. It is the transmission and reception of messages using computers as input, storage, output, and routing devices. CMC includes information retrieval, electronic mail, bulletin boards, and computer conferencing (Blurton, 1999).

The use of computers coupled with the Internet means that learners can study at home without physical contact with their instructors. This has great significance not only in terms of pedagogy, content design, costs, instructional and learning skills, among others but also in terms of the cross-cultural adaptation needs of the learner.

Interactions between instructor and student as well as among students themselves are important in facilitating the learning process. Moore (1989) described three types of interaction, learner- learner interaction, learner-instructor interaction, and learner-content interaction. Hillman, Willis, and Gunawardena (1994) introduced a fourth type of interaction – learner-interface interaction that occurs between learner and the technologies used to deliver instruction. Studies have been made into the effects that the various types of interactions have on learning efficacy (Ritchie and Newby, 1989; Fulford and Zhang, 1993). The value of interactions is shown by Fulford and Zhang (1993) who found that students that had higher level of interaction had more positive attitudes and higher levels of achievements. O'Donoghue, Caswell, and Singh (1998) also found that students need interaction within their community for motivation and to reaffirm views and opinions.

It is reasonable to postulate that ICT may enhance and increase communication between people, creating 'virtual learning communities' of people from diverse places. Bellman (1992) reported that computer conferencing increases literacy, encouraging usually silent students to participate in class discussions.

Be that as it may, there are real concerns about the degree of participation by non-English speaking learners using ICT tools. For example, Witsel (2003) suggested that one reason for Chinese/Asian students not being participative, whether in a physical or a virtual classroom, is the fear of 'losing face' in public by giving a 'wrong' answer and being *told* that it was incorrect in public by the lecturer.

While the debate continues over whether the use of ICT tools help or hinder interactions, some researchers are already confident of the benefits of online learning. Brogan (1999) reported that U.S. colleges experienced success with online learning environments, judging from "increased pass rates, increased student engagement and satisfaction, flexibility in delivering content, more personalized instruction based on assessments, and improved cost-effectiveness for the institution" (p14).

To conclude, the recommendation being made here is that more extensive use should be made of ICT not only as a learning tool for students but also to help newly arriving foreign students cope with problems of acclimatisation.

### ***5.6.6 Compulsory English classes***

The literature and the present study identified poor grasp of the local language as one of the factors that contribute to poor acclimatisation of foreign students to their new environments. Since private educational institutions in Singapore use English as the medium of instruction and the general population speak English, it is recommended that all foreign students be required to undergo compulsory English language classes for six months from date of arrival, unless adequate proof of English language proficiency can be evidenced. This should be a stringent requirement as the present study has shown that inability to speak and understand the English language is a major problem that foreign students face, and a hindrance to the process of acclimatisation. The teaching staff in the school also attested to the poor command of English on the part of the Chinese students as being a major hurdle that needs to be overcome before the students can proceed up the academic ladder.

Ideally, foreign students should undergo a process of language proficiency test at the point of registration, which occurs usually in their own home countries. However, doing so may compromise the reliability and validity of the tests. On the other hand, to conduct the screening tests only when they arrive in Singapore may cause inconvenience and financial difficulties to those students who fail the tests and have to prolong their studies as a result. Therefore, it may be necessary to conduct the tests in two stages, the first one at the home countries of the foreign students, and a second, confirmatory test when they arrive here in Singapore. Adopting this two-stage test process should provide both the student and the school a better way of gauging the student's language capability and hence his/her ability to cope with life here.

### ***5.6.7 Job attachments and internships***

As the present study found, foreign students expect the school to help them find jobs. When asked what they would like the school to do for them, 5 out of 12 participants mentioned jobs. Although the Singapore government prohibits visitors on student passes to work, temporary job attachments and internships are permissible if these are part of the approved curricula. When considered together, these two factors provide a strong argument in favour of private educational institutions to weave job attachments and internships into every module being offered.

In this context, 'job attachments' and 'internships' are used synonymously.

Before discussing the types of jobs that should be arranged for students, and the process of doing so, it is pertinent to take a step back and look at the issue of curriculum. Curriculum is defined as 'all the planned learning opportunities offered to learners by the educational institution and the experiences learners encounter when the curriculum is implemented' (Print, 1993, p.7). Grundy (1987) points to three different types of interests that have a bearing on the types of curriculum. The first, technical interest, is associated with an empirical-analytic perspective and 'objective knowledge'. A curriculum informed by technical interests will promote a view of knowledge as fixed and bounded. The second, practical interest, in contrast, is associated with 'understanding and interaction', and the generation of 'subjective knowledge' (p.15). A curriculum informed by practical interest promotes knowledge as subjective and open to interpretation (p.69). The third, emancipatory interest, is concerned with 'empowerment' (p.19). A curriculum that is informed and driven by such interest involves its participants in 'action which attempts to change the structures within which learning occurs...' (p.19). Both learner and teacher are involved in the process of creating curriculum and are engaged in a form of praxis. Both the production and application of knowledge is within the control of the curriculum participants (p.104). This process is socially emancipating, and learning is considered as a social act.

Clearly, therefore, adopting job attachments and internships as part of a school's curriculum meets the second and third 'interests' that Grundy (1987) postulates. Curriculum content cannot be fixed and rigid. In extending the notion of learning as being a lifelong necessity, the role of a private educational institution in facilitating adults to continue learning new skills and measuring the outcomes of their learnings



against benchmarks established by ‘powerful’ economic, social and political discourses, becomes an important issue. With the need to meet the requirements of the marketplace being paramount, the economic or market discourse has a major impact on curriculum development in a private institution.

Assuming we accept the argument for having job attachments and internships, we turn to the question of what types of jobs foreign students may be placed with, and the types of employers. Obviously, students, whether foreign or Singaporean, having no working experience and proper qualifications, cannot expect to be placed in well-paying, managerial jobs with any degree of responsibility. Indeed, anecdotal evidence tells us that many students fortunate enough to find temporary vacation jobs complain that they were made to do largely menial and/or clerical work unbefitting future bosses and entrepreneurs. It is therefore important to impress upon students that the job attachments and internships to be offered are meant to give them some exposure to the working world, with no guarantee that they will be well-paying or high-level. The least that should be offered with such job attachments is that the jobs should have some relevance to their field of study in school.

The process of job attachment begins as early as the instant the student registers for a course of study. He/she should be given clear indication of whether job attachment is part of the course. The duration and timing of the job attachment should be clearly spelled out for him/her. At the end of the attachment, certificates of attendance should be issued. To make this system works, it is imperative for the school administration to have an ongoing, never-ending programme of liaison, networking and alliances with employers.

#### ***5.6.8 Qualified academic staff***

From the present study, it was found that quality of academic staff influence the perception of the students about the quality of the school as a whole. In addition to this, some participants expect lecturers to have specialisations, rather than try to teach subjects of differing disciplines; doing so adversely affect the credibility of both the school and the lecturers.

The reputation of a school rests as much on the relevance of its programme offerings as the effectiveness of its academic staff. The school must therefore ensure that all academic staff are qualified in their specialised fields of teaching. The qualifications of the lecturers are a major selling point for the school. Minimum academic qualifications for entry should be not lower than a Masters degree in any discipline.

#### ***5.6.9 Student Council***

The aim of a student council is two-fold. Firstly it is to give students, an important stakeholder, a voice in the management of the school. Secondly, it provides an avenue for students to exercise leadership styles and qualities critical for their success in their future roles as managers and business leaders. One major issue with having a student council in a private educational institution is the short duration of the courses such that students do not have enough time to get through their studies and yet have time remaining to contribute to the student council. The time factor will be less daunting for those students who pursue a three-year diploma-to-degree programme.

Assuming that students generally accept the concept of a student council and are willing and able to participate, it is necessary then to talk about the nature and composition of such a council.

The student council is an important tool for two-way communication between students and the management of the school. As such, care should be taken to ensure adequate representation of all student nationalities and from all the programmes of study offered by the school. While some students may be keen to participate in the activities, there are likely to be those who do not, as evidenced from the findings in this present study. It is therefore argued that having a democratically elected student council does

not serve the purpose as well as proportional representation. This in turn can only be achieved by having a council that is fully appointed by the school management. In this way, membership from all major ethnic groups and faculties can be assured. The membership of the council can be flexible depending on the number of nationalities, and programme intakes. Representation can also be by class, with one student member per class sitting in the council. The term of office of each council should not exceed one year and perhaps even six months, so as to give more students an opportunity to participate.

The role of the student council should include organising student activities, talks and forums on economic, business, and political issues, dialogues between management and students concerning all matters related to student welfare and facilities, and so on.

#### ***5.6.10 Land for campuses***

On the supply side, the Singapore government is keen to develop the nation as a global player in the education industry. One of the strategies that it is adopting is to create a more conducive environment for schools and students by putting in place a business-friendly framework to enhance the schools' infrastructure facilities and curriculum to reinforce the concept of Singapore being a Global Schoolhouse (Economic Development Board, *Annual Report 2003/2004*, Singapore).

One of the most visible ways that the government has done to help the private education industry in Singapore is to give private schools the opportunity to lease State property as school campuses. This is aimed at attracting international students who want to study and even live in a proper campus setting, despite the increasing use of the virtual classroom (Ziguras, 2001, p10).

Given the national goal, all private educational institutions that intend to enroll foreign students on a fulltime basis should be required to have land for campus facilities. Doing so raises the barrier to entry to the industry as well as being a barrier to exit, so that only serious players will be motivated to become a player. More

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importantly in the context of this present study, the accommodation woes of foreign students should be mitigated to some extent.

#### ***5.6.11 Tighter regulations***

Last year, the local media carried news reports about the closure of a private educational institution in Singapore. As a result of that closure, many students were left in the lurch, having paid their fees to the school but being unable to get their money back. They also had to transfer to other schools to continue with their education. Lecturers and other staff were also reported in the press as not having received several months of wages. The media went on to describe how Singapore's image as a regional hub for continuing education suffered a major dent since most of the students in the bankrupt school were from countries like China, Vietnam, Indonesia, and other neighbouring countries. This incident was one of a series of private school closures in Singapore. Another that comes to mind was of a private school that accepted foreign students for courses that it did not offer. That school was only found out and taken to task by the authorities after the students complained to the Ministry of Education. The present study also reported incidences of dishonest sales persons and unfulfilled promises.

What these incidents highlight is the important role of the government in controlling and regulating private education in Singapore. Because of the reputation of the country for quality and standards, students and their parents from other countries expect private enterprises to be also of similar high standards, without realising that, as in all marketised businesses, it is a situation of 'caveat emptor'. What is more significant is that aggrieved customers (the students and their parents) expect the Singapore government to do something about this state of affairs, even to the extent of punishing the culprits and regulating the market in tighter ways than it already does. While the government sees itself as being the primary provider of education at the primary, secondary and tertiary education in Singapore, computer and commercial/business studies are left to market forces to the extent that private enterprises are free to supply such services within certain guidelines designed to protect consumer interests (<http://www.moe.gov.sg/privatesch>. Accessed 20 March 2006).

Private schools in Singapore are governed by The Education Act, Cap. 87 (1985 Edition). This Act requires private schools conducting educational courses such as those

stated above to be registered with the Ministry of Education (MOE). In addition, the Act requires private schools to register new teachers, courses and members of the management staff. To be registered, prospective private school operators need to fulfil certain requirements. For example, “members of management committees (i.e. managers) operating private schools are expected to be persons of exemplary conduct possessing the knowledge, management skill and experience in education related matters. Applications by persons with questionable background and/or assessed as lacking in qualifications, skill and experience in educational matters will be rejected” ([http://www.moe.gov.sg/privatesch/reg\\_managers.htm](http://www.moe.gov.sg/privatesch/reg_managers.htm). Accessed 20 March 2006). These regulations demonstrate that while the Singapore government allows free enterprise for commercial courses, clear boundaries are drawn up for the private sector. At the same time, the MOE tries to disclaim responsibility or endorsement or accreditation of the quality of the schools, courses and teachers offered, by saying that, as all private schools are owned by private entities, the operators themselves are responsible for the management and administration of their schools and courses ([http://www.moe.gov.sg/privatesch/reg\\_schs.htm](http://www.moe.gov.sg/privatesch/reg_schs.htm). Accessed 20 March 2006). This control on the one hand and disclaimer on the other has caused many foreign students to be confused about the accountability of private education in Singapore.

The key issue that can be identified in this situation is that the customers want and expect government intervention to protect their interests. The free market system is not working efficaciously in giving customers the best deal, to the extent that it is in the public and national interest that government must regulate the industry. One thing good came out of the scandals mentioned earlier in this section. As a result, the government initiated a scheme for the protection of foreign students. The Ministry of Education created an accreditation programme for local private schools and a CaseTrust for Education scheme. The accreditation programme offers an upgrade path to the local private schools by accrediting them for their capabilities to deliver quality courseware, while the CaseTrust for Education scheme ensures that the schools have adopted good student protection and welfare practices and standards.

To ensure consistent high quality, the Singapore Quality Class for Private Education Organisations (SQC for PEOs), a trustmark of quality, has also been put in place. SPRING Singapore (the national agency tasked with the responsibility of sustaining Singapore's productivity growth and competitiveness) launched SQC for

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PEOs to encourage PEOs to build more robust systems and processes for greater competitiveness and business performance. (<http://www.firefly.gov.sg/ets/html/applicant/Spring.html> Retrieved 16 May 2005). The SQC award, which is benchmarked against internationally recognised standards such as the Malcolm Baldrige Award, recognises academic organizations that have achieved a high standard of business excellence. Instead, it aims to encourage over 400 private commercial, IT, fine arts and language schools operating in Singapore to improve their business processes, excel and ultimately compete for a bigger market share in the region. Benefits given to award recipients include expedited visa processing for their international students, and increased visibility in government promotional initiatives. Sixteen private institutions received the SQC for PEOs awards in 2003.

In 2004, the Singapore government established an Education Excellence Framework (EEF). This framework safeguards student interests and develops high quality education providers in Singapore. To enhance student protection, the government's Economic Development Board together with the Consumer Association of Singapore (CASE), the Singapore Tourism Board (STB), the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA), SPRING Singapore and the various Private Education Organisation (PEO) associations, implemented the Student Protection Scheme (SPS) in December 2004. Among other features of this new scheme, any private school that wants to enrol foreign students has to deposit the fees collected from foreign students into an escrow account with a bank. These fees cannot be released until the course for which the student signs up has been delivered.

It is argued here that such tight regulations must continue to be enforced. Reputations that are at stake are not only those of the private education institutions, but also of the nation as a whole.

#### *5.6.12 Open door policy*

Small nations without natural resources need to master the language of commerce and technology to survive in the global economy. As Stiglitz (2002, p20) points out, 'education needs to be directed at developing entrepreneurship and the ability to cope with a fast changing world.' Without opening its economy to the world, Singapore will be unable to learn the latest and the best from the rest of the world. Insularity will breed parochialism and a slow death.

The WTO through the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) has since 1999 been urging countries of the world to remove discriminatory practices against foreign education providers by insisting on equal or better treatment to that of domestic providers. The ultimate goal of GATS is to remove all restrictions on international trade in education including the Internet. The better treatment needed may include equal subsidies to foreign education providers, and non-interference in the nature of the curriculum even by an accredited agency (Muhamad, in Yeoh et al, 2003, pp14-17).

It is thus imperative for the Singapore economy to be open and for local enterprises to fight international competitors for survival. In the case of education, when the futures of young lives are at stake, we owe it to the future generations to provide quality education.

The entry of several major players in the Singapore education scene in 2004 attests to the attractiveness of Singapore as a global education hub. The vibrancy in this sector is also enhanced with the presence of many diverse players – from specialty schools to local privately funded independent secondary schools – across different geographies and disciplines (according to the Education Statistics Digest 2004, published by the Planning Division of the Ministry of Education, April 2005, there were 147 commercial schools, 43 computer studies schools, 84 fine arts schools, 134 language schools, and 246 tutorial schools as at end-2004). This is made possible by the open and welcoming climate created for FDI in this industry. It is something that must be upheld for many more years to come.

The establishment of a separate statutory board is recommended. This new board will take over the role of the Ministry of Education to oversee the private educational industry and to ensure that all players maintain high standards of practice. It will also take over the role of the Economic Development Board in drawing leading foreign schools by showcasing Singapore as a compelling education hub of quality institutions with opportunities to link up with key industries and its huge base of multinational corporations here. Governance by a statutory board instead of a ministry allows for more flexibility and faster responses to changes in the industry.

### **5.7 Limitations of the Portfolio**

The small sample size of twelve imposes limitations on the applicability of the findings across the population of 300 Chinese students within our institution, and indeed on the applicability to foreign students in Singapore in general. What the Chinese participants said might not be reflective of the experiences of students from other countries. The efficacy of the suggested improvements to school services will require a longitudinal study that is outside the scope of this portfolio.

Furthermore, the sample of 18-22 year-olds (at the time of arrival in Singapore) may be unique in the sense that they might not have acquired the life-skills expected of people who are older. Hence their experiences might not be representative of students in other, older, age groups.

### **5.8 Recommendations for Further Research**

The fact that nine of the twelve participants came to Singapore for the express purpose of studying English suggests that their command of the language is weak. The question therefore arises as to whether the problems of acclimatisation would have been different if they had a stronger command of the English language. Would they have responded to these problems in different ways? This would be an interesting area for further investigation.

Another area for research is the experiences of foreign students from other countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam and India that have recently been



important sources of students for Singapore. Are their problems different? Does the so-called 'superiority-complex' of the Singaporeans extend to them? Do accommodation and food affect them in the same way? Do they also depend on social networks as much as the Chinese?

Chiu's (1995) study of the influence of 'anticipatory fear' on the adaptability of students suggests that a similar study could be done in the Singapore context, with students who have less academic prowess than her Stanford University subjects. Would the results be different?

A fourth area for further research concerns investigating the factors that influence the choice of country and university. Taking up on what Soutar & Turner (2002) found to be the top four attributes (course suitability, academic recognition, excellent teaching quality, good job prospects) in the choice of university to enrol in, it would be interesting to see if their results can be replicated in the Singapore context. Perhaps future research could be done to validate the findings of Sohail et al (2003) that the availability of hostel facilities and employability are important factors affecting choice.

From the perspective of the private educational institution that I work for, it would also be interesting to identify some of the social problems that a private educational institution in Singapore might encounter with the influx of foreign students. Work done by Carr et al (1999) serves as a benchmark for this purpose. In addition, further research could also focus on the problems with attracting and keeping foreign students.

In concluding, this present study can be said to be a pilot for larger quantitative studies in the future that investigate into the areas mentioned above.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **APPENDIX 1**

#### **ETHICS COMMITTEE APPROVAL LETTER**

**Chey Chor Khoon**

**CSESS301**

33 Surin Avenue  
SINGAPORE  
535616

12 April 2005.

**Dear Chey Chor,**

#### **RE: ETHICS CLEARANCE FOR HONOURS, COURSEWORK MASTERS OR DOCTOR OF EDUCATION**

I am writing to confirm that the Faculty of Community Services, Education & Social Sciences Ethics Committee has approved your application for Ethics Clearance. This approval was granted on the following date: 12 April 2005.

The period of approval will be until 31 December 2005.

Yours sincerely,

**Sarah Kearn**  
**Executive Officer**

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Higher Degrees Office  
Faculty of Community Services, Education & Social Sciences  
Cc: Dr Jeremy Pagram – School of Education

## **APPENDIX 2**

### **INFORMATION LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS**



Edith Cowan University  
Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Sciences  
Mt Lawley, Perth  
Western Australia

16 May 2005

Dear Participant,

#### **Information Letter on Project to study Adaptation of Foreign Students in Singapore**

I am inviting you to participate in a study that I am conducting as part of the requirements of a Doctorate in Education at Edith Cowan University.

The title of my project is:

“Adaptation of Chinese foreign students to studying and living in Singapore.”

The purpose of this project is to find out what problems our students from China encounter when they first arrive in Singapore, how they cope with these problems, and adjust to their new environment. The information will be obtained from a sample of 12 Chinese students who have been in Singapore for between six months and one year.

You have been selected based on the length of time you have spent in Singapore, and the experiences that you are willing to share with me.

To participate in this project, all you have to do is to be interviewed face-to-face and individually by me, and to answer some questions pertaining to your personal experiences with studying and living in Singapore from the time you arrived here until now. Each interview will last about one hour. There may be more than one interview involved. The results of the interviews will be transcribed and collated to obtain a clear picture of the problems and issues encountered by students from China, and how they cope with these problems and issues. The study will hopefully lead to our institution adopting strategies to

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help our students in future.

The results of the study will be published in reports to the school's management, in publications, and presented in conferences. Please be assured that the results will not include any information that may identify you personally, unless you have given your consent specifically. You will also receive feedback regarding the results of this study if you wish to receive them.

Your permission will be sought for the interviews to be tape-recorded. All information collected will be used solely for the purpose of this project. No names of participants will be recorded or revealed to anyone. Transcripts of our interviews will be kept by me personally, in the school's premises, and no one else will have access. The tapes and records will be kept for five years after the interviews and destroyed thereafter.

You are free not to participate and to stop the interviews at any time, and request for all records of our conversations to be destroyed and/or returned to you. You are not required to give any reasons for your withdrawal. Non-participation in this survey will not diminish or harm your academic standing with the school and with any of the academic staff including myself, in any way, since your name will not be recorded in any of the survey material.

This study is not funded by any commercial or outside sources. Neither will you receive payment of any kind.

If you have any questions or require any further information about the research project, please contact:

Researcher:  
Chey Chor Khoon  
33 Surin Avenue  
Singapore 535616

Supervisor:  
Dr. Jeremy Pagram  
Lecturer in Educational Computing  
School of Education  
Faculty of Community Services,  
Education and Social Sciences  
Edith Cowan University

If you have any concerns or complaints about this research project and wish to talk to an independent person, you may contact:

Research Ethics Officer  
Human Research Ethics Office  
Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Science Ethics Sub Committee  
Edith Cowan University  
100 Joondalup Drive  
JOONDALUP WA 6027

If you agree to participate in this survey, kindly fill in and sign the Informed Consent document provided for this purpose. Thank you very much.

Yours truly,  
Chey Chor Khoon

## APPENDIX 3

### INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT



Edith Cowan University  
Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Sciences  
Mt Lawley, Perth, Western Australia

### Informed Consent Document

#### Title of Project

“Adaptation of Chinese foreign students to studying and living in Singapore.”

I, the undersigned, hereby confirm the following:

1. I have been provided with a copy of the Information Letter explaining the research study.
2. I have read and understood the information provided.
3. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions (if any) have been answered to my satisfaction.
4. I am aware that if I have any additional questions I can contact the researcher and the supervisor (the contact information are contained in the Information Letter).
5. I understand that participation in this project will involve face-to-face interviews on possibly more than one occasion, and lasting about one hour each.
6. I consent to having the interview tape-recorded.
7. I understand that the information I provide will be kept confidential, and that my identity will not be disclosed without my consent.
8. I understand that the information I provide will be used for the purposes of this research project and published in reports to the school's management, in journals, and presented in conferences, but my personal particulars will be de-identified.
9. I understand that I am free to withdraw from further participation at any time, without explanation or penalty.
10. I am aged 18 years and above.
11. I freely agree to participate in this project.

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Name of Participant:

Signature indicating consent:

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## APPENDIX 4

### INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

(NOTE: The twelve interviews were conducted in Mandarin, and the following transcripts are translated into English by the author.)

#### Case No.1 Fiona (Female)

##### *1. When did you first arrive in Singapore?*

I first arrived in Singapore on 25 Dec 2001 when I was about 18 years old. Before I came to Singapore, I had studied English for about three months.

##### *2. Why did you come to Singapore?*

My mother encouraged me to go overseas for studies. My parents had confidence that I would be able to look after myself.

Before coming to Singapore, my friends and I had considered different countries to go to for our education. We thought of going to France, but the preparation took too long. The Chinese-speaking environment in Singapore was favourable for us.

I came together with about 10 classmates from my English course. When we arrived in Singapore, we attended a 15-month travel and tourism diploma course at AIT.

##### *3. What are the problems that you faced when you first arrived in Singapore?*

Looking back over the three years that I have been in Singapore, the most problematic was changing school. It took me about 2-3 months to look for another school after finishing my course at AIT (name of a private education institution that has since closed). I was not very satisfied with the standard of the school. We checked out between 7-8 schools, compared their fees, duration of course, specialisation, and finally

decided on Informatics. Despite hearing from other people that the reputation of Informatics was not good, I found that the course content and the duration suited me.

Another major problem that I faced was accommodation. An agent helped us to find accommodation even before we arrived here. We stayed in a Housing and Development Board (HDB) flat in Tiong Bahru, 3 in a room. Finding cheap accommodation was a major problem. After the first apartment, when the lease was up, my friends and I tried looking for another place to stay. There were many considerations, like the rental amount, and having a stay-in landlord. We preferred not to have a landlord that stayed in, and having to deal with the nagging over the use of utilities, cooking, and cleanliness.

At first, I was always mentally converting prices in Singapore into Chinese *yuan*, and finding things very expensive, but after a while, I stopped doing that, and didn't feel that things were expensive anymore.

#### *4. How did you cope with these problems?*

I have 2-3 close friends, all of whom are Chinese. Although I have friends and classmates from other countries, like Indonesia and Vietnam, we were never really close, maybe because of the language barrier. We need to have close friends to share our problems, go shopping together. One of my close friends has become my husband. We got married last year in China. We went home to meet each other's parents, and got their blessings.

Talking about parents, my mother came to visit me three months after I arrived in Singapore. And I also returned to my hometown regularly, about 4-5 times over the last two years, because I needed to see my parents. The visits that my mother made to Singapore to see me was a very big factor in helping me cope with life here. She was a great source of comfort to me.

The mobile phone for me was very important in helping me socially. At first I had resisted buying a mobile phone for myself, but my friends talked me into buying one. To keep costs down I used a Starhub ICC card, and subscribed to Starhub's free incoming call feature.

Another thing that was very important was the computer. I used it to chat and to send emails to my friends.

Among the Chinese diaspora, there is a website [www.sgchinese.com](http://www.sgchinese.com) where we can find information on all sorts of things like accommodation, school, friends, jobs, and so on.

Money is not such a big issue for me, as I know how to control my expenses and to be careful in my spending. My current cost of living is about \$1000 per month. Therefore we must study enough to make it worth our while.

*5. Have you adjusted to life and study here?*

I suppose I can say that I have, to some extent, considering that I feel happier now, have a husband, and I don't think of the money so much as before. But if you ask me if I will settle here for good, I suppose at this moment I won't. I still look forward to going home. I miss the food in China, the familiar things in my hometown, which is a large city in the north. And talking about the north, I miss the seasons too.

*6. How satisfied are you with the support you are getting from the school in adjusting to life here?*

At the moment, in my opinion, the school has not done anything much to help us settle in.

Support from school is very important. In my opinion, it is very good that we now have a campus. It creates a proper school atmosphere.

I think that the main aim of many students in going overseas for studies is to gain some working experience after their studies. We believe that our salaries would be higher back home if we have overseas working experience. Many of my friends want to settle in Singapore after studying here, but some of us, including myself, have the eventual aim of going back home to China. We know that many of the private schools' diplomas are not recognised in China, but employers still want us if we have good command of the English language. Academic standards must be maintained.

*7. What would you like the school to do to help you?*

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I would like to see better customer service. Immediate attention should be given to our students' needs.

The school should help us get jobs. Like the polytechnics, the school should arrange with companies for attachments for us. At least help us with more information about job opportunities.

Help us to get extensions for our student passes so that we have a few more weeks after the end-of-course so that we have some time to look for jobs.

### **Case No. 2 Ma (Female)**

#### *1. When did you first arrive in Singapore?*

I first arrived in Singapore in December 2002, when I was 22 years old. An agent in China arranged for a school for me. The day I arrived, there was nobody at the airport to receive me.

#### *2. Why did you come to Singapore?*

I came to Singapore primarily to get a foreign degree. I learned from my friends back home that a degree from a British, Australian or American university would help me get jobs in multinational companies operating in China. I was also interested in improving my English, so I thought Singapore would be a good place to learn English in a Chinese-speaking environment.

I heard a lot about Singapore from my former classmates. Somehow they got to know about this place. Come to think of it, it is kind of strange how they knew. In any case, many of them were determined to leave China, at least for a short period of time, just to experience what the world was like outside China. From what I heard, Singapore was a very clean and safe place. People here speak four languages. I felt that this would be a safe place for me to get my further education, and to improve my English.

#### *3. What are the problems that you faced when you first arrived in Singapore?*



I lived near Orchard Road. It was like a private hostel, with 9-12 rooms and with three people in a room. It was very cramped. Despite having so many tenants, there was only one fridge. When I wanted to move out, the landlord didn't want to refund my deposit. I could not find many places around there for meals. Now we have learned to buy things from NTUC supermarkets. We had to use a map to find our way around.

Because the hostel was very crowded, seldom did we have a chance to cook for ourselves. There were just too many people trying to use the kitchen.

At first, I could not understand what people were talking. The English that people used here did not seem to be the same as what I learned in school back home. I had to speak to people in Chinese and ask them to speak to me in Chinese too. You can say that my objective of learning English was not entirely achieved.

Maybe it is just me, but I seem to have difficulty making friends with local people here. I find that many of them treat me in a condescending manner, as if I came from an undeveloped place, and know nothing. Perhaps they are right about my not knowing much, but surely there is no need for them to feel superior, right?

I am aware that some Chinese students here are doing illegal work, but as far as I know, there are only a very small number of such students. Most of us are really serious about getting a recognised qualification. So why do people here have such a poor opinion of us?

#### *4. How did you cope with these problems?*

After studying in the school for a few weeks, I got to know some other Chinese students better, and became friends with a few of them. We went out together and had lots of meals together. Often we would cook for ourselves in our places.

I also made many calls home to my parents. The mobile phone was expensive and calls were not cheap, but it helped me to overcome many moments of loneliness and low points.

I keep a photo of my parents. I don't look at it very often, but whenever I take it out of my purse and look at it, I get a nice feeling.

As a result of the negative perception among the locals about Chinese students, most of us keep to ourselves, and build a wall around us, really to have this feeling of solidarity and safety in numbers.

*5. Have you adjusted to life and study here?*

My friends and I converse mainly in Chinese, seldom in English. Perhaps this helps us to feel more at home. I don't know about other students, but I find my inability to speak well in English a major problem.

If not for my Chinese friends that I had met here, I don't think I would have survived a year here. I would definitely have packed up and gone home. I don't remember making any friends among the locals here. Some students from other countries are quite friendly, like those from Indonesia, but not enough for me to share my problems with.

Looking back, I think I would not have come to Singapore. The food is different from what I am used to. I still can't get used to it. The people here are not as friendly as I would expect. There is a cold feeling here.

*6. How satisfied are you with the support you are getting from the school in adjusting to life here?*

I chose the school based on what I heard from others, but the school did not turn out to be what I expected. I was disappointed. Maybe my expectations were too high. The experience was not good. But I didn't know what to do, whom to ask. I didn't know anybody.

*7. What would you like the school to do to help you?*

I think the first and most important thing the school can help us with is regarding our accommodation. I would have liked to stay in the campus, enjoying life with other students, being young. I want to enjoy the atmosphere of hostel life that is not overcrowded, stressful. So the school should seriously consider building a in-campus hostel for foreign students like me.

I would also like to be met at the airport when I first arrived in Singapore. That would have been a nice welcome to a strange new place.

Another area that the school can help is with job placement. I think many of us would like to work here for a while before going home. Job placements should be made part of the curriculum, especially at the degree level. Even if the job placement is for a very short time, like say three months, it is still better than nothing.

### **Case No. 3 Chen (Female)**

#### *1. When did you first arrive in Singapore?*

I first arrived in Singapore in December 2002, at the age of 18. I heard a lot of good things about Singapore, but maybe my expectations were too high. At first I stayed in a private condo, a friend's house. The owners were a very old couple with a grown daughter. There was no privacy. I was not allowed to cook, and not allowed to use the washing machine. When I came back late from school or library, the owners would ask me why, and would even phone home to my parents to complain. I felt very lonely. I stayed there for three months and moved out.

#### *2. Why did you come to Singapore?*

I came to Singapore with the intention of studying English. I also wanted to experience life outside China, away from my family and to see how much I could do for myself.

I chose Singapore after considering America and Britain, but these places cost too much money. They were also far from home, and my parents did not think it was safe for me to go there alone. After all, they said, I was only 18.

#### *3. What are the problems that you faced when you first arrived in Singapore?*

I didn't know what to do, where to go for meals. I felt very lost. The food in Singapore was very oily. There were not enough vegetables, and I always had to eat out, and I was not used to it. Eventually I had to eat instant noodles.

I didn't know anybody then, and my parents were too far away, back in China, and I had to do so many things all by myself. I was homesick often, so much so that I went home many times.

I also wanted to change school. The school was very different from what I had expected. I had to go to many schools to check out their programmes myself.

*4. How did you cope with these problems?*

Oh, I try to go back home to my family at least once a year. I admit I miss my family very much, especially my mother. So, seeing them is very important to help me cope with the hardships here. Luckily my parents have the means to pay for my trips home, otherwise I won't know what to do.

Having a close friend is very important. Boy or girl does not matter, but we must have a very close and open relationship. I managed to make some good friends among my classmates, but they are all from China too.

We contact each other very frequently, on the mobile phone, chatting on MSN, and meeting for meals during breaks and after school.

There is a website for Chinese people that I visit very often. We often exchange information and alerts about things that concern us, for example, which schools have problems, problem landlords, etc. It is like a gossip page of the newspaper. I think having such an information source helps to break down the feeling of being lost and being alone in this world.

*5. Have you adjusted to life and study here?*

I suppose to some extent I have managed to cope with life here, but I think deep down inside me, I still cannot feel that this is home for me. The friends may be helpful, but they are not family. They may not be friends for long, and will probably go our separate ways after graduation.

As for living here, I will definitely not want to live here for long. If I don't go straight home to China, I will probably go to Australia or even America to further my studies.

*6. How satisfied are you with the support you are getting from the school in adjusting to life here?*

The short answer is, not very satisfied. For example, nobody told me about the school's opening term since I had gone home. Somebody was supposed to mail the student visa to me, but I waited two months until the air ticket expired. The school couldn't seem to do what it was supposed to do. Nobody seemed to be in charge. There was apparently no management. The whole place was out of control. People had a 'couldn't care less' attitude. When you ask a question, you get many different answers from different staff. The staff just sit there. It took three months to apply and get my library card. And there was no exam entry card too. When the people in charge practise poor management, how could they hope to teach us about management?

There are also too few lecturers. The same lecturers teach so many different subjects.

In Singapore schools, people are too varied, so unlike in Chinese schools, where students are all the same, and can have common interests.

*7. What would you like the school to do to help you?*

Well, I don't expect the school to do much for us foreign students. but at the very least, I think the school should have people to offer information about accommodation, maybe even help us to make contact with reliable agents. I was lucky to have a friend's house to stay in when I first arrived here, but I heard so many stories from others about their problems with difficult landlords.

Another idea I just thought of is for the school to have some kind of buddy system, in the sense that every new student is matched with another student who has been here earlier, who can show me around the campus, explain some things like rules and regulations to me, bring me to places for food, the local library, and so on. You know, when I first came here, I had no one to ask.

**Case No. 4 Wei (Female)**

*1. When did you first arrive in Singapore?*

In my case, my parents brought me here, in Jan 2002, when I was 18 years old. We stayed in a hotel for the first three days.

*2. Why did you come to Singapore?*

I came to Singapore to study English and to get a business diploma. My parents decided that Singapore was the right place based on advice from their friends. They told my parents that Singapore was safe and Mandarin speaking. My parents have not visited Singapore themselves.

*3. What are the problems that you faced when you first arrived in Singapore?*

My parents had a friend in Singapore, and after my parents went home, I stayed in her house for three years. I could use the fridge. I bought food, but I was not allowed to cook. I was not even allowed to watch TV. My parents' friend said I should not be distracted from studying. I felt very unhappy, but even though I complained to my parents, they told me I had to stay on because they felt it was safer for me this way.

After three years, I decided on my own to move out and to stay with my own friends that I had made while studying in the commercial school. By this time my parents did not object anymore. Perhaps they felt that I was already adjusted to the environment here and could look after myself.

I studied English here for one year, but after attending the commercial school my command of the English language declined because there were only Chinese

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students in that school. There was no chance for me to practise my English. When I wanted to change school, the people in the school kept asking me why, and gave me a lot of hassle, such as not giving me a copy of my attendance record for Immigration Dept to issue a new student pass.

*4. How did you cope with these problems?*

The mobile phone is very important for communication with friends and family. I would say my friends helped me the most whenever I had problems. I have a group of three friends with whom I am closest to. The four of us come and go together. Recently, I met a Chinese boy in our school that I like a lot and I am seeing him more often. My group of friends still give me support. I depend a lot on friends for information.

One very popular website for information among Chinese students is [www.sgchinese.com](http://www.sgchinese.com).

I call home whenever I can to speak to my parents. The conversations are not very long, but just hearing their voices give me a sense of love and belonging. Sometimes I wish I were home.

*5. Have you adjusted to life and study here?*

After three years here, I guess I can safely say I have adjusted to life here. However, that is not to say that I really enjoy it here. To me, this is just another step in my journey towards getting an education and some experience in life. Having my friends helped me with the adjustment.

In terms of studying here, I guess I have adjusted to the school system here. I have also got used to the inefficiencies of this school. I don't complain anymore, no point. I just look forward to the day I get my degree, and then I will go home first before deciding what to do next.

*6. How satisfied are you with the support you are getting from the school in adjusting to life here?*

Frankly speaking, both the schools I attended had been disappointing. The previous school that I attended when I first came here was very small and had no facilities apart from the classrooms.

I got to know about our present school after reading about its advertisements. I visited the school and spoke to a sales person, and got to know about the school fees. Later when I visited the school again, I spoke to another sales person, I was told another set of fees. I was confused. I went back a third time, found the first sales person I had met, and asked him why there was a difference in the fees, and he said there was a promotion going on. I really felt upset that school fees could have promotional price. This is a school and not a supermarket.

Talking about the support provided by the school, I cannot recall any real support that stood out. Our school did not help us very much in terms of looking for accommodation, although I did not need help in this. It also did not help with checking on our welfare. I cannot trust the sales people, and the service people seemed all so busy. Some lecturers are very friendly but they could only help in terms of academic matters. Why would I want to ask them for help in my personal problems? They are my teachers.

*7. What would you like the school to do to help you?*

If the school is really serious about helping foreign students, there are many things they can do. For example, easing the accommodation problem upon first arrival. To me this is a big problem. Most of us feel totally lost on the first day or week here. We are completely disoriented, so a good place to stay is very important.

Giving us information is another area for the school to help us. Right now, most of us rely on outside sources like the website I mentioned to you. The school should have its own website that gives students all the information they need. The school's current website does not contain a lot of information that is relevant to living here, such as accommodation, bus services, places for food, etc. I would like to see it incorporate a chat site for students to exchange information. I think that would be welcome by all students.

The school can also help us get concessionary discounts for mobile phone calls, bus and MRT fares, cinema tickets, etc.

Give us a chance to learn to do business. The school can help secure some tie-up with a business for us to have practical experience in sales, marketing, advertising, public relations, accounts, and others.



**Case No. 5 Wang (Female)**

*1. When did you first arrive in Singapore?*

I arrived in Singapore in December 2002 at the age of 18. On the day I arrived, there was someone to meet me at the airport. He was probably paid by the school to meet me.

*2. Why did you come to Singapore?*

I came to Singapore to learn English. My plan was to learn English, and after that to go through a course in Marketing, and maybe even get a degree. But my primary reason was to learn English as I felt it was necessary to have a good command of the English language if I wanted to get a good job back home.

As to why I chose Singapore, this was because I heard from friends that this place is very safe and secure for girls like me. It is safe to walk along the streets, go home late at night, and there is law and order. It is also not far from my hometown in southern China.

*3. What are the problems that you faced when you first arrived in Singapore?*

At first I had a good impression of Singapore but when I saw my school for the first time, I was disappointed. The school was in an old shop house. There were only students from China. I had expected students from other countries.

Another thing that made me upset was the medical check-up. All foreign students had to go for a medical check-up before they are issued with a student pass. The place where we were sent for medical check-up was such a dilapidated place, the staff there had such poor attitude, that I felt really let down. The least that could be done for us was to send us to a proper hospital.

In my case, I lived in a flat with four rooms, with more than 10 people. In my room alone, there were three people. I cried everyday. I didn't call home because I didn't want my family to worry about me. I stayed there four months. I moved out to stay with four other friends in a private condo. When I moved out, the landlord did not refund my deposit.

At first the new landlord was very good to me, but later he changed. He watched us cook, and didn't allow us to use the washing machine freely. We could not even use the toilet freely, as he would stand outside the door and asked us to hurry. If we used the air-conditioner, he would be outside the door, place his feet along the edge of the door to feel the temperature, and ask us to switch off the air-conditioner if he felt it was cold enough. After a while, he removed the air-conditioner. He even had a key to our bedroom. When we went out, he would go into our room and checked our belongings. He was unwilling to install broadband connection for us unless we agreed to pay him extra. When we had four people to a room, we paid \$450. After two tenants moved out, the remaining two of us paid \$400. We stayed there one year, and had a lot of problems with the landlord.

Looking for accommodation was a big headache. When we came to Singapore, we had expected to live in a proper hostel. There was no feeling of home. The place where we stayed was just too crowded. There were all sorts of people, of different ages, in different occupations.

Things are expensive here.

We still have some difficulty with language. When we learned English back in China, we thought that what we learned was the 'pure' type of English (Queen's English). But sometimes we could not understand the English that people in Singapore spoke. We also could not understand the English spoken by the Vietnamese and the Indians.

The reason we don't speak English among ourselves is because we feel it is strange to speak in a foreign language among ourselves.

The Chinese in Singapore have a superiority attitude; they treat us from China as backward, inferior. People here have no warmth in their interpersonal relationships with us. Very cold.

We often feel cheated, whether it is shopping, or in dealing with the schools, landlords, etc.

I find the food here very oily. There are not enough vegetables in the cooked food that we eat in the food-courts. And we always ate out. I am not used to it, but if I eat at home, I had to eat instant food all the time.

*4. How did you cope with these problems?*

Having a close friend is very important. The friend can be someone of the same sex or the opposite sex, it doesn't matter, but must have very close relationship so that we can be open with each other.

Having a phone is also very important. Whether a mobile phone or a fixed line phone, it is very important to use it for contacting friends and family people in China. We depend a lot on friends for information. We also depend on the website [www.sgchinese.com](http://www.sgchinese.com) for information.

As for food, I still cannot adapt to the food here. We try to eat better now, but that means having to cook it ourselves, and that is a hassle for us. We usually don't eat alone, but together.

Things are expensive here, but we learn not to buy unnecessary things. The most we indulge in is some clothes. By being prudent in our spending we have managed to get by.

*5. Have you adjusted to life and study here?*

I suppose I can say that I have adjusted to life here to a large extent. I don't cry anymore. In fact I laugh a lot more nowadays. I have also learned to accept the school the way it is. Moving to this campus is a good thing for us students, but the warmth is still not there.

*6. How satisfied are you with the support you are getting from the school in adjusting to life here?*

I must tell you this: the Sales Consultant cheated me of my money, and then resigned. I complained but got no response from the school. I had to pay higher fees because of the laptop promotion.

The school is not effective in helping us. The staffs in the school appear to be too busy to talk to us. Furthermore, we get different answers from different staff members. There is no information from the school, only when they want us to pay money. They are always chasing us for money. There is no information about the exams, term breaks, nobody informs us. Nobody told us about semester openings. I had returned to China and I was promised that my student visa would be mailed to me. I waited and waited, for over two months, and the air ticket had even expired, but no visa. So I did not come back to Singapore. Later I found out from friends that school term had already started.

When one member of the staff resigned, there is no follow-up from the others. I don't get the feeling that we students are treated as number one in importance.

Some lecturers speak too softly. Some are good, but there does not seem to be any specialisation. They teach everything. They cover too many subjects. There are too few lecturers. How is it possible for a lecturer who teaches marketing to also teach human resources subject?

Some are not serious in their teaching. They read from the slides, joke a lot, and talk about trivial things. They also tend to belittle students for not knowing some stuff that they take for granted, saying, 'How come you don't know this (or that)?' Some of them use the same examples over and over again. For example, four different lecturers use examples like LV, Gucci, and bubble tea.

The school does not seem to be able to do what it promised to do. Nobody seems to be in charge, no management. The place seems to be out of control. Staff members have a 'couldn't care less' attitude. People sit at their places, looking very busy, and not wanting to talk to us. It took us six months to apply for our school's library card. If the people who work here have such poor management, how can they try to teach us Management?

#### *7. What would you like the school to do to help you?*

I think the school should help us find accommodation. Ideally it should have accommodation already planned for us before we arrive here. But that may be asking too much of the school here as there is no tradition like this.

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Another thing I would suggest is for the school to help us with more English language lessons. We all realise that our command of the English language is still weak, and more should be done to help us here.

I understand you are the school counsellor, but few of us actually know how to approach you for help, and what your responsibilities are. Perhaps the school should make this service more known to the students.

Lastly, about food. There should be more variety in the canteen. If we have to eat the same thing day after day for two to three years, I think we will go mad.

**Case No. 6 Pauline (Female)**

*1. When did you first arrive in Singapore?*

I first arrived in Singapore on 23 December 2001 when I was 22 years old.

*2. Why did you come to Singapore?*

My purpose on coming to Singapore was to learn English and some specialization in international marketing. I came to Singapore alone. I am quite independent.

Before coming to Singapore, I had already learned some English for about one year in Wuhan, China. So it was easier for me to catch up with the lessons than many of my classmates. I had also spent two years studying in a university in China before coming here.

It is important to have a clear objective when one goes overseas. Mine was to learn English and a business speciality, international marketing. Singapore is very different from my hometown. Here, people speak mainly English. And that is why I chose to come here.

I feel that living in Singapore had helped me to mature and experience many things that I associate with growing up.

I feel that learning business in Singapore is good, because this is a very business-oriented country. Everything is advanced, like technology, tourism and hospitality. Learning such subjects here is very appropriate. I have also thought of helping my family set up a sales representative office here for our business. I believe there is a market here for our business.

*3. What are the problems that you faced when you first arrived in Singapore?*

The language school where I attended in Singapore was not up to my expectations. An agent in China helped me to enrol in this school. He didn't tell me much about it. In fact, the agent didn't explain very much the circumstances in Singapore. I found the language to be very small, with few students. It had business classes, but the lecturers only joked in class.

The agent in China also arranged my accommodation. This was also below my expectations. It was a very small room, with 3 persons sharing one room in a private condo. I paid S\$300 per month in rent for this room.

Although I was not very satisfied, I thought that since I was already here, I might as well finish my studies and earn a qualification before going home. I didn't want to go home for fear of embarrassment.

I was afraid of being cheated again by people. Luckily I met some Singaporeans while out shopping, and they brought me to attend church and told me more about Singapore.

I was quite homesick in the first six months that I was here. I used to phone home quite frequently.

Changing school was a very big issue. It wasted a lot of my time looking for a new school. The school didn't help me. I had to compare the schools on my own.

Changing accommodation was also a big problem. To look for new accommodation, I went to the vicinity of the Immigration Department to look for an agent to help me.

Living with people from other parts of China was sometimes a problem. I did not have problems with others, as my personality was such that I could get along with others quite easily. However, my flatmates could not get along with each other.

The biggest problem was financial. I had to learn to control my spending.

I missed my boyfriend very much. I frequently phoned him, but could only see him once a year. But he suggested giving up on our relationship. So I went window shopping, chatting with other friends, and going to Sentosa, instead of fretting over the relationship. Friends were very important in helping me overcome my loneliness and problems. Through them I had overcome the failed relationship, and also the thought of giving up my studies and going home.

#### *4. How did you cope with these problems?*

I went back to China only once in the first year that I was here. After that first year, I went back more frequently, twice a year. But I didn't go back to my hometown,

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only to the factory to help with the family business. I returned to my hometown only for the Lunar New Year reunion. It is my hope that our school can arrange for us Chinese to have time off for the CNY to go home.

As I said, having friends is very important in helping me cope with my problems.

*5. Have you adjusted to life and study here?*

By now I am familiar with the culture here. I have learned to adapt to the food, the transportation system, but the weather is still too hot for me. The place is clean, green, and safe.

The church I am attending has helped me to learn moral values, English, and living in Singapore. Fellow churchgoers have been very helpful.

It is not enough to have friends just in school but we also need friends outside school.

*6. How satisfied are you with the support you are getting from the school in adjusting to life here?*

About our school, I don't have many problems. My major gripe concerns the renewal of my student pass. We had to wait a long time for it to be renewed, and the school could have done it for us much earlier.

The ECA (extra-curricula activities) in school should include non-sports related activities, such as BBQ, art, social and cultural activities. More excursions, visits to plays, concerts, etc could be organised. Not much is being organized on a school-wide basis, so there is no feeling of belongingness to the school.

*7. What would you like the school to do to help you?*

Work attachment is very useful for us. They help us to gain experience in the working environment. We can put our classroom learning into practice, and learn to work as a team. The school should help us get such attachments during term breaks.



**Case No. 7 Zhou (Male)**

*1. When did you first arrive in Singapore?*

I first came arrived in Singapore on 13 September 2002, at the age of 19.

*2. Why did you come to Singapore?*

My school results were not very good, so my parents encouraged me to come to Singapore to study first, then proceed to other countries for further studies later. I was keen to study something, anything. I had studied some English in my high school in China.

When I first came to Singapore, I attended a language school. Getting a student pass was difficult. Later I looked around for a school for business studies. My main concern was getting a qualification that could help me get a job back home. I found out that the Chinese government does not recognise qualifications obtained from private schools. I could not find any resource that could give me guidance on which school was good at what subject and specialisation. Only through word of mouth and looking at the advertisements put out by the schools themselves, did I manage to piece information together. After looking around for three months, I decided to join Informatics, because it was better known than the others. Informatics was more international, with more branches around the world. Not as bad as compared with other schools. I checked with my friends, and they told me other schools were worse.

*3. What are the problems that you faced when you first arrived in Singapore?*

One of my problems when I first came here was inter-personal communication with people. People here didn't seem to care about me. They seemed to look down on me, not that they didn't understand what I said. For example, the first two landlords I had seemed to dislike Chinese people. Maybe they had bad experiences with other Chinese people before me. Anyway, I was not used to it. Later on, in early 2003, I met more people, and some of them brought me to church, and I found people there warm and helpful, and my perception of Singaporeans changed for the better.

I also had problems with accommodation. The first place I stayed in was arranged through an agent in China who linked up with another agent here. My experience with accommodation has been very bad, and you can see that from the fact

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that I moved 8 times over the last four years. The landlords increased rents without justification. The locations were inconvenient. I had arguments with landlords over the use of utilities, the fridge, etc.

I would say most students prefer not to have live-in landlords. Fewer arguments. Having a live-in landlord does not make much difference to the rental amount, but the place would tend to be dirtier than if there was no live-in landlord. The usual rental I paid was about S\$200-300 per person per month excluding utilities. Accommodation would be the single biggest item of expenditure for foreign students.

Among us, we are willing to share accommodation, say 2 or 3 to a room, and pay less. But I notice that students from other countries prefer to stay in single rooms not wanting to share, and they are willing to pay more for better accommodation.

Landlords don't refund deposits in full because they claim there are damages to their properties.

I did not have many problems with my flatmates. Usually there were two in a room, sometimes three. The usual problems concern personal hygiene, habits like smoking, etc.

In the beginning, the biggest problem was loneliness, the lack of friends. To overcome this I spent a lot of time in the library. I would phone home once or twice a week. International calls from Singapore are cheaper than in China.

In terms of social life, there is nothing much. Life is boring here. There is nowhere to go, after you have been to one place, you won't want to go again.

As for food, I did not have major problems, except that I found the food here not appetising. When I bought ready-cooked food, usually the quantity is insufficient. The portions were too small for me.

Financially I don't have a big problem.

#### *4. How did you cope with these problems?*

As I mentioned, the biggest problem was loneliness. I spent a lot of time in the library, and buried myself in books, magazines, comics, to while away my time outside school.

I also called home often, once or twice a week. I usually speak to my father, and let him know about my progress, and asked him about his business. Sometimes I would also ask him for more money.

Later after I got acquainted with some students from my school, we spent time playing games, going to the cinema, chatting. Initially I didn't dare to speak up, because I spoke only Mandarin. Among my Chinese friends, we spoke only Mandarin. Why should we speak any other language when we are among our own kind?

*5. Have you adjusted to life and study here?*

Living and studying in Singapore has helped me to learn a lot and be independent. At first I didn't like staying in Singapore. The food, the accommodation, the attitude of people here, etc, did not make life very pleasant for me. But after a while, I have the feeling that all cities are the same. Some people cannot adapt, and they go home or to another country.

At first when I arrived here, I did not find the mobile phone necessary. But now, it is very essential. Friends, girlfriends are the most important. We can speak the same language; can be more intimate in sharing our problems.

I would like to work here after my studies, for about two years. I will definitely go back to China after that, where there will be better prospects and pay.

*6. How satisfied are you with the support you are getting from the school in adjusting to life here?*

Some of the negative things about our school – at first there was no campus. It is strange that in Singapore, private schools are located in commercial buildings. There is no feeling of being in a university.

I also have problem with replacements for lost certificates. It took such a long time to get replacements. The school was very efficient at chasing me for payment, and always asking me to pay this and that fee.

Among us Chinese students, we are very concerned with our qualification, whether it will be recognised or not. I would prefer to study in the UK but it is too late now. I have already studied for 1-2 years, so changing now is not practical. I would not

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be able to get transfer credits if I go to a UK university now. If I had known this earlier, I would not have continued with my studies here.

It is incomprehensible that the Singapore government does not recognise qualifications obtained from private schools. We can find jobs, but we cannot get the WP (Work Permit) and EP (Employment Pass), only on a case-by-case basis. Compared with graduates from local tertiary institutions like the polytechnics and the universities, we are at a disadvantage. I regret studying at a private school.

The quality of lecturers in our school is another problem. The content of the lectures is not meaty enough, not substantial. I don't think I learn much listening to the lectures.

My biggest worry is that I don't get to learn anything substantial. For example, Business Finance 1 and 2, the lecturer for BFin 2 asked how was it that we didn't learn certain topics in BFin 1? If we had the same lecturer for both modules, maybe we won't have this problem.

Overall, I feel that private schools here have little variety. All of them offer the same subjects, in business, IT, not much to choose between them. I would suggest having a specialised school like a school for Finance, and offer specialised subjects.

There are too few universities in Singapore. All of the existing ones have very high standards. There is room for a few more with lower standards, for the average student, offering degree level education.

There are many problems with the administration of the school. With such high staff turnover, a lot of follow-up is missing. For example, I paid my fees, but I was told there was no record of that. The school increased its fees, and no reason was given to us. The content of the course is the same, the quality has not improved, so why is there such huge increase in fees?

We can negotiate fees with our sales consultants. This is ridiculous. The school must have standard school fees for everyone, not like a marketplace. This is bad for the image of the school and bad for the image of Singapore. If there is no improvement, Chinese students will want to go to Australia.

*7. What would you like the school to do to help you?*

The school can help us with accommodation. Other than just calling us and chasing us for fee payments, the school never helps us in any way. We have agents cheating us, landlords bullying us; the school doesn't help us with any of these problems. In Australia, schools have a department that helps overseas students with such problems.

The students' council should organise activities for more students instead of dancing and disco.

The Chinese students are not united, and not interested in joining the council. The school should ensure that all major nationalities are represented on the council.

There are too few activities in the school. One school in Singapore organises factory visits for the whole school. Maybe it has very few classes. Such activities help to unite students, create a sense of belonging.

Singapore's position as an educational hub is in danger. Foreign students are not allowed to work part time. There is really no reason to come here. This is a Chinese language environment, whereas Australia is an English-speaking environment. What the authorities seem to miss is that the Chinese students can help Singapore students establish connections if they want to do business in China someday. Many Chinese students have strong connections in China through their parents.

Chinese students use Singapore as a springboard to other countries. Many of us male Chinese students want to obtain a Master's degree in another country, or in a Singapore school with a proper campus.

It is important to learn to manage our time. Half a day class in school can be a waste of time if we don't know how to make full use of it. It can also be so boring with no homework to do, no school activities.

Homework should count towards final assessment.

**Case No. 8 Tian (Male)**

*1. When did you first arrive in Singapore?*

I came to Singapore in May 2002 when I was 21 years old.

*2. Why did you come to Singapore?*

I came to study English language. My cousin was already here with his family, and he arranged for me to attend an English language school called TCL. He met me upon my arrival in Singapore.

My cousin made all the arrangements for my stay here. I stayed in my aunt's house (my cousin's mother). I am still staying there. She is also from Shenzhen. Thus, I have no problems with transportation, cost of living, and accommodation.

*3. What are the problems that you faced when you first arrived in Singapore?*

My biggest problem was that I did not understand the English language.

The food here is also a problem. The food is very unpalatable, and limited in variety. Apart from that, there was not much difference from life in my hometown in Shenzhen.

My first school TCL is a very small school. The facilities were very poor, below my expectations. The only good thing about it was that it was cheap. The school principal was a very weird character. He would punish us for being even a little bit late. The English teacher was a native speaker, and was good in his teaching. After spending one year there, I was able to read and write, but still could not speak well. This may be because my social circle consisted of only Chinese students. Now my circle of friends includes non-Chinese, and I speak more English as a result. I feel more confident about speaking English.

After TCL, I changed to our present school, also recommended by my cousin. I switched because I wanted to learn computer (science). Here, the problems I encountered made my life a bit miserable at first, but nowadays I don't really care anymore. The problems I was referring to concerned student pass renewal, lack of information about courses and exam dates and some other minor things. As a student, I

should not have to worry about such administrative things. I should just have to pay my fees and the school should take care of everything for me, and keep me informed.

*4. How did you cope with these problems?*

Because I was not strong in English, I tended to stick to my circle of Chinese friends and schoolmates. I know it is stupid of me to do that, so now I am more open to mixing around with students from other countries particularly the Indonesians and the Vietnamese who are friendlier. I don't have any Singaporean friends firstly because there are not many Singaporean students in our school, and secondly, those few that I meet appear to be aloof.

To me, friends are very important to help me cope with problems especially when it comes to school homework. I am not a particularly strong student, and have even failed a few subjects. My friends help me by explaining things I don't understand in our subjects. I would rather ask my friends than to ask the lecturers. Although most of the lecturers are helpful and friendly, I feel there is still a gap between us.

My friends and I spend the weekends going to Chinatown, the parks, and the major shopping malls, and game arcades just to pass the time. Of course we also spend some time catching up with our studies at home. When I am at home, I surf the Internet a lot. We chat a lot on MSN.

I also call home about once or twice a week to my parents. We usually speak just a little while, and my calls are really to assure them that everything is all right with me. My mobile phone is very important to me in this respect.

Talking about food, I am lucky I can go home, my cousin's house, and have home-cooked food. But during school hours, I just eat a little in the school canteen. I still cannot get used to the food here.

*5. Have you adjusted to life and study here?*

As far as studies and school is concerned, I suppose I can say I have been able to adjust. I don't feel any unhappiness or regret coming here. This is only one phase of my life, and I will move on to another country or back home to China once I obtain my degree. Since I am staying with my cousin's family, I have no problems with accommodation, unlike many of my friends.

*6. How satisfied are you with the support you are getting from the school in adjusting to life here?*

This school is ok, but in some respects is abnormal. For instance, the sales consultants – they make me very confused. They can quote different prices for the same course. I find it very strange that different consultants can quote different prices for the same course.

Another thing I find abnormal is that the advertising and what I see in reality are divergent. There is a big difference between what is advertised and what we get. E.g. the computers in the classrooms are so old.

Customer service attitude was very poor, especially the staff in the International Students' Services. Their attitude showed they were not interested in us.

The Students Council has only black students. There are no Chinese representatives. I would like to see a council for Chinese students run by Chinese students. With non-Chinese representatives, there is a communication gap. They don't understand us, and we don't know what they are talking about. I don't really know what they are doing. All I see is they walk around with a superiority attitude and name tags hanging around their necks. When I was in high school, we would approach the student councillors whenever we had problems, but here, we wouldn't do that. Anyway, there is no money to be paid to councillors, so why bother to stand for election? There is no meaning in participation. And we are here for a short time only.

*7. What would you like the school to do to help you?*

For me, it doesn't matter much any more since I am about to graduate. If the school can help me to get a job here, that would be good, but if it can't, it is all right. The school should think hard about how to help itself. With the kind of pricing schemes, the attitude of its sales people and customer service people, I think students will get turned off.



**Case No. 9 Wu (Male)**

*1. When did you first arrive in Singapore?*

I arrived in Singapore in Feb 2003 at the age of 20.

*2. Why did you come to Singapore?*

An agent in China recommended me to study in a polytechnic. On arriving, I found that I could not secure a place. I wanted to learn English. I went to a language school here because I was told it is not so good to go to a polytechnic because it offered only a diploma. When I first attended the language school, there were 20+ students, of whom 15 were from China. We all spoke Chinese. So, we did not get to speak much English.

At first I chose finance, then I decided to switch to marketing, because I believed that a qualification in finance from this present school couldn't compete with one from NTU or NUS. The certificate is ok, but I won't get enough knowledge – the content is insufficient. But I believe it is different with marketing.

I was recommended to attend a 3-year course at James Cook University. The moment I got into the class, I saw 50+ people, of which 40+ were Chinese. The others were Vietnamese and Indonesian. The problem was with the lecturer. He did not have the ability to teach a degree programme. His approach was simplistic. He talked down to us. I was very disappointed with the lecturers. The quality of the education in private schools in Singapore is poor.

*3. What are the problems that you faced when you first arrived in Singapore?*

Singapore is not as good as I expected. It was the first time out of China for me. I found mostly Chinese here. The change seemed to be only in the physical buildings, similar to Shanghai, my hometown, but I had to pay five times more for everything.

I expected to get high quality education here. I wanted to get an education better than that available in China. An agent found the schools for me. Agents always recommend the schools that paid the highest commission, not necessarily the best schools.

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The agent told me that I could get a part time job, and that the school would help to look for a job for us after graduation, on a 3-year contract. I was also told that the minimum salary would be S\$2,400 per month, and the Singapore government guaranteed that this.

I did not know anybody when I first arrived here. I had felt a sense of financial insecurity. For example, the agent who helped me look for accommodation took money from me to help look for accommodation. I felt cheated. I paid 8 months x S\$300 pm rental, and didn't get any money back.

The government does not really care about students.

Our school rented hostels in Chinatown, Jurong East, and one other place in the east coast area, and provided a school bus service. The rental for the hostel is S\$350 p.m., with 3 sharing a room. The rental is higher than elsewhere. We had no choice of roommates.

Accommodation is very important. People living together can affect one's mood a lot. If we have the same interests that will be good, but what if we don't? I moved house 10 times in the last two and a half years, because of problems with roommates and landlords. Noise, smoking, playing of online games.

There is nothing to do in Singapore. We cannot work part time; things are expensive. So I go to the library a lot, to read.

Three of my former roommates have gone back to China, because they could not speak English, their attendance did not meet the minimum required, and could not cope with their studies. My best friend returned after spending one year here. He could not learn English properly. His lecturer was not good. Half of the students in the English class I attended went home because their attendance failed to meet the minimum level. They were sick of life here.

Many of my friends went to Australia after attending classes in our school, despite fees being cheaper here than in Australia. Singapore is going down in standards and reputation among Chinese students.

I feel a sense of loneliness and being lost. I don't know why I am here, what I should do. I watch TV, read books in libraries. The libraries here are much better than those in China.

I surf the Net. I don't chat a lot online. I use Internet chat with my family. I also call home sometimes, more out of politeness, as I didn't really feel the need to.

I cannot make friends with Singaporeans. They look down on us Chinese. I don't understand why they have this attitude.

The food is ok here. Things are very expensive. However, I got used to the high prices here after the first 6 months.

#### *4. How did you cope with these problems?*

I came to Singapore with a friend. We gave support to each other, encouraging each other to study. In China, there is very great pressure to study hard, but coming to Singapore is like a release. We go wild. Many students don't attend class, or they simply sign attendance and then go off.

Among the Chinese students, there is a good forum for us to share information and experiences. The address is [www.sgchinese.com](http://www.sgchinese.com).

Choosing a good agent is crucial for a good start.

I try to focus on my studies. I go to the local libraries a lot, and read the magazines, newspapers and books on things that interest me. This way, I saved a lot of money, and also kept myself out of the hot weather outside. I cannot stay at home because it is just noisy and crowded there.

#### *5. Have you adjusted to life and study here?*

I can say that I have adjusted to life here. Only the weather is unbearably hot. I stay indoors as much as possible; otherwise I will perspire like crazy.

I don't have many friends left here anymore. I keep in touch with them through the Internet. One or two friends are still here, and there is one girl I go out with quite a bit. She's a Malaysian. I find that Malaysians, Indonesians and the Burmese are friendlier than the Singaporeans.

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I still think of home, but I have lost that feeling of homesickness that I had initially felt. Maybe it is because I have grown older and more experienced. Maybe because I have some friends. It also helps to keep myself busy with my studies and don't think too much about problems.

*6. How satisfied are you with the support you are getting from the school in adjusting to life here?*

Support? The school had no support at all to help us settle in.

The situation now may be different. But there is still plenty of room for improvement.

*7. What would you like the school to do to help you?*

The exam system does not test ability. This makes me depressed. I doubt if the certificate is good enough. The image of Singapore education is going down. I am thinking of going to Australia or UK. I suggest that the standard of entry for foreign students should be controlled. The exam requirement should be maintained. It used to be that you study overseas only if you are good. Now, not so anymore. Anybody with money can study overseas.

Three hours of study per day is too short. The school should keep students busy. Give them homework; make homework count towards the final assessment. Make class presentations count too. Guide students positively. The lecturers must do this. Lecturers must be serious. Don't just read from the book. This school is better than most other schools, but even so, very few are good.

The school should appoint reliable agents who must take responsibility for the total welfare of the students. They should not just earn a commission for finding a student, and leave them alone after the sign-up. Their role should extend all the way to finding suitable accommodation, follow through to meet-up at the airport upon our arrival, and opening bank account.

**Case No. 10 Xu (Male)**

*1. When did you first arrive in Singapore?*

I arrived in Singapore on September 16, 2001 at the age of 19.

*2. Why did you come to Singapore?*

To study English. I wanted to improve my English.

My mother's friend's daughter studied in Singapore. She said I could study in a polytechnic here, and could also apply for PR (permanent resident) status.

*3. What are the problems that you faced when you first arrived in Singapore?*

The processing time to obtain a student visa took 3-4 months. The agent (mother's friend) took commission of S\$10,000 or more. This fee covered admission letter from school, government processing, accommodation, but excluded school fees. It was a very unhappy relationship. The agent didn't do anything. I visited the polytechnic and did all the applications myself, with the help of a friend.

I didn't get through the polytechnic entrance exam.

I entered a school for English language. I was quite happy there. There were many foreign students; it was quite a good school. The fees were acceptable. I studied eight months there.

While studying there, I again applied for a place in another polytechnic, to study naval engineering, shipbuilding, but could not get admission. So I was forced to take up Business studies.

The agent's daughter had a friend who introduced me to stay in a condo. Four of us shared a master bedroom. It cost me \$200 per month excluding everything else. At first I thought it was quite cheap, but later I realized it was expensive because we had four persons in a room. The room was always dirty. After that I moved to a walk-up apartment in Somerset (a residential area in the heart of town, along Orchard Road).

I discussed with my parents via phone. It is too expensive to use the hand phone. So, whenever I looked for accommodation, I always looked for one with phone facilities.

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The biggest issue I had was moving and looking for accommodation. It was my biggest headache. I use [www.sgchinese.com](http://www.sgchinese.com) to help me find accommodation.

I moved many times. The problem was with friends over money, sharing of things.

Now I am staying in a room for one person. It is clean, with Internet connection. I can cook and use the phone. For \$250 – 300 p.m., one can get an HDB room depending on location. For this price, one can also get a room in a condo with sharing. I prefer not to share room, for reasons of security, convenience, and no disturbance.

Food is not a big issue. I was allowed to cook at home. Local food is OK for me. Other Chinese students however, didn't like local food.

I came to our present school immediately after English school. I didn't look for other schools. It is cheaper here, and affordable.

There is a feeling of regret coming to Singapore, because there is not much chance for me to use English here. I had thought of mixing with other foreign students, but I feel a kind of a barrier between us. I feel that very few people mix around with foreign friends. I have some Singaporean acquaintances in my place of work. I find them mercenary, materialistic. I don't have a sense of intimacy with them.

#### *4. How did you cope with these problems?*

Having friends is quite important, especially help in finding accommodation. We help each other, but I don't feel that we are very united. People from Beijing and Shanghai are rivals. The Shanghainese look down on the other Chinese. They are materialistic.

I use Chinese to communicate with other Chinese friends.

I call home quite often. I normally speak to my mother, and sometimes to my father as well. They usually ask me about my studies, very seldom about how I live. I suppose they think that there is nothing to complain about living in Singapore apart from the high cost of living. I also don't want to tell them too much about my problems as I don't want them to worry and nag me.

I don't spend money on many things apart from the rental for my room, transport, food, and pay for my mobile phone charges. I am conscious of the need to be careful with money. I always try to live within the budget set for me by my parents.

*5. Have you adjusted to life and study here?*

I used to convert everything into *yuan*, and find things very expensive. But I don't do this anymore.

I have a girlfriend now, so I don't feel lonely. I had studied outside my hometown back in China. I think I am quite independent. I just feel this place is very humid.

*6. How satisfied are you with the support you are getting from the school in adjusting to life here?*

So far, I don't think there is much to say about this, because the support is minimal. As a school, what can you expect from them? We have to learn to be independent and not rely on the school for any personal help.

Fees here are very expensive now. Service is OK.

*7. What would you like the school to do to help you?*

My suggestion for our school is that it is better to use foreign lecturers for degree programmes, since they are foreign degrees. It is not so credible to use only local lecturers. Chinese students place great weight on a foreign certificate.

In APMI (a rival private commercial school), they also use Singaporean lecturers, but for every module, a British native lecturer always conducts the first lesson. In our school, there is no British flavour.

It will be best if there is a hostel in the campus. The atmosphere is different. Now there is no feeling of a university. Back in china, this would be unacceptable. University must have a campus, and its own buildings.

Another suggestion for our school is that it should help students find jobs after graduation. Give testimonials as a standard.

**Case No. 11 Liu (Male)**

*1. When did you first arrive in Singapore?*

I first arrived in Singapore in May 2001 when I was 20 years old. I came alone.

*2. Why did you come to Singapore?*

I chose Singapore because I was told it was not much different from China. It would be easier for me to cope with life here.

*3. What are the problems that you faced when you first arrived in Singapore?*

I joined our school's Language School when I first came here. The school was much smaller than I expected. I had expected a campus. Anyway, I accepted it because I found that other schools were the same. I spent half a year in the language school. My weakness in English is a major problem that is affecting my studies. Although I had learned some English back home, I found out how inadequate my command of the English language was when I came here.

Living here was a little problematic for me at first. I could not get used to the taste of the food here. The quantity of food was also too little for me. So I was often hungry.

Accommodation was another big issue for me. The agent found the first apartment for me. The relationship with the bachelor-landlord was difficult. He was always at home, and complained about the little noise I made, the amount of water I drank. I stayed for only two months. When I decided to move out, I asked friends and checked on the Internet for alternatives to move to. Altogether, I have moved 7-8 times. The longest that I have stayed in one place was about one year. Accommodation is a big headache. The problem was mainly with the landlord. For example, at one place, the landlord promised separate cupboards, tables, and chairs for my roommate and me. But later on, he could not fulfil his promise. He said there would be new TV and a radio in our room, but later did not provide. He said we could cook, but later said we could not. At first he said he did not mind having our friends over to visit, but when friends did come, he was quite unfriendly. After staying there for 7 days, my roommate and I had had enough. We moved out and looked for another place through another agent. I



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usually have twin sharing. Utilities are included in the rent I pay, about S\$200 per person per month. Internet connectivity costs another S\$50 per month.

*4. How did you cope with these problems?*

Friends are very important. They are helpful in finding accommodation and schoolwork. We speak Chinese when we are among ourselves. As Chinese, it is very awkward for us not to use our mother tongue.

The mobile phone is very important. It is the only way for my friends, family and me to communicate with each other. I phone my family in China once a week.

I am very close to my mother. I do think of her, of home a bit, but since I have weekly contact with her, it is not so bad.

Among friends here, I get the feeling our relationships are not as intimate as with my friends in China, maybe because we have this realisation that our relationship is not really permanent, only temporary. I can say it is even a bit superficial, casual.

I don't have problems with finance. My mother gives me a lump sum once every few months, so sometimes I feel rich, and when the money is drying up, I feel tight.

Living in Singapore gives one the feeling that one must be very practical, materialistic. There is a certain barrier to relationships, like they are not real, sincere.

*5. Have you adjusted to life and study here?*

I think it is possible to say that I have adjusted quite adequately. Of course, I still don't like the weather, the food, but I can get by.

After I finish my studies here, I would like to work overseas, in Singapore too, for a while before going home. Having overseas working experience is very important for getting a good job back home. Employers in China value this.

*6. How satisfied are you with the support you are getting from the school in adjusting to life here?*

In terms of support for adjusting to life here, there is actually not much support. The focus of the school is to sign us up as students, make us pay our fees, and go

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through the exams. Their focus is not on whether we can cope with living here, our accommodation, our transportation, and our general well-being. The International Student Services is really all about processing our student passes, nothing more.

Our school is now much better than before in terms of its administration. The answers given by the staff are now more consistent. The responses are faster, and more efficient. Things are improving.

*7. What would you like the school to do to help you?*

I would really like the school to help us find jobs. This is very important for us to gain some practical experience working outside Singapore. The job can merely be a short attachment, like an internship, but it should be meaningful to our course of study. It is also good for the school as a selling point for its programmes.

Many students including me have a lot of difficulties with accommodation. If the school cannot provide us with hostels and living quarters, the least it should do is to give us a list of approved agents who are reliable and experienced. Post the names on the school's website.

One last request concerns the agents who help the school to recruit students. Something must be done to ensure that these agents do not cheat and make us false promises. There are many recruitment agents who over-promise. It is terrible to do something like this to foreign students who are at their mercy.

**Case No. 12 Li (Male)**

*1. When did you first arrive in Singapore?*

I first came to Singapore in April 2001 at the age of 18. I came alone.

*2. Why did you come to Singapore?*

Before I came, I was considering various other places, namely UK, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. I finally settled on Singapore because of the proximity to China, and also because it was more economical here.

I came with the purpose of obtaining an internationally recognised higher qualification, i.e. a degree. An agent made the arrangements for me, covering visa, student pass, accommodation, and school. I paid about S\$2000 in agency fees.

*3. What are the problems that you faced when you first arrived in Singapore?*

I was not very satisfied with the arrangements made by the agent. One cannot rely on the words of the agent too much. The language school I attended when I first came to Singapore did not appear to be a proper school. It was a very small school. No textbooks were issued, only notes. The quality of the teachers was also not up to my expectations. But since there was a ruling that we were not allowed to switch school in the first 6 months, I had to stay put there. However, I felt that my standard of English did improve over what I attained in China.

After the six months were up, I looked for another school by myself. I joined SIC (a local private commercial school) and studied in the UOL (University of London) programme, but found it very tough. The subjects were very difficult. The lecturers were also not very experienced. They were reading from the books, and were not very responsible. It was not much better than reading the study guide. I had to depend on myself a lot. No point asking the lecturers to explain, as the time taken would be too long. I might as well solve the problems myself. I studied there for two years, and transferred to our present with some credits to study at the degree Finance track.

One of the worries I had was with changing school. It was quite stressful. Fortunately, my family advised me to choose a school that was suitable for me rather than the best school.

An agent arranged my accommodation for me. When I first came to Singapore, I stayed in a private condo. I did not think that the room rental was excessive. But after comparing with fellow tenants and friends, I later could see that what I had paid initially was very exorbitant. At that time, three of us had paid S\$1,000 for sharing one room. Now two of us pay just S\$500 to share one room.

Except for the weather which is hot and humid, living in Singapore is OK with me. This is mainly because this is a predominantly Chinese environment. I have no problem with the food.

Getting around was a problem at first; I had to rely on the MRT (Mass Rapid Transit train) and friends to bring me to places.

I don't have worries over money. I can control my expenditure.

*4. How did you cope with these problems?*

Friends are very important when I need help. One from Taiwan helped me a lot in everything, especially my studies.

The mobile phone is very important in helping me cope with life here. It is essential to have it; it is the most basic must-have. Another thing that helps a lot is the computer and Internet connection. I use the ICQ a lot for chatting with friends and my family back home.

*5. Have you adjusted to life and study here?*

It's been four years, a long time. By now, I suppose I have already experienced enough to be able to cope with life here. If not, I would have left like some of the other students I know of. The support of my friends and my family has been very important to my welfare. I owe them a lot.

Food and living arrangements are not perfect but I can get by. As for my studies, I guess I am still struggling with my command of the English language, but I think I am better than many other students from China. My business studies are Ok, and I should be able to complete my studies within this semester. After that, I am planning to go to Australia or the US for further studies, and hopefully get some working experience before I go home to China.

*6. How satisfied are you with the support you are getting from the school in adjusting to life here?*

The school has not done very much over the four years that I have been here. Maybe now things are improving, but the perception among my fellow students is that we cannot depend on the school for our personal needs. There is a Chinese saying, 'when abroad, depend on your friends'. To me this is very apt. The school is like government (bureaucracy), no point asking for help from it.

*7. What would you like the school to do to help you?*

I have a suggestion for our school, and that is to do something about standardising the school fees. 10 different consultants can quote 10 different prices. This causes a lot of confusion among students. I have heard of students being cheated, and our school disclaimed any responsibility. In the end the students suffer.

To me, having a campus is not as important as giving good quality in our education. The money that the school spends comes from students; therefore the school should spend the money on improving the quality of academic matters such as paying for better quality lecturers, giving more lessons, etc.