

Academic and Social Integration of Chinese International Students in Italy⁺

Gilsun Song*
College of Education, Zhejiang University

Abstract

The increasing mobility of students has supported the internationalization of higher education. Studying abroad brings to the forefront language and cultural issues. In this paper, through interviews and survey data I investigate the academic and social integration of Chinese students in Italian universities. While these students look forward to academic excellence, social integration is also significant in how well students perform academically and how they feel about their studies. I focus on factors that affect students' abilities and behaviors in blending academically and socially in Italy and attempt to bring out the idea that successful academic and social integration translates into better academic achievements. The results should help Chinese overseas students ascertain whether academic and social integration are effective for their studying abroad, what obstacles they may face and how they may be overcome. This research on social blending finds that there is a significant correlation between academic and social factors. This paper also indicates that a lack of Italian language skills, communication skills, and preparation for studying abroad directly influences social integration, academic achievements, and the expansion of social networks.

Keywords: academic and social integration, student mobility, internationalization, communication skills, Chinese overseas students

1 Introduction

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) data points out that 165 million students participated in formal tertiary education around the globe in 2009 with an annual increase of 2% (UNESCO Institute for Statistics database, 2011). The flow of students from countries such as China, India, Korea, and other Asian countries is increasing greatly. The most dominant group of

international students is from China which has overtaken India with more than 440,000 Chinese students abroad globally (Coughlan, 2011). Chinese students studying abroad in the EU (European Union) in 2010 occupied a quarter of the number of overseas Chinese students in Europe (European Commission and the Ministry of Education in China [ECMEC], 2011). As studying abroad is seen to lead to good opportunities for career development and understandings of global cultural and social experiences at an early age, the number of students seeking to go abroad is increasing dramatically. Increasing social demands and individual career development plans are very important reasons Chinese students are seeking education abroad.

The Chinese government maintains a strict control of higher education enrollment, allowing around 25% of high school students to attend university (Li, Yu, & Li, 2006) in well-developed cities such as Shanghai, Beijing, Hangzhou and Guangzhou. Those students who cannot attend university must look elsewhere. Parents looking for better education for their children may send them to other countries. In addition, for those students who feel they cannot attend famous Chinese universities, studying abroad in international universities comes as an alternative. Study abroad intermediary agencies in China also increase the numbers of Chinese studying abroad in countries such as Italy, Denmark, Germany, France, and many others.

This paper introduces a brief account of education agreements between China and Italy under the development of EU international student policies and investigates the motivation, satisfaction and attitudes of Chinese overseas student and their recognition of their learning and social blending through interviews and surveys. It then discusses the integration of Chinese overseas students in Italian university environments and society. Students' academic integration is connected to academic environments and networks, group work, and various learning meetings inside and out of classrooms. It can be seen that a lack of interaction in school life influences their academic and social integration (Winston, 1990). This study concludes

⁺ 985 Project the 3rd phase: Research on "World-Class University Development strategy and policy."

* Corresponding Author: Dr. Gilsun Song (gilsunsong@hotmail.com)
Associate Professor, College of Education
Zhejiang University

that overseas students' attitudes are not optimistic and that there is a perceived lack of connection between school and society.

2 Overview: Integrating Overseas Students in Italy

The EU firstly mentioned the importance of integration in education for European member countries in the Treaty of Maastricht in 1993 and since then has been continuing to set up EU education policies such as the Sorbonne Declaration, the Bologna Declaration and the Lisbon Strategy. EU policies and practices have naturally attracted flows of international students (Żyłkiewicz, 2010). Facing economic pressure, the EU reconsidered education's main value for Europe and pointed it toward the "harmonization" of culture, society, and economy (Falkner, Treib, Hartlapp, & Leiber, 2005).

Italy is one of the most popular study abroad destinations in the EU for Chinese students (Education in China, 2010). China and Italy signed a mutual agreement in 2005, and have rapidly increased study abroad programs. The European Unit Website explained that Italian universities recruited 4.9 million international students from 2007 to 2009 and the number of Chinese students ranked second (China News Network, 2009). In 2011, Chinese overseas students reached 1,420,000, with an increase of 23% in the last 3 years, making China the world superpower for sending students abroad (Jinghua Shibao, 2012). Chinese students in Italy choose many majors, ranging from architecture, engineering, marketing and economics to philosophy, design and arts (Xinhua Net, 2011). The main reason for the increase of Chinese students studying in Italy is the support afforded by the governments of both countries. Italy has 65 public universities and the Italian government officially opened itself to Chinese overseas students with free tuition policies (Study Abroad 51, 2012). Chinese students pay 6,000 Euros per year for living expenses and many of them receive around 4,200 Euros scholarships from local Italian government (Study Abroad 51, 2012).

Chinese students have excellent opportunities to study in Italy and to enter university programs and receive academic degrees. By mutual higher education degree recognition agreement, if Chinese students pass Italian language courses (B2 level) or evaluation examinations of university's own language courses, they can directly enter degree programs, especially B.A. (Bachelor of Arts) and M.A. (Master of Arts) degree programs. For many Chinese students, before they go to Italian universities, they must firstly learn at least a half year of Italian language and pass B2 level (basic 2nd level) in language training schools.

After that, students can apply for degree programs in Italian universities. In 2005, under the support of two programs, the Marco Polo program and the Turandot Program,¹ five hundred Chinese students studied in Italy, 2,000 students in 2006 and around 7,800 in 2011 (Center for Italian Education, 2012). Related data showed that every year nearly 5,000 Chinese students study in Italy (Xinwei Education, 2012) through both programs (Center for Italian Education, 2012).² The two programs have provided increasing numbers of students with the opportunity to study in Italy, but have also brought many problems to the forefront such as low language levels, lack of cultural understanding, different learning environments and social skills.

As mentioned above, the Italian government and universities have had an impact on the origins of higher education and have been playing an important role in the integration of European higher education. Italian foreign student policies have been directly attracting Chinese overseas students through free tuition fees, flexible entrance requirements, and the opportunity to work while attending university.

3 Theoretical Background

With the rapidly growing number of overseas students, the issue of academic and social integration has been discussed more and more. The definitions of academic and social integration are varied; however, they mainly point to a process of adaptation. Academic integration can be defined as the degree of academic adaptation which includes learning environments, social adaptation, adaptability of mind and body, degree of learning pressure, and recognition of one's school. Social integration is the degree of adaptability into school life. Social integration includes students' social networks, friends and family relation and economic support. As students move across cultures, challenges of social, linguistic, cultural and academic integration come to the forefront (Tinto, 1975, 1987). In more detail, academic integration refers to the degree of adaptation of students' academic life styles. Specifically, it concerns four aspects. The first is academic adaptation which reflects student's integration into an academic environment and atmosphere (Tinto, 1987). Tinto (1987, 1998) points out students' academic integration should have clear goals, interactions with peers and faculty,

¹ Generally, China and Italy government have both programs. Of them, Marco Polo program is for social, engineering and humanities fields, and Turandot Program for art and music field. The target students are undergraduate students, graduate students, researchers, and interns.

² Italian Education Center (2012). Counseling for oversea students joining Perugia in Italy: <http://www.liuxue315.edu.cn/articles.php?id=1509>.

and out-of-classroom factors in the learning community. Beil and Shope (1990) also emphasize that overseas students' positive experiences with academic advisors can increase integration in their academic lives, for instance, whether or not the students successfully respond to various learning requirements and are satisfied with their learning environments. Second, social integration asks for group-based cooperation such as making friends, participating in social activities, and small group projects. Third, physical adaptability and how students handle stress or pressure in their academic lives in a foreign society also affect their academic and social integration. Fourth, affiliations or feelings toward their university also influence overseas students' academic integration (Baker & Siryk, 1999).

Social integration refers to the degree of integration in social life. The difficulties overseas students face in social integration range from obstacles in foreign language use, being far away from their parents, having different cultural backgrounds, lacking communication skills, and encountering economic problems. Social integration has been researched in four main areas: satisfaction and recognition of their school through social networking, degree of friend and family support, satisfaction with social life, and economic support (Rienties, Grohnert, Kommers, Niemantsverdriet, & Nijhuis, 2011). In addition, foreign language skills are also very important elements in overseas students' social integration (Academic Cooperation Association, 2006; Ramburuth & McCormick, 2001). Student activities help in social integration, adaptation into new learning environments and lead to better communication abilities in school life (Niles, Sowa, & Laden, 1994). Overseas students are affected by various experiences and challenges of foreign language and cultural environments (Hsu, 2003), academic difficulties, homesickness, racism, and loneliness (Yeh & Inose, 2003).

Previous research (Baker & Siryk, 1999; Severiens & Wolff, 2008; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005) found that differences in overseas students' educational and cultural backgrounds affect social and academic integration. Overseas students' academic achievements such as grades, foreign language levels (normally English) and academic degrees also affected the degree of integration. Supports from family and friends have also been known to affect students' academic performance. Related researches on Chinese overseas students have mostly focused on countries such as the UK, the USA, and Australia and have found that there were many differences in Chinese students learning styles (Holmes, 2004), levels of intercultural adaptation (Scherto, 2007), and academic performance compared to other international students (Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010). Chinese overseas students studying abroad in western learning environments tend to encounter problems

in learning and communication and face difficulties in listening, understanding, and interacting with the host culture (Holmes, 2004). A case study exploring Chinese overseas students in UK business schools also showed interaction problems between teachers and Chinese students (Currie, 2007) and exposed potential ethnocentrism in teachers' pedagogical approaches. Scherto (2007) also discussed the necessity of intercultural adaptation and the transformation of understanding of learning experiences, self-knowledge, and awareness of the others in British higher education institutions. Li et al. (2010) compared Chinese students and other international students in terms of their academic performance during their overseas studies.

Research results show the education experiences of overseas students and finds students' different cultural backgrounds give rise to the problems of academic and social integration (Baker & Siryk, 1999). The highlight of attention is overseas student's experiences concerning language and their lack of understanding in the broader university community (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010) and active learning (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000). Overseas students need not only to obtain academic degrees and graduate, but also to actively blend with the local cultures. During their stay, this produces a strong impact on their school work (Severiens & Wolff, 2008). Parent and family support also affect their learning outcomes and academic achievements (Wilcox et al., 2005). University and learning environment are two of the important elements in overseas students' study experiences, but universities mostly focus on students' academic results. As a result, social integration is often ignored in the development of their further success (Sherry et al., 2009) and this significantly affects a majority of overseas students' behaviors and motivations for social integration (Rienties, Beusaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet, & Kommers, 2012). At the same time, many a overseas student endures much stress related to language levels. The lack of foreign language skills impacts students' abilities to integrate socially with other students (Yeh & Inose, 2003).

From this brief literature overview, it can be seen that academic and social integration of overseas students is an important point of discussion. Problems such as foreign language levels, school and learning environments, cultural and social differences, learning difficulties and individual education backgrounds need to be considered by universities and educators for supplying continuing support and appropriate academic and social resources, programs, and activities for overseas students. What students feel about their learning processes and the aforementioned problems should be addressed in detail, for these are important for universities and overseas students themselves.

Understanding of the problems overseas students face, their failures, and lack of interaction and understanding, as well as their successful academic and social integrations is the beginning point for the improvement needed.

4 Data and Method

The survey, from May to September 2012, consisted of undergraduate and graduate Chinese students in 6 Italian universities in the cities of Rome, Firenze, Milan, Bologna, and Verona. Table 1 presents the sample of students based on their major, age, gender, academic degree, and scholarships. Twenty students from the 80 respondents were selected for interviews. One hundred survey questionnaires were sent out and 80 responses were received. Five professors from sample 1, 2, 5, 6 were also interviewed. The most survey participants were from Mainland China, with only one student from Macao. This survey was made up of 28 questions and adopted the Likert scale (5 answers: Very good, good, average, not good, very bad).

Table 1 shows demographic data such as age, gender, scholarship, and degree. Most of the participants in the survey were in their early 20s and study in B. A. or M.A. degree programs. Student mostly majors in humanities and social sciences such as architecture, law, philosophy, media, and economics. Among the 80 students, 74 receive scholarships from the local Italian government³ which cover living fees and others. Easily obtained scholarships and free tuition fees are very important. This decreased financial pressure compared to countries such as the USA, Canada, the UK, and many others, attracts Chinese students. Most Chinese students go to Italy through the Marco Polo program, three years for BA degree, followed directly by MA program in Italian public universities.

The research questions for the survey and interviews are as follows:

- How are Chinese overseas students integrating academically and socially in Italian universities?
- What do Chinese overseas students say about their preparation for, recognition of, and satisfaction with their academic and social lives in school?

The survey and interviews were conducted through contact with Italian universities and Chinese student associations or unions, and all participants agreed to participate in the survey. This research is also based on recommendations by professors, students, and individual contacts. Because of the difficulty in connecting with large numbers of Chinese students abroad in Italy due to privacy regulations, the survey is therefore limited to several universities and does not cover all Chinese students in Italy.

4.1 Research Framework

Through the research design (See Table 2), this paper explains students' recognition of, satisfaction with, and attitudes toward academic and social integration.

- Analysis methods: The survey data uses SPSS Statistics 17.0 and Excel 2007 for analysis.
- Objective: To ascertain whether students' academic and social integration affect their learning performance in Italy.
- Hypothesis: Successful academic and social integration translates into better academic achievements for Chinese overseas students.

The framework focuses on common issues concerning students' interests, learning recognition and environments, social activities and academic performance from the literature and is made up of six factors (See Table 2). There are 28 survey questions in total and 3-4 questions for each factor and interviews.

Table 1 Student and University Basic Data

Italian universities	Student numbers	Major		Age			Gender		Degree			Scholarship	
		H.	S.	10s	20s	30s	M	F	BA	MA	Ph.D.	Yes	No
Sample 1, Rome	15	8	7	0	7	8	7	8	0	10	5	15	0
Sample 2, Rome	5	3	2	0	4	1	0	5	2	2	1	4	1
Sample 3, Rome	5	4	1	0	3	2	0	5	4	1	0	5	0
Sample 4, Bologna	15	4	11	2	13	0	6	9	4	11	0	14	1
Sample 5, Firenze	20	15	5	5	15	0	7	13	12	8	0	18	2
Sample 6, Milan	20	0	20	0	20	0	5	15	18	2	0	18	2
Total	80	34	46	7	62	11	25	55	40	34	6	74	6

Note: Unit: Student numbers. Major: Humanities/social sciences; Age: 10s/20s/30s; Gender: Male/Female; Degree: BA/MA/ Ph.D.; Scholarship: Yes/No.

³ Each city has a different name for scholarships, especially for supporting living fees which are based on family income and the ability to pass courses in Italian universities. Most Chinese students can receive the scholarship for living fees.

Table 2 The Framework of Academic and Social Integration

	Degree of Academic Integration (factor 7)	Degree of Social integration (Factor 8)
Understanding	Factor 1 Various learning and interest in my university	Factor 4 Satisfaction and recognition in school between you and your social life
Recognition	Factor 2 Academic environment	Factor 5 Learning support from my friends and my family
Satisfaction	Factor 3 Acceptance of study requirements	Factor 6 Italian Language and social interests
Attitude		

5 Data Analysis

5.1 Correlation between Academic and Social Integration

Based on the research framework, this study investigated the correlation between academic integration (factor 7)⁴ and social integration (factor 8).⁵

Table 3 explains descriptive statistics between factor 7 and factor 8, and each factor's mean value is 2.3260 and 2.6000. Factor 7 and Factor 8 (See Table 3) show significant correlations on the 0.01 level. The table shows a positive correlation between factor 7 and 8 and the correlation coefficient is 0.758. Through the correlation of academic and social integration, it can be shown that Chinese students' learning requirements, learning achievements and acceptance of their studies are strongly related to their social lives, learning support from parents and friends, and also Italian language and social interests. Based on the significant and positive correlation between academic and social factors, the following figures are analyzed in more to show what Chinese overseas students think about their academic and social integration.

5.2 Degree of Academic Integration

All figures in this article are marked 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5, which respectively indicates the answers of very good, good, average, not good, and very bad.

Figure 1 shows that Chinese students are interested

in their learning and in their classrooms. 86% of Chinese overseas students are personally interested in what they are learning in school, which explains their motivations for learning. However, more than 72% of the participants selected "average" and "not good" concerning their ability to follow courses and almost 40% responded "average" to their level of achievement of learning goals. It seems that most students are making efforts to integrate into their learning environments even though they are worried that their abilities and goals are low, given their level of interest in their learning. However, when it comes to their course test scores, their responses are "average" or "not good." It can be seen that students are interested in their learning and are motivated to learn; however, their academic achievements and their expectations of their learning goals are not that high.

Figure 2 shows Chinese students are willing to devote themselves to learning in the classroom (around 65%) and consider themselves having good relationships with professors and classmates (more than 50%). Only 6.25% of the students mention negative relations with professors. Figure 2 shows three questions concerning integration in classroom learning environments and the answers are mostly "good" or "average" and also show relatively positive relationships with their professors and classmates.

This section contains the details of students' learning processes in their majors, homework, and group activities after school. Interestingly, Figure 3 shows that more than

Table 3 Correlation between Academic and Social Integration

Correlation between Factor7 and Factor8		
	Factor7	Factor8
Pearson correlation	1	.758**
Significant (bilateral)		.000
Square and Cross product sum	12.199	11.190
Covariance	.154	.142
N	80	80

** .01 level (bilateral) significant correlation.

⁴ See Table 2: Factor 7 includes factors 1, 2 and 3.

⁵ See Table 2: Factor 8 includes factors 4, 5 and 6.

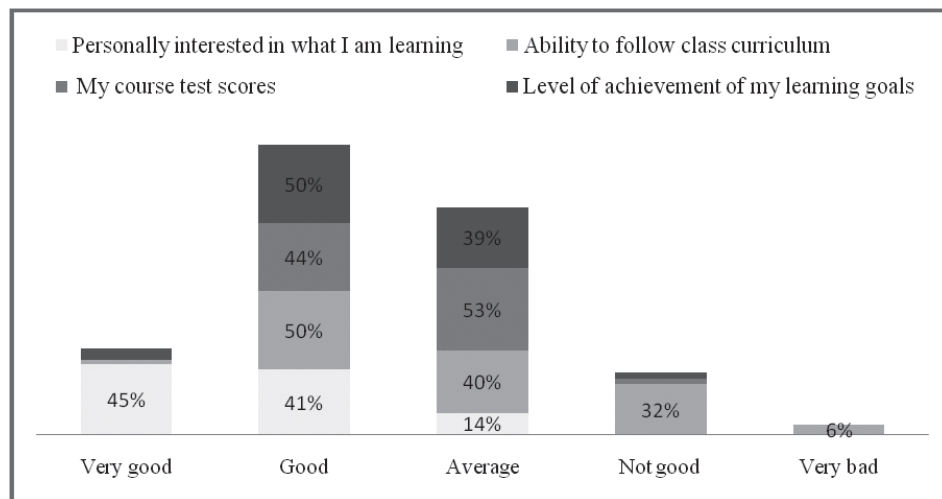


Figure 1 Learning and Interest

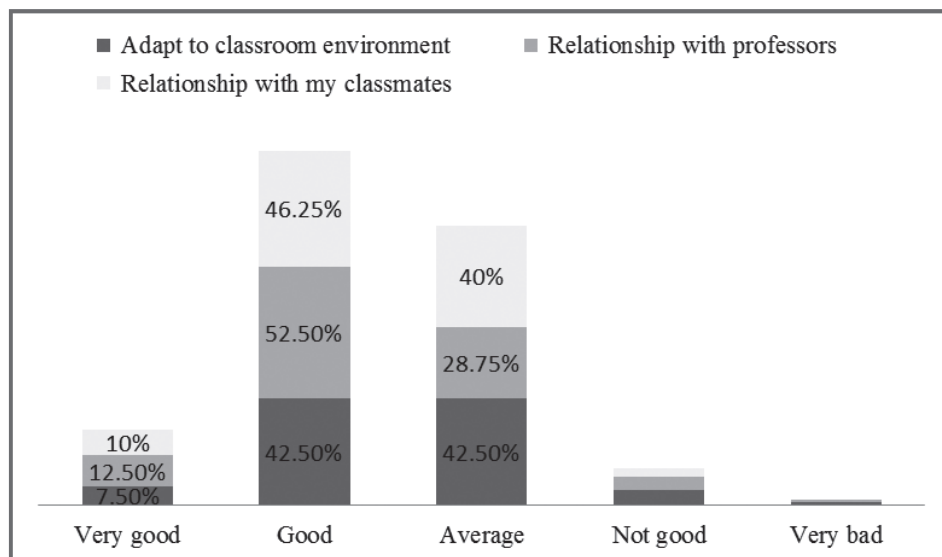


Figure 2 Academic Environment

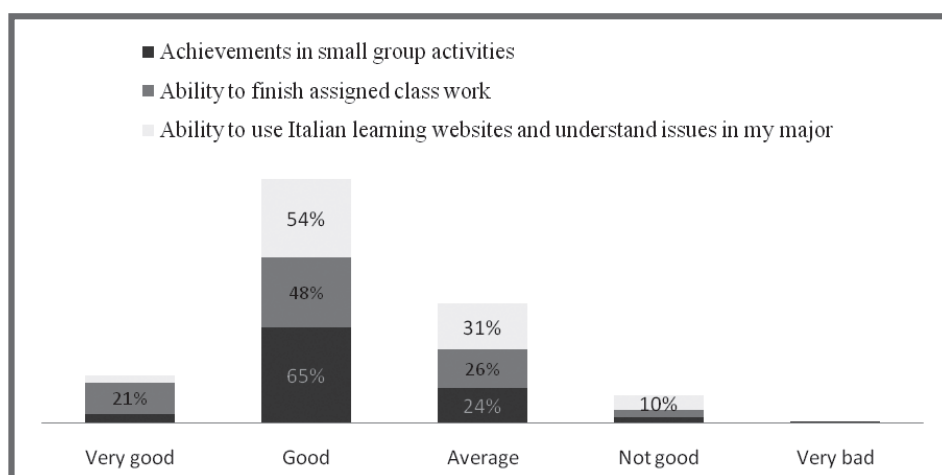


Figure 3 Acceptance of Studying Requirement: Ability of Learning

65% of the students can finish their homework and around 50% have good experiences in small group activities. But many Chinese students would like to finish work individually without participating in group academic activities. One student among the 68.75% explains this in the following way:

...most of the time I study by myself after school. If I have difficulties doing it, I check websites, especially Chinese websites. It's much easier to find relevant materials and understand directly the point of the homework....I do not like group activities, because Italian and other international students talk too much on other issues. I just want to finish my homework as fast as I can. It saves more time if I do it on my own....
(Undergraduate student 2nd year, Male, Rome)

As we can see from the interview, most Chinese students study alone and use Chinese websites more than Italian websites. This explains that their learning is not openly cooperative and also lacks in integrating with other classmates through homework or teamwork activities. What follows are more students talking about their classroom learning process. As we can see, there is still a need to consider serious language problems, which shadow the learning process.

...I like to go to school, but I do not always understand the professors.... There are times when I do not understand at all. When that happens, I ask professors and classmates for help.... It takes time to learn Italian language.... Professors and my classmates think I

am a very quiet person because I do not talk in the classroom.... professors ask me to talk or to raise questions in the classroom, but I could not express myself. I feel bad...my biggest problem is language, even though I learned Italian for one year, but it is not enough at all.... Entering a Italian university right after half a year of learning Italian language.... It is not possible to follow the lectures in the classroom.”
(Undergraduate student 2nd year, Bologna)

One of the biggest problems of integrating into academic environments is to understand Italian language -- speaking, listening, writing, feedback, homework, examinations, and communication. This ultimately results to a lack of confidence and self-esteem as students try to integrate into school environments and Italian society.

Figure 4 shows Chinese students are generally satisfied with their professors' recognition of their learning achievements, learning goals, and their decision to study in Italy. Around 77% of the Chinese students are satisfied with their decision to study in Italy and 72.5% think that they are reaching their education goals during their stay; however, one third of the students answer “average.” This may express that some of the students may not have seriously considered their learning recognition and learning satisfaction. Here is one student's interview response:

I had discussed with my parents and decided to study in Italy. I like to improve my study and get a degree.... I often visit my professors and one of them advises me to prepare for courses and exams.... I wanted to study in UK or USA but now I am here and do not regret.

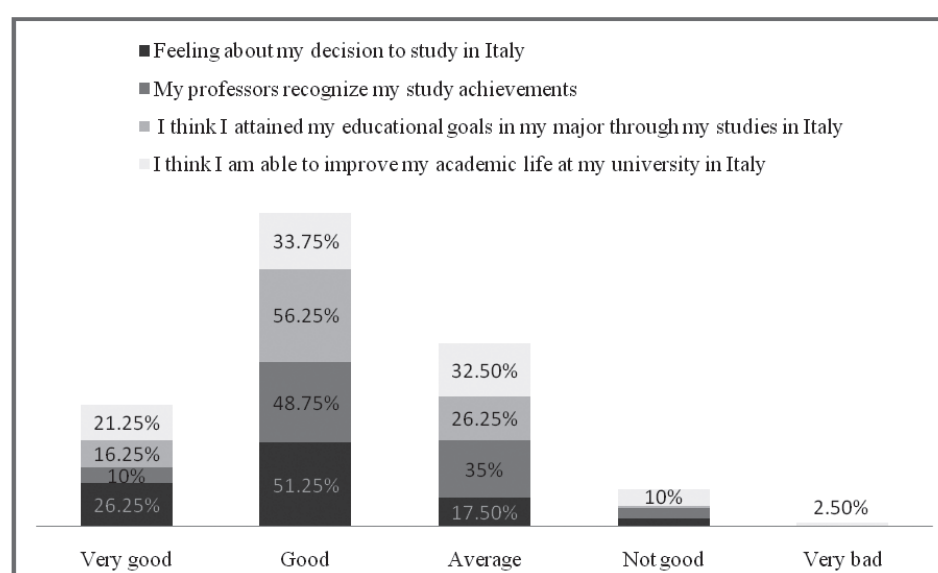


Figure 4 Learning Recognition and Satisfaction

The financial pressure is a lot less here..... I learn another foreign language... If English is the classroom instructional language, it will be great.... I do not forget English.... (Graduate student 2nd year, Firenze)

Through the survey questions and interviews, it can be seen that Chinese students would like to achieve their education goals (especially, obtaining degrees or certificates) and improve their academic life in their universities. On the other hand, Chinese students pointed out that the Italian education curriculum is given entirely in Italian. Chinese students suggested Italian and English should be used interchangeably in class, similar to what they do in Germany or France, which would be beneficial for their career development. The first foreign language most Chinese students learn is English; Chinese students who have been rejected by English-speaking countries (low scores on TOEFL, GRE tests) enter Italian universities (Average from 6 months to 1 year Italian language requirements for Italian universities) and non-English countries.

Here is another student's interview response, showing that one of the biggest challenges for academic integration is the language.

...In fact, I prepared to study in the USA but I am here in Italy. When I study in here, I realize many professors and Italian students are not good at English. My Italian is poor so it is very difficult to communicate.... I worry about how much I can improve my Italian in 2 years. Sometimes I regret for not having strengthened my English more...however I will try hard to get my degree.... (Graduate student 1st year, Milan)

The interviews with Chinese students strongly suggest and commonly emphasize that the learning period for Italian should be longer than half a year before coming to Italy. Students from the Marco Polo program emphasized that language is the biggest obstacle in their studies.

In addition to language issues, the classroom learning environment in Italian Universities also differs from that in China. Learning methods and environments are different from major to major. Many Chinese students explained in the interviews that professors and students in Italian universities seem to be on equal status and students ask questions and provide suggestions in class. This is very different from the situation in China. For the most part, Chinese students in China are quiet and listen to lectures. It is not possible to argue or give suggestions to professors over their lectures. This is clearly explained by one interviewee:

I was undergraduate student in China and decide to

study in Italy. My major is Media. When I studied in China, students did not ask many questions or argue with professors. But Italian students do.... Much to my surprise, Italian professors really listen to them.... This is what happens here.... Students like to ask questions and give suggestions on their learning.... (Undergraduate student 3rd year, Male, Rome)

Concerning the issue of language of instruction, the Marco Polo Program selects 10 keystone Italian universities⁶ to set up English curriculum for Chinese overseas students. In this way, Chinese students will only need to take TOEFL or IELTS tests for the upcoming 2013 school year. This may benefit some Chinese students, but does that mean Chinese students in Italy will not learn Italian? Language issues, however critical they are, should not overshadow the difficulties Chinese students encounter in culture exchange and social integration. A wholesale switch to English instruction may not be the best method and schools should look into a mix of different languages with equal emphasis on more cultural activities and social integration. At any rate, the chance does express the willingness of the Italian government to accept Chinese students and an indication that they are willing to listen to foreign students' opinions.

A lack of language skills does lead to a decrease in self-esteem and confidence in Chinese students' learning and social integration. However, as we can see from the interview responses, different learning environments and methods also help Chinese students open their eyes to new learning methods and new relationships with professors. Chinese universities can also do much more in this regard to prepare students before they go to Italy by introducing not only language, but also different types of classroom instruction, teaching methods, and more courses on Italian culture and society.

5.3 Degree of Social Integration

Chinese students' social integration is limited in the school environments. Figure 5 shows student recognition of and satisfaction with their schools. 75% of students have good or very good feelings about their university in general. 42.5% answered not much or not at all concerning managing social networks and 36.5% answered average, which shows that students are passive in creating their social networks. Concerning participating in school volunteer activities, 91.25% answered not much and not at all and less than 10% of students responded that their schools provided opportunities for them to integrate with

⁶ 10 selected universities: University of Bologna, University of Pavia, University Degli Studi di Milano, Universit Politecnico di Milano, Politecnico di Torino, Universita Degli Studi Siena.

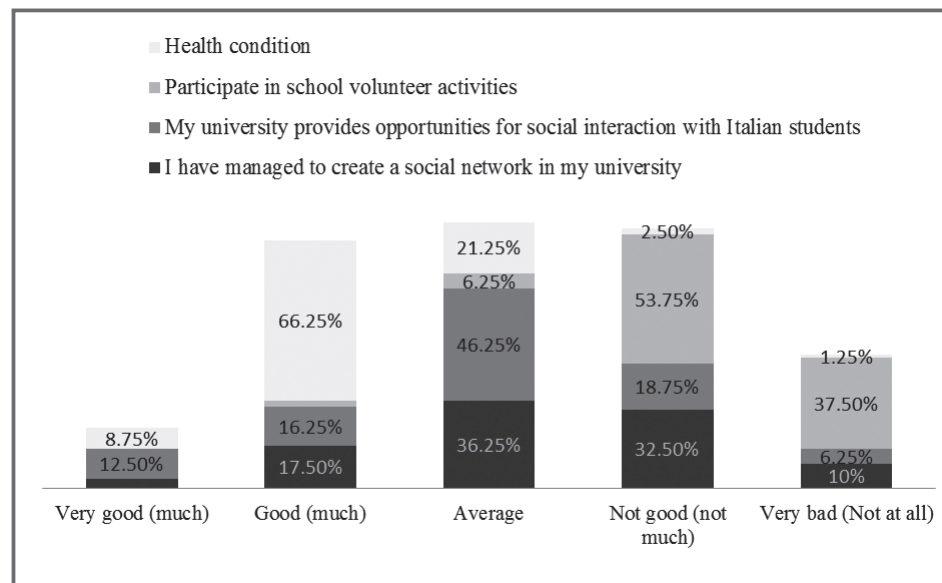


Figure 5 Students and Their Social Life

Italian students. In summary, the Chinese overseas students generally have no information about volunteer activities or creating social networks. Opportunities for communication and social interaction between Chinese students and Italian students are not often arranged by universities but rather by Italian students whose major is related to Chinese language. All interviewees explain there are no social volunteer programs provided by their university. One student describes his feelings about volunteer work:

Since I worked here, I've never heard about volunteer work. Maybe I did not notice my university website. But None of my Italian friends or professors suggested or invite me to join this activities. Do I have to joint? I do not think my university considers International students do.... If I have the chance, I may join. Through the social volunteer activities, I can understand more Italian society and people. Most of the time I am either in University or at home.... I think I lack social activities. (Undergraduate student 3rd year, Male, Rome)

While many Chinese students seem to have a good perception of their universities, there is lack of information or recognition for overseas students' joining volunteer activities. Through more social connections, these good perceptions of the universities can be expanded to interactions with communities, groups, volunteer activities and can lead to greater understanding, mutual exchange and learning for both Chinese and Italians.

This section explains how academic and social integration were supported by Chinese students' parents and friends and also how Chinese students recognize their

career development in their learning environment. Figure 6 provides a question on how often Chinese students talked about their learning problems with their family and friends. 42.5% of Chinese students are willing to expose their various problems. But 82.5% of the students responded that their friends and family do not often visit them; instead, they communicate through the internet and phone calls. One of the main reasons is the costly expense of travel between Italy and China.

In addition, 78% of Chinese students are satisfied with their learning environments. Chinese students have strong motivation for and satisfaction with their learning environments and many have strong support from family and friends. They want to develop their careers and they think they have a good chance through studying in Italy.

...I could not enter famous Chinese universities and my parents suggested me to study abroad. We checked many foreign universities and we found it is easier to enter good universities in Italy.... I learned Italian language for 3 months in China...and then continue in Perugia.... I enjoy learning here and I am happy to open my eyes globally. (Undergraduate student 2nd year, Female, Firenze)

On the other hand, negative reactions were also expressed in the interviews as with this student who describes her dissatisfaction in Italy;

...I graduate from one of the top universities in China. I got full scholarship for master degree in Italy.... I do not like their education programs and lectures.... I do not think their education program is advanced as they

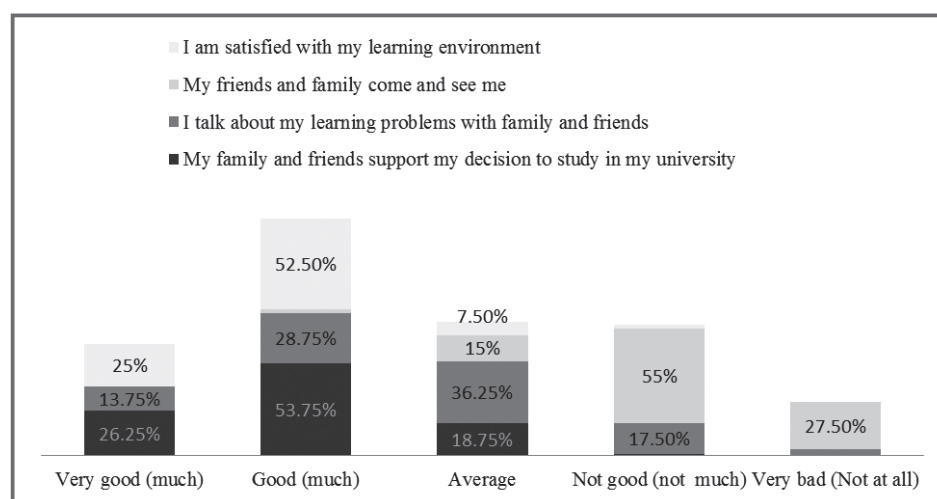


Figure 6 Learning Support from Friends and Family

used to emphasize before I leave.... I have to transfer to another university because my department was closed...Can you believe that? The university I chose is the one of the best university in Italy...but they closed a department just like that.... I regret I chose to study here. All of my friends study in the USA or UK.... Many Italian professors are not good at speaking in English. Teaching is boring because some professors just recite from the books...they are also always late for class...it is not possible in China...we have to wait for the professors more than 30 minutes or even 1 hour.... (Graduate student 2nd year, Female, Firenze)

Through the interviews it can be seen that unsatisfied students in Italy tend to have graduated from good Chinese universities and that their demands are higher than those

of other Chinese students who have graduated from two-year colleges or from high school. They would prefer not to remain in Italy and would like to leave as fast as they can. If they have a chance to go to English-speaking countries, they would try. These students have not integrated themselves into Italian social activities but their average academic scores are much higher than other interviewees. The average interviewee's credit points are around middle level (70%), low credit points (10%), and high credit points (10%). It is interesting to note that the Chinese students who receive high credit points (10%) are not very much interested in making efforts at integrating into Italian society.

Figure 7 shows how Chinese students are integrating through Italian language and social communication. 55% of Chinese students enjoy reading Italian books, magazines

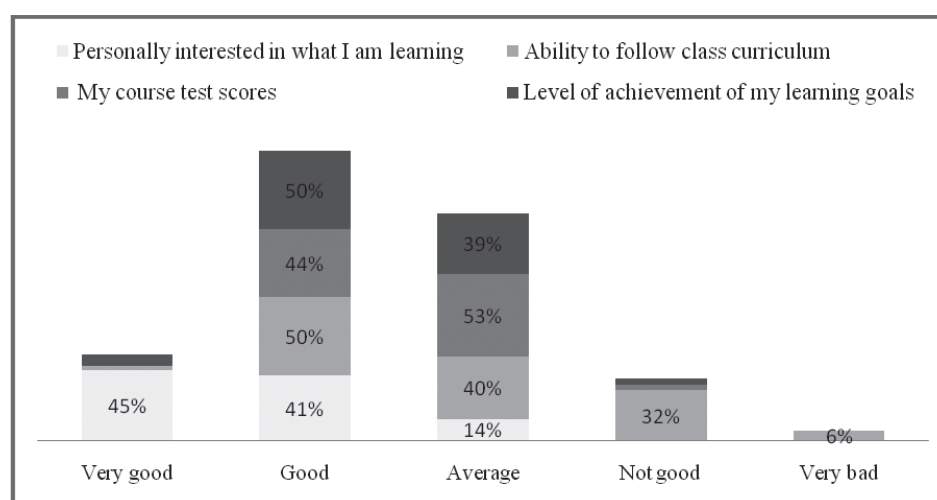


Figure 7 Italian Language and Social Interests

and academic journals and books. Students are especially interested in learning (78.75%) and communicating in the Italian language (81.25%).

Social integration is not only related to learning in school; it is also connected with residence issues and continuation of study in Italy. The visa process for international students is seen as taking too long in Italy. Chinese students explained that the visa application is too slow and sometimes they have to wait more than half a year or one year for results. No matter whether the students are there for two or three year degree programs, they have to apply for a visa every year. Here is a student's interview response:

Visa management of the Italian government is too slow...I think all levels of Italian governments are.... Since I came here, I had to apply visa every year and to carry the paper with me wherever I go. They check my visa for traveling to other cities.... I feel like I am totally outsider and should not be here.... I could not go to other European countries without visa permission in Italy ...that annoyed me.... I feel I am insulted because I am not from a well developed country.... (Graduate student 2nd year, Female, Verona)

The survey also shows that only 5% of Chinese students read a lot of Italian books and magazines and 50% of students say they like to read. Their books and magazines are mostly related to their majors or are used as homework references. Here one interviewer explains:

...I am sure many Chinese students find it difficult to read all Italian books or journals for classes or exam... compared to Spanish or Portuguese students, we cannot catch their Italian. They learn very quickly...however, when it comes to my major, I read a lot Italian academic books or journals, but I do not have time to read other kinds of books or news.... However, it helps me learn Italian. (Graduate student 2nd year, Female, Bologna)

When chatting or surfing websites most materials the students choose are in Chinese. Students feel they have to read books and magazines to prepare for their classes and exams but not for their interest in Italian society.

Chinese students are making efforts to integrate into their learning environments and enhance their academic performance. They want to be recognized by their professors and classmates and they also have high expectations and goals for their academic studies. But there are imbalances between their learning outcomes and their real learning abilities, which are especially revealed by

their relatively low performance scores and confidence in their abilities to achieve their goals. Most problems come from the low Italian language levels and communication skills; on the contrary, they enjoy learning Italian language and reading books and journals. Previous theoretical research clearly shows that international students face language problems, difficulties in interaction and dealing with different cultures, pedagogical and communicative styles. This study finds that Chinese students suffer from an imbalance between their expectations and their outcomes, socially and academically. Reducing this imbalance can increase satisfaction with and recognition of academic achievements.

6 Conclusion

Through analysis of the survey and interviews, this paper gets several interesting findings. First, Chinese students are not linguistically well prepared enough before leaving China. Through learning feedback and communication in the classroom, it can be seen that Chinese students are facing obstacles in improving their academic achievements which stem from their abilities in using Italian. However, Chinese students have motivation for studying and understand that there are good opportunities to study in Italy. This motivation can be put to good use before students step foot in Italian universities.

Second, meeting study abroad requirements is much easier compared to those of other western countries (especially, English-speaking countries), especially for Chinese students of the Marco Polo program. The same holds true for other Chinese students who individually study in Italy.

Third, most Chinese students are satisfied with their study in Italy. The main reason is free tuition and scholarships which provide quality education. Through education experiences in Italy, they can gain many international experiences at an early age, which is important for advancement of their future careers.

Through this case study of Chinese students studying in Italy, this paper comes to several conclusions. Firstly, Italian universities are facing a new challenge of integrating international students' academic outcomes and social activities. As the number of Chinese overseas students in Italy is growing rapidly, Italian universities need to take measures to reduce cultural and social gaps and strengthen mutual understanding between Chinese students and Italian students and professors. Secondly, universities also need to make efforts to support overseas students in social integration through various activities and cultural experiences. Italian universities also need to strengthen integration of learning and working environments. Related

curriculum and education programs in the selected 6 universities are all instructed in Italian but they may consider adding some English curriculum or providing various activities to attract more international students. Thirdly, at the same time, Chinese universities need to increase Italian languages courses before students leave for Italy. The Chinese government and Chinese students should be doing more to prepare for their study in Italy and for the different learning environments they may encounter.

Under the context of globalization, EU countries are facing challenges in attracting more international students. In the 21st century knowledge-based global society, increasing numbers of internationally mobile students are optimistic yet they face many negative global pressures. Italy is one member of the EU, and is a popular country in the international higher education market. Language differences, cultural differences, and differences in learning and teaching styles, however, have brought out obstacles for international students. This paper investigates how Chinese students in Italy integrate socially and academically so as to show a way to having successful academic performances, on the students' part, and to building positive learning environments, on the universities'. Only through more understanding and communication can students and teachers and administrators provide the most fruitful atmosphere for students in Italy and the world.

References

- Academic cooperation Association. (2006). *Support services for international students: Towards a European code of good practice*. Retrieved October 29, 2012, from http://www.acasecretariat.be/fileadmin/aca_docs/documents/ACA_Flyer_21_06_FINAL.pdf
- Baker, R. W., & Siryk, B. (1999). *SACQ student adaptation to college questionnaire* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Western Psychological Services.
- Beil, C., & Shope, J. H. (1990). *No exit: Predicting student persistence*. Paper presented at the Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research, Louisville, KY.
- Braxton, J. M., Milem, J. F., & Sullivan, A. S. (2000). The influence of active learning on the college student departure process: Toward a revision of Tinto's theory. *Journal of Higher Education*, 75, 569-590.
- China News Network (2009). Chinese students are 2nd rank among near 4 thousand overseas students in Italy. Retrieved September 1, 2012, from <http://news.qq.com/a/20090829/000905.htm>
- Coughlan, S. (2011). Record numbers of International Students. *BBC News*. Retrieved September 1, 2012, from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-12671198>
- Currie, G. (2007). Beyond our imagination: The voice of international students on the MBA. *Management Learning*, 38, 539-556
- European Commission and the Ministry of Education in China. (2011). *EU-China student and academic staff mobility: Present situation and future developments*. Retrieved September 1, 2012, from http://www.emeuropesia.org/upload/EMECW11/Study_EU_China_mobility.pdf
- Education in China. (2010). *Glorious prospect of study abroad in Italy*. Retrieved September 1, 2012, from http://www.eol.cn/shenqing_6219/20100111/t20100111_438808.shtml
- Falkner, G., Treib, O., Hartlapp, M., & Leiber, S. (2005). *Complying with Europe: EU harmonisation and soft law in the member states*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Holmes, P. (2004). Negotiating differences in learning and intercultural communication ethnic Chinese students in a New Zealand University. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 67, 294-307.
- Hsu, P. Y. (2003). *An assessment of counseling needs of international students at University of Wisconsin-Stout Spring 2003*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Stout, Menomonie, WI.
- Jinghua Shibao. (2012). *Study abroad: Student numbers in our country have grown 23% in nearly three years*. Retrieved August 21, 2012, from http://epaper.jinghua.cn/html/2012-08/21/content_1051993.htm
- Li, G., Chen, W., & Duanmu, J. (2010). Determinants of international students' academic performance: A comparison between Chinese and other international students. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 14, 389-405.
- Li, M. Q., Yu, J. T., & Li, P. F. (2006). Rising prices and equality opportunity problems in higher education -- A structural and transformative perspective. *Peking University Education Review*, 2, 47-61.
- Niles, S. G., Sowa, C. J., & Laden, J. (1994). Life role participation and commitment as predictors of college student development. *Journal of College Student Development*, 35, 159-163.
- Ramburuth, P., McCormick, J. (2001). Learning diversity in higher education: A comparative study of Asian international and Australian students. *Higher Education*, 42, 333-350.
- Rienties, B., Beusaert, S., Grohnert, T., Niemantsverdriet, S., & Kommers, P. (2012). Understanding academic performance of international students: The role of ethnicity, academic and social integration. *Higher Education*, 63, 685-700.
- Rienties, B., Grohnert, T., Kommers, P., Niemantsverdriet, S., & Nijhuis, J. (2011). Academic and social

- integration of international and local students at five business schools, a cross-institutional comparison. *Advances in Business Education and Training*, 3, 121-137.
- Scherto, G. (2007). Overseas students' intercultural adaptation as intercultural learning: A transformative framework. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative Education*, 37, 167-183.
- Science Guide. (2012). *Foreign students to fix Euro crisis*. Retrieved September 1, 2012, from <http://www.scienceguide.nl/201207/foreign-students-to-fix-euro-crisis.asp>
- Severiens, S., & Wolff, R. (2008). A comparison of ethnic minority and majority students: Social and academic integration, and quality of learning. *Studies in Higher Education*, 33, 253-266.
- Sherry, M., Thomas, P., & Chui, W. H. (2009). International students: Avulnerable student population. *Higher Education*, 60, 33-46.
- Study Abroad 51*. (2012). Retrieved September 28, 2012, from <http://www.liuxue51.net/studio/italy/n-39660.html>
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45(1), 89-125.
- Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving college Chicago*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Tinto, V. (1998). Colleges as communities. Taking research on student persistence seriously. *Review of Higher Education*, 21(2), 167-177.
- UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization). (2011). Global education digest. Retrieved September 1, 2012, from http://www.uis.unesco.org/Library/Documents/global_education_digest_2011_en.pdf
- Wilcox, P., Winn, S., & Fyvie-Gauld, M. (2005). It was nothing to do with the university, it was just the people: The role of social support in the first-year experience of higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 30, 707-722.
- Winston, R. B. (1990). The student development task and lifestyle inventory: An approach to measuring students' psychosocial development. *Journal of College Student Development*, 31, 108-120.
- Xinhua Net. (2011). *Interview: Italy-China student exchanges help enhance cultural links*. Retrieved September 28, 2012, from http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/world/2011-09/11/c_131132067.htm
- Xinwei Education. (2012). *Every year about 5,000 students obtain visas to study abroad in Italy*. Retrieved September 28, 2012, from <http://www.igo.cn/2010/news/lxxw/lxdt/2012/08/20/65835.shtml>
- Yeh, C. J., & Inose, M. (2003). International students' reported English fluency, social support satisfaction, and social connectedness as predictors of acculturative stress. *Counseling Psychology Quarterly*, 16(1), 15-28.
- Żyłkiewicz, E. (2010). *Functions of European higher education in the context of students' mobility*. Retrieved May 27, 2013, from www.exedrajournal.com/docs/s-internacionalizacao/18-269-274.pdf

