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Exploring and Comparing Underrepresented Students’ Learner Identities Between Elite Universities in Singapore and Shanghai

2023

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Yu-Tang (Oliver) Huang
Edinburgh June 2023

I declare that this work has been composed solely by me and that it is my own work. The work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification. The included publications are my own work, except where indicated throughout the thesis.

Yu-Tang (Oliver) Huang
Acknowledgement

The journey of pursuing a PhD can only be truly understood through firsthand experience. Throughout this process, I have received care and support from numerous people. First, I would like to express my deep gratitude to two esteemed supervisors of mine: Professor Velda McCune and Dr. Peter Evans. They are both insightful educators and wise mentors who have provided me with professional guidance and a generous spirit. If I am fortunate enough to become a good teacher one day, much credit will be owed to their exemplary role in shaping my life.

On this challenging path, I have witnessed both my own strength and vulnerability. Embracing all aspects of oneself is not always easy, but my family’s boundless love has consistently served as my greatest support and motivation. My parents and sister are invaluable companions who have accompanied me throughout my life’s journey.

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both words and space prevent me from doing so. Let time gradually unveil the intricacies of our shared stories.

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Lastly, I am grateful for continuing this journey and for the ability to recognise my own transformation and growth. Having undergone the rigours of a PhD education, I firmly believe that continuous self-improvement and treating others with kindness are paramount. I aspire to convert my energy into greater warmth, spreading it to an even larger audience in the future.
Abstract

This thesis explores underrepresented students’ higher education experiences in elite universities in two large cities in Asia – Singapore and Shanghai. In these two cities, 32 first/second-year students from four elite universities participated in the research.

In the context of the rapid expansion of higher education in Asia after the 2000s, elite universities have become more accessible for non-traditional or underrepresented students. However, previous research in other contexts highlights that these students frequently encounter problems in their transitions into higher education. This study explores whether similar patterns appear in Asia.

Underrepresented students learning and transition experiences in universities are important for social justice because this information helps us judge whether class mobility or educational adequacy in a certain social context is progressing or not. Hopefully, this thesis can contribute to social justice in higher education in Asia by richly illuminating underrepresented students’ unique experiences in elite universities.

This thesis adopts a qualitative research approach and employs learner identity as the main theoretical lens for exploring students’ learning and transition experiences in elite universities. Each of the 32 participants was invited to participate in two interviews, with half a year in between. Thematic
analysis was used to explore four key areas: students’ transition and learning experiences; their learner identities; the development of their learner identities; and the salient factors shaping their learner identities. In addition, four case studies are also presented to give insights by telling complete stories. Finally, the major findings from the data are considered through regional and institutional comparisons drawing out implications for social justice.

This research found heterogeneity in underrepresented students’ learner identities in elite universities in Singapore and Shanghai. Factors that seemed to influence students’ identities included: achievement, the sense of belonging, and peer social relations. Furthermore, this research also illustrated how these underrepresented students could sometimes lack self-confidence, intrinsic learning motivation and awareness of the full value of university education. The students in both Singapore and Shanghai usually focused more on the practical value of an elite university diploma or popular professions for future employment.
The lay summary is a brief summary intended to facilitate knowledge transfer and enhance accessibility, therefore the language used should be non-technical and suitable for a general audience. Guidance on the lay summary in a thesis. (See the Degree Regulations and Programmes of Study, General Postgraduate Degree Programme Regulations. These regulations are available via: www.drps.ed.ac.uk.)

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This study examines students’ university experiences in four renowned Asian universities. The purpose of conducting this research is to foster a more inclusive and supportive educational environment for all individuals.

A total of 32 students from diverse backgrounds participated in this study. The selection of these participants aimed to assess the compatibility of our current education system with various types of individuals. I conducted two interviews with each student to gain a comprehensive understanding of their learning experiences.

Through these processes, I discovered that these students commonly experience high levels of stress. Additionally, they often encounter challenges in adapting to the unique cultures and atmospheres prevalent in these prestigious universities, which differ significantly from their everyday life environments.

In conclusion, this study points out the importance of keep improving our education environment to ensure it accommodates the needs of all individuals effectively.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

1.1 Higher Education Progression: Opening the Narrow Gate and Beyond?

“Higher education is a rich cultural and scientific asset which enables personal development and promotes economic, technological and social change. It promotes the exchange of knowledge, research and innovation and equips students with the skills needed to meet ever changing labour markets. For students in vulnerable circumstances, it is a passport to economic security and a stable future” (UNESCO, 2023)

Though people may not always be able to articulate why higher education is important, for UNESCO, the idea of higher education being valuable, even indispensable or serving as a "passport to economic security and a stable future" is a widely held belief that resonates with many people. It is generally considered a desirable and positive step towards achieving a better life. In fact, the very nature of education is inherently beneficial and is regarded as a basic human right (UNESCO, 2019). This fundamental belief served as the starting point for my research, which aimed to make a contribution to maintaining the educational nature of higher education, enriching peoples’ perspectives of social justice, and, in turn, improving people's lives, no matter how small the impact may be.
Global Higher Education Expanding Trend and the Implications

In recent decades, there has been a clear global trend of growth in higher education participation. According to the UNESCO Higher Education Global Data Report (2022), over 235 million students were enrolled in higher education globally in 2020, more than double the number of students enrolled in 2000. In the same period, the worldwide gross enrolment rate in higher education increased from 19% to 40% (p. 9-10). These statistical facts indicate an ongoing massification process of higher education around the world.

The massification of global higher education has many positive implications. Freeman (2009) points out that the fast-growing global higher education system has contributed to accelerating technological, engineering, and scientific progress, leading to lower production costs and prices for goods. Similarly, the publication Towards Universal Access to Higher Education: International Trends (2020) highlights the benefits of increasing access to higher education, stating that "The expansion of access to higher education is crucial for success in the global knowledge economy, individual employability, national development, and international competitiveness at the macro level" (p. 23). These studies reveal that the ongoing trend of higher education growth worldwide has far-reaching implications for individuals, society, economics, and nations in global contexts, just like Chankseliani et al. (2021) emphasised, higher education plays an important role in supporting 'glonacal' (global, national, and local) developments. Relevant research conclusions have generally been consistent in this direction over the past two decades.
From another perspective, Baker (2011) suggests that an expanding higher education system has become a norm of modernisation, much like access to clean water or proper medical systems, which families universally hope for. Making a similar point, the spread of higher education or the development of universities has commonly been regarded as an indicator of modernisation or sustainable development in various theories or studies (Marginson, 2011a; Wu & Shen, 2016; Chankseliani et al., 2021; Stukalo & Lytvyn, 2021). Based on these understandings, higher education is a norm of modern living, a strong force pushing the development of human society, a practical approach to promoting social mobility, and even a basic human right. Therefore, expanding access to higher education and developing more universities should naturally be a universal progression that contributes to well-being on a global and individual level.

**The More, the Better? Challenges to Social Justice**

However, the notion that the significant expansion of higher education contributes to global or personal well-being is not always universally accepted. Challenges to achieving greater equity in universal higher education, such as social stratification and inequality, are quite common. On an individual level, numerous studies have highlighted students' unequal access to universities or higher education affected by various factors, such as regional disparities (e.g., Li et al., 2015; Hughes, 2018; Goldman, 2019), disability (e.g., Fernández-Batanero et al., 2022), ethnicity (e.g., Joshi & Basu, 2013; Liu, 2021), cultural backgrounds (e.g., Cataldi et al., 2018; Hu & Wu, 2021), or socioeconomic status (e.g., Lynch & O’riordan, 1998; Scanlon et al., 2019). These studies generally highlight inequalities which are rooted in
certain social categorising. Therefore, addressing unfairness or supporting underprivileged students becomes an important focus for improving higher education.

Promoting access to higher education for underprivileged or underrepresented students and eliminating barriers to their attendance is straightforward and widely recognised as a matter of social justice. In line with this belief, educational institutions are increasingly offering more flexible admission options and supports, while policymakers prioritise it as an essential consideration in policy-making. A notable example of this is the United Kingdom government’s longstanding emphasis on Widening Participation (WP) in higher education since the late 1990s. WP aims to enhance accessibility for students from diverse social backgrounds and ensure a more equitable distribution of educational opportunities, thus advancing the cause of social justice. This commitment remains one of the fundamental principles driving the development of education to this day.

In this context, a considerable amount of research has been dedicated to investigating the issue of equality and diversity in access to higher education. In addition to the research examples mentioned earlier in this section, which primarily examine differences in higher education participation rates among social groups, more and more research is looking into social justice through

---

1 The term "Widening Participation" gained widespread usage in UK Higher Education after the publication of the Dearing Report in 1997. The report emphasised the importance of higher education reflecting the diversity of society and called for greater accessibility to opportunities to study at that level. This focus on Widening Participation became a key component of government education policy from 1997 onward (Ellis, 2000; Kettley, 2011).
different foci. For instance, Boliver (2013) specifically investigated prestigious universities. Her study revealed that inequities in access for certain students in the UK appear to be linked to differential treatment during the admissions process by Russell Group universities. As a result, she argues that it is crucial not only to promote equal opportunities to apply but also to ensure equality of treatment in admissions. Others also see inequality in different corners of higher education. Stubbs and Murphy’s work (2020) discovers that underrepresented students have difficulties pertaining to their idea of familiarity, fitting in and experiencing a sense of belonging in prestigious universities (p.528). Although students managed to get into ‘Oxbridge’ and many other Russell Group higher education institutions (e.g., Durham, Bristol, or Edinburgh), they still perceive themselves as lacking confidence, ‘alienated’ or ‘out of place’ and even encounter differences in their access to certain resources.

Perspectives like these are highly valuable for expanding the scope of social justice, both horizontally and vertically, especially when considering the experiences of students throughout their higher education journeys, Stubbs and Murphy (2020) asserted: Widening participation to HE should not stop at the point of entrance. Similarly, a report provided by Universities UK (2019) highlights that historically, universities, policymakers, and governments have primarily focused on providing access to higher education for disadvantaged students and ensuring their admission to universities. However, the report emphasises that the success of disadvantaged individuals beyond graduation has often been overlooked in comparison.
Another study conducted by Universities UK (2016) highlights that the emphasis on widening participation and social mobility has traditionally assumed that any disadvantages students face will automatically be resolved once they enter university. However, in recent years, there has been a growing recognition that disadvantage and inequality persist throughout the university experience, as evident in graduate outcomes and students' perceptions of their higher education journey. In light of this, some scholars have turned their attention to examining whether investing in higher education or the global trend of expanding higher education is always advantageous for individuals. For instance, Abel and Deitz (2014) discovered a potential decline in the benefits of college education for students in the United States due to rising tuition costs and declining wage levels.

In addition to examining employability and investment perspectives, Quinn’s research (2016) provides valuable insights into the dropout rates and phenomena among underrepresented students in the European higher education context. The study concludes that students from low socio-economic backgrounds or minority ethnic groups are more likely to drop out. Quinn argues that addressing the issue of dropout rates requires a shift in focus, moving away from viewing non-traditional students as deficient and in need of assimilation, towards recognising the need for broader changes within the higher education sector to address diversity and equality. This shift should also emphasise the social and cultural factors that contribute to dropout rates (p. 95).

This highlights a blind spot that we sometimes encounter in our pursuit of
equality in higher education, wherein we tend to adopt a distributive justice\textsuperscript{2} approach. It is important to recognise that simply increasing access to higher education does not automatically guarantee better outcomes. While the nature of education is inherently positive, as we strive to create more opportunities for underrepresented students, we must also address emerging challenges.

**Access Versus Success: From Distributive Justice to Quality Education**

Thus far, we have engaged in discussions surrounding social justice by reviewing pertinent research focused on widening participation, educational equality, and the university experiences of underrepresented students within the context of the global trend of rapid expansion in higher education. It is evident that social justice is a multifaceted concept that can be approached from various angles. As highlighted by different scholars (e.g., Quinn, 2016; Marginson, 2016), the concept of justice extends beyond a distributive perspective. Increasingly, the research emphasises that challenges arise once we enrol more students in higher education or alter the student composition within elite universities. As Marginson (2016) argues, the outdated belief that education alone can create socially just societies must be abandoned. In the pursuit of social justice in education, it is crucial to address and reason specific phenomena or social realities, thereby necessitating further qualitative and quantitative research to uncover detailed information.

\textsuperscript{2} According to Kaufman (2012), distributive justice pertains to the equitable allocation of the burdens and rewards of social cooperation among individuals with differing needs and demands. In the present context of discussions surrounding higher education admissions, the concept of distributive justice encompasses the opportunity for inclusion, which is often linked to the advancement of social mobility.
Whether opening the narrow gates of higher education to students from diverse backgrounds is inherently beneficial remains a topic of debate and uncertainty. However, extending our focus from access to other aspects of higher education appears to be a constructive approach. With this understanding, I have positioned my thesis to explore social justice in higher education, particularly in the context of elite Asian universities.

In recent decades, there has been a growing emphasis on international higher education rankings and the establishment of top-ranking universities, particularly in certain Asian countries/regions such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and China (UNESCO, 2014). Consequently, this trend has fostered a competitive and elitist environment for universities and governments, giving rise to new challenges related to social justice. For example, in Singapore, there is an expectation for further expansion of higher education, with an increased enrollment of international students aimed at maintaining its position as a world-class competitor (Lee and Gopinathan, 2008). However, this expansion also brings potential exclusionary forces for domestic students. Behind the pursuit of academic excellence and global rankings, Singapore's higher education development strategy has sparked debates and challenges concerning social justice (Lee and Gopinathan, 2008; The News Lens, 2017).

Similar to the European and North American contexts we discussed earlier, numerous studies in Asia have also examined social justice issues through
the lens of distributive justice (e.g., Ho et al., 2012; Li, 2014; Fu, 2018).
However, in recent years, there has been a notable increase in research
focusing on broader aspects of social justice, mirroring the developments
observed in highly developed regions like the UK. Using Taiwan as an
example, there is a growing concern regarding the significant expansion of
student enrollment and the number of graduates since the 2000s. This
expansion, combined with a highly competitive job market and the
implications of graduate loan repayments, has led to a shift in focus towards
evaluating the outcomes of graduates, particularly in terms of employment.
Moreover, in this era of universalised higher education in Taiwan, it has
become common to observe an imbalance between the demands of the job
market and the output of university graduates (Chou, 2014; Hsieh, 2021;
Chan, 2023).

These questions bring us back to a fundamental inquiry: What happens
after we open the narrow gates of higher education to more students? As
emphasised at the beginning of this chapter, one of the primary purposes of
higher education is to improve people's lives, which is also the ultimate goal of
my thesis. From an individual standpoint, the perceived value of that
investment is a significant consideration for students and their families when
deciding whether to invest their time and resources in higher education.
Naturally, this is closely connected to their employability and prospects for
social mobility. However, in focusing on the outcomes of students' investment
in higher education, we may inadvertently overlook the significance of the
educational journey itself.
At this juncture, Brooks et al. (2021) conducted research on European students’ perspectives regarding higher education and found that one of the primary aims identified by students of higher education is to equip students with the skills needed for the labour market, which is not surprising. However, their studies also revealed that students hold broader views on the purpose of pursuing higher education. They recognise the opportunity it provides for personal development and the potential to contribute to societal progress. These findings strongly remind researchers and policymakers about the multifaceted nature of higher education and the significant ways in which obtaining a degree enriches lives, both on an individual and collective level, extending beyond purely economic considerations. Such a perspective is highly valuable when considering the rapid emergence of elite Asian universities, which interests and concerns me personally.

From an educational perspective, higher education encompasses the development of new skills, the acquisition of knowledge, the cultivation of rationality and kindness, and the practice of critical thinking. It can be a transformative process that promotes self-improvement. These qualities are undeniably commendable aspects of a high-quality university education. As discussed previously, it is extremely important to recognise that, in addition to access, there are other crucial considerations in the realm of social justice, such as post-graduation outcomes, equity in the admissions process, inclusivity, or social mobility. In this thesis, my particular focus is on expanding the scope of social justice to examine whether underrepresented students in elite Asian universities are receiving a quality education.
1.2 Inspirations

Continuing the discussion from the beginning of this chapter, in this section, I will talk about the inspiration behind the idea of this doctoral thesis. As mentioned in the Abstract, social justice is what this thesis hopes to contribute to, and for me, social justice has gradually become a concern in my life experiences. This is closely related to a period of my past military experience, which I will describe and provide details on in the following.

1.2.1 Social Justice Concerns from Real-World Awareness

One afternoon in the winter of 2016, I was sitting in a cafe enjoying my holiday with friends, enthusiastically sharing some of my experiences in the military. At that time, I was serving compulsory military service in Taiwan. It was a precious moment we caught up after a long time apart; however, it was also an important moment for me to be aware of my strong concern for social justice.

Adult males in Taiwan have an obligation to serve in the military. However, close to my generation, we could have the chance to choose an alternative "substitute military service" (SMS) based on different expertise from higher education. Some people are assigned to government agencies to perform administrative work, some go to rural schools to teach, and others can enter some top technology companies as research and development engineers. In short, various SMS categories give young men more choices than serving in the army.

Previously in the summer of 2016, I obtained my master's degree in
education, and because of this, I was qualified for SMS based on this expertise. However, I had chosen to sign a disclaimer and give up my qualification for SMS, which meant I had to enter the military as a soldier. In fact, I hesitated for a long time at that time. It would have been a precious experience as well to work as a teacher at a rural area school or in a government department, but finally, I felt that these would not be as unique compared to the military, which seems to be an unusual experience I didn’t want to miss. Even though I was extremely nervous before entering the army at that time, and life inside the camp was never easy, looking back now, it was one of the best decisions I have ever made in my life. I encountered many interesting people in the military, mostly professional soldiers and officers, who have completely different life experiences from me or the majority of my friends from my original life journey. This is extremely inspiring and beneficial to my learning in social science, as I have a chance to get along with people in huge diversity.

Back to that afternoon gathering with friends, I was the only one serving in the military. Most of my male friends, who were about the same generation as me and whom I had known from school or university, chose the SMS. On the one hand, many had participated in higher education, and some even graduated from elite universities, so obtaining the qualifications for substitute military service was not difficult for them. On the other hand, many people of my generation who received higher education often have a mindset that serving in the military is meaningless and will only waste their time.

Everyone enthusiastically updated their recent life at the table, and I was
asked about my military life. I tried to share some funny stories that happened in the camp, and people impressed me. For a while, the topic revolved around the military. My friends were interested in many intriguing anecdotes about life in the military and wondered if it resembled what they saw in movies. I also talked about some of the professional soldiers I had encountered and mentioned that many of them came from disadvantaged social backgrounds and never had the opportunity to attend university.

On this topic, I noticed that these friends at the gathering showed disdain towards professional soldiers who had not attended university. Someone even remarked: “Those people take this as a job because they are not smart or diligent enough as we were”, or “We shouldn’t put everyone into the university”. I can spot some of my friends looking at things and judging people in the military with a hint of mockery, which made me uncomfortable. Yet, what I gathered from the remainder of the conversation that day is that these people, who have received a privileged higher education and are destined for a promising future, tend to take something for granted and attribute all their achievements solely to their innate talent and effort.

I find myself contemplating: What is the essence of equality or equity? What is the ultimate objective of social justice? To me, the people at the gathering are cherished friends whom I hold dear. Their perspectives on the military and professional soldiers may be rooted in their life experiences, which is both understandable and natural. Unfortunately, I found it difficult to convey my observations in a way that resonated with them. Additionally, it is foreseeable that in the near future, they may ascend to prominent positions in diverse
realms of society, such as doctors, business owners, lawyers, government officials, or even university teachers. This evokes a sense of confusion within me regarding the future.

Again, there is nothing inherently wrong with my friends, and they are generally nice people. I understand that, to a certain extent, our perspectives are shaped by society and our experiences. Soldiers are ordinary human beings with emotions and feelings, just like everyone else. An academic style of social justice discourse might be far away among them, and they often find it challenging to articulate their observations using sophisticated language. However, they are all active participants in society and keenly perceive any form of oppression or reality, no matter how subtle.

Through my interactions and connections with the people in the military, I have gained a better understanding of their contexts, perspectives, and stories. This is why I consider joining the army one of the best decisions I have ever made, as it offers me the opportunity to observe and engage with reality through authentic, real-world encounters. I view my time in the military as a valuable gift that has provided me with profound insights. Since then, I have been engaging in self-reflection more frequently. Have I ever taken things for granted, as some of my friends have? Absolutely. However, I consider myself fortunate to see things now differently and to be more aware of the importance of social justice, and treating people with greater compassion. The process of speculation will never cease, but at least this marks a positive starting point.
1.2.2 Seeing from Others: An Interest in Underrepresented Groups

Similar to the military experience mentioned previously, I have enjoyed interacting with individuals from diverse social backgrounds in various contexts. From random encounters on the street or in nightclubs to researchers in the conference room, I talk to people. At this point, the most interesting story to share about is about my interest in driving. From a young age, I have always been fascinated by different kinds of vehicles. In 2014, while I was a master student in Taiwan, I had a sudden inspiration to learn how to drive a bus, and I actually went ahead with it. Throughout this process, my presence seemed somewhat out of place. A young graduate student coming to learn how to drive a bus was quite unusual for others.

I discovered that interacting with the people around the bus driving training place was eye-opening. Among them were truck drivers and middle-aged career changers, and my instructor – a 75-years old grandpa, each bringing unique reflections that went beyond classroom theories. During this time, I just began to focus more on studying sociology. However, I realised that through learning to drive a bus, I not only acquired driving skills but also learned different viewpoints from people. Interestingly, dining together and having small talk with these people who had no connection to academia actually deepened my understanding of certain sociological concepts, such as Bourdieu's theory of capital.

Since then, learning to drive various types of vehicles has been an ongoing pursuit for me. I obtained different licenses for larger vehicles like lorries and yachts. As a result of these experiences, I had the opportunity to work
alongside other professional drivers, which kept sparking my interest in social justice and deepened my understanding of social reality and inequality. I also became more skilled in communicating with individuals from diverse backgrounds and developed effective ways to initiate conversations. Looking back, I realise that these experiences have not only improved my qualitative research abilities by enhancing my ability to read people but also enhanced my interviewing skills and my understanding of my research subjects.

![Figure 1.2.1 Driving as Social Practises](image)

Rich life experiences are what I consider to be my greatest advantage in engaging in educational work or conducting social science, especially qualitative research. They have made me more inclusive, allowing me to communicate with different people and adapt my perspectives. Through these experiences, I have come to realise the disparity between theory and social reality. As for why my research interests lie in underrepresented groups, I believe it is deeply influenced by all the aforementioned experiences.

Underrepresented groups are often not the most empowered or influential voices in society. They are part of the social system and may be aware of
injustice and oppression, but they may not have the means to articulate or advocate for their rights. In my view, gaining an understanding and reflectively examining the legitimacy of a social system is meaningful when approached from the perspectives of underrepresented groups. They often reflect social reality's hidden or overlooked aspects and offer valuable insights into systemic biases.

![Image](image1.png)  
*Figure 1.2.2  Interacting as Social Practises*

### 1.2.3 Identity: The Filter to See Individuals and Reason

On my Instagram profile are three words in the self-introduction section: photographer/teacher/truck driver. I believe such an introduction is funny and allows people to quickly get to know me on social media, not only in terms of what I do or my interests but also the underlying perspectives and personality traits. A photographer, a teacher, or a truck driver, but not a student - these are the roles I often choose to introduce myself to outside the university, particularly at my current age. This reflects a comprehensive appearance in my self-identities in recent years, prompting speculations and a process of sorting out the underlying reasons.
Actually, I was not quite familiar with the concept of identity in the past. It was not until I started my doctoral journey in the UK that I gradually explored the studies related to identity more extensively. Even so, after acquiring relevant knowledge, I realised that identities are almost omnipresent in our lives. How we introduce or express ourselves, our feeling toward jobs, people, or places, and even how we dress could all be linked to our identities. In the following, I will use identity as a filter to view my life in the UK as an example. The academic literature on identities will be reviewed in Chapter 3.

Living in the UK brought me multiple new identities and also affected the progression of my original identities. First, the question of whether people should call me Yu-Tang or Oliver is interesting. It seems to vary depending on the individual. I often introduce myself as Oliver to non-Chinese speakers so they can pronounce and memorise more easily. However, some prefer to call me as Yu-Tang, respecting that it is my original name in Chinese. There are also those who use a compromise and simply call me ‘Yu’. These different ways of calling me sometimes remind me of what specific context I am standing in or with whom I am getting along, and could also give me a hint of individuals’ values or their identities as well.

Additionally, I have a distinct identity as a foreigner in the UK. Due to my typical Asian look, it is almost impossible to consider me a British or European guy. Therefore, it is common for people to ask me where I am from. Another interesting thing is, that I also noticed people from the West are easily confused about Asian people’s ages. I am often mistaken for a young person in their early twenties in Western contexts.
As a doctoral student at the University of Edinburgh, I naturally feel a stronger connection with Edinburgh City and uniquely identify with the university. During my PhD career, I have had chances to interact with many other colleagues, and we share a mutual understanding of the uniqueness and perspectives of being doctoral students (particularly in the social science sphere). This has also contributed to how I build my identity as a PhD student. Moreover, since Edinburgh is a city in Scotland, I have a stronger sense of identity with Scotland from a cultural and geographical standpoint. Over the past four years or so, my sense of identity has continuously evolved. Living daily life in Edinburgh has prevented me from viewing this city like a tourist. I could look deeper, feel the pressure from reality, and I won’t feel ‘ahh…everything is so cute’ in this city. Nevertheless, gradually, I have had valuable life experiences here, established deeper connections with people, and developed a stronger sense of belonging to Edinburgh.

The formation and performance of identities involve intricate and unique contexts that contribute to each individual's particular ways of being. Sometimes we may find someone to be strange or have significant gaps in values, making communication challenging. In such a situation, identity is a practical, theoretical filter to help us trace back and find out the underlying reasons, as we can unpack how a person behaves or thinks with more clues from cultural or societal contexts. Moreover, the application of identity filters is not limited to reasoning from the past; it can also serve as a useful basis for understanding the environment or seeing the future. Just like in my own example, my identities show my life, encounter, and transition in the UK, which are also deeply influenced by my past life experiences and growing
contexts. However, at the same time, it can be used to interpret my PhD education experience and will likely impact my future values and behavioural patterns as well.

This understanding positions identity as an ideal theoretical perspective within my research context. The identity filter enables us to recognise the distinctiveness of each individual and endeavour to uncover the origins, outcomes, and significances associated with identity. Ultimately, it facilitates a profound exploration and self-reflection.

Figure 1.2.3 My Diverse Identities

1.3 Research Questions and Objectives

In the previous sections, we have explored two fundamental aspects of this thesis: the research background and the inspirations that have shaped the development of the research idea and framework. The former is the foundation for developing my doctoral research project, grounded in my observations and concerns regarding various social phenomena. To elucidate the significance of certain social phenomena, I have connected them with my life experiences. I have gained valuable insights into my personal goals and
values by delving into my educational and social journey. These insights have played a crucial role in shaping a clear research structure and facilitating a deep engagement with research details.

Building upon the discussions on the background and inspirations, this section aims to organise my social reflections, self-explorations, and inspirations into a set of well-defined research questions and objectives. These research questions and objectives will serve as guiding principles throughout the research process, providing a framework for investigating the complex issues and challenges surrounding higher education and social justice.

1.3.1 Over-arching research question

How do students from underrepresented groups experience the transition into elite universities in South and East Asia? How do these experiences contribute to the processes of social justice in these contexts?

1.3.2 Sub-questions

1. What are the important similarities and differences between elite universities and their contexts in Singapore and Shanghai, which are salient for students’ transitions?

2. How do the target groups of students reflect on and build their learner identities in elite universities in the two cities?

3. What are the relevant processes of social justice for understanding
underrepresented students' experiences in Singapore and Shanghai, and how do these interact with their learner identities?

1.3.3 Research Objectives

1. Reporting

   Investigating underrepresented students’ HE experiences, including their perceptions of learning and transition in elite Asian universities and the learner identities they enact or experience.

2. Gaining

   Exploring and obtaining an understanding of the reality of Asian higher education from the perspective of elite universities and underrepresented students’ experiences.

3. Enriching

   Providing insightful qualitative data as a possible reference for later researchers, policymakers, or the general public in pursuit of social justice or improving people’s well-being.

1.4 Outline of the Thesis

   This thesis consists of a total of nine chapters, organised into four main components: Research foundations, methods, findings, and implications. These components are visually represented in Figure 1.4.1 displayed below.
The first chapter so far has provided a broad overview of this thesis. It has briefly introduced the background of this research, which covers reviews of the global higher education expanding trend in recent decades, massification, widening access, underprivileged groups, and reflections on educational equality. These connected us to the main interest of this thesis - maintaining the educational nature of higher education, improving people's lives, and promoting social justice. In addition, I also explained how I began to develop my research idea and framework, which is highly influenced by my life experiences. Overall, the first chapter aims to get the reader into the research context quickly by presenting the big picture and stories of myself.

In Chapter 2, I provide a comprehensive background for this thesis to ensure that the research design and settings are built on a solid foundation. I introduce contextual information regarding the research subjects and objects, encompassing political, societal, and historical factors that interact with higher
education in our two target cities: Singapore and Shanghai. Additionally, I broaden the scope beyond the city level to present essential comparisons and discussions at the national level, incorporating perspectives from policy-making and state-level visions of national development.

Chapter 3 serves as the literature review chapter, working in conjunction with Chapter 2 to further contextualise this research within the academic sphere. This chapter primarily focuses on two crucial concepts central to this thesis: learner identity and social justice. The former serves as the primary theoretical lens for examining underrepresented students' learning and transition experiences in elite higher education institutions. The latter acts as the framework for exploring the current state of Asian higher education and providing potential guidance for future improvements. Within this chapter, relevant studies have been thoroughly reviewed to conceptualise both learner identity and social justice within the specific research context. Lastly, a set of justice principles are presented to examine all the analysed research data.

Chapter 4 centres around methodological discussions, delving into my philosophical stances and the relevant theories that underpin them. The chapter is divided into two sections to facilitate a comprehensive discussion. The first section reviews the research in its entirety, providing an overview of the research design, including methodological approaches, research questions and aims, and the expectations and purposes of this thesis. By presenting these details, readers will gain a clear understanding of the objectives and foundational elements of this thesis.
Moving into the second section of Chapter 4, I delve into discussions on my ontological and epistemological stances, tracing their development. The primary objective of this section is to present my fundamental perspective and attitudes towards knowledge and reality. These viewpoints will resonate throughout the research process, guiding the data analysis and interpretation. By addressing these methodological aspects, Chapter 4 establishes a solid framework for conducting the research and ensures a coherent and informed approach to data analysis.

Chapter 5 complements the preceding Chapter 4 by providing a detailed exposition of the methods employed in this research. This chapter elaborates on various aspects, including the construction of a mind map outlining the structure and organisation of this thesis, the design of the interview framework, and the methods utilised for data collection, analysis, and presentation.

Within the scope of sampling, this chapter engages in discussions regarding the definition and identification of underrepresented students as employed in this thesis. A comprehensive examination of the criteria and selection process will be undertaken to ensure clarity and consistency. Furthermore, the last section of this chapter delves into the ethical considerations that were given utmost importance throughout the research process. These ethical considerations will encompass informed consent, confidentiality, privacy, and the well-being and rights of the research participants. Chapter 5 ensures transparency and adherence to ethical considerations by providing a comprehensive account of the research.
methodology. It serves to strengthen the validity and reliability of the research findings and enhances the overall quality of the thesis.

Chapters 6-8 present and discuss the findings of this study, serving as pivotal sections where the major discoveries derived from 62 interviews with 32 participants are presented. These chapters extensively discuss the analytical results in relation to the research questions and interests that guided this study. Within these three consecutive chapters, a substantial body of critical quotations extracted from the interviews will be provided as supporting evidence for the discourses and interpretations presented. These selected quotations substantiate the arguments and contribute to a deeper understanding of the research findings.

Chapter 6 is divided into three main sections, each shedding light on different aspects of underrepresented students in elite universities. The first section aims to provide an overview of our target population, namely underrepresented students in Singapore and Shanghai's elite universities. Drawing upon my general understanding and observations from the interviews, this section serves as the foundation for unravelling their learner identities and delving into their experiences.

Moving on to the second section, the focus is on underrepresented students' transition experiences into elite universities. This entails examining their process of acclimating to the university environment, identifying the challenges they encounter, understanding their characteristics and attitudes, and exploring any changes they may undergo as they embark on their higher
education journey. Finally, the third part of Chapter 6 centres on underrepresented students' learning experiences in elite universities. In this section, I explore their common learning challenges and investigate the strategies they develop to navigate the university curriculum successfully.

Chapter 7 presents the learner identities of our target underrepresented students based on the results of thorough data analysis. This analysis encompasses the reflective thematic analysis conducted through NVivo, as well as my own interpretations. This chapter will highlight the four most prominent and representative learner identities that emerged among our 32 participants. By examining and discussing the various learner identities that underrepresented students adopt, this chapter aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these individuals perceive themselves as learners and navigate the higher education landscape in elite Asian universities. The incorporation of relevant literature will contribute to a broader scholarly conversation surrounding learner identity within the context of underrepresented student populations.

Chapter 8 delves into a case study featuring four selected underrepresented students out of our pool of 32 interviewees. These students hail from four different elite universities in Singapore and Shanghai, representing diverse educational backgrounds and experiences. All four participants engaged in two interviews with me, which allowed for a more comprehensive exploration of their higher education journeys.
Within this chapter, I integrate the interview data and their respective contextual backgrounds to construct a cohesive narrative that illuminates the intricate details of each student's unique story. By presenting these case studies, we can gain profound insights into the development and evolution of the students' identities along a continuous timeline. These micro-level perspectives not only enhance our understanding of the students themselves but also provide valuable insights into the dynamics within our target elite institutions and educational environments as a whole.

Chapter 9 serves as the final chapter of this thesis, structured into four key sections. The initial section encapsulates the findings derived from the previous chapters, providing a succinct summary of the key findings presented throughout the thesis. Then, the second section engages in discussions that draw comparisons across multiple levels, utilising the research findings obtained throughout this study. This comparative analysis encompasses individual, institutional, and regional levels, offering a comprehensive understanding of the research subject.

The third section of this study centres around discussions of social justice, utilising the principles of justice derived from relevant theories outlined in Chapter 3. Specifically, I examine the experiences of underrepresented students in Asian higher education through the lens of social justice frameworks. Through critical analysis, this section delves into the complex dynamics of social justice within the educational context. Furthermore, it establishes a correlation between the research findings and the initial research questions and objectives, elucidating how they have been achieved.
through this study.

Lastly, in the concluding section, I offer final conclusions and implications derived from this doctoral research, marking the end of this thesis. These conclusive remarks aim to comprehensively synthesise the research findings and their broader significance within the field. The implications of this research contribute to the existing knowledge base and may guide future research endeavours in related areas.
Chapter 2
The Context

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a comprehensive background for the thesis, aiming to ensure that the research design and settings are grounded solidly. The discussion will be divided into three sections, starting with an overview of the East and Southeast Asian higher education contexts which are relevant to this study, followed by separate discussions on China and Singapore. The contextual information presented encompasses political, societal, and historical factors that interact with higher education in our two target cities: Singapore and Shanghai. Furthermore, the scope will be broadened beyond the city level to include relevant discussions at the national level, incorporating perspectives from policy-making visions of national development. Understanding this contextual information not only aims to provide indispensable knowledge for analysing research data and interpreting its meaning but also hopes to help readers grasp the essence of the thesis.

2.2 The Broad Asian Context

As discussed in Chapter 1, there have been significant transformations in global higher education in recent decades, including massification trends in various regions, an increasing emphasis on sustainable development, and a growing focus on promoting social justice. When examining higher education within the Asian context, we can observe numerous transformations that align with the global framework.
2.2.1 Changing Landscapes of Higher Education in Asia

Prior to the mid-1990s, Asian higher education systems tended to be recognised by their small size, emphasis on teaching, domestic focus, and elitist orientation (Chan, 2018). However, in recent decades, we can see some outstanding improvements and changing appearances in higher education systems, particularly across the region in East and Southeast Asia, including talent cultivation, knowledge output, student participation, and internationalisation, (Soh, 2012; Ratanawijitrasin, 2015; Chan, 2016). Upon examining the results of various common educational indicators, such as increased investment in research and development, rising participation rates, a growing influx of international students, and higher rankings in prominent global university listings (Tilak, 2003; Valerio, 2018, Chan, 2018), it becomes apparent that higher education is experiencing substantial transformations. These changing dynamics manifest themselves across various levels, encompassing individuals, families, and nations as a whole.

2.2.2 World-Class Universities

The rise of world-class universities (WCU) has become a prominent global trend in the 21st century (Altbach & Balán, 2007). University administrators worldwide are increasingly focused on enhancing the educational and academic reputation of their institutions, with the goal of achieving international recognition as WCUs (Tayeb, 2016; Ganotice et al., 2017). At the same time, governments are investing substantial efforts and resources to ensure that their top universities attain WCU status, signifying their ability to operate at the forefront of intellectual and scientific advancement as acknowledged by global rankings (Salmi & Altbach, 2016).
So, what distinguishes WCUs? From a comprehensive perspective, scholars typically define WCUs as leading research institutions that continuously strive to generate, share, and transfer the latest knowledge in an ever-progressing global knowledge society (Salmi, 2009; Tayeb, 2016; Deeks, 2018). In addition to their exceptional capabilities and achievements in academic research, Deeks (2018) also highlights other qualities of WCUs, such as having state-of-the-art research facilities, an outstanding international reputation, and the ability to attract top-tier talents and students from around the world. In this regard, Tayeb (2016) suggests that achieving these objectives requires the implementation of effective strategies that address various aspects, including academic and educational excellence, adequate funding, appropriate support facilities, highly qualified academic staff, and the development of graduates' competencies.

From a government perspective, active investment in WCUs holds multiple meanings. Ahmed (2015) argues that governments' pursuit of WCUs is deeply ingrained in governmental and institutional policies aimed at promoting national competitiveness in an increasingly globalised world. Furthermore, she emphasised that such pursuit goes beyond mere improvement in the quality of learning and research in higher education. It also seeks to develop the capacity to compete in the global higher education marketplace by acquiring and generating advanced knowledge. As Altbach (2003) aptly states, "Everyone wants a world-class university. No country feels it can do without one" (p. 5). This statement reflects the ongoing trend of international competition in higher education and captures the shared aspirations of young Asian countries in their pursuit of WCUs.
Global Rankings

It has become increasingly common for policymakers and higher education leaders to shape their ambitions and strategies based on the aspiration for favourable global rankings of their universities (Hazelkorn, 2013). Currently, the prominent providers of university rankings include the QS (Quacquarelli Symonds) World University Rankings, the Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE), and the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), also known as the "Shanghai Rankings" (Altbach, 2012). These rankings serve as indicators of world-class universities (WCUs) and effectively capture the collective efforts made by institutional administrators and policymakers in their pursuit of WCUs.

On the other hand, these rankings also shape the perception and evaluation of higher education institutions by families and individuals, influencing their value judgments. As Hazelkorn (2013) suggests, students and their parents have become discerning consumers, recognising the connection between educational qualifications and career prospects. Like institutional administrators and governments, individuals and families are keenly interested in university rankings. However, their primary concern is not centred around national competitiveness or research funding, but rather on ensuring that they make a worthwhile investment in obtaining a valuable university degree.

In the Asian Context

Krishna (2019) underscores the correlation between the ascent of Asia in the global knowledge-based economy over the past decades and the growth
of higher education institutions and scientific research output in the region. Additionally, he draws attention to the burgeoning innovation ecosystems centred around universities in Asia, suggesting the significant interplay between investments in higher education and science, technology, and innovation policies. In this context, universities assume a pivotal role in driving national development initiatives.

Especially within the context of WCUs, their innovative research output serves as a critical foundation for the rapid development of East and Southeast Asian nations (Krishna, 2019; Francesca & Chen, 2022). This observation aligns with the findings of Postiglione and Jung (2013), who note that academics in many Asian universities have achieved remarkable research productivity within a relatively short period of time. The rise of WCUs represents a transformative shift in the higher education landscape across various Asian countries and cities, including our specific focus on Singapore and Shanghai. This trajectory also illuminates the emergence of elitism and the evolving dynamics within higher education in these regions. A thorough understanding of these dynamics can be attained by examining their distinct developmental progressions, as well as their social and historical contexts. These aspects will be discussed in separate sections of the same chapter, providing detailed insights into the subject matter.

2.2.3 Singapore and Shanghai: Similarities in HE Landscapes

The primary rationale for selecting Singapore and Shanghai as the research field is based on the distinct higher education landscape they share within the diverse Asian context. These two cities exhibit certain similarities in terms of
their higher education systems and various social aspects. This exploration involves an extended focus on the developmental trajectory of education, the contextual influence of history, and traditional values, as well as an understanding of the political environment. In the following paragraphs, I will delve into the relevant context of higher education in East and Southeast Asia.

Among different Asian countries/regions, Singapore and Shanghai have demonstrated notable prowess in the field of education (OECD, 2011; Liang et al., 2016; Gleason, 2018). Both cities have been classified as ‘High-Performing Education Systems’ (HPESs), a designation reserved for education systems that have excelled in the most recent editions of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) league table (Lee et al., 2014; Deng & Gopinathan, 2016; Tan, 2019). Furthermore, both cities are home to several WCUs that consistently rank among the top globally. These institutions not only attract domestic and international students and talents but also reflect the strong emphasis and ambitions of Singapore and China.

Knight’s concept of ‘International Education Hubs’ (2014) offers a valuable perspective for examining the characteristics of higher education in Singapore and Shanghai. These hubs possess strong allure for cross-border students,

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3 The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), developed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), serves as a benchmark for evaluating education systems worldwide by assessing the abilities of 15-year-olds in applying their reading, mathematics, and science knowledge and skills to real-life challenges. PISA holds significant influence over educational policies and systems (Deng & Gopinathan, 2016; OECD, 2017).
are marked by high competitiveness, and embody the notion of a ‘planned effort,’ which is another concept introduced by Knight. She suggests that a hub represents an intentional and strategic undertaking that involves a comprehensive policy framework, strategic planning, and significant public and private investments. The concept of a ‘planned effort’ aligns closely with the distinctive higher education landscapes of Singapore and China, as the development of their universities encompasses these elements and has been greatly influenced by various state-level forces.

In summary, the preceding discussions suggest notable shared characteristics in higher education between Singapore and Shanghai. Both cities exhibit strong ambition and remarkable accomplishments across various educational levels. The realm of higher education, particularly universities, is significantly influenced by ongoing global ranking competitions, which further bolster state investments and institutional developments. Within this context, the emergence of elitism in higher education becomes apparent, serving as the focal point of this study.

2.3 China’s Trajectory of Higher Education Development

In this section, I will discuss the trajectory of higher education development in China, encompassing an examination of the rapid expansion context, the increasing trend of investing in world-class universities at a national strategic level, as well as the emerging concerns of distribution and inequality. Furthermore, I will explore the efforts that have been made to promote educational equality.
2.3.1 Social Context and The Development of Higher Education

The People's Republic of China (PRC), one of the most populous countries globally, with a population exceeding 1.4 billion, has undergone a rapid and transformative process of modernisation and development since the late 1980s, following the economic reforms initiated in 1978. A significant component of this transformation has been the remarkable expansion of higher education, which serves multiple purposes such as addressing economic needs, promoting national development, and recovering from the impacts of the Cultural Revolution (Wan, 2006; Li & Xing, 2010). This expansion is in line with the assumptions put forth by Hannum and Buchman (2003) regarding the consequences of educational expansion for economic and social development. These assumptions include the notion that higher levels of education contribute to increased individual productivity, facilitate social mobility, and enhance the overall qualities of citizens.

In China, the development of higher education is considered a government responsibility and has always been a significant component of the government's development agenda (Wan, 2006). The government has played a central role in formulating education policies, leading to a rapid and substantial expansion of higher education in recent decades. Data from the

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4 The Chinese Cultural Revolution had a devastating impact on higher education in China. Historical records indicate that the number of enrolled students at the higher education level reached its lowest point in history at less than 50,000 in 1976, compared to approximately 117,000 in 1949 (MoE PRC, 2018). This period of turmoil and upheaval severely disrupted the functioning of universities and hindered educational progress in the country. However, since then, China has made remarkable strides in rebuilding and expanding its higher education system, as evidenced by the significant growth in enrollment numbers in subsequent years.
Ministry of Education of China indicate a remarkable increase in the total number of colleges and universities, which grew from 2,529 in 2014 to 2,914 in 2017. Notably, this expansion included the establishment of nearly 400 new higher education institutions within a span of just three years.

The substantial increase in the number of higher education institutions has led to significant growth in enrollment. Shanghai, our focus city in China, is renowned as a major hub for higher education and is home to several world-class universities. Data from the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission (SMEC) reveals a remarkable expansion in higher education enrollment in Shanghai from the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s. The number of students rose from 804,000 in 2005 to 931,000 in 2014 (SMEC, 2015). Additionally, the number of postgraduate students witnessed a nearly 70 per cent increase from 78,700 to 133,600 during the same period. Both local and central government policies have played a crucial role in promoting higher education expansion. In 2014, the Shanghai government announced the '2015-2030 Higher Education Development Plan' with the goal of reaching an enrollment of 1.4 million students in higher education institutions.

The Launch of Plans for Building World-Class Universities

Since the 1990s, the Chinese government has pursued an ambitious expansion of higher education enrollment, seeking to narrow the gap with global competitors (Li & Min, 2001; Gu, 2006). This endeavour has been accompanied by the implementation of a series of policies aimed at establishing world-class universities. At the national strategic level, Projects 211 and 985 have played pivotal roles in shaping China's contemporary
higher education landscape (Mok, 2002). Launched in 1995, Project 211 allocated a significant investment of approximately 2.2 billion USD to the development of approximately 100 key universities.

In 1998, Project 985 was introduced with the objective of establishing world-class universities that prioritise research excellence. This significant initiative has empowered universities that have since gained high recognition. Subsequently, in 2006, the Ministry of Education unveiled the "111 Plan," also known as the Program of Introducing Talents of Discipline to Universities, which can be seen as a continuation of Projects 211 and 985. The 111 Plan aims to attract international scholars and students to enhance the quality of higher education and bolster research capabilities.

Furthermore, the government has made notable state-level investments through initiatives like the "2011 Project." This project was designed to expedite the development of China's innovative industries by integrating the efforts of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance. Substantial financial support has been provided to establish research or innovation centres in relevant fields and foster collaboration between academia and industry.

2.3.2 Implications of the Rise of WCUs

The expansion of higher education in China has significantly increased the chances of individuals pursuing a higher education degree (Li & Xing, 2010). However, along with the emergence of prestigious universities resulting from the 211 and 985 projects, issues of distribution have arisen. The National
College Entrance Examination (NCEE), commonly known as Gaokao, has traditionally played a central role in determining access to higher education and is widely considered a fair method of social distribution among the Chinese population (Zheng, 2006).

Nevertheless, relevant studies suggest that regional inequalities have become more pronounced, particularly between highly developed coastal provinces and remote inland provinces. For instance, data from the Ministry of Education (MoE) in 2018 reveals a significant disparity in acceptance rates for undergraduate students between Beijing or Tsinghua University and Guizhou Province in 2016. In Beijing City, the acceptance rate was approximately 0.9%, while in Guizhou Province, it was only 0.03% (MoE, 2018). Scholars have argued that the rapid expansion of higher education and substantial investments in elite universities have exacerbated educational inequities in China (Lee, 2014; Shi, 2017).

**Increased Focus on Navigating Educational Inequality**

Shen and Qiao (2010) emphasise that students from diverse regions or cultural backgrounds encounter varying starting points and disparities in access to educational resources. Students in remote districts often face challenges such as inadequate support and a shortage of specialised subject teachers. In addition to regional disparities, the pursuit of social justice raises further concerns in relation to the strong national policies that prioritise resources for the development of WCUs. These concerns encompass inequalities in access among different social groups, disparities in labour market outcomes, and the negative consequences for individuals excluded...
from WCUs (Lee, 2014; Shi, 2017; Chen, 2017).

With the rise of novel social justice issues, there has been a gradual shift in educational policies in China since the late 2010s, with a greater focus on fostering public trust in social justice. Chen (2018) argues that, in the context of the PRC's centralisation political system, promoting social justice that aligns with the expectations of the people is crucial for maintaining a stable ruling structure, given the limited freedom of political choice compared to democratic countries. President Xi Jinping of the PRC has emphasised social justice in various policies, particularly after the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China.

**Efforts on Promoting Students’ Access to WCUs**

In addition to the focus on building world-class universities (WCUs) and increasing investments, there has been a noticeable shift towards promoting educational equality in higher education in recent years, both at policymaker and institutional levels. This shift can be observed in the efforts made by two prominent WCUs, namely Fudan University (FU) and Shanghai Jiao Tong University (SJTU) in Shanghai. These universities have implemented special admission programs (SAPs) and scholarship systems to enhance educational equality.

For example, in 2016, FU introduced the "Takeoff Project" (騰飛計劃), which reserves 400 undergraduate spots annually (approximately 13% of the total) for rural students. This initiative aims to provide opportunities for students from rural areas who may face barriers to accessing higher education.
Similarly, SJTU's "Siyuan Program (思源計劃)" offers 310 undergraduate spots (approximately 8% of the total) specifically for students from remote areas and rural districts. These programs are designed to bridge the gap between students from different regions and provide equal opportunities for education.

Furthermore, SJTU has also made significant efforts to provide financial support to its students. In 2019, more than 50% of SJTU students received financial aid through school scholarships. This demonstrates the commitment of the university to ensure that financial constraints do not hinder students from accessing higher education. These initiatives reflect the shifting priorities of the central government towards promoting educational equality and addressing the disparities that exist in higher education. By implementing SAPs and scholarship systems, FU and SJTU are actively working towards creating a more inclusive and equitable higher education system in China.

In summary, China has witnessed a rapid expansion of higher education driven by government initiatives to address economic needs and promote national development. The focus on building world-class universities has been prominent, leading to the emergence of prestigious institutions and the rise of elitism. However, this expansion has also highlighted issues of distribution and inequality. To address these concerns, there has been a recent shift towards promoting educational equality. Fudan University and Shanghai Jiao Tong University in Shanghai have implemented special admission programs and scholarship systems to reserve undergraduate spots for students from rural and remote areas, ensuring equal opportunities. These initiatives reflect
the government's changing priorities, aiming to create a more inclusive and equitable higher education system. By addressing regional disparities and providing support to underprivileged students, China seeks to enhance educational access and promote social justice.

2.4 Singapore’s Trajectory in Higher Education Development

In this section, I will delve into the trajectory of higher education development in Singapore. This will involve examining the distinctive role of the Singaporean government in centralised policy planning for higher education, as well as exploring the case of the National University of Singapore (NUS) as an exemplar of strategic thinking geared towards national development and economic progress. Additionally, I will address the emerging concerns related to social justice within the higher education landscape of Singapore.

2.4.1 Social Context and The Development of Higher Education

Since gaining independence in 1965, Singapore has been widely acknowledged for its strong emphasis on education to meet its socioeconomic development needs (Gopinathan and Lee, 2011; Dai and Kuo, 2016; Huang and Yeung, 2018). As a young nation with limited natural resources, education plays a vital role in contributing to the national economy by supplying a well-educated and skilled workforce for economic growth, societal advancement, industrial demands, and political stability (Lee and Gopinathan, 2008). Tan (2004) highlights that a key component of the national economic development
strategy, as outlined in the *Strategic Economic Plan*, is the policy of internationalisation, aiming to utilise global resources, technology, and talent. In line with this plan, Singapore is actively transforming into an international hub for education and learning.

The Singaporean government has consistently prioritised investments in higher education, recognising their significant role in policy planning and shaping the university sector (Tan, 2004). Despite the impact of the 1997 Asian financial crisis on Singapore's economy, the government introduced policies aimed at upgrading higher education and establishing world-class universities. According to Singapore's open data (The Report of Government Total Expenditure on Education 2019), the government's investment in education remained stable and demonstrated a steady upward trend until recent years, highlighting their unwavering commitment to enhancing the quality and competitiveness of education in the country.

**Government Initiatives in Building WCUs: The NUS Case**

In the 1970s, the Singaporean government initiated an intensive strategy to utilise universities as catalysts for the nation's technological advancement (Altbach & Salmi, 2011; Nurdin et al., 2017). During this period, the National University of Singapore (NUS), established in 1962, placed significant emphasis on delivering high-quality education and engaging in research endeavours. By the 1980s, there was a notable shift in focus, with the

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5 Chia (2007) explains that Singapore's Strategic Economic Plan (SEP), developed by the Economic Planning Committee (EPC) in 1991, aimed to integrate key factors impacting the country's future economic performance.
university prioritising exceptional research as its primary mission (Nurdin et al., 2017). Ramakrishna (2012) points out that NUS implemented an educational development policy rooted in a meritocratic system, aiming to produce talents capable of fostering Singapore’s economic growth.

Altbach and Salmi (2011) further highlight that the Singapore economy underwent a gradual shift from labour- and capital-intensive manufacturing activities to knowledge-based activities. Wong et al. (2007) address that the role of NUS expanded to encompass a significant focus on research since the late 1980s and technology commercialisation since the early 2000s. In addition, the mission of NUS evolved from being a local tertiary institution focused on labour development to becoming a globally oriented university, actively competing for top faculty and students worldwide and aiming to make a substantial impact on the global stage through knowledge creation and dissemination. To provide NUS with the necessary flexibility to transform its role in the Singaporean economy, the Ministry of Education corporatised NUS in the mid-2000s.

The case of NUS serves as a prime example of how strategic thinking focused on national development and economic progress can act as a catalyst for academic advancements, enabling a university to achieve world-class status (Nurdin et al., 2017). NUS flourished within a political and economic environment where the government consistently and unequivocally emphasised the paramount importance of human capital development, recognising its scarcity in comparison to other natural resources. Low et al. (1991) argue that since its establishment, NUS has been guided by national
educational development policies rooted in meritocracy, aiming to produce graduates who can contribute to Singapore’s growth as a global hub for international financial services and trade.

2.4.2 Higher Education Landscape and the Streaming System

The streaming education system in Singapore originated in 1961 with the release of the Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Vocational and Technical Education (TVET) by the Singaporean government (Varaprasad, 2016). This report laid the foundation for the establishment of the vocational education system. Currently, the streaming system categorises graduates from primary schools into three secondary school tracks—Express, Normal Academic (NA), and Normal Technical (NT)—based on their results in the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). However, the practice of segregating students into distinct learning environments based on standardised test performance at the age of 12 has been a topic of debate in Singapore. Notably, from 1991 to 2003, even primary school students were divided into three different levels of classes (EM1, EM2, and EM3) based on streaming tests conducted at the end of the fourth grade.

Development and Criticisms of the Streaming System

The Singaporean government has consistently supported the streaming education system, highlighting its pragmatism, efficiency, and structural benefits. Nevertheless, criticisms and challenges to the system have persisted. In 2002, the influential Singaporean film "I Not Stupid" shed light on several issues related to the streaming system, such as the early labelling of students, the impact on students' confidence in learning, and the potential
neglect of other educational values beyond academic achievements (Huang, 2014). The film generated significant public attention and stimulated discussions on streaming and education (Foong, 2012; Singapore Eye, 2015). In this context, the Singaporean government implemented measures to address these concerns. In 2004, the merging of EM1 and EM2 led to a unified curriculum structure, and in 2008, the primary 4 streaming exam system was terminated.

**Transition to the Subject-Based Banding (SBB) System**

In March 2019, Singapore's Minister of Education, Ong Ye Kung, announced a major education reform plan for 2024, which involves replacing the existing secondary streaming system (Express, NA, NT) with the new Subject-Based Banding (SBB) system. This reform eliminates the division of students into different classes based on their PSLE scores. Instead, schools will offer three levels of difficulty for certain subjects, granting students the freedom to choose their preferred level (MoE, Singapore 2019). The introduction of the SBB system signifies a significant departure from the traditional streaming system and will take effect after 2024.

**Challenges in Higher Education Equality**

Singapore strives for international competitiveness and a leading position in Asian higher education. However, it also faces pressure for domestic educational reforms. Within the context of elitism and the WCU's dominating the higher education landscape, the Cohort Participation Rate (CPR) of domestic students in all six local universities only stands at approximately 35% (MoE Singapore, 2019). Critics argue that this statistic indicates the
government excludes university education from domestic students (The News Lens, 2017).

Moreover, since the Global Schoolhouse initiative launched in 2002 by Singapore's Economic Development Board (EDB), attracting international students has become a major focus of maintaining the compatibility and WCUs’ global leading position. Additionally, the high costs of private higher education institutions in Singapore led approximately 9% of secondary school graduates to choose overseas universities which cost lower (ICEP Monitor, 2016).

Based on the preceding discussion, it becomes evident that the Singaporean government encounters numerous challenges in the realm of educational reform. Specifically, it must navigate the delicate equilibrium between national interests and public aspirations, particularly in relation to social justice. These challenges include augmenting the domestic cohort participation rate, revamping the conventional streaming system, and upholding international competitiveness.

In this section, the trajectory of Singapore's higher education development is discussed. The government has prioritised investments in education and implemented policies to establish world-class universities like the National University of Singapore (NUS). NUS serves as an example of how strategic thinking focused on national development can drive academic advancements. The government has also introduced reforms to address the limitations of the streaming system and promote educational equality. Challenges include
increasing domestic cohort participation, reforming the streaming system, and balancing international competitiveness with the inclusion of domestic students.

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided comprehensive discussions of the contextual backgrounds relevant to the thesis. I have reviewed the transformation of Asian higher education landscapes, with a particular focus on the developing trajectories of our two target countries: China and Singapore. Additionally, I have explored the emergence of elitism and world-class universities, and the discussions surrounding social justice, as these factors form an important backdrop for my research. The next chapter will shift the focus to the literature review, where I will delve into the conceptualisation of two crucial notions in this thesis: learner identities and social justice. Subsequent sections will present further discussions on social justice.
Chapter 3
Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews relevant research on the two central concepts of this study, namely, learner identity and social justice. Distinct from Chapter 2, which primarily provided contextual background information, the present chapter is dedicated to conceptualising the fundamental ideas and establishing my perspectives through theoretical foundations.

Chapters 2 and 3 function in conjunction as a cohesive process, offering a conceptual and analytical framework that aligns with the research design and questions of this study. As previously mentioned in earlier chapters, learner identity serves as the primary theoretical lens through which I examine the higher education experiences of underrepresented students. In this chapter, I incorporate relevant studies that have been referenced in various sections of this thesis. Subsequently, I will delve into an explanation of how I conceptualise learner identity and apply the pertinent knowledge to conclude this doctoral research.

Furthermore, promoting social justice stands as the ultimate objective of my research and is also one of my core interests. Within this thesis, the attainment of social justice can be realised at two levels. Firstly, as elucidated in Chapter 1, shedding light on students' unique higher education experiences within institutions is advantageous for the advancement of social justice. This
endeavour enriches our knowledge and comprehension of reality. In this regard, I present my discoveries and analytical outcomes in Chapters 6-9. Secondly, passing value judgments on these research findings also contributes to social justice, as it highlights individual differences and disparities in experiences. By examining and comparing these variations, we can attain a better understanding of the current education system. Consequently, in this chapter, I will not only review relevant theories or studies pertaining to social justice but also define the parameters of social justice and provide a set of principles for evaluating the higher education experiences of our target students.

3.2 Learner Identity

In order to establish a clear scope for learner identity within this thesis, the first step is to clarify the specific aspects we aim to explore through this concept. As previously emphasised, the primary objective of this study is to advance social justice by exposing and examining the higher education experiences of underrepresented students in prestigious Asian universities. In this context, learner identity emerges as an ideal perspective through which to weave together the narratives of individuals' journeys in higher education. It plays a crucial role in providing intricate details about students' lives, their learning experiences, and their ability to adapt to university environments. In the subsequent section, I will commence by conceptualising and defining learner identity, followed by an explanation of how I utilise this framework to present the higher education experiences of the students in question.
3.2.1 Conceptualising Identity

It is important to note that a full review of all existing identity theories extends beyond the scope of this research. Traditionally, within the field of psychology, the concept of identity often pertains to discourses surrounding self or personal identity. One notable contribution in this regard is Charles Horton Cooley's introduction of the term 'looking-glass self' in 1902. This concept elucidates how individuals develop their self-understanding by perceiving others' reactions and feedback. Additionally, personal identity is closely linked to various research focuses, such as self-concept, self-esteem, personal characteristics, and development. These concepts are typically employed to describe and differentiate individuals' uniqueness. Another prominent figure in the exploration of identity is Erik Erikson, who, as one of the earliest psychologists, has made significant contributions through his theories of individual development and the notion of 'Ego Identity'. These psychological perspectives provide insights into identity by focusing on individuals' internal journeys.

In contrast, within sociology, the focus on identity often centres around collective identity. Unlike personal identity, collective identity places greater emphasis on discourses related to relationships, social interactions, and shared definitions. Scholars in this field are interested in understanding how individuals' behaviours are shaped within specific social contexts. There are...

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6 Ego Identity, as described by Erikson in 1968, refers to an individual's conscious sense of self. It encompasses a person's perception of continuity and helps to shield individuals from abrupt changes, thereby preserving a cohesive identity over time. A stronger sense of ego identity equips individuals with greater knowledge and confidence in understanding their own characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses.
social psychological theories that begin to take this into account. For instance, Turner (1985) suggests that individuals' perception of themselves as prototypical members of a social group can influence their behaviours. Tropp and Wright (2001) highlight that an individual's sense of belonging to a social group is correlated with their closeness to ingroup members, such as the sharing of beliefs, values, or actions. Additionally, within sociology, Bourdieu (1991) has also highlighted the relationship between identities and social classification, including ethnic and regional categories. He emphasised that identities are constructed rather than predetermined, and symbols, labels, and language usage have a tangible impact on an individual's sense of self.

After a concise examination of identity theories from psychological and sociological perspectives, it becomes evident that identity is multifaceted and can be comprehended through both the inner trajectories of individuals and their collective relationships. It is through a combination of internal processes and external interactions that individuals' identities are likely to emerge, given their inherent interactive and intertwined nature. The integration of psychological and sociological perspectives in theoretical frameworks is particularly valuable for conceptualising learner identity within the context of this thesis, as the focus is on first and second-year students who are currently undergoing a transitional phase while integrating into a higher education environment.

In this regard, the Social Identity Theory offers an explanation for why individuals identify with specific groups, the resulting impact on their affiliation and communication, and how in-group and out-group distinctions influence
interpersonal relationships. It further posits that individuals derive a sense of self-esteem from groups they positively identify with, leading to a preference for those groups. Tajfel and Turner (1979) put forth the notion that belonging to different social groups provides individuals with a sense of connection to the social world. This theory underscores the importance of social categorisation and the process through which individuals learn the concepts of 'them' and 'us'. According to Tajfel and Turner, the formation of a 'Social Identity' is influenced by the corresponding social groups to which individuals belong. These social groups can be categorised based on various criteria, such as family, social class, community, occupation, or gender. In the context of my research, insights from social identity theory are highly valuable for examining the process by which students develop their new identities within elite universities, which themselves represent distinctive social groups.

On the other hand, examining how underrepresented students experience the process of navigating different identities is one of the core interests of this study. Through exploring this, we could extend our understanding of students’ positions from diverse social backgrounds. At this point, Symbolic Interactionism offers useful perspectives in conceptualising identity. Derived from the works of Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934), symbolic interactionism places a strong emphasis on the significance of self and identity processes. The self is increasingly viewed as a collection of identities that individuals strive to validate through their interactions with others. Stryker & Serpe (1982) advocate that “identities are reflexively applied cognitions in the form of answers to the question ‘Whom am I?’.” (p.206). They suggest that responses to this exploration are articulated in terms of the positions individuals occupy
within organised structures of social relationships and the associated social roles that accompany these positions.

Symbolic interactionism explains individuals' identities as a hierarchy of salience that constitutes the self and can be organised (Stryker & Serpe, 1982). Multiple levels of identity are commonly emphasised, including core or personal identities, social identities, group identities, and role identities. These levels are often structured in a hierarchical manner, with an individual's positive or negative emotions and self-perceptions being the most general, followed by social identities associated with specific categories (such as age, gender, or ethnicity), then group identities linked to collective units, and finally, role identities being the least general (Burke & Stets, 2009; Turner, 2015). There exists interconnectedness among these levels of identity, as validation of identity at one level can impact the confirmation of identity at another level. This perspective not only examines how individuals integrate different identities but also sheds light on how different layers of identities intertwine with one another, providing a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of identity formation.

In addition to interpretations provided by the Social Identity and Symbolic Interactionism perspectives, which emphasise the interplay between individuals' identities and social interactions, this study aims to highlight another crucial aspect of identity - individuals' ongoing narratives about themselves. Understanding students' motivations and self-perceptions in their higher education journeys is essential for comprehending their experiences within the university setting. Various researchers have contributed diverse and
comprehensive understandings of identity in this regard. For instance, Hogg and Abrams (1988) advocate for identity as "people's concepts of who they are, what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others" (p. 2). Wenger (1998) describes identity as "who we are in the way we live day to day, not just in what we think or say about ourselves" (p. 151), highlighting the complex interplay of social and personal relationships within identity. Norton (2013) defines identity as "how a person understands their relationship to the world, how this relationship is structured across time and space, and how they perceive future possibilities" (p. 45). These perspectives elucidate identity from a perspective of continuity, aligning with Geijsel and Meijers' (2005) argument that individuals' identity is an ongoing process of making sense of who they are in relation to past, present, and future experiences.

Conceptually, identity is a dynamic and multifaceted construct that emerges from an individual's unique growth context and is influenced by social construction over time. Henkel (2000) posits that this construction takes place on a continuum that spans the past, present, and future. In the context of academia, Billot (2010) suggests that individuals develop their sense of an "academic self" by forming perceptions of what it means to be an academic, drawing from their past experiences, and understanding the current academic landscape. It is important to acknowledge that identity is not fixed or confined to a specific time period (Henkel, 2000). Instead, self-identity is intricately linked to the known and valued aspects of one's life, while also being influenced and shaped by unexpected disruptions and external social pressures at both individual and societal levels. As a result, each facet of an individual's identity, rooted in the past and contributing to future development,
can arise from a blend of imagined and real experiences and aspirations. By focusing on the continuity aspect of identity, we broaden our perspective beyond a specific timeframe that encompasses the ongoing dynamics of the past, present, and future.

To summarise, considering the specific context and objectives of my research, my aim is to integrate the aforementioned perspectives into a comprehensive framework that encompasses the multifaceted dimensions of students' higher education experiences. As a result, I propose the following definition of identity: Identity is an ongoing and dynamic self-perception that is unique in nature and emerges from an individual's past life experiences, the evolving dynamics of their interactions with people and the environment, and their aspirations for the future up to the present moment. It is also conceptualised as a component or social label that contributes to a collective sense of self, which is socially constructed and interconnected with other identities in a hierarchical manner.

3.2.2 Conceptualising Learner Identity

Having established an understanding of identity, the next step in conceptualising learner identity is to establish its boundaries within the context of learners. Lowson (2014) provides a concise definition: learner identity pertains to how individuals perceive themselves as learners and the extent to which they identify themselves as such (p.346). To delve deeper into learner identity, it is essential to clarify the concept of a learner. However, further defining a learner relies on our understanding of learning itself. In this study, learning primarily occurs within universities or under the context of university
education. Consequently, the focus will be on reviewing theories that are particularly relevant for explaining learning based on such understanding.

In the context of university education, Bereiter's 'container' metaphor (2002), which portrays learning as the act of 'adding more substance' to the mind, offers a straightforward explanation. This metaphor encapsulates the widely held belief that learning involves acquiring new skills, knowledge, languages, or values. From this perspective, learning is seen as a process of accumulating personal assets within an individual's mind. This interpretation aligns with one of the fundamental purposes of universities, which is to provide individuals with knowledge and skills, as emphasised by Zgaga (2009).

On the other hand, Sfard (1998) introduces the 'participation' metaphor, which highlights the importance of practice, discourse, and communication. According to this metaphor, learners are active participants who engage in specific activities, rather than mere collectors of knowledge or possessions. This perspective views learning as a dynamic process characterised by active engagement, interaction, and negotiation. It recognises that learning is context-dependent and interactive, involving attempts, negotiations, self-corrections, and transformations. Such a perspective holds particular significance when examining students' learning experiences during their transition to university, as it emphasises the importance of their active involvement and adaptation within the university environment.

Lave and Wenger (1991) also emphasise a similar perspective, where
learning is seen as both a process and a product that are inseparable from sociocultural settings. They highlight the interconnectedness of learning and social contexts, emphasising that learning occurs through participation in communities of practice. By considering these perspectives, we can develop a nuanced understanding of learning as a multifaceted process that involves the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, active participation and engagement, and the socio-cultural contexts in which learning takes place.

The construction metaphor of learning, as described by Hager (2008), conceives of learning as an ongoing process of development. Drawing a parallel to building a house, individuals construct their understanding of the world by continuously assembling and reconstructing their evolving knowledge and insights. This metaphor holds particular significance when examining the transition experiences of underrepresented students, as it expands beyond individual learning to encompass collective learning. It underscores the intricate web of relationships that extend beyond individual learners, highlighting the emergence of new understandings and contexts through collaborative efforts. This perspective acknowledges the dynamic and interconnected nature of learning, capturing the complexities of knowledge construction within diverse social and educational environments.

As mentioned earlier, in order to foster a comprehensive understanding of learning in the university context, it is crucial to consider students' experiences holistically. The preceding discussions have broadened the scope of learning beyond academic settings, recognising that students' university experiences encompass far more than the purely scholarly realm. Instead, university
learning is multidimensional, encompassing many of the attributes elucidated by the reviewed theories and metaphors. It is inherently context-dependent, interactive, and transformative in nature. By acknowledging the multifaceted nature of university learning, we can better appreciate the diverse and dynamic processes through which students engage with and derive meaning from their educational journeys.

In the university setting, students engage in various forms of learning, including mastering professional knowledge and skills, facing challenges, establishing connections with others, participating in social activities, enriching their life experiences, acquiring new values, developing self-concepts, and even encountering and learning from failure experiences. Based on these understandings, a university learner can be seen as an active practitioner engaged in these diverse learning activities that go beyond the traditional academic realm.

Based on the above discussions, learner identity refers to how students articulate and perceive themselves in relation to their learning experiences. It encompasses their self-awareness, attitudes, and emotions regarding the process of learning. Within the scope of this research, the focus lies specifically on the self-perceptions of learners, involving their subjective feelings about and evaluations of themselves as learners. The objective is to delve into the learner identities of underrepresented students and unravel their distinctive narratives throughout their university journey, utilising insights derived from their self-expressions and my own observations. By doing so, this endeavour aims to deepen our comprehension of the contemporary Asian
higher education system by enriching our understanding of the challenges, triumphs, and aspirations encountered by underrepresented students. The ultimate goal is to amplify the voices and experiences of these students, allowing their stories to shape and enhance our understanding of the intricacies of learner identity within the university context.

Another crucial aspect of learner identity addressed in this thesis pertains to how students demonstrate the quality of university education. Their learner identities not only encapsulate their personal learning experiences within the university but also encompass their conceptualisation of what it means to be a university learner or a learner in general. As previously discussed, learning encompasses various dimensions that mirror the complexity of life itself. Consequently, students' attitudes toward learning can be regarded as reflections of their broader life outlook. Therefore, examining students' learner identities serves as a valuable entry point for assessing whether they receive a well-rounded education in universities, and it offers insights into their capacity to recognise the significance of a balanced life.

From an educational philosophy standpoint, the insights of American educational reformer John Dewey provide valuable perspectives on understanding university education. Dewey famously stated, "I believe that education is a process of living and not a preparation for future living" (Dewey, 1897, p.78) like other prominent educators and philosophers such as Abraham Maslow and Paulo Freire, Dewey advocates for the value of holistic education. This perspective emphasises the importance of nurturing students'
passion for learning and life, cultivating their primary human values, and fostering meaningful relationships within their living environment. These are essential educational outcomes that universities should strive to achieve (Mahmoudi et al., 2012). According to Dewey (1897), the embodiment of these values is tantamount to living itself.

While research attention has rightly focused on promoting social justice, providing support, eliminating disadvantageous factors, and fostering inclusivity for underrepresented students, it is equally crucial not to underestimate the educational value of universities. Thus, in this study, I endeavour to explore and present the quality of students’ experiences through the lens of holistic education.

To summarise the conceptualisation of learner identity in this section, we began by establishing a broad understanding of identity through a review of relevant theories. In this thesis, identity is conceptualised as both an ongoing and dynamic self-perception and a socially constructed label that contributes to a person’s collective sense of self. Building upon this understanding, we narrowed the application of identity to the realm of university learners. To achieve this goal, we speculated on the essence of university learning, gradually forming a comprehensive understanding of the university learner. With a certain degree of clarity regarding identity and university learners, we

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7 Primary human values refer to fundamental virtues in humanity. From a holistic perspective, Kaliannan and Chandran (2010) have dedicated their work to promoting education for human values (EHV). According to their perspective, love, truth, peace, right conduct, and non-violence represent the five fundamental universal human values.
established the conceptual boundaries of learner identity.

The conceptualisation of learner identity in this study integrates various perspectives from psychology, sociology, and philosophy. As a result, students' learner identities are interconnected with multiple dimensions, including their experiences in university learning, self-concepts, cognitive development, cultural contexts, social relationships, understanding of their environment, and the overall balance in their lives. In conclusion, within the research context of this study, learner identity is defined as students’ perception of themselves as learners and their ongoing process of being and becoming learners. It is shaped by their past learning experiences, their current learning journey, and their aspirations for the future.

Students' learner identities reflect the cognitive and emotional aspects of their university experiences. For example, if a student tends to perceive participating in social activities in a negative way, researchers can possibly infer their lifestyle and the value judgments they hold, which are likely to be influenced by their past and ongoing experiences. It is important to note that students typically possess multiple identities or learner identities simultaneously. Therefore, the singular usage of "learner identity" is employed solely for the purpose of conceptualisation in this chapter. In the subsequent section, I will review the relevant applications of learner identity in scholarly works and explore the discourse surrounding the formation of students' learner identities in the specific research context of this study.
3.2.3 Learner Identity Formation

In application, learner identity theories serve as an ideal theoretical foundation for various research domains. For instance, in the modern era, there is a growing interest in investigating the relationship between students' learner identities and online learning or artificial intelligence. Within this context, the impact of technology on students' learner identities and the definition of "digital identities" have become popular research areas (e.g., Kwon et al., 2021). Conversely, many studies focus on social stratification and educational inequality. Regarding underrepresented students, Reay et al. (2009) explored the learner identities of working-class students in four different UK universities. Their research revealed significant heterogeneity in the learner identities of working-class students across the various institutions. They highlighted the influence of institutional habitus and the additional challenges faced by some students in navigating their identity development.

Another common research application of learner identity theories lies in the field of language learning. For instance, Norton and Toohey (2011) provide valuable insights into understanding language learner identities from the perspective of "investment." They discovered that, apart from motivations, learners' belief in acquiring more cultural capital, specifically the possibilities for their future, plays a crucial role in shaping their learner identities. In another work by Norton (2015), she emphasises the powerful influence of communities on the formation of learner identities. When a community aligns with the learner's desired or imagined identity, it provides a conducive environment for identity development. According to Norton, within an imagined community, new identities emerge through relationships and interactions.
Through the discussions above, it is evident that insightful interpretations and findings can be gleaned from other learner identity studies, despite differences in research focus. However, it is important to note that students’ learner identities may be shaped differently in distinct research contexts. In the framework of my own research, I specifically examine the learner identities of underrepresented students in four Asian elite universities. Consequently, in the subsequent paragraph, I will review relevant studies that contribute to exploring the learner identities of underrepresented university students, followed by an examination of learner identities within the context of elite universities. Finally, I will present a synthesised perspective that combines these insights.

Underrepresented Students in Universities

In the context of underrepresented students, a significant body of research sheds light on their experiences in higher education. To address the formation of underrepresented students’ learner identities in universities, it is crucial to understand their overall encounters. Numerous studies focus on the experiences of first-generation students, which is particularly relevant to my understanding of the interviewees, as most of them are also first-generation students. Scholars have found that first-generation students differ from their peers in universities. They are often less prepared for higher education (Warburton et al., 2001; Pascarella et al., 2004), face additional pressures (Amirkhan et al., 2022), and may exhibit poorer academic performance (Ward et al., 2012; Jury et al., 2015). McCain et al. (2018) even suggest that first-
generation students may experience unfulfilled basic psychological needs. They argue that the lack of cultural or social capital may limit their exposure to intrinsic achievements such as competence, relatedness, and autonomy, which can subsequently impact their academic performance and transition experience.

Another common research focus related to the formation of underrepresented students' learner identities is working-class students. It is not uncommon to observe difficulties in fitting in or negative emotions among these students. Soria et al. (2013) discovered that working-class students struggle to find peers with similar life experiences or backgrounds. Similarly, Thomas (2012) highlights the feelings of discomfort and isolation experienced by working-class students in the UK higher education context. She emphasises practical approaches to promote students' sense of belonging.

Indeed, a lack of belonging is often observed among working-class university students. Aries (2008) argues that students from working-class backgrounds can keenly perceive disparities based on class differences and tend to believe that these disadvantages significantly impact their higher education experience. For example, a participant in Thiele and Pope's work (2016) described facing extra difficulties and disruptions related to her family's lower levels of education, domestic violence, mental/physical health problems,

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8 They utilised the BNSC-S model (Basic Needs Satisfaction at College Scale, Jenkins-Guarnieri et al., 2015) as a component of variables to assess students' intrinsic motivation. According to the BNSC-S model, fundamental psychological needs encompass autonomy, competence, and relatedness.
and poor economic circumstance. This case suggests that working-class students not only acknowledge their disadvantaged situation in universities but also experience a sense of alienation from others.

Based on current research, it is evident that underrepresented students often face structural disadvantages. MacFarlane (2018) highlights how inequalities arising from class differences can impact students' academic performance and shape their learner identities. However, the formation of learner identity is a complex process that goes beyond these factors. Read et al. (2003) argue against the existence of a singular "working-class identity," emphasising the diversity of learner identities among working-class students. Furthermore, it is essential to recognise that the educational experiences of underrepresented students can vary significantly depending on social and institutional contexts. While numerous studies have generally highlighted the disadvantaged positions of various underrepresented student groups, it is crucial not to perpetuate the stereotype of viewing them as inherently deficient. This is one of the reasons why I have reviewed relevant literature on underrepresented students mostly in other social contexts—to maintain a critical distance and an open mind when examining students within our specific research context.

**Elite Universities**

MacFarlane (2018) regards learner identities as temporary identities that are socially constructed. This perspective aligns with the concept of social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) discussed earlier in this chapter. It is key to explore students' learner identities within a specific social context, which in
this research refers to elite universities in Asia. In this section, I will further narrow down the scope of underrepresented students' learner identities with an additional filter. We will now develop a comprehensive perspective on how to examine students' sense of belonging, engagement, and alignment with their self-awareness as learners and as part of the university community.

In Chapter 2, we outlined several common features of our target four elite Asian universities: their reputation as prestigious institutions, desirability as positional goods, excellent academic standing and international rankings, highly selective admissions, strong institutional culture, and high expectations for students. Building on these understandings, we will delve into the formation of learner identities within this sociostructural context. Sfard and Prusak's works (2005) are particularly useful for explaining underrepresented students' identity conflicts and learning experiences in elite universities. They distinguish between a person's "actual identity," which consists of stories about the current state of affairs, and "designated identity," composed of narratives depicting a state of affairs that is expected to be the case, either currently or in the future. Students in elite universities encounter unfamiliar, evolving, and strong designated identities, shaped by campus cultural messages and collective values. Moreover, underrepresented students often experience multiple identity conflicts simultaneously.

Stubbs and Murphy (2020) highlight the experience of underrepresented students feeling "alienated" from certain academic and social contexts in the UK elite university setting. They suggest that despite efforts to promote social mobility through widening participation, entering an "Oxbridge" level university
and embracing the associated designated identities remains challenging in terms of academic and social adaptability. In my research context, underrepresented students have had an increased opportunity to enter elite universities through special admission pathways in recent years. However, this may also introduce strong identity conflicts. Factors such as a lack of self-confidence due to gaps in academic performance and the weight of family expectations can significantly impact students' learner identities.

To summarise the formation of underrepresented students' learner identities in elite universities based on the above discussions, we can identify various crucial factors that interact with learners, including learning experiences, identity conflict, social relations, institutional culture, and societal expectations.

### 3.3 Social Justice

In this section, I will conceptualise another key notion of this study: social justice within our specific research context. Social justice serves as a theoretical framework that assists us in examining the higher education experiences of underrepresented students. As mentioned in Chapter 1, this study aims to engage in more extensive discussions about social justice that go beyond a purely distributive approach. In other words, the framework I aim to establish here should serve as a lens for understanding the further encounters of underrepresented students in elite universities, encompassing their learning and transition experiences.

Based on this understanding, I adopt both the perspectives of educational
equality and educational adequacy as two cornerstones, which will be discussed separately in the subsequent sections. Additionally, before concluding this chapter, I will present a set of justice principles derived from our discussions on relevant literature.

### 3.3.1 Educational Equality

According to Koski and Reich (2007), education can be regarded as positional goods in at least two significant ways. Firstly, it plays a crucial role in the competition for admission to post-secondary or higher education opportunities. This is referred to as the 'admissions benefit of education', where the former benefit, such as receiving a high-quality primary education, reinforces the latter benefit. Secondly, education is also crucial in the competition for well-paying jobs in the labour market, which Koski and Reich term the 'earnings benefit of education. Those who receive a good education are more likely to secure high-paying and high-status jobs in the labour market.

Indeed, when examining the modern higher education systems in Singapore and China, we can easily connect the concept of positional goods to our target elite universities, as they are characterised by competition and scarcity. In this context, the allocation of university spaces becomes one of the most controversial issues. However, it is important to note that in this study, the main focus of the discussion on social justice will be placed on students’ higher education experiences after they have been enrolled. Based on this understanding, the discussion of equality will revolve around fairness in securing students’ success.
From the perspective of educational equality, it is crucial to allocate resources properly. Brighouse (2000) emphasised that an individual's chance of achieving educational success should not be influenced by factors beyond their control. If competition is fair, the educational achievement should depend solely on "talent" and "hard work." This aligns with the concept of opportunity fairness as advocated by Rawls (2001), which asserts that individuals with the same talents, abilities, and willingness to utilise them should have equal prospects for success, regardless of their social background or the class they were born into. Thus, social class or family background should not impede educational opportunities. In this perspective, addressing learning disparities and implementing affirmative action is acceptable as long as fair competition is ensured. However, can all factors that affect educational fairness be eliminated?

Brighouse and Swift (2006) provide a description that closely aligns with the social realities that challenge the notion of fair competition. They state, "The fact that wealthy parents can provide their children with educational advantages over others, enhancing their marketability and giving them an advantage in the race for well-rewarded and interesting jobs, unfairly tilts the playing field in their favor" (p. 476). This description effectively highlights the challenges in achieving fairness in real-life situations.

Also from an educational equality perspective, Swift (2003) mentions that when parents confer additional advantages on their children, it further disadvantages those who are already disadvantaged. Consequently, when parents invest in their children's education, they may easily violate the
principle of fair competition. At this point, Brighouse and Swift (2006) argue that certain additional educational investments should be prohibited as they can harm others. On the other hand, for children who are equally talented and hardworking but face educational disadvantages due to their family’s socioeconomic background, compensatory measures should be implemented to rectify their situation.

Through the above discussions, it can be concluded that the perspective of educational equality suggests the elimination of factors beyond students’ own talent and hard work to ensure fairness in educational outcomes. This lens is particularly valuable in our research context, as it allows us to examine the experiences of underrepresented students in elite universities and identify external factors that may contribute to unfairness or act as obstacles to their success.

3.3.2 Educational Adequacy

From another standpoint, when people devote time and effort to ensuring fair competition and allocation, it becomes easier to identify inequalities that are prevalent in educational systems. As described by Satz (2007):

"Educational inequalities include not only disparities in funding per pupil but also in class size, teacher qualifications, and resources such as books, labs, libraries, computers, and curriculum, as well as the physical condition of the school and the safety of students within it. While not all schools attended by poor children are bad schools, and not all schools attended by well-off children are good schools, there are clear patterns. Poor children are more
likely to attend crowded and poorly equipped schools with less qualified teachers than children from more affluent families\textsuperscript{9}. (2007 p.623)

These disparities, as described by Satz, in educational resources and outcomes are complex, and there are numerous external factors that could potentially explain them. In reality, even if students possess the same talent, their development can be influenced by their growth environment, parental social class, and habitus. For example, if parents have greater advantages in terms of cultural or economic capital, students are more likely to be motivated to work hard, and their parents can serve as guides when they face challenges. These disparities in educational resources and supports are commonly observed across different levels of education systems, including universities.

Based on these understandings, the pursuit of eliminating factors that contradict the equality principle of justice could lead to an endless discussion. However, scholars who advocate the theory of educational adequacy focus not on addressing relative deprivation but on pursuing equality in social relationships. For educational adequacy, the purpose of education is to foster the basic abilities of every student, not to foster competition among individuals but to acquire sufficient ability, skills, or knowledge to become independent citizens.

\textsuperscript{9} Satz provides an example of the disparities in school resources in the United States: While some of the wealthiest districts in New York allocate more than 25,000 USD per pupil, the poorest district in Texas spends only approximately 1,200 USD.
Nonetheless, the standard of "adequacy" varies among scholars. Tooley (1996) suggests that individuals can acquire and maintain employment, while Satz (2007) uses the concept of the "educational floor" to explain the goal of education, which is to ensure minimum cognitive achievements and outcomes. Others link adequacy to citizenship in a democratic society. For instance, Gutmann (1987) describes educational adequacy as students receiving sufficient education to exercise their rights as citizens. At a minimum, being adequately educated means being competent to obey the law and participate in the democratic process, such as voting.

In other words, educational adequacy could be understood as it aims to pursue a form of relational equality rather than distributive equality\(^{10}\). Challenging the discourse of egalitarian justice, Anderson (1999) advocates the concept of "democratic equality." She argues that education should ensure that every citizen is equally respected and free from social oppression, fostering equality in relationships. This entails securing individuals' freedoms and allowing them to live under conditions of equal dignity. Rawls (2001) shares extensive views, stating that:

"The value of education should not be assessed solely in terms of economic efficiency and social welfare. Equally, if not more important, is the role of education in enabling a person to enjoy the culture of their society and

\[^{10}\text{According to Voigt (2017), distributive equality emphasises fairness in outcomes. It aims to directly evaluate the fairness of the distribution of educational resources or opportunities. On the other hand, relational equality is centred around the relationships between individuals. It asserts that equal relationship considerations should inform our distribution assessment more broadly.}\]
participate in its affairs, providing each individual with a secure sense of their worth... Resources for education should not be allocated solely or primarily based on their estimated return in producing trained abilities, but also based on their worth in enriching the personal and social life of citizens, including the less advantaged. As society progresses, the latter consideration becomes increasingly more important" (2001, p.86-92).

Rawls's perspective is particularly insightful, as it not only provides a possible reference for an ideal university education but also serves as a useful lens for examining the higher education experiences and perceptions of our target students. This educational adequacy perspective, which encompasses the intrinsic value of humanity in university education, aligns well with the overall tone and focus of this research.

Anderson (2012) provides further perspectives on social inequality, analysing it through three hierarchies: authority, esteem, and standing. According to her framework, in the authority hierarchy, individuals are subjected to following commands and live in a state of powerlessness and unfreedom. The hierarchies of esteem lead to the stigmatisation of individuals in inferior social positions, with certain aspects of their identities, such as sexual orientation, language, religion, or ethnicity, being marginalised within mainstream social and cultural frameworks. Additionally, hierarchies of standing enable those in superior social groups to secure their own interests and exert influence over others, often resulting in the marginalisation of individuals who lack power and opportunities.
Such perspectives on power relations and authority hierarchies are highly valuable in examining the dynamics between elite universities and students from various social backgrounds. Drawing upon Anderson's work (2007, 2012), it becomes evident that the primary objective of education is to confront these oppressive structures and work towards establishing a society based on equal relationships. Within the framework of educational adequacy, Anderson proposes the inclusion of students from diverse social backgrounds in the same educational setting, fostering social integration and facilitating opportunities for respectful interactions.

In summary, from the perspective of educational adequacy, the emphasis of resource allocation in education is not solely on providing an equal amount of resources to everyone, but rather on how to promote an equal society and citizenship. Satz (2007) further argues that an education system should not exclude specific groups of students, regardless of their socioeconomic background, as this would violate the principle of providing adequate education and undermine the ideal of treating every individual with equal respect.

3.3.3 Combining Educational Equality and Adequacy

When examining the concepts of educational equality and educational adequacy, it becomes apparent that they each have their unique discourses which extend to their own principles of justice. In terms of fairness in education, the former tends to focus more on distributive equality, considering talent and hard work as essential factors. It allows for an acceptable level of educational achievement gap as long as fair competition is ensured. On the
other hand, the latter tends to emphasise the pursuit of equal societal or political relationships, placing less emphasis on positional aspects of education.

To develop a comprehensive framework that could effectively examine students’ higher education experiences by integrating the two contrasting concepts, it is crucial to gain an in-depth understanding of the advantages and limitations of each approach. Beginning with the educational equality approach, assessing educational equality requires a careful evaluation of whether the distribution of resources or educational achievements is influenced by brute luck or option luck\(^\text{11}\). This determination is essential in determining the justice of these outcomes. However, luck egalitarianism provides a more acceptable and realistic approach, as it considers controllable factors, such as hard work. This approach allows for an explanation of inequalities or unfairness in outcomes. For instance, in an Olympic swimming competition, the only controllable factor is ensuring that all participants start from the same position, and the resulting outcomes can be attributed to individual hard work and talent.

Indeed, hard work appears to be the only fair and controllable element dependent on individual choice. However, talent may hold even greater

\(^{11}\) According to Vallentyne (2002), Brute Luck refers to unavoidability. The occurrence of an event could be attributed to brute luck for an agent only if the agent could not have avoided the possibility of its occurrence. On the other hand, option luck pertains to the outcomes of deliberate and calculated gambles, determining whether an individual gains or loses by accepting an isolated risk that they should have anticipated and potentially declined. Brute luck, however, pertains to the outcomes of risks that are not intentionally taken as gambles.
influence in various circumstances, and it is uncontrollable. This presents a limitation to luck egalitarianism. Firstly, it is challenging to consider and exclude all potential external factors. For example, the fact that the parents of certain players are swimming coaches or that some students grew up in families lacking cultural capital. Similarly, talent is similar to these random and contingent factors. If we reject external factors such as social class or parental education level and view them as injustices, on what basis can we claim that allocations based on personal talents are just?

As Satz (2007) challenges: "Although the meritocratic conception of equality of opportunity has some intuitive appeal, it faces serious problems... the creation of merit is highly endogenous to the distribution of educational resources that we choose" (p.629-630). In other words, it is difficult to justify on the basis of "merit" alone what type of social allocations are reasonable, as this only informs us about the criteria we have selected and who benefits from these arbitrary decisions.

On the contrary, when considering educational adequacy, it becomes apparent that the competitive nature of education can have detrimental effects and further stigmatise disadvantaged students. It raises the question of whether it is fair or reasonable to attribute low educational achievement solely to a lack of talent. This perspective presents challenges, as extensive evidence indicates that educational outcomes are influenced by a multitude of complex factors. In light of this understanding, the concept of educational adequacy emerges as a more practical option. While the educational equality approach focuses primarily on identifying disciplines that ensure fairness and
eliminate external factors that impede justice (Brighouse and Swift, 2014; Swift, 2003), educational adequacy offers greater flexibility and adaptability.

It is extremely challenging to separate family influences from individual achievements and rectify them all to achieve perfect equality. However, when it comes to examining the fundamental human rights of individuals in contemporary society, the task becomes more feasible. While scholars may have varying perspectives, there is a general consensus on the importance of relational equality. This principle asserts that every individual, simply by virtue of being a human being, is equal and deserving of respect. This proposition is intuitively comprehensible and widely accepted.

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDG4) in education, as outlined in 2015, place a strong emphasis on the provision of inclusive and equitable quality education for all. In line with this direction, Reich (2006) offers insights into an earlier trend in educational policy in the United States, highlighting a shift from a focus on equality to one on adequacy. He explains:

"What caused the shift from equality to adequacy? The answer is complicated... First, although state education articles vary considerably from state to state, there is generally a requirement that the legislature provides a 'thorough and efficient,' 'uniform,' or 'high-quality education to its children. This language was more amenable to an adequacy orientation rather than an equality orientation... and third, it resulted from a pragmatic decision among school reform advocates about how best to improve the position of the least advantaged schoolchildren" (p.8-9).
Reich's analysis elucidates two points. Firstly, it is easier for people to perceive and address inequality when problems or issues are more specific. For example, it is easier to voice concerns about inequality resulting from differences in classroom equipment than from family advantages. Secondly, improving the circumstances of the disadvantaged is easier than constraining the privileged. Consequently, educational adequacy appears to be an acceptable discourse that aims to ensure a basic level of living ability and literacy.

In summary, both the perspectives of equality and adequacy provide valuable insights for this study. On the one hand, the institutions being investigated are elite universities in Asia, which implies that the students being studied have gone through a competitive selection process. While the focus of this thesis is not on the specific process of their admission to these top universities, there are still significant variations in the students' backgrounds. From the standpoint of educational equality, the ideal scenario would be that students' learning outcomes are solely determined by their talents and hard work, regardless of their upbringing or socioeconomic status. Although it may be challenging to achieve complete justice by eliminating unfair factors from students' higher education journey, the equality perspective remains a straightforward and useful lens in helping us identify potential factors that may impact the learning and transition experiences of underrepresented students.

On the other hand, the perspective of educational adequacy is also valuable in examining the experiences of underrepresented students, given its comprehensive focus on the multiple dimensions of university education.
Additionally, the adequacy perspective is particularly helpful in exploring ways to enhance the support system for students from diverse social backgrounds. In conclusion, when developing a social justice framework to analyse students' higher education experiences, I believe it is beneficial to combine these two distinct approaches, as they both provide valuable insights.

3.3.4 Justice and the Purpose of Higher Education

According to my research design, I tend to presuppose that in these elite institutions, achieving educational equality remains challenging, as talents and hard work do not solely determine students' learning outcomes. This is also why I have chosen to focus on underrepresented student groups.

Broadly speaking, "underrepresented" can be understood as reflecting diversity. Although students may have started their higher education journeys from the same starting point, they have followed different paths. When students from diverse backgrounds are placed within the same educational framework, including the curriculum, environment, language, and expectations, we are likely to observe varying outcomes and developments. I have decided to investigate from the perspective of learner identity because, through individuals' experiences, we may uncover some uncontrollable inequities. Specifically, in this thesis, "underrepresented students" generally refer to those who potentially undertake disadvantages in their educational trajectories or conditions before higher education, which are in contrast to the elite systems. For example, there may be gaps in educational resources for students from remote areas, financial disadvantages for students relying on student loans, or significant cultural gaps for ethnic minorities. According to
scholars, these differences are likely to impact educational equality (Brighouse and Swift, 2006; Satz, 2007). From the viewpoint of educational equality, such disparities contradict justice, as experiences of failure may influence individuals' outcomes in the labour market and their future development.

In addition to equality in higher education, it is important to discuss the purpose of higher education itself. By identifying the essential functions and purposes of higher education, we can determine the criteria of "adequacy" for students. Discussing justice from the perspective of educational adequacy can be challenging without defining the threshold achievements for university students. The following discussions will examine intrinsic and comparative values, including higher education as positional goods. So, what is the purpose of university education? Scholars present various ideas. Thompson (2014) describes it as follows:

"Colleges and universities are afforded a high degree of autonomy in the belief and expectation that they will operate in the service of society. This contract requires that higher education be responsive to societal needs through generating knowledge and providing an educational experience that prepares students to meet societal needs and realise a meaningful and rewarding life" (p.36-38).

Brint (2019) highlights an important point: the purposes of higher education vary depending on the type of institution within the system. For instance, community colleges' aims may differ from research universities. Community
colleges serve multiple missions, including providing skills training or academic education, and preparing students for jobs or transferring to four-year higher education programs. Fletcher and Carter (2010) analyse information from the American Association of Community Colleges (AAAC) and point out that community colleges play a crucial role in providing access to higher education for underrepresented groups, including adult students and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This demonstrates the vital function of community colleges in enriching the education and career choices of non-traditional students, such as adults and disadvantaged students. Thus, from both the perspectives of equality and adequacy, positive aspects of social justice can likely be found in community colleges.

Returning to the focus of this thesis, what about research universities\textsuperscript{12}? To understand the relevant processes of social justice, we can begin by examining their purpose and role. Njuguna (2015) explains research universities through Cranfield University:

"Its mission is to create and transform world-class science, technology, and

\textsuperscript{12} The concept of a "research university" lacks clear regulation and has been subject to various interpretations by different scholars. For instance, Altbach (2013) proposes several defining characteristics of a successful research university, such as being at the top of the academic hierarchy in a differentiated higher education system or receiving more funding compared to other universities to attract top-tier faculty and students and support research infrastructure. In this study, I categorise the four targeted elite universities as research universities based on two sources: descriptions provided by educational evaluation agencies (e.g., Times Higher Education and QS) and the universities' own descriptions on their official websites. Considering the esteemed reputation of these four institutions, I believe this classification is appropriate and accurate.
management expertise into viable, practical, environmentally desirable solutions that enhance economic development and the quality of life...the uniqueness of Cranfield University lies in teaching and research being integrated and undertaken in an environment and culture of innovation and applicability" (p.1-2).

Brint (2019) lists three main purposes of research universities from a public policy perspective: human capital development, basic research and research in the national interest, and providing access for students from lower-income and underrepresented minority backgrounds. Based on the understandings suggested by these scholars, I conclude two points that may be relevant to this study. Firstly, there are high social expectations for research universities, which may be even more pronounced in the top universities we are focusing on. This means that while students enjoy the prestige of these universities, they may also face significant mental stress. From the perspective of educational equality, this stress is likely an uncontrollable factor influencing learning outcomes and university experiences, especially for underrepresented students who are minorities in an elite environment. What is their subjective perception of stress? How does stress relate to their identity? In order to make judgments regarding equality, these questions need to be addressed in exploring students' learner identities.

Secondly, from the standpoint of education itself, whether it is a community college or a research university, the ultimate goal is to educate individuals. This brings us back to the discussion on the adequacy of higher education and holistic education reviewed earlier in this chapter (Dewey, 1897).
Research universities usually have clear academic goals, such as "transforming world-class science." O'Shaughnessy (2012) categorises colleges and universities into four types based on their "educational mission." She points out that the undergraduate programs at many research universities tend to be academically oriented rather than vocational. However, there could be various reasons why students choose prestigious universities. Selecting a research university does not necessarily mean that they all desire or are suited for an academic-oriented learning environment.

O'Shaughnessy (2012) presents an interesting example from the United States: a story from The New York Times that captures the concerns of faculty at Harvard University who worried that the teaching at the institution was not meeting its renowned standards. In fact, a professor lamented that some undergraduates, after spending four years at Harvard, did not know a single faculty member well enough to ask for a letter of recommendation. One student interviewed by the Times suggested that undergraduates should understand that Harvard's professors are too focused on research to put much effort into what happens in the classroom. The student stated, O'Shaughnessy describes: "You'd be stupid if you came to Harvard for the teaching... You go to a liberal arts college for teaching. You come to Harvard to be around some of the greatest minds on earth" (p.126-127).

It is disheartening to hear such comments from students because they

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13 "Research universities," "Master's degree or regional universities," "Liberal arts and baccalaureate colleges," and "specialty schools" are categories mentioned by O'Shaughnessy (2012).
provide a glimpse into the pressure to learn that exists among peers. The example of Harvard highlights that emphasising research and academic development in top universities may give rise to other educational problems. For example, teaching may not be prioritised as highly. While research awards and productivity, which can be easily measured by data, are highly valued, those educational indicators that are more challenging to quantify may be difficult to demonstrate. Therefore, by exploring students' learner identities, I hope to gather more information and understanding of elite systems. Students accepted into elite institutions are likely high achievers at the secondary level. The results of Aries and Seider's study (2007) indicate that most students emphasised personal characteristics such as determination, self-reliance, motivation, and hard work as important factors for academic success, accepting the meritocratic myth. However, as we have consistently emphasised, educational achievement is the outcome of the interaction of many complex factors. With this understanding, in order to establish a connection with social justice, the question becomes: does the role or atmosphere in elite universities create unfairness for underrepresented students? Do they receive adequate and quality education, including effective teaching, throughout their higher education journey?

3.3.5 Justice Principle in this Thesis

In my research context, I have established three justice principles based on the preceding discussion. These principles will serve as a framework for assessing whether the success of underrepresented students in our selected elite Asian universities is influenced by external factors associated with their underrepresented social backgrounds or identities. Three justice principles
are outlined below:

1. **Students' Perception of Identity Conflicts**

   From the perspective of educational equality, it is ideal for *students' learning outcomes to be independent of uncontrollable external factors and solely determined by their talent and hard work. Some may argue for even stricter criteria that consider only individual effort. However, in reality, students' learning outcomes are influenced by a multitude of complex factors. It can be challenging to establish a singular basis for justice or justification. Nevertheless, the perceptions of underrepresented students experiencing identity conflicts can shed light on the additional time and effort they need to invest in navigating their relative identities. If students perceive significant disparities in their identity experiences or observe clear patterns or tendencies, it suggests the presence of external factors that affect certain students' higher education experiences. Such circumstances are often considered instances of injustice.**

2. **Self-Confidence Demonstrated by Students**

   Self-confidence refers to an individual's belief in their own abilities and is considered a significant factor in one's attitude (Bandura, 1977; Clark et al., 2008). It reflects a sense of control over one's life and a positive self-perception. In the context of our study on underrepresented students in elite universities, self-confidence serves as an important indicator to observe their learning and transition experiences. If students exhibit a noticeable lack of confidence throughout their higher education journey, it suggests potential
struggles or negative encounters.

Greenacre (2014) suggests that individuals with low levels of confidence tend to assume a subordinate position and conform to the behaviour of others in order to gain social acceptance. Considering the perspective of "equal relations" proposed by the educational adequacy approach, it would be unjust if students are unable to develop sufficient self-confidence through their university education.

3. Students' Perception of the Teaching Quality of Universities

The assessment of teaching quality often presents challenges when relying solely on statistical data, as different individuals may have varying opinions based on their personal experiences. However, to a certain extent, students' perceptions of teaching quality can offer insights into whether underrepresented students are receiving adequate education within the elite university system. These perceptions can be examined through the lenses of both educational equality and adequacy.

From an equality perspective, if underrepresented students perceive the teaching quality to be significantly poor, it suggests the presence of an uncontrolled factor that negatively impacts their learning outcomes. On the other hand, from an adequacy standpoint, universities have a fundamental responsibility to provide stable teaching quality and sufficient support to all students. Hence, regardless of the approach taken, if students perceive a lack of quality teaching during their university education, it likely indicates an injustice. This holds particular relevance for underrepresented students, as
their experiences may further be influenced by their underrepresented backgrounds.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has provided literature reviews on two fundamental concepts central to this study: learner identity and social justice. Furthermore, a set of justice principles has been presented, which will serve as a theoretical framework for examining the higher education experiences of underrepresented students. In the following two chapters, the focus of the discussion will shift to the methodology and research methods employed in this study.
Chapter 4
Methodology

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 work together in the discourse of this thesis's methodological considerations. The focus of Chapter 4 is on methodology, in which I will unpack my philosophical stances and the relevant theories behind them. This chapter is divided into two main sections.

The first section serves as a foundational introduction to the thesis by reviewing the entire research picture and addressing its overall settings. It covers the research overview, methodological approach, research questions and aims, and my purposes and expectations for the thesis. This section provides readers with a clear overview of the thesis's background and objectives. The second part of Chapter 4 delves into my ontological and epistemological stances and their development. I will not only explain my philosophical positions in relation to the research but also attempt to provide readers with an understanding of my views on reality and knowledge. I aim to create an accessible entry point by providing contextual information about myself.

Overall, Chapter 4 sets the stage for the rest of the thesis by thoroughly understanding the research's background and the author's philosophical positions. Hopefully, readers will have a clear sense of the research's objectives and my approach to studying the topic by the end of the chapter.
the end of the chapter, readers will have a clear sense of the research's objectives and my approach to studying the topic.

4.2 Research Overview and Methodological Approach

In the field of learner identity studies, researchers employ both qualitative and quantitative methods. For instance, Huang and Hashim's (2020) study examines the relationship between Chinese students' learner identities and their attitudes toward English accents. They use a quantitative questionnaire survey and employ SPSS and Nvivo as analytical tools. Through the statistical data they discovered, they challenge a common default point of view that British or American English accents are most preferred and other non-native accents are marked as a failure in language learning for non-English native learners. Instead, Huang and Hashim suggest that overseas experiences might be important in enhancing learners' confidence and identities. In addition to statistical results, participants' responses to open-ended questions as well helped readers understand the research context more easily.

On the other hand, researchers also commonly adopt various qualitative methods for exploring learner identities. Take Turner and Tobbell's work (2017) as an example, it contributes to addressing UK undergraduate students' learner identities and transition experiences by applying a combined qualitative method using both ethnographic and thematic approaches in data collection and analysis. Such a practice allows them to get closer to their main research interest - exploring learner identities through the perspectives of 'trajectory' or psychological process. In line with Amuomo and Odoyo’s view (2020), they highlight that one of the biggest advantages of adopting an ethnographic approach is the direct involvement of researchers to observe
and find important information for providing in-depth findings. In another example, MacFarlane (2018) revealed crucial factors influencing the development of students' learner identities through thematic data analysis. She presents a higher education learner identity formation model based on the coding and theme-generating results.

The above review of studies shows that various research methods and approaches make research diverse in their characteristics and the way they contribute. As Creswell (2013) notes: "Qualitative and quantitative approaches should not be viewed as rigid, distinct categories, polar opposites, or dichotomies" (p.3); instead, mixed methods research, such as Huang and Hashim's work (2020), can provide valuable insights. Moreover, a mixed method does not necessarily refer to a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, as Turner and Tobbell's study (2017) explain. The choice of research approach and methods should depend on the thesis's objectives and core interests. In the following paragraphs, I will go through my research context, questions, aims, and personal expectations, and by the end of this section, I will present a clear idea of my research approach.

4.2.1 A Qualitative Approach to Research

Through the above discussions, in consideration of the best interest of achieving the aims of this research, the qualitative approach is adopted. The reason for setting this thesis to be qualitative research rather than quantitative or mixed-methods is because the main subject of this thesis is students' HE experiences, which are unique, subjective, and highly context-dependent. Using learner identity as the lens to examine underrepresented students' HE
experiences in elite universities, the aim is to acquire as much detailed information as possible to illustrate individuals' stories in context. The interviewees' subjectivity and uniqueness are highly valued in this thesis, as they are key elements in puzzling out learner identities.

Qualitative research has the advantage of addressing individuals' uniqueness based on two points. Firstly, a person's uniqueness in identity is highly linked to contextual factors. Understanding contextual information, such as cultural backgrounds, early experiences, or family influences, is essential when exploring underrepresented students' learner identities. As Sullivan and Sargeant (2011) note: “Qualitative studies are helpful to understand why and how … Generally, qualitative research is concerned with cases rather than variables, and understanding differences rather than calculating the mean of responses” (p.449). Those contextual clues are beneficial in explaining the formation of identities and help us get closer to the complete picture of the story. Secondly, the qualitative research approach is diverse in the way of obtaining information. Although there are many methods and theories in qualitative research, some shared qualities are always salient for conducting insightful research, such as being perceptive or developing comprehensive viewpoints to understand things. In this thesis, the raw data are collected through interviews. In addition to students' linguistic expressions, interactions between interviewees and me also provide rich information for me to interpret meanings.

In summary, the qualitative approach has been chosen for its advantages in exploring target students' learner identities, as it enables a broader and
deeper understanding of context or phenomena. The following section will
discuss this thesis's ontological and epistemological stances, as they are the
basic foundation before the discourse moves on how the data collection and
analysis approach was decided.

4.2.2 Research Context and Overview

In the context of the global trend towards increased tertiary education
participation and the rapid expansion of higher education in Asia after the
2000s, elite universities have become more accessible for non-traditional or
underrepresented students. However, as reviewed in Chapter 1, previous
research in other contexts has highlighted that these students frequently
encounter problems in their transitions into higher education. This study aims
to explore whether similar patterns exist in Asia. Singapore and Shanghai are both home to several world-top-ranked elite
universities. Under the trend of globalisation and increasing attention to
international university rankings, universities and policymakers have placed a
greater value on diversity in student formation and inclusiveness. With the aim
and belief of promoting social class mobility and creating a better educational
environment, they have made efforts to increase access to higher education,
particularly for disadvantaged or underrepresented students. In addition to
social justice concerns, accepting more underrepresented students also tends
to give elite universities an advantage in the competition for international
ranking.

Beyond a distributive point of view, the learning and transition experiences
of underrepresented students in universities are also important for social
justice because this information helps us judge whether class mobility and educational adequacy in a certain social context are progressing. Therefore, this thesis is framed with two core concepts: learner identity and social justice. Learner identity is chosen as the main theoretical lens to examine students’ learning and transition experiences because they are useful in exploring and presenting students' higher education experiences.

This thesis was designed to adopt interviews as the primary method of data collection. There are primarily two reasons for making this decision. Firstly, learner identity, as conceptualised in Chapter 3, mainly refers to how students perceive themselves as learners. Interviews offer direct access to students’ rich language expressions regarding their self-perceptions in universities. Secondly, interviews are structured as a continuous process of conversation and interaction between the interviewees and myself. This affords me ample space to clarify ideas and interpret meanings. This is important to my research because I aim to examine students' higher education experiences with social justice frameworks. Considering these points, interviews tend to be an appropriate approach for data collection, in line with my research design. Each of the 32 participants was invited to participate in two interviews, with a six-month interval between them. Through the process of interviewing underrepresented target students, I explore their university encounters and life stories. I then illustrate their learner identities based on their expressions, my observations from our interaction process, and further data analysis results.

The analysis and comparison of the learner identities of 32 students from
four elite universities in Singapore and Shanghai aim to provide a deeper understanding of the reality and the potential problems in the Asian higher education system. Finally, I expect to contribute to promoting social justice by investigating the experiences of underrepresented students in elite universities.

4.2.3 Research Questions and Aims

This study aimed to address two overarching questions: (1) How do underrepresented students experience the transition into elite universities in South and East Asia, and (2) how does this contribute to the processes of social justice in these contexts? By examining the learning and fitting-in process of target students, this research aimed to present their learner identities, reflecting their unique higher education experiences and how these identities were formed. In addition, this research aimed to unpack the important similarities and differences between elite universities and their characteristics in Singapore and Shanghai. Overall, these findings will be beneficial for reflecting on social justice and Asia’s current higher education system.

4.2.4 Purposes and Expectations

This thesis aims to achieve two key objectives. The first is to provide insights to both the public and policymakers. By gaining a deeper understanding of underrepresented students’ experiences in transitioning to elite universities, individuals and families who aspire to achieve class mobility or pursue betterment through higher education can make informed decisions about their path forward. For underprivileged families or non-traditional
students, investing in higher education can be risky and challenging, as noted by scholars such as Wong (2018), Carreira and Lopes (2019), and Baars et al. (2016). By shedding light on students' situations and barriers in universities, policymakers can gain valuable insights to inform the current direction and future policy decisions.

The second objective is to provide insights into higher education in Taiwan. Although this research focuses on Singapore and Shanghai, my home country of Taiwan faces similar challenges and trade-offs in higher education development. By learning about other countries' experiences, this thesis can enrich policymakers’ vision and understanding of higher education policy and promote cross-context knowledge sharing. Ultimately, I hope this thesis can contribute not only to my own educational process but also to the development of education in Taiwan and beyond and to any potential readers seeking to contribute to relevant research or understand the complexities of higher education in Asia.

4.3 Ontological and Epistemological Stances

In this section, the focus of the discussion will be on the philosophical position of this thesis. Ontological and epistemological stances determine how reality and knowledge are conceptualised in the research process. Clarifying and formulating these views guides how I design and conduct research, which I also regard as highly subjective. Kalu (2019) discusses the subjectivity of researchers when conducting qualitative research. He argues that subjectivity reflects a researcher's beliefs and values and how these affect the development of research interests or theoretical approaches. In this respect, I
will first address my personal background and then explain the ontological and epistemological stances of this thesis based on it.

4.3.1 Personal Backgrounds

Doctoral education is a lengthy process, and in my opinion, one of the most crucial things to ensure in continuing this path is finding something that you truly care about. Otherwise, it could become quite difficult. There are many potential spheres related to education for my doctoral thesis, but I am most interested in relevant topics around social justice, such as educational inequality or widening participation. This is a field that I deeply want to explore more.

Why? When I reflect on my life history, I find that my passion for social justice is much influenced by my rich and diverse life experiences, as described in Chapter 1. I have studied in elite institutions, served in the Taiwanese Military Police Force, taught as a teacher, and even worked with truck drivers. In these very different contexts, I have encountered people from all kinds of backgrounds. I have learned that significant gaps in people’s values and attitudes, among other things shaped by their unique life journeys, are something that I always pay attention to. Some people come from wealthy families, while others are from disadvantaged growing environments. Hearing people’s stories, their views on society, or what is happening always makes me feel curious. Most of the time, I am eager to understand more about the reasons and contexts that shape people’s views and positions.

I regard people as the foundation of social science, no matter what area of
focus we choose. Dealing with different people can be challenging and unpredictable but also fascinating. Conflicts and discrepancies in perspectives among individuals are nothing more than common because everyone’s life experiences are unique and influenced by various factors such as culture, family, talents, luck, or any random encounters. Everyone’s cognitions towards the external world are framed as we learn, grow up, and become socialised. Although sometimes, at first glance, other people’s points of view may seem bizarre to us, I believe they will eventually make sense if we have gained enough contextual information and can see the whole story with an open mind behind the surface.

There is one proverb I particularly like: "You can't see the wood for the trees." This points out the importance of always trying to see broader and deeper, which I interpret as we try to respect, understand, and eventually accept. For example, I came from a typical middle-class family. It was not until my second or third year in university that I gradually became more perceptive in class differences through lots of tiny things or moments. It feels shocking when witnessing it from people around you in everyday life. I still remember some unexpected responses from others when sometimes I was trying to be nice and friendly in a middle-class way. That could make them feel uncomfortable. However, this doesn’t necessarily mean anyone is wrong. Instead, it is possibly because we have different interpretations and meanings towards the same thing.

According to Collins English Dictionary, this proverb means someone is very involved in the details of something, so they do not notice what is important about the thing as a whole. Source: https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/cant-see-the-wood-for-the-trees.
At a personal level, all the interaction experiences have been a great education for me, no matter whether it ended up with a solid 20 years of friendship or misunderstanding. Those experiences shape who I am now and teach me that personal experiences are small compared to everyone else’s, and we live in a gregarious structure. On the other hand, at the research level, these experiences no doubt have shaped me and fueled my interest in social justice.

I feel privileged to have the opportunity to participate in doctoral research, and I understand that not everyone has this opportunity. Based on all my understanding, knowledge, and quality of social science, I strongly realise that the chance to do a PhD is the result of various factors or social realities, not just my personal talents and efforts. I set up underrepresented students as my research subject, aiming to contribute to people who might need a voice and carry out my beliefs in social science.

4.3.2 Ontology: Social Constructivist Approach

This thesis adopts the social constructivist approach based on two primary considerations. Firstly, it aligns with my fundamental attitude towards obtaining research data and engaging with interviewees. Social constructivism emphasises the social construction process and underscores the significance of contextual understanding in society, including culture, history, religion, and personal experiences, as knowledge is constructed based on this foundation (McMahon, 1997; Derry, 1999). This approach is consistent with my personal experiences and understanding of the formation of a person's identity.
Berger and Luckmann (1966) note in their book, *The Social Construction of Reality*, that "reality is socially constructed, and that the sociology of knowledge must analyze the process in which this occurs...Sociological interest in questions of 'reality' and 'knowledge' is thus initially justified by the fact of their social relativity" (p.13-15). I contend that relativity is one of the core elements of this thesis, as it enables the exploration of the higher education experiences of specific underrepresented students, their self-perceptions, and my justification of social justice. These aspects are challenging to measure with absolute objectivity, but I aim to shed light on these issues by unpacking social relationships or classifications.

Ian Hacking (1986) uses the 'looping effect' concept to describe classificatory practices in society and interactions between classified individuals and others. In *The Social Construction of What*, Hacking (1999) introduces two opposing concepts: 'Interactive kinds' and 'Indifferent kinds'. The former typically have looping effects, as they are classifications that are influenced by looping effects and interact with the external world (e.g. 'homosexuality', 'middle-class', or 'students of top-ranked universities'). Hacking describes how "classifications that, when known by people or those around them, and put to work in institutions, change the ways in which they share behaviours and traits. The idea is that classificatory practices induce certain group members' reactions by enabling new intentional ways of being and acting (Vesterinen, 2020; Tsou, 2007).

15 The looping effect describes the interaction between classifications and the targeted group of people. They share behaviours and traits. The idea is that classificatory practices induce certain group members' reactions by enabling new intentional ways of being and acting (Vesterinen, 2020; Tsou, 2007).

16 What 'Indifferent kinds' means is closer to 'physical facts', that imply things as external exists. For example, rock, river, or mountain.
individuals experience themselves—and may even lead people to evolve their feelings and behaviour in part because they are so classified" (1999, p.103-104). The research interests of this thesis aim to depict students' learner identities by incorporating as much contextual, cultural, and social information as possible, which aligns with the idea of the looping effect.

Secondly, the social constructivist approach provides a strong foundation for conducting cross-institutional or cross-regional comparisons, as it allows for the construction of a unique version of reality. At an individual level, students' higher education experiences and self-perceptions are based on their unique life experiences. Crotty (1998) suggests that constructivism permits people to derive meaning from objects in the environment and from social interactions. Thus, the purpose of the comparison is not to generate a conclusion by manipulating variables but rather to reason and recognise meanings. At a broader institutional or societal level, the social constructivist perspectives maintain good flexibility in explaining realities in different social contexts. For instance, Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that society is created by human interactions and habits with the notion ‘Habitualisation'. Such a discourse is particularly useful in understanding not only how students’ learner identities are shaped by the environment or contextual factors but also how a certain campus atmosphere or social values are likely to be formatted.

17 Berger and Luckmann (1966) describe Habitualization as “any action that is repeated frequently becomes cast into a pattern, which can then be reproduced with an economy of effort…Habitualization further implies that the action in question may be performed again in the future in the same manner and with the same economical effort” (p.70-71).
In summary, the social constructivist approach is an appropriate approach in the current research context. It has a strong ability to reason and explore meanings as it values context and relativity. Besides, it also provides great flexibility in conducting comparative research since it allows different versions of realities or meanings to exist simultaneously. Additionally, the social constructivist approach coordinates with my general personality and views towards the external world.

4.3.3 Epistemology: An Interpretivist View of Knowledge

The interpretivism paradigm posits that individuals' thoughts, ideas, and perceptions can be understood through an exploration of their participation in social and cultural life (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022; Chowdhury, 2014; Elster, 2007). This approach emphasises understanding the motives and meanings underlying people's behaviours and interactions with others (Whitley, 1984). In light of the previous paragraph's discussion, the social constructivist approach is the ontological stance of this thesis, given its strength in exploring meanings within contextual factors. As such, social constructivism and interpretivism share qualities that align with the research interests and can complement each other in the thesis.

Walt (2020) proposes the concept of 'interpretivism-constructivism' from a methodological perspective. He argues that, unlike positivism, interpretivism-constructivism assigns and constructs names for interpretive findings, the meanings that emerge from the data (p.65). Different from positivism's emphasis on pursuing 'proven facts', in which the validity and reliability of research findings are regarded as extremely essential, Interpretivism-
constructivism is less concerned with pursuing 'proven facts' than with locating authenticity, plausibility, and comprehensibility when addressing research data (Baggini, 2017; Walt, 2020). This approach is particularly relevant to the primary data collection method used in this thesis, namely interviews, as it aligns with the process of interpreting research data and constructing meanings from it.

Dornyei (2007) contends that qualitative research is inherently interpretative, with the research outcome ultimately reflecting the researcher's subjective interpretation of the data (p.38). Similarly, Pulla and Carter (2018) note that the interpretive view invites the researcher to explore the meaning behind human behaviour, interactions, and society, thereby developing an in-depth subjective understanding of people’s lives (p.9). While the subjectivity of qualitative research is sometimes criticised for being unstable, hard to verify, or lacking in reliability, it is a neutral concept that can provide distinctive, insightful, informative and explanatory discoveries that quantitative research cannot access.

Hammersly (2013) highlights the importance of acknowledging the multiple possible interpretations of findings derived from the same data when conducting interpretivism research. Therefore, the researcher's responsibility is to recognise and understand the diversity of experiences within different cultural settings. This statement explains why the interpretivist epistemological stance is suitable for this thesis, which focuses on how students interpret and how the researcher interprets their interpretations in various contexts. In essence, the value of the interpretivism paradigm lies in its role as a meta-
point of view that reminds us to acknowledge subjectivity and not overlook the complex factors underlying the surface-level observations.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter delves into the theoretical framework of the research methodology used in this thesis. My research interests and ideas were influenced and inspired by my personal background, which encompasses my education, work experience, and broader social interactions. From there, I established this research's general parameters and philosophical underpinnings. Specifically, I have chosen a qualitative research approach, adopting social constructivism as my ontological stance and interpretivism as my epistemological perspective on knowledge. Chapter 5 will delve further into the specifics of research methods and their implementation.
Chapter 5
Research Methods

5.1 Introduction
In the previous chapter, we extensively covered the research setting and context, my personal experiences, and philosophical perspectives as the foundational discourse for the theoretical perspectives on the methodology of this thesis. In this chapter, I intend to elaborate further on the methodology employed for conducting the research. This will include a detailed account of how the thesis was designed, the framework for the interview setup, and the methods used for data collection, analysis, and presentation. Additionally, the final section of this chapter will delve into the ethical considerations that were taken into serious account during the research process.

5.2 Research Framework

5.2.1 Research Design
The following mind map (Please see Figure 5.2.1) guided the design of this research. My interest in higher education in the field of education led me to explore its development and ecology on a global scale. Social justice became the focal concern for this research due to its personal significance to me. These decisions were informed by my life experiences and characteristics. To examine and justify social justice in higher education, I narrowed the research focus to East and South Asia's higher education under rapid expansion, elitism, and globalisation.
In aiming to contribute to social justice, I adopted a microscopic angle instead of relying on general statistical facts. This approach allowed for a better understanding of underrepresented students' actual experiences and the elite systems. Learner identity was chosen as the primary theoretical lens, aiding in the exploration of underrepresented students' learning and transition experiences. By utilising data collected through interviews, underrepresented students' learner identities were identified, showcasing their unique perceptions and experiences in elite universities. Ultimately, this thesis seeks to contribute to social justice in Asia's higher education by providing a rich understanding of underrepresented students' unique experiences in elite universities.

**Figure 5.2.1 Research Mind Map**

**5.2.2 Foundation of Comparison**

The research data was used to draw out implications for social justice by comparing the findings through regional and institutional lenses. The foundation for comparing Singapore and Shanghai was based on their
similarities and differences. Both cities have high population densities and are inhabited by more than 75% Chinese, meaning they share common traditions and characteristics to a certain extent. For instance, the influence of Confucianism is particularly significant in both places, as Hennig (2014) noted. Marginson (2011b) coined the term "Confucian Model" countries, such as Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, China, and Vietnam, which have four common features: (1) strong nation-state policy drivers and close supervision control, (2) rapid growth of tertiary participation, (3) national examination systems as the basis of distributing pupils into different institutions, and (4) high and growing public investment in science research (p.594). These contextual background similarities allow us to make reasonable comparisons of people or institutions in similar social contexts and provide more materials when interpreting individuals’ identities.

State power is evident in both Singapore and China, whether viewed through higher education policies or rapid increases in enrollment in recent decades (Please see Chapter 2). Additionally, family motivations for investigating higher education are multiple, including desires for social mobility or obtaining a better future reward from the labour market. This is consistent with traditional Confucian thought, which views education as a premium approach to pursuing social positions, as Trow (1973) explained. For underprivileged families, higher education is essential for social mobility. According to my research findings, this is an important factor affecting the formation of students’ learner identities.

Singapore and Shanghai are both highly competitive in economics and
industry due to their similar natural conditions for city development. Given its small size and lack of natural resources, Singapore strategically focuses on developing international trade and getting involved with the global industry chain. Its control of the Strait of Malacca, jointly with three other nations, is a significant advantage. Similarly, Shanghai has played a key role as the transportation hub for both domestic and international trade since the late Qing Dynasty in the 18th century, owing to its location in the middle of the east coast of China, as well as being the estuary of the longest river in Asia, the Yangtze (長江). Shanghai is the world's largest and busiest container port and one of the most important financial centres globally. These historical and social contexts have influenced the development of higher education in both cities.

Although sharing some common historical and geographical trails, Singapore and Shanghai still have unique characteristics that further shape the living environment, traditions, and distinctive social values. These factors play vital roles in shaping underrepresented students’ identities.

In summary, the two cities have four interactive aspects of similarity. First, they share basic conditions as high-density populations with Chinese as the ethnic majority group and convenient locations as transportation hubs. Second, they exhibit highly commercialised, internationalised, and competitive characteristics. Third, their style of governance involves strong state leadership, strategic policies, resource-intensive investments, and ambitious development goals. Finally, the character and function of higher education, which sustains the development of a city/nation, provides domestic R&D and other high-end labour and meets the universal needs of families pursuing
betterment. For both Singapore and Shanghai, continual investment and upgrading of higher education, expanding enrollments, or creating world-class universities are all essential and practical for gaining global competitiveness. Comparisons between individuals, institutions, cities, and countries are all possible on such a foundation. Nevertheless, the primary subject of my thesis is underrepresented students and elite universities; therefore, they will be the main body of comparison. The city or country-level comparisons, on the other hand, serve to enrich our understanding of the research context.

5.2.3 Interview Design

This thesis presents data collected from 32 first-year or second-year students attending four elite universities in Singapore and Shanghai. The primary theoretical lens adopted is learner identity, with a focus on how students convey their identities through conversations and interactions with me. Investigative foci include previous school education, current learning experiences, personal context, and transitions within elite institutions. The interview design included two interviews for each of the 32 participants, separated by a half-year interval. All 32 interviewees attended the first interview, and 30 of them attended the second interview between 2020 and 2021. The decision to conduct two interviews was motivated by two reasons. First, the transition into elite universities is critical for exploring underrepresented students' learner identities. Research indicates that young students often encounter a gap between secondary and higher education, which significantly impacts learner identity development. Therefore, the interviews were divided into two phases, specifically to observe students' differences or changes.
Second, the two-interview structure is beneficial for building trust between the interviewees and me. By doing so, participants may feel more comfortable expressing their thoughts and feelings without reservation. The previous interview provides a foundation for building rapport and a better understanding of the participant's background. This approach aligns with the qualitative research interview approach suggested by McGrath et al. (2019), in which the interviewer is seen as a co-creator of data with the interviewee, and the interviewer's previous knowledge plays an essential role in understanding the context or experiences of the interviewee. The interval between interviews also provides additional time for adjustments to the interview process.

In the first stage of the interview, an average of 60-minute interviews were conducted, in which four core topics were discussed. These topics include 1) personal background information, 2) previous school education experiences, 3) current higher education experiences, and 4) relationships and interactions between interviewees and external environments and people. Gathering objective and subjective background information provides a basic view of individuals as the foundation for looking deeper into learning experiences later. Gaining a rich understanding of students' context is necessary, especially for their identities.

Moving on to the learning section, the discussion covers learning status, strategies, and challenges. Discussing current and previous learning experiences provides a great entry point for understanding the gap between higher education and secondary education. Our target first-year and second-
year undergraduate students are experiencing a fast-changing transition period, where they must adapt to a new environment and accept a new curriculum framework. Therefore, how they describe these experiences is important to uncover the real appearances of their learner identities.

Furthermore, students’ interactions and relationships with peers, teachers, or administrative staff reflect how they live in a university. Examining these interpersonal relationships is important due to their influence on social life and the development of learner identities. For instance, positive interactions and good relationships with academic staff have been found to be beneficial for academic success (Tett et al. 2016; Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2010). On the other hand, the environment can be divided into several different layers, including the campus, physical surroundings, atmosphere, or inherent rules. For students, living in different external surroundings could possibly bring up conflicts and shocks against their original life experiences. To summarise the first stage of the interview, I concentrated on understanding students’ perceptions of things and others, finding out their experience gap, and trying to piece together a general image of their learner identities.

In the second phase of the interview, a slightly different approach was taken compared to the first phase. In this stage, open-ended and abstract questions were used for an average interview of around 40 minutes. There were three main objectives for this stage. Firstly, to examine whether and how students are changing in the university, including their learning status, social life, and emotions. Given that the target students in this study are all in the early stage of higher education, it is useful to see whether any changes are positive or
negative as these are likely to be connected to their learner identities.

Secondly, to enrich or refine the inferences of students' learner identities that were made in the first stage of the interview. As individuals' identities are dynamic, changeable, and contextual, it is not uncommon for students' learner identities to either significantly change or remain stable. The aim is to gather as many details as possible. Thirdly, observing the interviewees' self-awareness refers to their sense of self-understanding. Views on the future, confidence, autonomy, and emotions are essential components for illustrating students' learner identities, higher education experiences, and social justice.

To achieve these three objectives, students were encouraged to talk as much as possible during the second interview. They were asked to sort out what they knew about themselves, and their opinions or dilemmas were checked to ensure consistency with previous interviews. The interview design aimed to build a complete story of each interviewee with as many details as possible through two interviews, which provided wider spaces for interpreting meanings and justifying social justice. I also consciously tried to imagine and stand in the same position as these underrepresented students.

In conclusion, the two-stage interview process aimed to understand students' perceptions and experiences in higher education comprehensively. The first stage focused on gathering objective and subjective background information, providing a foundation for exploring learning experiences in greater depth. The second stage used open-ended and abstract questions to examine changes in students' learning status, social life, and emotions while refining inferences of their learner identities. Overall, the interview design
aimed to capture the complexity and nuances of underrepresented students' experiences and identities in higher education, providing valuable insights for promoting social justice.

5.3 Data Collection

5.3.1 Selection of Interviewee

Before discussing the selection criteria for interviewees, it is necessary to clarify what underrepresented means in this study. Rather than an absolute filter, underrepresented is a relative concept. While it literally means insufficient or inadequate representation, in this thesis, being underrepresented does not equate to being a minority. Instead, the constructiveness in the context determines who is an underrepresented student in this study. Specifically, the focus is on identifying the gaps between the elite higher education context and students' personal backgrounds or previous experiences, as these gaps profoundly impact their university life and the development of their learner identities. Thus, the crucial point is that students must be grouped by some sort of social label that is potentially influential to their identities.

Common characteristics of contemporary elite HE institutions were first sorted out to determine what kind of social label to use for filtering interviewees. Some scholars point out the hidden messages elite HE institutions convey, such as being highly selective, competitive, desirable, and diverse (Karabel, 2006; Lipson, 2007; Warikoo & Fuhr, 2014; Holland & Ford, 2020). While there are trends in reducing socioeconomic and ethnic gaps in
access, challenges against these social justice beliefs or institutional policies still exist (Stulberg & Chen, 2014: Hindle et al., 2021). Karabel (2006) argues that elite universities' emphasis on diversity in the student body is self-interested. When promoting ethno-racial or class diversity in admissions, universities select students who will help increase their competitiveness, such as high-achieving racial/ethnic minority students. According to Holland and Ford (2020), the institutional habitus of elite universities leads them to prioritise particular diversity practices, so they can attract more desirable and high-achieving students who want a diverse college experience.

From this discussion, it can be inferred that exclusivity is one of the most significant characteristics of elite universities. Such exclusivity is both horizontal and vertical. The status of elite universities makes them stand out from other universities and more attractive to students. When certain university brands stand for ‘betterment’ or are more preferred by the labour market, they become a kind of positional good that is desirable, selective, and worth investing in. In this power relation, it is typically the university that selects whom they want, and students must learn institutional habitus, afford tuition fees (or find other financial resources), get used to the curriculum framework, or fit in the way of daily communications.

In short, this study focuses on underrepresented students, who are grouped based on some sort of social label potentially influential to their identities. This label is determined by identifying the gaps between the elite HE context and students' personal backgrounds or previous experiences. Elite universities are characterised by exclusivity, leading to particular diversity practices prioritising
By organising social labels, power relations, exclusivity, and positional goods into a coherent framework, we can approach our objective of defining the term underrepresented. The genesis of elite universities is characterised by randomness, contextual factors, historical legacy, and external factors such as global trends and the socioeconomic status of the country. In contemporary times, elite universities are entrenched in a privileged cycle, whereby their academic reputation and social standing make them a coveted destination for many students. Consequently, they find it easier to attract high-achieving students, which in turn bolsters their competitiveness. This creates a power dynamic that favours elite universities and makes it challenging for students or other universities to challenge the status quo. This power dynamic is at the core of elite universities' exclusivity.

Drawing from this framework, 'constructiveness in context' can be understood as a student's relative position in the power relationship. Therefore, any social labelling that distinguishes the positional differences between students and institutions simultaneously determines who is considered an underrepresented student. In selecting underrepresented students, this thesis employs multiple criteria, including first-generation students, rural/remote area students, socioeconomically disadvantaged students, students enrolled in special admission programs, and students from vocational secondary education systems. These social labels play a crucial role in shaping students' identities within the elite system, as they set them apart from the default ideology. The use of multiple criteria instead of a single
criterion aims to diversify the information gathered.

5.3.2 Non-Probability Sampling

After clarifying the boundaries of underrepresented students, the next step is to narrow down the criteria for selection. Firstly, I limited the participants to first-year or second-year students. This decision was made because, during the early period of higher education, students were going through a major transition period. Younger students have less time to adapt to universities compared to senior students, making it easier to observe changes and negotiate their learner identities.

In addition to the consideration of students’ year of study, for other background conditions such as major, nationality, or ethnicity, I made most of my decisions based on increasing diversity to obtain richer information. Therefore, students from both liberal arts and natural sciences majors were included, as opposed to choosing either side according to certain presuppositions.

For distributive factors, I tried to make the interviewee selection as even as possible. Therefore, all 32 interviewees in this study were evenly divided among our four target elite universities, with eight participants from each. Additionally, interviewees were also equally divided by gender, with four female and four male participants from each university, totalling 16 female and 16 male participants overall.

Instead of quantitative sampling approaches, I adopted the non-probability
sampling method in this study. There are two reasons for my decision. Firstly, non-probability sampling mostly involves subjectivity, which is consistent with my research design logic. As I specifically looked into underrepresented students as I defined them, it also meant that I was selecting students based on my own judgement. This aligns with Henry’s idea (2009) for exploratory research, where participants were selected mostly depending on the researcher's interests on the basis of case information related to the study. Secondly, while non-probability sampling is sometimes criticised for lack of generalizability, potential risk of misinterpretation, or being too subjective, it has the ability to provide valuable insights and is useful for qualitative research (Vehovar et al., 2016; Showkat and Parveen, 2017).

The present study adopts both purposive and chain referral (also known as snowball) sampling under the concept of non-probability sampling. The former involves selecting participants based on the researcher's own judgement, as it reflects the purpose of this research, which is to pursue social justice (Showkat and Pareen, 2017). According to Dornyei (2007), purposive sampling aims to find individuals who can provide rich and varied insights into the phenomenon under investigation, and researchers need to make principled decisions on how to select respondents. Therefore, before inviting any interviewee, I consciously reflect on my research questions to see if they are connected. During the first phase of the interview, I constantly check if the interviewee is the person we are looking for.

Chain referral sampling is another common approach to non-probability sampling. According to Dornyei (2007), it involves starting with a list of key
respondents who are asked to recruit further participants who are similar to them in some respect central to the investigation. Chain referral sampling was particularly useful for my research in two ways: it reduced the difficulty of reaching students and increased the efficiency of finding the right ones. However, the "chain reaction" in my sampling process did not aim to find the "same kind" of people, as mentioned by Showkat and Pareen (2017). Instead, it was an efficient and pragmatic execution method, especially when travel was restricted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I asked interviewees to search for more participants and provide their contacts according to the conditions I set.

To sum up, through the sampling process, I gained a deeper understanding of the characteristics and potential risks of non-probability sampling. I tried a hybrid approach, combining both purposive and chain referral sampling methods. The former set the main conditions of the interviewees according to the research design and our discourse on the notion of under-representation. The latter was used as the method of reaching target students. With this hybrid approach's help, I found all 32 first-year or second-year students across the four target universities in Singapore and Shanghai.

5.3.3 Reaching the Interviewees

The first phase of interviews with all 32 participants was completed between late 2020 and February 2021. Following a six-month interval, 30 out of 32 students participated in the second phase of interviews between July and October 2021. Before initiating the first round of interviews, I emailed teachers at the target universities, detailing my research plan and the specific type of
students I required. With the help of three teachers (two from Shanghai and one from Singapore), I met with four potential interviewees (two from China and two from Singapore). After briefly speaking with them, I found that three of the four students fulfilled my thesis requirements. I conducted a pilot interview with a female student from one of our target universities in Shanghai to test the interview arrangement and to make any necessary adjustments.

After the pilot interview, I conducted more interviews using the chain referral sampling approach. Through the first three interviewees, I was able to find more participants, not only from the same university but also from other targeted universities. Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, I was unable to travel to Singapore and Shanghai to conduct face-to-face interviews with students, as originally planned. Therefore, all interviews were conducted online using four communication applications: WeChat (for all Chinese students), Google Meet (for most Singaporean students), Line, and Telegram. I chose these platforms based on their convenience for the students, which increased their willingness to participate. Additionally, these applications all provide stable quality video calls, which allowed me to obtain more information than a voice call, such as the participant's emotions, body language, or facial expressions. This additional information helped me interpret the participant's message.

During each interview, I recorded the audio and took handwritten notes. Handwriting notes helped me create a more lasting impression of the interviewee and were less disruptive than typing. To ensure the quality of the
interviews, I did not conduct more than two interviews on the same working day. Moreover, all interviewees were compensated for their participation in the research project. Each interviewee was paid USD 15 for the first stage interview, while payment for individuals increased to USD 35 for the second stage interview. The difference in payment was intended to encourage students to participate fully in both rounds of interviews. As a result, I successfully engaged 30 participants for the second phase of interviews (approximately 94%).

5.4 Data Analysis

5.4.1 Primary Analytic Method: Thematic Analysis

When deciding how to approach the analysis of the interview data in this study, I aimed to examine the transcripts from a holistic perspective while exploring different theories simultaneously. Various qualitative data analysis methods are commonly used by researchers, including content analysis, narrative analysis, discourse analysis, grounded theory, and thematic analysis. In this study, my focus is on how to link all the interview data to the research objectives and extract insights from them.

Thematic analysis (TA) is the method that best suits my research needs. There are three reasons to support this choice. First, with 62 interviews, a

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18 In the process of interviewing, I learnt that an hour-long interview consumes much energy. When the interviewer is tired, the comprehension of the information may also be affected. Moreover, the impressions and memories of individual interviewees may also become blurred.
line-by-line analysis of such lengthy texts is impractical. Thus, thematic analysis provides an efficient way to categorise and organise large amounts of data for better comprehension. Second, TA is particularly useful when seeking subjective information, such as students’ self-perceptions or transition experiences, which we are particularly looking for. Braun et al. (2016) suggest that TA can produce clear, understandable findings that provide meaningful insights into otherwise complex data. In this study, it is crucial to combine the stories of 32 different individuals to identify commonalities and differences and understand their higher education experiences as a system. From this perspective, TA functions as a horizontal chain that links different cases.

Third, to connect students' higher education experiences to social justice discussions, it is essential to distinguish whether their learner identities are positive or negative. While the content analysis (CA) approach involves counting phrases or words in a text, understanding individuals' learner identities is more complicated. It requires a deep understanding of contextual information and its continuous development process. Thus, assessing a student's learner identity focuses on the whole story rather than fragments. TA has a significant advantage in this situation. Guest et al. (2012) emphasise that thematic analysis explores explicit and implicit meanings within the data. We can also It is possible to examine participants' living experiences, behaviours, and perspectives by coding and developing themes. In addition to individuals, we can also see the social processes and influential factors that shape our daily lives and lead to certain phenomena. Behind the phenomenal world are norms or rules that dominate practices, such as the social construction of meaning and the representation of social labels in a particular
society or environment (Braun & Clarke, 2013). These are precisely what this study aims to explore and expose.

5.4.2 Overarching Approach and the Type of Thematic Analysis

Wiltshire & Ronkainen (2021) suggest that thematic analysis (TA) is the most widely used method for analysing textual data in contemporary qualitative research (p.159). This is consistent with the claim that TA has the advantage of applicability and flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Javadi and Zarea, 2016; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). However, others have pointed out that this flexibility can also lead to a lack of coherence or inconsistency when developing themes derived from the collected data (Holloway & Todres, 2003; Nowell et al., 2017).

In considering different approaches and types of TA, I first reconfirmed this study’s aims and research questions. Regarding my research design, I found that it is closer to the deductive approach. In contrast to the inductive approach, which tends to create themes without any preconceptions, deductive thinking involves a set of predefined themes that we expect to find in the data. When looking back at this thesis's main interest, several core concepts are clear, including social justice, learner identities, underrepresented students, and elite institutions. These core concepts lead us to identify relevant themes such as ‘fitting in’, ‘inequality’, or ‘students’ confidence’.

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19 According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis not only has a higher degree of freedom in setting up themes, but also has a relatively larger space to work with other theories.
In other words, when designing the research and conducting interviews, I always had a clear direction about what I aimed to explore. As a result, coding and creating themes followed deductive logic, aligning with the thesis's idea. Of course, there are limitations to such research settings. Decoteau (2017) argues that neither inductive nor deductive reasoning is likely to contribute to the development of new explanatory theories. However, generalising new theories is not the main purpose of this study. Instead, the focus is on uncovering different meanings and insights from students’ life experiences. Overall, using TA as a method of analysis provides several advantages for this thesis. It allows for the categorisation of large amounts of data to make it more manageable, and it is particularly useful for uncovering subjective information such as personal experiences. Additionally, using the deductive approach in creating themes aligns with the research aims and objectives. By exploring the stories of students’ life experiences, this study aims to contribute to our understanding of social justice and learner identities.

There are three main types of thematic analysis: (1) Coding Reliability TA (CRA), (2) Codebook TA (CTA), and (3) Reflexive TA (RTA). In the context of this study's research questions, both codebook and reflexive TA could be feasible approaches for coding. Ultimately, I decided to adopt RTA as a theoretical foundation for two reasons.

First, RTA is suitable for exploring individuals' experiences, views, and perceptions and can also explain representations of a given phenomenon. As Braun and Clarke (2021) describe, "RTA is 'a theoretically flexible method' for developing, analysing, and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset...'
Reflexivity' involves drawing upon your experiences, pre-existing knowledge, and social position (such as ethnicity, gender, class, etc.) and 'critically interrogating'... how these aspects influence and contribute to the research process and potential insights into qualitative data" (p.4-5). These qualities are precisely what I expect from interpreting data.

Second, compared to CTA's stronger structure, such as Smith and Firth's framework analysis (2011), RTA offers more flexibility (Byrne, 2022). It allows more space for potential possibilities. While CTA may appear more stable than RTA, it may still not be the most appropriate tool for analyzing semi-structured interview data. On the contrary, RTA can be guided by concepts from various fields and used in various research approaches, including inductive or deductive (Braun and Clarke, 2016).

It is worth noting that both inductive and deductive reasoning have limitations in contributing to the development of new explanatory theories (Decoteau, 2017). However, the main purpose of this study is not to generalise new theories, but to explore different meanings and insights from students' life experiences to contribute to the field. Therefore, RTA provides a theoretical foundation that aligns with the goals of this study.

5.4.3 The six-phase analytical process

According to Braun & Clarke (2019), the RTA approach reflects the active role of researchers in producing knowledge. Different codes and themes are rooted in their perspectives, so the 'reflexive' thematic analysis approach is considered as data. Braun et al. (2019) highlight another important
characteristic of RTA, which is that the process of theme development and
coding is organic and flexible. I interpret this statement as an explanation that
RTA coding is a continuous and dynamic process, just as Byrne (2022) points
out, "progression through the analysis will tend to facilitate further familiarity
with the data, which may, in turn, result in the interpretation of new patterns of
meaning" (p.1393).

Although RTA is sometimes criticised for being unpredictable or subjective
(Finlay, 2021), I consider it an ideal way to analyse data for this study. In
addition to the advantage mentioned previously that the RTA approach leaves
room for potential possibilities, the overall purpose of this study is more likely
to explore than to set the tone between poles. RTA also established a good
connection between myself and all the participants. RTA values the
researcher's subjective experience, and pursuing objectivity or removing bias
is not its main purpose. Instead, it aims to use the researcher's personal
experience and values as the primary tool to discern knowledge and make
sense of data.

While conducting RTA, it is essential to clarify the theoretical assumptions
of the methodology as the foundation (Braun & Clark, 2021). Campbell et al.
(2021) describe this as making 'key decisions in RTA', which involves the
researchers' ontological and epistemological orientation, the logic of research
design (inductive or deductive), and the selection of semantic or latent
coding\(^{20}\). The aim is not only for researchers to identify where their analysis is

\(^{20}\) Whether themes are identified at the semantic or the latent level is crucial. Semantic
themes are descriptive and explicit, paying more attention to conversations' surface meaning.
situated on each of these continua but also why the analysis is situated as it is and why this conceptualisation is appropriate for answering the research question (Byrne, 2021). By adopting Braun and Clarke’s six-phase analytical framework (2020), we can identify and attend to the important aspects of the RTA of this research. It is worth noting that they emphasise that the six-phase analysis is not necessarily a linear process, but it could be recursive and iterative. Researchers are encouraged to be ‘creative’, and it is fine to move back or find new interpretations at any phase of the analysis.

The six phases of this thematic analysis framework suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) are: (1) Familiarizing yourself with your data; (2) Generating initial codes; (3) Searching for themes; (4) Reviewing themes; (5) Defining and naming themes, and (6) Producing the report (p.87). I have reorganised my understanding of these phases and how to process the analysis in a table (see Table 5.4.1 below):

On the contrary, latent themes are more interpretive and intrinsic that go beyond what was literally said, trying to reveal the underlying ideas, assumptions, or hidden messages. When semantic themes are useful for summarising data, latent themes help more with conceptualisations. (Terry et al., 2017; Campbell et al. 2021). In this study, I primarily identify themes at the latent level because this is more in line with the research structure. When we are trying to figure out students’ learner identities, it is more of a conceptualisation process than induction.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analytic Phase</th>
<th>Brief description</th>
<th>Tasks</th>
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</table>
| **Familiarisation with the data** | ✓ Soak yourself into the data pool  
✓ Gain overall and depth understanding (sharp feelings) of the data | ✓ Listening to each interview recording  
✓ Transcribing data  
✓ Reading and re-reading the data  
✓ Noting down ideas |
| **Generating initial codes**    | ✓ Coding interesting features of the data with logic  
✓ Pay attention to different data items | ✓ Labelling and organizing data items into meaningful groups |
| **Generating themes**           | ✓ Identifying meanings and relationships among initial codes  
✓ Collating codes into potential themes | ✓ Mapping  
✓ Writing themes and their defining properties |
| **Reviewing themes**            | ✓ Identifying coherent patterns from coded data  
✓ Reviewing entire data from a holistic perspective | ✓ Ensuring there is enough data to support a theme  
✓ Collapsing overlapping themes  
✓ Re-working and refining codes and themes |
Table 5.4.1  Six Phases of Thematic Analysis Framework and My Tasks

| Defining and naming themes | ✓ Refine the specifics and identify the story of each theme | ✓ Checking between the data and the identified themes to organise the story |
|                            | ✓ Piece together a broader overall story and try to respond to the research questions | ✓ Linking stories and themes to learner identities |

| Producing the report       | ✓ Presenting stories told by the data | ✓ Writing a reasonable argument that addresses the research questions |
|                            | ✓ Relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature | ✓ Try to provide perspectives or insights |

Thematic analysis can be time and energy-consuming. In this thesis, we are faced with a large amount of interview data, making using relevant software more reasonable and efficient. I have chosen to use NVivo as the tool for data analysis for two main reasons. First, NVivo provides a variety of functions that facilitate thematic analysis. For example, it can transcribe audio or video in different languages with good accuracy, and there are useful tools such as ‘word frequency query’, ‘mind map’, or ‘project journal’. These features can greatly reduce the workload of analysis.
Second, NVivo is widely used not only for thematic analysis but also for various kinds of qualitative research methods. Therefore, finding relevant resources for learning how to use the software or finding solutions to problems is easier. Using NVivo as the analysis platform, I found that I could optimise my time and resources, making our research more efficient and effective.

5.4.4 Second Analytical Method: Case Studies

In addition to using the thematic analysis approach, a second approach was employed in this study - a case study. According to Baxter and Jack (2008), a qualitative case study is a research approach that facilitates the exploration of a phenomenon within its context using multiple data sources. I saw it as a possible way to find answers to the confusion encountered during the interviews. While conducting the first stage of the interviews, some students shared significantly outstanding stories. Their higher education experiences in the target elite universities were distinctive, particularly under the semi-structured interview framework. However, I realised two problems. Firstly, it was challenging to generalise their unique experiences to others. Secondly, examining these precious data only from a single theoretical perspective was a pity. After all, each interview provided rich information worth exploring.

Consequently, I decided to adopt the case study (CS) approach as another theoretical lens for data analysis. This approach has two benefits: enriching qualitative information and enhancing our vertical understanding of interviewees. While thematic analysis functions as a horizontal chain that connects interviewees, CS draws perpendicular lines that allow for more
context and course of change. Yin (2003) outlined several situations where CS is suitable, such as when exploring contextual conditions that may be relevant to the phenomenon or when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are unclear. By comprehending participants' stories, they can describe their views of reality, enabling the researcher to understand better the participants' status (Lather, 1992; Robottom & Hart, 1993). I consider this to be an ideal approach for gaining a deep understanding of contextual factors and unpacking the students' learner identity formation.

Nonetheless, the selection of a specific type of case study design is typically determined by the overall study purpose (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). With a focus on constructivist paradigm-based case study approaches, which tend to be closer to the ontological position of this study, there are two prominent scholars: Robert Stake (1927-) and Robert Yin (1941-). Both are well-known in the field of qualitative research and case study methodology. However, they employ different frameworks to categorise various styles of case studies. Stake (1995) identifies case studies as intrinsic, instrumental, or collective, while Yin (2003, 2006) categorises case studies as explanatory, exploratory, and descriptive. Additionally, Yin differentiates between single, holistic case studies and multiple-case studies.

Although Stake and Yin's classification logic is slightly different, their theoretical frameworks are not totally in opposition to each other. Considering my research design, I have designated case studies as an assistant role. This is because the primary purpose of this study is to identify meanings between students' higher education experiences (learner identities) and social justice.
At this point, RTA - the main analytical theoretic lens - has more advantages when it comes to organising and comparing all 32 interviewees. However, case studies still play a role in data analysis. In total, I have selected four students for case study analysis. Looking back at Stake and Yin's classification, I believe that my case study style is closer to 'Intrinsic' and 'Descriptive.' As Stake (1995) describes, the former approach is suitable for researchers with a genuine interest in better understanding the case. He also emphasises that the main purpose is not to represent other cases or to build theory but to illustrate a particular trait or problem. Yin (2003) explains that a descriptive case study is used to describe an intervention or phenomenon and the real-life context in which it occurred. In short, the primary purpose of adopting case study analysis is to enrich my research findings, and the combination of RTA and CS is helpful in achieving this purpose.

5.4.5 Comparative Discussions

As advocated by Ragin (2000), a qualitative comparative analysis is an approach that expands the single-case study to multiple cases with an emphasis on useful configurations of similarities and differences. In this study, both the similarities and differences between the settings are important. Firstly it is the similarities between the cases that allow me to explore and enhance the potential research findings within a distinct higher education landscape under the broader Asian context. Specifically, the similarities shared by the two targeted cities and four elite universities as outlined in Chapter 2. At this stage, the majority of my research findings, presented in Chapters 6 and 7, highlight the common tendencies in learner identities and university experiences among all target students.
Secondly, the different settings also serve to highlight the differences between various social or institutional contexts. This can be seen as a categorisation process that aids in identifying distinctive aspects of social factors that potentially influence students' higher education experiences. Building upon this understanding, the comparative discussions presented in Chapter 9 of this study serve as an assistant analytical lens, aiming to expand our research discoveries beyond the general level of East and South East Asian higher education. Instead of directly applying the analytical tool to analyse the raw interview data, I employ a comparative process based on the findings from previous chapters. Specifically, I utilise the results of the data analysis, which were obtained through a thematic analysis approach, with the four distinct learner identities serving as the foundation. I then identify the distinctive aspects between different regions and institutions.

5.5 Ethical Concerns

5.5.1 Anonymity and Confidentiality

Ensuring anonymity and confidentiality is crucial to protect participants’ right to privacy, particularly when we are studying students’ experiences that may contain a lot of personal information. Although securing anonymity and confidentiality is commonly considered essential in different kinds of social science research that involve people’s sensitive data (Berenson et al., 2017; Coffelt, 2017), it is still important to clarify how I conduct this study with these considerations in mind.

First, it is essential to set a clear scope of the definition. Saunders et al.
(2015) point out that the terms ‘anonymity’ and ‘confidentiality’ are often used interchangeably or conflated in many works of literature. While the two concepts overlap, they have their own qualities. From a classification logic point of view, ‘confidentiality’ could be a broader concept than ‘anonymity’. We can understand anonymity as a type of confidentiality practice. On the other hand, some believe that anonymity means that the researcher should be unaware of the participant’s identity, while confidentiality refers to the researcher knowing the participants’ identity but not sharing this information beyond the research team (Wiles, 2013; Coffelt, 2017). Nonetheless, I prefer not to define these two concepts in either affiliation. In my thesis, anonymity quality is similar to the common definition of scholars or institutions (e.g., Wiles et al., 2008; Saunders et al., 2015) - to keep participants’ identities from being discovered by others. This means interviewees will not be traceable from the presented data or the author’s descriptions.

For confidentiality, instead of describing the access to information, it is more about explaining how I present collected data. During the interview, I always confirm with participants whether they feel comfortable reporting specific information or opinions. Ensuring confidentiality means respecting individuals’ autonomy. Thus, I present data on the premise that the interviewees and I agree with each other. However, the information that is not presented is not useless; on the contrary, it is all essential material for me to understand students’ learner identities.

Although anonymity and confidentiality are commonly regarded as default
position in qualitative research, some scholars challenge this ethical stance. For instance, Dougherty (2021) points out that while these protections may enable researchers to obtain candid responses from participants, the data set is often not verified or replicated by third parties. Similarly, Walford (2005) argues that confidentiality and anonymity, while ideal in theory, are difficult to guarantee in practice. Despite these concerns, I maintain a positive attitude towards protecting participants' anonymity and confidentiality. This approach increases the likelihood of obtaining richer information from participants and helps establish equal and respectful communication. Furthermore, given the sensitive topics that may arise in my research on students' experiences, it is important to avoid causing emotional harm or potential risks. In light of this, protecting participants is necessary to ensure ethical research practices.

5.5.2 Dynamic Relationships Between Participants and Me

My relationship with interviewees involves three different roles: researcher, senior, and foreigner. These roles correspond to different researcher-participant relationships. Initially, I assumed the role of a researcher at the beginning of the interview conversation. I explained the research idea, clarified the interview process, and introduced myself to the participants. Although the power relationship associated with this role is the heaviest, it is fundamental for conducting interviews. The role of a researcher can help participants understand the situation quickly and maintain discipline during interviews. For example, during semi-structured interviews, if the interviewee

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21 For example, Saunders et al. (2015) mention that many official ethics guidelines recommend disguising the personal identities of research participants as a ‘default position’ (e.g. British Sociological Association, 2002).
deviates from the topic or talks too much, the dominance of the researcher can help bring the conversation back on track.

As the interviewee's trust in me gradually increases, the role of a senior becomes more apparent. Interviewees usually call me ‘xué zhǎng’ (a senior), which indicates that they feel comfortable talking to me and treat me like a big brother to some extent. Unlike the researcher role, the power relationship between a big brother and a younger brother or sister is relatively mild. This creates two benefits: first, students can talk more freely with a big brother than a researcher, which encourages them to express their opinions with richer details. Second, the big brother role can provide support to participants when discussing sensitive topics or becoming emotional. However, to avoid any potential risks of influencing participants, I maintain the primary interaction as the researcher-participant relationship during data collection.

The role of a foreigner has positive implications for both interviewees and me. When interviewees realise that I am an outsider in their living context, they feel more responsible for explaining things to me. I see this as an advantage for obtaining information. While interviewees are ‘showing me around’ their lives like a tour guide, I can get more details from conversations and observe individuals' personalities. Moreover, the role of a foreigner

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22 Most interviewees call me 'xué zhǎng' (學長). This is a Chinese / Japanese (先輩 せんぱい) way of calling a senior or a person who is one or several years earlier than you in an institution. They are calling me 'xué zhǎng' because I am older and more experienced than them in the university. It still makes sense even though we are not in the same institution.
reminds me to maintain an open-minded attitude. Even though I may have already captured some common patterns of students after several interviews, I still see something new from the next interviewee even if I am asking similar questions.

In summary, I describe my relationship with participants as dynamic because they are all part of the research and have different aspects of positivity (Please see Table 5.5.1). The researcher-participant relationship is easy to understand and provides a clear scope of interaction and disciplines, which are beneficial for conducting this research. The senior-junior (big brother-younger sisters/brothers) relationship is more equal in power compared to the previous one, making communication smoother and more relaxed for interviewees. However, while becoming closer with interviewees, the roles of each other become blurred, which may be risky as I could potentially influence them. Finally, the foreigner-locals (tourist-tour guide) relationship has similar benefits to the senior-junior relationship and is essential in gaining a better understanding of the interviewees. From the perspective of studying learner identities and social justice, these two roles are no less important than the researcher's, and combining them in my thesis and using their strengths is crucial.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My Role</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Power Relation</th>
<th>Advantage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Researcher</td>
<td>✓ Researcher-Participants</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>✓ Clear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓ Easy</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓ Understanding</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓ Disciplines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Senior</td>
<td>✓ Senior-Junior</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>✓ Less Stressful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>✓ Big brother-younger</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓ Trust and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sisters/brothers</td>
<td></td>
<td>supportive</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓ Richer details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Foreigner</td>
<td>✓ Foreigner-Locals</td>
<td>Flat</td>
<td>✓ Open-minded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>✓ Tourist-Tour Guide</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓ Richer details</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.5.1  Dynamic Between Interviewees and Me

5.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented a detailed discussion of the research methods employed in this thesis. This includes the design of the basic structure of this research, the definition of underrepresented students, the methodological approach employed for sampling, data collection, and data analysis, as well as ethical considerations. In the following three chapters (Chapters 6-8), all major findings of this thesis will be presented.
Chapter 6
Findings One – Underrepresented Students’ HE Experiences

6.1 Introduction

The following findings chapters present the major discoveries from 62 interviews with 32 participants in this study, following the data analysis approach discussed in the methodology chapters. Thematic Analysis was utilised to integrate the large amount of data obtained from over 60 hours of interviews into the findings. Themes were identified, which corresponded to our research interests and provided discoveries into the learning experience, transition experience, and learner identities established by underrepresented students in elite universities in Singapore and Shanghai.

This finding chapter consists of three main sections. First, an overview of our target underrepresented students in elite institutions will be presented as the foundation for exploring their higher education experiences. This section combines general observations and understanding of the students.

The second section focuses on the fit-in process of underrepresented students at elite universities, including their impacts, characteristics or attitudes, and the observed changes in them. Finally, the third section presents the learning challenges faced by students in the university. Two crucial learning challenges reported by students were identified: time management and issues related to online courses. These challenges are
described by students primarily based on their early experiences in universities and are essential for understanding students’ learner identities.

In an effort to get closer to the expressions of the students, their original descriptions have been preserved as much as possible. Additionally, to enhance readability, conversations between interviewees and myself have been organised into complete quotations. However, as mentioned in the methodology chapters, all Chinese students were interviewed in Mandarin, while some Singaporean students were interviewed in both Mandarin and English. Consequently, the majority of interview data had to be translated into English transcripts before further analysis using NVivo. The words used by the interviewees were translated based on their corresponding meanings in English, while specific Chinese terms or metaphors were retained. Additional explanations or contextual information will be provided in brackets when necessary. The subsequent sections of this chapter will commence with the presentation of underrepresented students’ higher education experiences in Shanghai and Singapore.

6.2 Overview of the Students’ Higher Education Experiences

6.2.1 Examples of Underrepresented Students’ Path to Higher Education

This section demonstrates three different paths taken by the participants in their journey to higher education. Type 1 represents a common route for graduates from polytechnical institutions to gain admission to the elite universities focused on in this study in Singapore (Figure 6.2.1). Type 2 reflects the typical pathway followed by most Chinese students, involving the
experience of standardised exams on two occasions (Figure 6.2.2). Lastly, Type 3 outlines the general timeline for Singaporean male students who, under normal circumstances, are required to complete two years of compulsory military service. While some individuals complete their service prior to attending university, others may divide their university education into two segments (Figure 6.2.3). It is worth noting that these variations in students’ paths to higher education are likely to impact their transition experiences and learner identities. For a more comprehensive understanding, please refer to Chapters 7, 8 and 9.
6.2.2 Pressure to Succeed

A phenomenon observed among underrepresented students in elite universities is the presence of various pressures. These pressures encompass financial constraints, familial expectations, academic challenges, and the need to fit in. In my exploration of these phenomena, I aim to adopt a comprehensive perspective in order to comprehend the students' experiences within the university environment. It was discovered that the different types of pressure experienced by underrepresented students were all linked to the overarching pressure to succeed.

For example, consider the case of Ying (Case Study 2), a student from a low-income family who faced a challenging decision when considering higher education. Despite the financial burden, Ying believed that investing in her education was necessary in order to repay her mother's support in getting her into university. Consequently, Ying felt compelled to secure a well-paying job in the future, which necessitated her success in university.

Another case worth examining is that of Jack (Case Study 1). Jack had previously excelled academically in high school, and his acceptance into a prestigious university in Shanghai, facilitated by a special admission program, garnered attention from those around him. These factors, including Jack's past achievements, the scrutiny of others, and his identity as a student enrolled on a special admission program, contributed to his sense of pressure. During the initial interview, Jack emphasised the need to prove himself, underscoring the magnitude of the pressure he felt. Ultimately, after completing two semesters at the university, Jack made the decision to drop
Self-esteem and Successful Experiences in the Past

By examining the cases of Ying and Jack, we can discern distinct life experiences and sources of pressure. For various reasons or motivations, both individuals encountered significant pressure to succeed. Consequently, stress factors can be categorised across different layers. At the individual level, it is customary for the interviewees to have previously experienced success. According to their own accounts, they typically achieved above-average grades during their secondary school education. Nevertheless, these past accomplishments can also act as sources of pressure, particularly when students confront learning challenges or encounter gaps in academic achievement.

“I am not satisfied with my current grades, of course. I think this is mainly because I am inexperienced in university. I need to put more effort into studying. If I spend enough time on it, I can have a different result…”

(Zhao 1st interview)

“It was shocking the first time I found my grade in the middle of the class. I think I’ve tried hard, but there are always super smart people who can roll over others… This made me feel demoralised… I don’t know, but I used to be at the top. I definitely need to make some change…”

(Yuan 1st interview)

23 Roll over (輾壓) is a Chinese metaphor, meaning to be better than someone or to defeat.
The cases of Zhao and Yuan exemplify a notable disparity in academic achievements and expectations. Both students possess a strong sense of self-esteem when it comes to their studies and anticipate success in university as a natural progression. However, in the context of a highly selective elite university where their peers are typically top performers from secondary institutions, the contrast between their previous successful experiences and the current reality can have a profound impact on these students. This disparity in expectations and the academic environment may exert a significant influence on the student’s overall experiences and outcomes.

Special Admission Program Enrolled Student Identity

From a sociological perspective, our data suggest that underrepresented students’ identities are intertwined with the pressure to succeed. One prominent identity that emerged among these students is the identity of being a special program enrolled student. In fact, more than half of the interviewees in our study were admitted to our target elite universities through special admission programs. These programs are generally designed to support students from diverse backgrounds. For instance, in China, one common special admission program caters to students from remote areas, while Singapore offers a special education channel for students from vocational institutions.

Within this context, our interviewees shared numerous descriptions of their experiences. For instance, Ming vividly depicts the pressure she feels as a special program enrolled student in an elite university during the first interview:
**Ming:** “Everyone knows what Gaokao scores you need to get in this university, but actually, my scores are lower than that. This makes me feel nervous… I used to worry about my grade being the last in the class… Moreover, I was quite afraid of people being judgmental about it as well… It’s almost impossible not to talk about these things. When people ask where you are from, it is easy to sense your identity…”

**Researcher:** “Does this stress still bother you?”

**Ming:** “After the first semester in the university, I feel much better… My grades in the class are about average… People don’t talk about how you get into this university after the first one or two weeks… But, even people do; I am still better than many of my peers”.

(Ming 1st interview)

Ming’s example highlights her previous experience of feeling anxious as she constantly compared herself to other students. However, her anxiety subsided, and she gained confidence once she achieved certain academic results at the university, alleviating the pressure she felt. On the other hand, Timothy, a second-year Singaporean student who also encountered similar pressures, had a different outcome compared to Ming’s case.

**Timothy:** “Honestly, I still don’t feel like I belong to this university… I am not really interested in my current study now… I entered this department because I happened to be admitted, but my grades are not very good… My parents are quite upset about it. They often told me something like: cherish your chance to study at this university… But, recently, my dad hasn’t talked to me about these things anymore, and we have a cold relationship now”.

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**Reseacher:** “Have you ever considered doing other things you said you like? Art or music you mentioned before?”

**Timothy:** “Well, I think that’s impossible. I am 22 and just finished my second year at this university. You definitely can’t imagine how people might be judgmental here in Singapore… And for my parents, I can expect how angry they will be if I say I am quitting”.

*(Timothy 2nd interview)*

**Quitting is Not an Option**

Timothy also expressed feelings of both excitement and anxiety when he initially entered the university. Despite his weak background in mathematics during his time in junior college, he chose to pursue a department related to engineering. While Timothy did not emphasise the pressure stemming from special admission programs, we can observe the negative identities and emotions arising from his past experiences of academic failure. This contrasts significantly with Ming's situation.

Furthermore, it is evident that Timothy lacks enthusiasm for his current field of study, yet he remains committed and does not contemplate giving up. This aligns with a common phenomenon observed among underrepresented students in our study. Once they have the opportunity or make the decision to enter an elite university, there is a strong sense of obligation to complete their degree. The act of "finishing" university is widely regarded as a measure of success. Consequently, if a student fails to complete their studies or decides to quit, it is seen as an unusual and potentially embarrassing occurrence.
Most interviewees who express negative sentiments about their academic pursuits generally do not consider the possibility of making any changes. Jack, however, stands as an exception (Case Study 1). In the second interview, he extensively discussed the pressure he faced after deciding to leave the university.

“My parents intensively kept the information from others that I am no longer studying in Shanghai, but eventually, people still knew… I remember that at that time, the vice principal of my high school even called my house. People are always curious about the reason for quitting… It’s impossible to tell others some negative thing. I always say that it is because I prefer to go abroad. This is a relatively better answer”.

(Jack 2nd interview)

Jack’s case serves as a comprehensive illustration of the social pressures experienced by students to succeed. It is evident that Jack not only faces tremendous pressure himself when making such a decision, but his parents also share in this burden. This would parallel Timothy’s expectation of possible negative reactions from his parents if he were to consider giving up.

In summary, underrepresented students commonly encounter pressures to succeed, stemming from various internal and external factors. These factors include a sense of responsibility towards their families, feelings of insecurity arising from their identity as special admission program enrolled students, self-esteem influenced by past successful experiences, and societal values at large. These pressures reflect the experiences of our targeted students within
elite universities. Furthermore, such pressures are likely to impact their career choices, transition experiences, and the establishment of their learner identities.

6.2.3 Lack of Confidence

This is another tendency commonly observed among our underrepresented students. A prevalent situation is the lack of self-confidence when they perceive themselves as different from their peers. As previously discussed, special admission program-enrolled students often experience anxiety upon entering university, as they navigate their adaptation to the academic environment of an elite institution. The disparities in admission criteria can sometimes trigger concerns about their intellectual capabilities compared to their peers. Within highly selective elite universities, not being perceived as intellectually equal can also lead to a sense of identity conflict. For instance, Ying's (Case Study 2) identity as a graduate of a polytechnical institution generates significant discomfort for her within the university setting.

“I was quite intimidated initially because I have a mindset that people who graduate from junior college have been studying more stuff than me …”.

(Ying 1st interview)

“I think sometimes JC students look relaxed and nature… they are likely to talk about going on a trip or applying for exchange programs in the future… it feels like they have nothing to worry about, life or money…”.

(Ying 2nd interview)
Comparison with Big City Students

Ying's case exhibits clear indications of lacking confidence due to the identity conflicts she faces. She keenly perceives the disparities between herself and her peers, stemming from variations in family background and secondary education experiences. From Ying's perspective, she likely perceives herself as an "outsider" within the elite university, as the identities of her peers seem to align more closely with the values upheld by such institutions. This sentiment finds support in Kai's (China) description as well.

Researcher: “Do you think you are different from local students in Shanghai or students from other big cities?”

Kai: “Well, their English is generally better. I think the quality of English education in big cities is still relatively better… The other thing is that it feels like they know what they want, so they usually look confident and relaxed. It’s hard to describe that kind of ‘sense of ease (從容感)’ I feel from them”.

(Kai 2nd interview)

Interestingly, Kai's perspective is not unique in regarding local students as having a better understanding of their goals. In fact, similar descriptions were provided by several Chinese interviewees, highlighting a noteworthy phenomenon. This phenomenon indicates two key aspects. Firstly, some underrepresented students tend to perceive students from metropolitan areas as having identities that align more closely with the university's expectations. These expectations encompass attributes such as strong English proficiency, a heightened sense of personal responsibility, and independent thinking. While these qualities are desirable for university students, developing them
poses a significant challenge for many first-generation or underprivileged students. Consequently, this contributes to their diminished self-confidence within elite university settings.

Confusion for the Future

Secondly, the descriptions provided by our target students regarding their peers from major cities shed light on their own sense of confusion. Based on our interviews, students often find themselves perplexed by various aspects, including the challenges they face during the transition period, their current academic progress, and their future career aspirations. These uncertainties have a direct impact on their self-confidence. Once again, the cases of Xiawen (China) and Racheal (Singapore) can be employed to illustrate the correlation between these factors.

**Xiawen:** “I think I will apply for graduate school.”

**Researcher:** “I see. Are you going to apply for a graduate school in the same field as now?”

**Xiawen:** “I am not sure… maybe I will apply for something different. I feel my current study (History) has no advantage in employment. In addition, if you don’t study for a master’s degree now, it may be difficult to compete with others”.

(Xiawen 2nd interview)

**Researcher:** “Do you like your current major in university?”

**Racheal:** “To be honest, not really… but I can’t make any change at the
moment. Anyways, at least finding a job with what I learn now should not be hard”.

(Racheal 2nd interview)

As evident from the cases of Xiawen and Racheal, both individuals exhibit an uncertain attitude towards their current academic standing and future plans. This uncertainty reflects their lack of confidence in their identities within elite universities, and this phenomenon is shared among underrepresented students in our study. I attribute this to their limited autonomy in learning, which is often influenced by the pursuit of attending prestigious institutions. Several interviewees expressed that prioritising admission to a renowned university took precedence over choosing a department aligned with their interests, leading to varying outcomes. Apart from disinterest in their studies, negative learning experiences, as illustrated by Timothy’s case earlier, can also arise.

In summary, the lack of confidence among underrepresented students is a prevalent phenomenon in elite universities, often stemming from identity conflicts or a lack of autonomy. These observations shed light on the higher education experiences of students in elite institutions and bear significant implications for the formation of their learner identities.

6.3 Underrepresented Students Fitting into Elite Universities

Fitting into the university is a complex process intertwined with students’ early higher education experiences. During this transition, students may face challenges in bridging gaps in learning, managing daily life, and navigating
social relationships from their previous schooling to the university environment. The underlying reason for these difficulties lies in the differing expectations placed upon them. Particularly in elite universities, students are often expected to possess specific attributes that align with the institution's values. For underrepresented students, the process of fitting into elite universities entails understanding the prevailing value system, experiencing shocks or disparities, and making adjustments to their behaviours. The subsequent section will delve into the findings pertaining to the fitting-in experiences of the participants.

6.3.1 Be an Elite University Student: Learn the University Way

There are two fundamental perspectives regarding the concept of 'learning the university way.' Firstly, it entails understanding and internalising a specific value system that encompasses various aspects such as the functioning of the university, societal expectations of students, cultural norms, lifestyle considerations, and definitions of success. Secondly, within the context of my research, 'learning the university way' also involves adopting new identities as students of an elite university and actively engaging in practices aligned with the established value system. For instance, in highly selective elite universities, there is often a prevailing expectation of intellectual prowess, which is reinforced by the university, academic staff, and peers. Students become cognizant of this expectation and strive to demonstrate the corresponding qualities, thereby facilitating their integration into the university community. Within distinct contexts, both Ban (China) and Levi (Singapore) recognise the external expectations surrounding their identities as students in elite universities.
“I was invited to give a talk in my high school. On this occasion, I realised I would not tell those high school students about the downsides, like the difficulties I encountered, negative emotions, or some bad learning experiences… Instead, I describe myself as always being positive and well-organised in the university. I feel that is what they need to hear from me and how they think I should be… After all, I am here to encourage people…”.

(Ban 2nd interview)

“I found that whenever there are any occasions expecting you to talk, you must say something. For example, if the teacher asks you a question in class or you are having a group discussion with others, when all eyes are on you, you can’t just say I don’t know, or I have no opinion. It will be very awkward”.

(Levi 2nd interview)

From the cases of Ban and Levi, it becomes evident that they were cognizant of the expectations placed upon them as elite university students and made efforts to meet those expectations. This process of aligning with the expectations can be defined as 'learning the university way'. It is important to note that the perception of expectations is not limited to the campus environment alone. For example, many Chinese students mentioned that even before starting their higher education journey, their names were displayed on the red banner in their high schools as a result of being accepted into the targeted elite universities. Consequently, students were already labelled and expected to be the "smartest," "elite," or the "honour of the school."
Successful integration and fitting in can provide students with a sense of accomplishment and contribution to the establishment of positive learner identities throughout their higher education journey. However, it is not uncommon for students to face challenges in adapting smoothly. According to my findings, those who struggle to meet the expectations of elite university students or have yet to achieve a sense of accomplishment may experience a lack of identity certainty or a diminished sense of achievement.

6.3.2 Feeling Uncertain about Identities

Uncertainty regarding their identities at the university is a common phenomenon among the underrepresented students I interviewed in this study. Building upon the previous section, when students find themselves unable or uncertain about meeting the various expectations set within elite universities, they often exhibit signs of anxiety. Tsai’s case serves as a valuable illustration of this point.

“It feels scary because you don’t know how smart you are compared to everyone else… You are likely to assume everyone is smarter than you… What if I couldn’t keep up with others?... It was not until I became more familiar with my classmates and finished the first mid-term exam that I gradually had some clues to see how good I was”.

(Tsai 1st interview)

This description reflects Tsai’s initial expectations and imagination of university life during the first interview. It becomes evident that she lacks confidence and fears being compared to her peers before gathering sufficient
information to understand others and evaluate herself. This anxiety is manifested in her uncertainty about her position at the university. The self-evaluation Tsai undergoes pertains not only to her intelligence but also to how well she can meet the university's expectations. Tsai mentions that her anxiety significantly decreased once she realised she could achieve average grades in her classes. Another similar example, Lao Wang's case, further exemplifies the uncertain emotions that students may experience regarding their identities at the university.

“I was terribly homesick at first and wanted to go home right away the first week. I found it hard to chat with others… They are talking about games, celebrities, or drama. I didn't have so many rich life experiences. I thought I must be a boring guy automatically. It wasn't very comfortable, and I did something like searching online secretly for what people were talking about all the time…but actually, getting along with people in university is not what I used to think. You don’t need to be a talkative guy. Instead, letting people know your uniqueness can bring you friends. In the university, if you are a funny guy, good at something, or a sports team player, people will like you”.

(Lao Wang 2nd interview)

Lao Wang's case illustrates a shift in his perception of peer relationships. Initially, he would blame himself for being perceived as boring. However, as he gained more experience interacting with his peers, he gradually became more comfortable and displayed increased confidence. The cases of Tsai and Lao Wang indicate that students may experience negative emotions when they are unfamiliar with the university context. Fortunately, both students
managed to navigate these challenges successfully. Nevertheless, the process of fitting in remains arduous. Students need to observe and learn rapidly. Additionally, the ability to solve problems independently is repeatedly emphasised by the interviewees as a crucial skill.

6.3.3 Being Expected to Have the Ability to Solve Problems and Learn Independently

According to the experiences shared by my participants, possessing the ability to solve problems independently is another commonly expected quality of an elite university student. This expectation significantly influences the process of fitting in and has the potential to shape students' learner identities. Melissa's case provides an example of an incident that occurred when she initially enrolled in university.

“The university staff was bustling. She told me in the office: this is a job you should finish online… I felt shocked and embarrassed because people were looking at me. She made me feel like I was childish. I was quite upset because I didn’t think I had done anything wrong. I was just confused… This got me into a new habit. I will always try to figure things out by myself first or double-check with my friends rather than asking for random people’s help directly…”

(Melissa 2nd interview)

This incident took place during Melissa's first semester at university when she was attempting to access certain student services. The response she received from a female staff member left her shocked and had a lasting
impact on her behaviour and habits within the university. Through experiencing such shocks and gaining more exposure to university life, Melissa developed a deeper perception of the expectations placed on students in various situations on campus. It is, therefore, not surprising that she emphasises the significance of cultivating independent problem-solving skills. As she puts it, "It's better to avoid giving others the impression that you are lazy or unintelligent." Interestingly, Hyomin also shares similar perceptions regarding the expectations from different university contexts.

**Hyomin**: “I don’t know why, but I feel there is an atmosphere in the university that we should know things automatically. Sometimes I don’t quite understand something or feel confused, but no one is asking any questions. For example, once there was a statistic assignment. I tried several times, but the result seems to be strange. In class, some of my classmates argued about it. People have different results with their theories. The stupid thing is that, actually, it’s the teacher’s mistake because he uploaded the wrong file on the learning platform.”

**Researcher**: “But how did you finish your assignment with the wrong file? And how do you understand the situation you described?”

**Hyomin**: “I searched online. Anyway, even if you make it wrong, you must submit your assignment. I was unfamiliar with other classmates then, and it was the first assignment we had in class. I felt like everybody knows what to do. I don’t know, but I don’t want to look ignorant….”

(Hyomin 2nd interview)

A noteworthy observation from Hyomin's case is that despite encountering
an issue, students still managed to submit their assignments on time. Despite receiving an incorrect file from the teacher, they were able to find their own methods and interpretations and even made efforts to persuade others. The "atmosphere" described by Hyomin also highlights the expectations placed on elite university students. In this context, it becomes crucial for students to avoid appearing ignorant or lacking problem-solving abilities. There is a distinction between not submitting assignments and completing them incorrectly, with the latter carrying a more positive connotation such as demonstrating independence, responsibility, and fulfilling the obligations of a university student.

Melissa and Hyomin's experiences also shed light on the challenges students face when it comes to questioning or doubting the situation, atmosphere, or expectations imposed on them. In the process of fitting in, students continuously develop a comprehensive understanding of the university environment. Particularly in elite universities, students are generally expected to be intelligent, talented, independent, and responsible. However, for many of our underrepresented students, fitting in proved to be a significant challenge. They not only need to adapt to and absorb new information quickly but also overcome negative emotions and uncertainties surrounding their identities. These factors heavily influence their learning experiences and overall higher education journey.

**Being Expected to Learn Without Depending on Good Teaching**

In addition to the expectation of independent problem-solving abilities discussed earlier, our students also emphasise that, as elite university
students, they are sometimes expected to learn and master course content on their own. This expectation can be seen as an extension of the ability to solve problems independently, which aligns with another common expectation in elite environments – intelligence. I initially observed this aspect through complaints about teaching quality made by some students, exemplified in the cases of Melissa and Zhao:

“The teaching style and quality varies a lot from different courses. Some teachers are really hard to follow, and nobody is listening. The teacher, probably doesn’t care at all”.

(Melissa 1st interview)

“We have two teachers in our department teaching the same required course in the first semester, each assigned to classes A and B. I found that compared to class A, clearly, our teacher’s teaching is worse and extremely boring”.

(Zhao 1st interview)

Through the examination of Melissa and Zhao's cases, we observe not only their dissatisfaction with the quality of teaching in their respective universities but also the discrepancies in their course experiences. Furthermore, I have also observed that students who express negative evaluations of teaching quality at universities tend to perceive such experiences as a common aspect of their higher education journeys. Some students adopt an attitude where they voice complaints about the "common shitty stuff" that occurs at the university. Yet, they still manage their learning independently without relying
on teachers' quality of instruction.

“I think everyone has had bad teachers in the university, this is nothing new. Nevertheless, since the environment is like this, and everyone is experiencing the same, the point is to figure out your own way … If you didn't learn something properly, that is definitely not going to be considered the teacher’s problem, it is your own fault because there are always people who can make it right”.

(Jayleen 2\textsuperscript{nd} interview)

“Sometimes in class, everyone is doing their own thing, and the teacher doesn’t really care that no one is attending the class, and even makes it clear that he doesn’t care if the students are present or not, as long as they pass the exam”.

(Yuan 2\textsuperscript{nd} interview)

Jayleen and Yuan’s cases once again emphasise that students are inherently expected to take responsibility for their own learning outcomes, rather than relying solely on the quality of teaching or classroom experiences. This observation reflects two significant aspects. Firstly, the ability to learn independently without depending on teachers’ instruction is considered a characteristic of elite university students. Given that subpar teaching quality is often perceived as a common occurrence in universities. Yet, many individuals still manage to succeed, an inability to attribute negative learning experiences to poor teaching quality may be viewed as a deficiency. Secondly, students are expected to assume responsibility for their time management. In Yuan's
case, the instructor indicated a lack of concern for class attendance or how students utilise their time, as long as they are able to pass the exam. While some students are able to meet these expectations by engaging in self-directed learning, overcoming inadequate teaching quality, and demonstrating strong time management skills, it is evident that many students struggle with adapting to this university paradigm. The subsequent section will delve further into discussions regarding students' challenges with time management.

6.4 The Most Common Learning Challenges: Time Management

According to the data analysis, it is evident that our students commonly perceive time management as the most significant challenge in their learning journey. This finding is consistent with several studies that have explored the difficulties students encounter with time management during their first year of higher education. For instance, Lowe & Cook (2003) found that students often have misconceptions about time allocation, leading them to either overestimate or underestimate the time required for academic tasks. Haggis (2006) emphasises that difficulties in organising work and managing time can impact students' overall experience of higher education. Van Der Meer et al. (2010) argue that since time management is a common challenge for first-year university students, it should not be solely regarded as the student's responsibility. They suggest that teaching and support staff should actively assist students in understanding the expectations related to time management and self-study. Other scholars, including Prescott and Simpson (2004), Kantanis (2000), and Bisbee (2019), have also highlighted the barriers students face in managing their time effectively in higher education.
Nevertheless, both quantitative and qualitative studies consistently suggest that time management remains a significant challenge for university students, which aligns with the findings from the interviews conducted with my 32 participants. The issue of time management was mentioned directly or indirectly by both Singaporean and Chinese students. However, it is important to note that students’ experiences in dealing with time management difficulties can vary significantly. Therefore, based on the focus and purpose of this study, I have categorised three types of time management issues.

6.4.1 Not making time for academic tasks

Van Der Meer et al. (2010) propose that learning self-study skills and effective time management is a transition challenge faced by first-year students. Furthermore, students are expected to cultivate an autonomous attitude and effectively manage multiple study tasks. However, certain students find it exceptionally challenging to establish a sense of learning discipline. For instance, Jayleen (Singapore) elaborated on her lifestyle in the student accommodation during the first semester.

“At the beginning of the semester, it feels like I have plenty of time to finish all the work; anyways, it is still far away from deadlines … sometimes I plan to study at night, but my hallmates ask me out for dinner, then eventually I think I will then do it tomorrow; sometimes it is because someone asks for my help, so I came… Because I and my hallmates are very close to each other…however, when it came to the end of the semester, everything felt like messing up…”

(Jayleen 2nd interview)
Jayleen's account shows that her interactions with her hallmates sometimes impact her studies. It is evident that during that period, she faced numerous choices in allocating her time and often opted to postpone her studies. Similar situations were mentioned by Tim (Singapore) and Tao (China). Both male students dedicated significant time to online games and club activities, resulting in an adverse impact on their academic performance. These cases highlight the challenges students encounter in learning self-control and establishing effective time management, which is not easily overcome. As Lowe & Cook (2003) emphasised, "The sudden transition from a controlled environment, such as school or college, to an environment where students are expected to assume personal responsibility for both academic and social aspects of their lives, can create anxiety and distress, undermining their usual coping mechanisms" (p.53). When first-year students are suddenly granted the autonomy and responsibility to make decisions, they may make unreasonable judgments.

From the preceding discussion, it can be inferred that the disparities between universities and secondary schools or colleges, as well as the challenges in establishing personal autonomy, contribute to students' difficulties with time management. This makes it challenging for them to allocate sufficient time for academic work and keep pace with the learning demands of university. Furthermore, underrepresented students may face additional obstacles in overcoming this learning challenge due to a lack of shared family experiences, particularly as many interviewees in this study are first-generation students.
Another factor that hinders students' ability to dedicate time to studying is employment. Some interviewees, who lack financial support from their families or scholarships, are compelled to work to cover their living expenses or tuition fees. Numerous studies have examined students' financial needs (Curtis & Lucas, 2001; Lashley, 2005; Barron & Anastasiadou, 2009), highlighting the prevalence of students balancing work and study. However, many students take up part-time jobs even without financial pressure. Since the late 1990s, research has indicated a growing trend of college students engaging in part-time employment (Lucas & Lammont, 1998; Watts & Pickering, 2000). There are varying perspectives on students' employment while studying. Some view part-time employment as a valuable experience that enables students to acquire skills and establish social connections (Aggett & Busby, 2011; Evans et al., 2015), while others raise concerns. For instance, Manthei and Gilmore (2005) argue that employment limits students' available study time and may compromise the quality of their academic pursuits.

Indeed, when it comes to time management, the challenge of organising one's schedule becomes more pronounced. Two cases shared by our interviewees shed light on this issue. Firstly, Nei (China) used to work at a pizza restaurant where she had to work shifts for 10-14 hours per week. According to Nei, although the hours may not seem excessively long, whenever she had work, it became extremely difficult for her to find time for studying. The second example is Thomas (Singapore), who works as a part-time consultant in an insurance company. While Thomas enjoys relatively flexible working hours compared to other jobs, he faces the significant time
commitment of commuting between his workplace and the university. He describes his situation as follows:

“The job is fine, I quite like it, but the thing is it’s almost an hour away from the university… sometimes I skip the class probably because I am working … the good thing is now there are more options for taking a course online, in this case, I can study even I am in the office…”

(Thomas 1st interview)

These two cases illustrate how employment can impact students’ lifestyles and daily schedules. Furthermore, Nei and Thomas’s ability to study effectively is likely to be compromised. Jogaratnam and Buchanan (2004) offer an additional perspective, suggesting that students who juggle a full-time academic load and a part-time job may experience negative emotions such as stress and fatigue. This aligns with Nai’s description of facing increased academic pressure towards the end of the semester.

In conclusion, both internal factors such as self-control and external factors such as employment can contribute to time management issues, ultimately affecting students’ learning experiences in university. However, it is important to acknowledge that this study examines these phenomena from a social justice perspective, considering factors like financial necessity and the challenges faced by first-generation students.
6.4.2 Unrealistic Expectations

Another prevalent time management issue identified from the interview data is students' struggle to make realistic decisions and plans for their studies, particularly in course selection and study time allocation. Previous research has shown that unrealistic expectations play a significant role in students' failure to manage their time effectively in university (Lowe & Cook, 2003; Smith & Hopkins, 2005). Hassel & Ridout (2018) highlight the challenging barrier faced by first-year students, stemming from the gap between their prior expectations of higher education and the reality of university life. They argue that students often lack a clear understanding of what it takes to succeed in university and tend to view it as an extension of secondary school. Echoing this perspective, Lowe & Cook (2003) point out that many unrealistic expectations stem from inadequate preparation students receive before entering university.

Drawing from these viewpoints, it is reasonable to speculate that students are likely to encounter challenges in learning time management during the transition process to university, and it is natural for them to expect higher education to be similar to their previous educational experiences (Cook & Leckey, 1999; Lowe & Cook, 2003).

According to our interviewees, one of the most frequently mentioned learning challenges is the overwhelming number of tasks they have to handle. Both Singaporean and Chinese students highlight that this situation is particularly common towards the end of the semester. Students may find themselves simultaneously dealing with multiple assignments and exams. For
example, Wei (China) recounts her experience of having to take six final exams in her first semester while juggling assignments from different courses. Examining Wei’s semester timetable, we observe that she enrolled in eight courses, including four compulsory subjects and four electives. In other words, she made the decision to take all these courses. However, the total number of credits accumulated from these eight courses (26) far exceeds the minimum credit requirement set by the university (15) for a single semester. Similar patterns can be observed in the experiences of other interviewees. Melissa (Singapore), for instance, enrolled in as many courses as possible, up to the maximum course load allowed by the university. Consequently, she spends at least 20-25 hours per week attending classes.

“The first time when I signed up for courses, it felt like the time I need to spend in class in university is far lesser than in high school … Actually, I had no idea that taking eight courses at the same time is crazy … At that time, it feels like everything is useful and will be important for the future. Many courses attracted me. As a university student, I should learn as much as possible. I was quite confident in myself…”

(Wei 2nd interview)

“I had an idea that I should take more courses in the first and second years to graduate on time in four years. Moreover, I could have extra time to apply for exchange programs or internships… However, from the present point of view, it is just too ideal because taking classes is energy consuming and you will need more time for many other things …”

(Melissa 2nd interview)
These observations align with the argument presented by Crisp et al. (2009) that the significant disparity between students' expectations and the reality of university life can often stem from misunderstandings arising from the information provided by universities. While universities do offer specific guidelines and information to students, it remains challenging for first-year students without prior higher education experience to make informed decisions. Merely following the regulations or recommendations for course selection provided by universities does not guarantee that students will not encounter time management difficulties.

From the cases of Wei and Melissa, we observe a strong ambition for learning. Whether driven by the motivation to enhance future career prospects or to have more flexibility in subsequent semesters, Wei and Melissa both experienced a demanding first semester. They recognised the disparity between their expectations and the reality of their academic workload and highlighted the immense pressure they faced towards the end of the semester. Scholars have conducted relevant studies addressing these issues. Lowe & Cook (2003) suggest that encountering such challenges during the transition to university can significantly contribute to first-year students' anxiety. Yorke and Longden (2004) argue that negative experiences can greatly distress students and impact their academic performance. Unrealistic expectations and the resulting negative emotions and time management difficulties can hinder a successful transition. Furthermore, numerous researchers have indicated that early transition experiences play a crucial role in shaping students' subsequent development in higher education (Kantanis, 2000; Hillman, 2005; Bowles et al., 2011). Tinto (1993) particularly
emphasises the importance of first-year experiences in shaping students' learning attitudes and motivation, aligning with our research focus on exploring students' learner identities.

Other interviewees also shared their experiences of encountering time management issues and the resulting stress. For example, Jayleen highlights the expectation of several hours of self-study or assigned reading by teachers, making it challenging for her to meet all the course requirements.

“Normally, in the course introduction, the teachers usually state clearly how much time you need to spend studying by yourself every week. It could be 1 to 4 hours, depending on which course you are taking, but to be honest, I rarely study according to those suggestions. It is just not very realistic… For example, in one of the courses I took in the first semester, the total class hour was 3 hours, splitting into two classes in a week. For this course, we are required to read several articles or a book assigned by the teacher every week, and we must upload a reading summary to the learning platform every Monday. Therefore, I felt stressed almost every Sunday night and stayed up late doing this assignment. I think it is simply impossible to complete such an amount of reading and writing within the two hours claimed by the teacher”.

(Jayleen 2nd interview)

Taking Jayleen's example, she had to allocate at least three time slots per week for a single course she took. Additionally, she had to balance her hall life and extracurricular activities mentioned in previous paragraphs. It is evident that organising everything becomes a challenging task for Jayleen.
Furthermore, some of our target underrepresented students have a compelling need for part-time jobs. Jayleen's case not only highlights the difficulties students face in managing their weekly schedules but also reveals the gap between teachers' expectations and the authentic university lifestyle of students.

As first-year students begin their transition and explore university life, it is important to recognise that teachers' unrealistic expectations can also contribute to time management difficulties. Previous studies have discussed the expectation gap between academic staff and students, suggesting that different roles may hold unrealistic expectations of each other within the university context (Lowe & Cook, 2003; Hassel & Ridout, 2018). Smith & Hopkins (2005) specifically note that first-year students often overestimate the level of academic assistance they can receive from teachers or other academic staff. This finding resonates with the experience shared by Yuhan (China), who mentioned the disparity between her expectations of teaching approaches by teachers and the actual situation at the university:

“Now it is like studying by ourselves rather than being taught. We have to study before the class, and the teacher won't go through everything in the book step by step. Instead, the teacher is likely to jump and pick some points they feel are important, and some of the class time, we are having discussions or sharing comments. I don’t feel the teacher would find out whether you have understood or what difficulties you have”.

(Yuhan 1st interview)
From Yuhan's expression, it becomes evident that she held entirely different expectations regarding teachers' teaching methods and classroom interactions at the university, particularly when she mentioned the shift from teacher-centred teaching to student-centred learning. This disparity reflects the gap between secondary school and university education. Moreover, it indicates that teachers may have unrealistic expectations of students and underestimate the difficulties they face during the transition (Fraser & Killen, 2003; Van Der Meer et al., 2010). Pithers & Holland (2006) argue that teaching staff often make incorrect assumptions about students, and universities generally provide information based on institutional expectations. For instance, teachers may assume students to be more independent and self-motivated than they actually are (Fraser & Killen, 2003), leading to a discrepancy similar to what Yu-Han described. Additionally, Brinkworth et al. (2009) highlight the rapid adjustment, sense of responsibility, and autonomy as crucial factors for a successful transition to university, aligning with the university's expectations of students. To address this gap, they emphasise the importance of providing feedback and bridging the expectations between students and teachers.

Regarding students' time management issues, a common problem identified in our data is unrealistic expectations. In terms of the learning process, students often hold unrealistic expectations regarding course selection, the difficulty of learning materials, and the required effort and time for academic tasks. These unrealistic expectations can lead them to set overly ambitious goals and make unreasonable decisions, ultimately resulting in time management difficulties.
Furthermore, there is a gap in expectations between teachers and students in terms of teacher-student interactions. The findings of previous studies support the observations made during the interviews: unrealistic expectations from both teachers and students can contribute to time management difficulties. For instance, students may expect teachers to provide step-by-step instruction similar to their previous educational experiences, while teachers may assume that students possess sufficient maturity and independence to understand and organise their responsibilities effectively. This misalignment adds another layer of difficulty to proper time management. Whether viewed from the learning process or the teacher-student interaction perspective, time management problems stemming from unrealistic expectations are prevalent and significantly impact students' higher education experiences.

6.4.3 Digital Distractions

University students' time management issues encompass various aspects of their daily lives. On the academic front, students are responsible for attending classes, completing assignments, participating in group projects, and taking exams. In addition to these academic obligations, students also have other roles, responsibilities, and personal desires that demand their time, such as pursuing hobbies, engaging in fitness and sports activities, working part-time jobs, or maintaining relationships. These everyday occurrences can easily divert their focus and energy (Alika, 2012; Eduljee et al., 2021).
However, contemporary time management for students extends beyond mere organisation and prioritisation. With the ongoing digital revolution reshaping human behaviour and being recognised as a significant transition in human development (Raschke, 2003; Lindström, 2020), the boundaries between different tasks have become increasingly blurred. Multitasking has become a common practice for many individuals. For instance, Seemiller and Grace (2017) assert that students often divide their attention during class due to multitasking. They may be simultaneously taking notes on their devices, checking the time, searching for information, texting someone, or browsing social media. These actions have become ingrained in our everyday lives, as described by Lindström (2020): "Browsing, scrolling, checking, and streaming have become natural parts of our everyday lives" (p.9).

Certainly, several studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of smart technology and internet applications in supporting learning (Spector, 2016; Vincent-Lancrin, 2022). Some argue that smart technology can enhance equitable learning opportunities by increasing access to information (Vincent-Lancrin, 2022). Others suggest that it can improve learning efficiency, increase learner motivation, and enhance problem-solving abilities (Connelly & Miller, 2018; Witherby & Tauber, 2019). However, on the other hand, scholars have also examined digital distractions and the impact of smart technology on students' learning. Aivaz & Teodorescu (2022) assert that one of the major challenges for college students today is maintaining focus during academic studies due to their inclination to consult multiple sources of information and multitask on their digital devices (p.10). Rosen et al. (2013) discovered that students, on average, cannot concentrate for more than 3 to 5
minutes due to the distractions of social media, which can result in poor academic performance.

According to our interviewees, digital distraction is a common issue among our target students. However, it differs from other factors such as expectation gaps, lack of experience, or time-consuming jobs, which contribute to time management issues. Instead, digital distraction represents a relatively constant, microscopic impact factor. In this regard, Kraushaar & Novak (2010) provide a compelling explanation. They utilised activity-monitoring software to record undergraduate students' laptop activities during class and found that more than 60% of computer usage was considered distracting and unrelated to class material. Similarly, Leysens et al. (2016) point out that the constant influx of information brought by smart devices can diminish focus and productivity. These findings align with the responses provided by our participants during discussions on time management issues.

**Hank:** “Sometimes I sit in front of the laptop for a long time, but I just can’t finish my report. It is really strange, but it’s even hard to start working. I really hate it that way when you turn down on something else, and your tasks remain unfinished; it feels bad”.

**Researcher:** “What do you think is the main reason you can’t get your work done?”

**Hank:** “Just some silly things, I think. Sometimes when I am working on my tasks, I need to search for something online, but maybe some message just popped out, or I clicked a link and found something. Eventually, I am always browsing some other random stuff, such as buying things online or checking
out the comments of popular articles or the news shared by my friends … also I like to play some music while studying. However, every once in a while, I need to select or change the music, and it is easy that you start watching other videos, and then you won’t be productive for like one or two hours”.

(Hank 2nd interview)

“My mom and grandma video call me almost every day. It is very important for them – to make sure I am doing all right, like a well-being check. I understand it is because they care about me, but sometimes I feel a little bit pressured. For example, my mom and grandma know about my class schedule, so sometimes, they could call me at any time other than class hours. They often expect me to answer the phone immediately, especially my grandma… Sometimes the point is not about a 5- or 10-minute video call, but maybe because I need to focus on my study or anything I am doing at the moment without any interruption; I mean a whole period I can relax and don’t need to expect calls coming at any moment … I also feel a bit embarrassed to chat or make any video calls in front of others…”

(Ming 2nd interview)

Hank and Ming’s cases exemplify different manifestations of digital distraction. In Hank’s case, he illustrates a situation that many individuals in the modern world frequently encounter. With most work being intertwined with digital devices and the internet, it becomes effortless for a person to become distracted. Hank’s description also highlights an imbalance in time management. Not only is he unable to engage in other activities freely, but he also struggles to accomplish his work even when sitting in front of the
computer for extended periods. Although current research findings vary on whether digital distractions directly impact students’ academic performance (Glass & Kang, 2018; Schmidt, 2020; Eduljee, 2021), based on my observations, the connection between digital distractions and students’ time management issues appears to be quite evident.

On the other hand, Ming's case demonstrates media multitasking and interruptions. The use of social media enhances convenience in staying connected, but it also consistently disrupts her studies and social life. Similar phenomena were also observed in other interviewees. For instance, Thomas, who works as a part-time consultant in an insurance company, mentioned feeling increased pressure whenever receiving messages from clients or supervisors. Ayness from Singapore stated that she frequently checks her phone to ensure she doesn't miss any important messages, emails, or the latest news; otherwise, she may experience anxiety. While Thomas and Ayness claim that these conditions do not interfere with their learning, they agree that time management becomes more complicated as a result. Another noteworthy aspect is that the aforementioned students mentioned experiencing negative emotions related to internet usage, smart technology, or time management issues.

To summarise, our data analysis discovers the interconnectedness of digital distractions, time management issues, and negative emotions. Additionally, digital distractions shed light on the disparity between the school environment and the university setting. Students’ access to and usage of smart devices is often strictly regulated in controlled school or family environments, particularly
among Chinese students. However, in university, while some teachers may impose rules regarding technology use in the classroom, students generally have more freedom to utilise smart technology in their daily lives. Consequently, time management becomes more challenging for students. Furthermore, digital distractions can impact students' transition into higher education, similar to other learning challenges they may encounter. When first-year students grapple with time management difficulties or experience negative emotions, they are compelled to acknowledge these issues and develop strategies to address them. This process can significantly influence their learner identities.

6.5 Common Learning Challenges: Online learning

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the transition to online learning became a necessity in higher education (Aguilera-Hermina, 2020; Ali, 2020). Institutions swiftly shifted to delivering courses online during the spring of 2020 (Ali, 2020; Murphy, 2020). Examining the timeline, all participants in this study experienced the pandemic during their university careers, and both first and second-year students highlighted challenges related to online learning.

Based on the perceptions of our interviewees, we can identify three categories of online learning challenges: gaps in basic conditions, availability of academic support, and social factors. The first category, basic conditions for online learning, represents the most apparent factor that reveals the disparities in online learning experiences. Factors such as hardware requirements and essential skills needed for operating online learning platforms can significantly impact students' learning. Furthermore, these
discrepancies in conditions can also reflect potential educational inequalities.

The second category pertains to class interactions and the channels through which students can access academic support, which has predominantly shifted to online platforms. Consequently, some students found it more difficult to engage in effective learning due to the challenges associated with this transition.

Lastly, students have expressed concerns about the negative influence of social isolation resulting from lockdown measures on their studies. For instance, some students had to study from home for an entire semester during the outbreak. Once they were no longer on campus or in residence halls, it became more challenging for them to access information or engage in peer learning. These viewpoints were primarily raised by second-year interviewees who witnessed significant changes in their university lifestyle, rendering past experiences less applicable. In the subsequent section, I will provide further elaboration on the three aforementioned online learning challenges based on my findings from our target underrepresented student population.

6.5.1 Problems in Access to Online Courses

According to the data gathered from my interviews, the majority of students who reported experiencing difficulties with accessing online courses lacked prior experience with online learning. Schnieders & Moore (2021) emphasise that engaging in online learning for the first time can be overwhelming due to the unfamiliarity with the technical aspects of the online learning environment. They further suggest that students need to exert additional effort in
comprehending how to navigate the system, which consumes the time and energy that could have been allocated to academic work. Our interviews revealed a similar phenomenon in the case of Kwang (China).

“Some teachers require us to answer questions through interactive response systems. For example, an app from the university e-learning platform or a mobile app called Zuvio (出题优). However, sometimes the app is complicated, not working, or maybe the teacher is not familiar with it, so we will need to stop and wait and figure out what is wrong before we can start or continue the class. Therefore, I found it could be not reassuring… Besides, this kind of software is sometimes used by teachers to check our class attendance. The bad thing is that when you have some problem, like having difficulties operating the system or a bad connection, you not only need to fix it during class but also probably need to talk to the teacher and prove that you were in the class…”

(Kwang 2nd interview)

Kwang's case highlights two prevalent challenges in online learning. Firstly, when teachers or students encounter technical issues, it often disrupts the flow of the class, ultimately impacting students' learning experience. The use of interactive response apps or learning platforms requires students to invest additional effort in learning how to utilise them effectively, and the same applies to teachers. If students find themselves in a class where the teacher frequently grapples with technical difficulties, it is likely that the overall quality of the class will be compromised. These variations in class quality can occur unpredictably across different courses, leaving students with limited control
over the situation.

Secondly, Kwang expressed the common problem of facing computer or internet connection issues while engaging in online courses. This is a point that was also raised by other interviewees. For instance, Yuhan expressed dissatisfaction with the unstable quality of the campus Wi-Fi in the student dormitory, which poses challenges during online learning sessions.

“The quality of Wi-Fi connection in the dormitory is sometimes terrible during popular course hours, for example, Wednesday morning. It is not that the lesson cannot be processed, just that there might be some lag. As a result, if I need to do something which requires smooth live communication, such as taking an important lesson, giving a presentation, participating in group discussions, or taking an exam, I will need to find somewhere quiet and with a power supply…”

(Yuhan 2nd interview)

Yuhan’s experience exposes difficulties encountered by resident students in online learning in China. Indeed, personal devices seem to have become more familiar to people in recent decades. However, taking a good-quality online class at the university probably requires far more than owning a smartphone or a laptop. The example of Sie (China) and Antonio (Singapore) can illustrate this gap clearly.

“The first semester after the COVID outbreak, the university was closed, so we all had to take online classes at home. At that time, I mostly used my phone for classes because the internet connection at home usually couldn’t
work very well running a live online class. Even if I use my laptop, I still rely on my mobile phone’s hotspot, which sometimes makes it even slower. Finally, I found it is easier to use the smartphone… These issues could be quite annoying and stressful. Using a smartphone for taking classes is quite uncomfortable. My friends and I used to have some discussions, but you still need to sort out your way because your problems will likely differ from others, and the university cannot help your Wi-Fi quality at home…”

(Sie 2nd interview)

A gap in accessing online courses is evident from Sie's experience. She faces challenges with the quality of her online classes due to device or internet connection issues. These technical obstacles significantly impact her learning and contribute to her feelings of stress. Furthermore, Sie doesn't feel confident in receiving adequate support from university staff or her friends when encountering these problems. A similar phenomenon is observed in the case of Antonio.

“There was a time when I could not successfully join some online classes at home. The staff suggested that I should use the VPN provided by the university at first, but it still didn’t work. Then they suspect that it may be something wrong with the teacher's classroom authorisation setting. Finally, it was because some of my details in the school system were incorrect. It took like two to three weeks for this issue to be resolved. During this period, I frequently sent emails to different technical or academic departments to see if the problem could be solved. On the other hand, I needed to ask my classmate to share the class video with me if there were any. I also tried to
request slides from the teacher. It sounds stupid, and I think it is difficult to learn like this rather than participate in classes”.

(Antonio 2nd interview)

Antonio's case highlights the occurrence of random technical issues that can be challenging and time-consuming to resolve, disrupting the normal learning process. Additionally, according to his experience, universities did not have specific standards in place regarding the learning resources teachers should provide or the format in which online classes should be conducted. For certain classes, teachers did not offer slides or record class videos. In such situations, Antonio sought help from peers or engaged in self-study. This aligns with Sie's perspective of having to "sort out your own way."

In summary, the gap in accessing online courses is a common factor that contributes to students' learning challenges. Adequacy in basic conditions for online learning relies on various foundations, including personal devices, stable and reliable internet connection, a quiet and undisturbed learning space, basic online operating skills for both students and instructors and access to proper assistance when encountering technical problems. However, these factors often fall beyond students' control, and our data indicate a trend where students are left to tackle these challenges alone in the university, particularly when lacking prior online learning experience. Consequently, students' learning outcomes are likely to be affected due to the absence of necessary conditions. Moreover, scholars have also identified a link between the gap in accessing online courses and other social disparities, such as socioeconomic differences (Schnieders & Moore, 2021). For further
discussions on social justice, please refer to Chapter 9.

### 6.5.2 Lack of Perceived Teacher Presence

Another common observation among the interviewees is their general agreement that the widespread adoption of online courses by universities has made the learning process more challenging. However, only a few participants argue that online teaching has had no impact on their learning. One of the reasons behind students’ negative perceptions is their belief that it is more difficult to grasp class content effectively or receive adequate academic support. Timothy, from Singapore, openly expresses his personal learning obstacles.

“*Yes, the teacher uploads clips of teaching videos and course documents on the e-learning platform. There are instructions for the assignments, but I still can’t understand how and what to do… Everyone’s understanding seems to be different. My classmate tried to email the teacher, but he got nothing helpful. The teacher just respected the instructions again*”.

*(Timothy 2nd interview)*

Timothy's experience shed light on certain phenomena, such as students experiencing confusion and facing difficulties in communicating with their teachers. Our interviews with Singaporean and Chinese students have highlighted a significant difference between in-person and online classes, which is a decrease in interaction between students and instructors. This difference appears to contribute to the increased challenges in learning.

Hyomin, from Singapore, argues that online classes often resemble a "one-
way speech” rather than fostering effective communication. She elaborates:

“Usually, we are mute during online classes. Over time, it feels like some online classes are like this—mainly, the teacher talks, and it’s hard to see classmates. I think this makes the teaching pace faster because it’s hard for the teacher to observe our reactions… However, teachers sometimes have frequent conversations with us in the actual classroom. For example, when the teacher asks something, but we can’t respond immediately, the teacher can realise that we are confused and will stop. However, online classes rarely stop. Therefore, the teacher may not have noticed even when someone posts a question with the ‘chat’ function”.

(Hyomin 2nd interview)

Hyomin’s observation highlights certain limitations of online teaching in this particular context. She even mentioned an extreme example where the teacher continued teaching without realising that she had been disconnected. Indeed, in online classes, teachers may face challenges in promptly understanding students’ learning status and making immediate adjustments to their teaching, as they have to manage the online platform and deliver the content simultaneously. This can pose difficulties for students in comprehending the course material. Wei, too, faces similar learning challenges. She described another common method of online learning - prerecorded videos.

“I quite like prerecorded videos compared to live online classes. You have more flexibility in scheduling your time, and videos are usually shorter. But
watching a teaching video for an hour or longer is hard. I feel tired and find it difficult to concentrate continuously. I think it is because videos are more informative than classes. The good side is that you can watch the video repeatedly and stop whenever you don’t understand. The downside is that you can’t ask questions or discuss them immediately. Of course, you can e-mail professors, and they will reply, but you will have to wait, and sometimes that doesn’t help... One hand, you can’t just write many e-mails all the time; on the other hand, asking the teacher questions in a face-to-face situation is more like a continuous dialogue process; you realise what’s the problem and learn right away, rather than me writing a letter to you and waiting for your reply...”

(Wei 2nd interview)

Wei’s statement shows the advantage of in-person discussions when students do not understand something. This view combines Jack’s (China) and Chang’s (Singapore) perceptions. Two students are first-generation. Jack mentioned that interacting with teachers in the classroom is a relatively more comfortable way for him than seeking help from online consulting programs or academic advisors. This is closer to the way he solved problems in high school. From another angle, Chang gave an example which can link classroom interaction with a positive transition experience for first-generation students.

“I think being in an environment and getting along with other people is good. This makes me feel safe because I can learn from observing... I once took a class with only 15 people. At first, I was not used to it because the teacher
often talked to us. I felt nervous. Then I found it was good to work with these people. We got to know each other and had many discussions, and the teacher gave us lots of feedback… This helps me understand how things work in the university and gives me a sense of belonging.”

(Chang 2nd interview)

Chang's case exemplifies the importance of class interaction, not only in terms of first-generation students' learning but also in their overall transition experience. However, establishing a close interaction in an online learning environment may not be easy, as revealed by the experiences of our students. With the shift to online teaching during the peak of the COVID-19 lockdown, there has been a noticeable decrease in interaction between teachers and students. This transition has posed learning challenges for some students. For instance, Ting mentioned that she used to discuss questions with the teacher during breaks in the middle of the class whenever possible. She believes that the reduction in in-person interactions has made it more difficult for her to solve learning problems. Similarly, Ying also expresses a preference for in-person classes.

“It is very different between online classes and in-person classes. It's much easier to focus on the class and understand in a real classroom because teachers express more clearly… Only when we are in the same space can we know each other. I mean between teachers and us, and I feel more motivated if we have a good relationship. However, for some online classes, even after a whole semester, the teacher still doesn’t know who we are”.

(Ying 2nd interview)
In summary, based on the experiences of the interviewees mentioned above, including Ying, it can be concluded that online teaching reduces opportunities for interaction with teachers and removes certain factors that contribute to learning and transition. On the other hand, real-time face-to-face interaction with teachers is generally considered beneficial for learning. For some of our focal underrepresented students, the decrease in student-teacher interaction has made it more challenging for them to comprehend class content and integrate into the university environment.

6.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented the key findings regarding the higher education experiences of our target students in our focused Asian institutions, specifically focusing on their learning and fit-in experiences during the transition. Furthermore, two of the most frequently encountered learning challenges were thoroughly discussed. Building upon the findings presented in this chapter, the subsequent chapter will delve deeper into the emergence of distinct learner identities among underrepresented students, as revealed through the data analysis.
Chapter 7
Findings Two – Underrepresented Students’ Learner Identities

7.1 Introduction

After Chapter 6 provided an overview and general understanding of our target underrepresented students and their higher education (HE) experiences, this chapter aims to delve deeper into their learner identities in elite universities in Singapore and Shanghai. This exploration is based on the comprehensive data analysis, including reflective thematic analysis conducted through NVivo, as well as my interpretations.

Through the exploration and analysis of all the interview data applying a thematic analysis approach, four distinct and prominent learner identities have emerged among our 32 participants. These four learner identities serve to conclude and lead us to discover our target students' higher education experience as learners in universities. They can be understood as key narratives that the students often offered to describe themselves in these contexts. They reflect the unique positions and perspectives of underrepresented students in Asian elite institutions. These four identities are the ‘Successful Elite University Student (SES)’, the ‘Responsible Student Meeting Expectations (RS)’, the ‘Reflexively Negotiating Diverse Identities (RNDI)’, and the ‘Competitive Player for Social and Financial Positions (CPP)’. Each of them represents the various ways in which students manifest and express themselves as learners.
As previously conceptualised in Chapter 3, learner identity refers to students’ self-perception and understanding of themselves as learners. These identities influence and are shaped by their attitudes towards learning, ability to navigate challenges, development of problem-solving strategies, and overall perspectives on higher education. These aspects reflect their individual encounters in higher education, which are crucial in examining whether they have received a quality university education and have been treated fairly within this current research context. Additionally, this chapter will incorporate and discuss relevant literature related to learner identity. Like Chapter 6, some critical quotations extracted from the interviews will be provided as supporting evidence for the discourses and interpretations presented.

7.2 The Successful Elite University Student ‘SES’ Identity

A notable phenomenon wherein underrepresented students in elite universities frequently face immense pressure to succeed, as Chapter 6 has previously discussed. This phenomenon gives rise to discussions on various associated issues. One perspective that offers an in-depth understanding of this phenomenon could be the successful elite university student (SES) learner identity. The SES learner identity elucidates the pressure underrepresented students experience to excel in elite universities, stemming from external influences, societal or institutional expectations, and intense competition during admissions. In the subsequent discussion, I will delve deeper into the first type of common learner identity among our target students - the learner as a successful elite university student - providing relevant evidence and explanations to support my analysis.
7.2.1 Formation of the SES Identity

First and foremost, before delving into the content of the SES identity, it is essential to understand its roots and formation. In my investigation into the sources of students’ SES learner identity in elite universities, I have identified two distinct phases based on timing: pre-enrollment and post-enrollment. In this section, I will focus on elucidating the factors that contribute to students’ SES learner identity focusing on the pre-enrollment layer. Essentially, there are two primary factors that position students at this initial stage:

Succession in the Admission Battle

Elite universities are renowned for their high selectivity and prestigious reputations. This awareness is evident among our target students in Singapore and Shanghai, as most of them clearly expressed in interviews about understandings among general social perspectives on prestigious universities and their motivations for pursuing those. In situations where the demand exceeds the available seats, such as through standardised higher education entrance exams or other admission programs, gaining admission to prestigious universities becomes the result of intense competition.

Therefore, when students achieve the status of being enrolled in an elite university, they are frequently labelled as ‘the intelligent ones’ who have prevailed over the majority, commonly referred to as successful students. This SES label is not only bestowed upon them by society but is also embedded in institutional expectations. From a societal standpoint, even before embarking on their higher education journey, students are compelled to embrace this new identity as successful students, regardless of their personal perceptions.
An illustrative example of this phenomenon is highlighted in the case study of Jack, who gained fame in his high school after being admitted to an elite university (refer to Case Study 1 in Chapter 8).

At the institutional level, in elite universities, students are naturally assumed that they have been selected through a rigorous process or that they are intuitively intelligent. This presumption could significantly influence the expectations placed on students, campus culture, or some of the interactions between academic staff and students. To explain this, Kai and Wei’s description is quite specific:

“Of course, we all know our university is among one the top in China, and we are probably expected to be at the same level. In fact, there are lots of scenarios on campus that always remind you of this. Sometimes you see some brilliant people with amazing achievements, for example, a guy I know who once won an international mathematic competition, and you don’t see himself or others feeling too surprised about it. I don’t know, if it’s me, I will be super excited about it. However, it feels like that’s something normal to happen at this university…”.

(Kai 2nd interview)

“During my first semester, once there was a class assignment in which we had to do an analysis of China’s inland economic development, and the limited maximum word count was 4,000. However, the teacher uploaded an example from our seniors; this example report has over 50 pages, which is
Because of this, nobody would dare to hand in a report which is really at 4,000 words. Instead, crazily, everyone tried to imitate the example report and managed to make theirs at such a scale. It was during the middle of the term; I was so busy and stressed. I eventually achieved something like 35 pages.”

(Wei 2nd interview)

The experiences of Kai and Wei both underscore the natural expectation for students in elite universities to achieve outstanding academic outcomes or a high level of intelligence. Such expectations align with students' SES learner identity. Not only are students labelled as successors upon their successful admission, but they are also further expected and moulded to embody the characteristics of a successful person. Even in instances where certain academic requirements may appear unreasonable, as Wei once encountered, students still strive to meet them driven by their adherence to the SES learner identity.

Past Successful Experiences in Secondary Education

Another common source of the SES identity is derived from students' past successful experiences in secondary education. This is as well closely tied to the logic of admission. As previously mentioned, elite universities are characterised by their high selectivity. Despite the growing emphasis on

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24 Using Microsoft Word, 4,000 Chinese words usually are around only 4-6 pages with a font size of 12. According to Wei, the example report did follow the limitation of 4,000 words for 'the main body' of the analysis. Other additional pages were under the section of 'Appendices'.
promoting diversity in students' social backgrounds and introducing more flexible admission routes by universities, these changes do not necessarily include students with poor academic performance in school or junior college. A clear indication of this is that most enrollment programs still consider students' grade point average (GPA) as a crucial criterion for admission. Therefore, students who can gain acceptance into elite universities must either excel in standardised exams or possess a sufficiently good academic record. This finding echoes the data from my research, which indicates that most of our interviewees perceive themselves to have achieved academic success during their secondary education.

The successful academic experiences of students during their secondary education indicate their ability to cultivate effective learning methods, leading to high grades in school/junior college and success in the competitive admission process. In other words, the students we are focusing on, who have gained admission to elite universities, typically possess their own methods for achieving success. Moreover, their acceptance into prestigious universities serves as validation for the effectiveness of their learning methods. As a result, the acquisition of the SES identity often takes place early, usually before their enrollment in the university.

In summary, the SES learner identity is evident among the majority of our interviewees. Internally, it can be observed and inferred from their expressions, attitudes, descriptions of learning experiences, how they navigate challenges, and the confidence they exude. Externally, the SES learner identity is shaped by social and institutional factors and stems from
two primary sources: their successions in the admission process and their previous positive learning experiences in secondary education. Overall, the SES identity is both a societal label and a natural outcome of students’ educational experiences. It influences how students perceive themselves as having efficient methods of learning and shape their expectations within the university setting. In the next section, I will delve deeper into the SES learner identity of our target underrepresented students.

7.2.2 The Tendency of the SES Learner Identity

Building upon the previous discussion, the SES learner identity is significantly shaped by social factors associated with the essence of elite universities, including their reputation, desirability, and high selectivity. Students' prior positive learning achievements in secondary education are as well an important root of students' SES learner identity. From either point of understanding, this identity is usually established before students actually step on their higher education journey. Regardless of their personal perceptions, students are labelled and subjected to societal expectations as successful people once they become students of elite universities. For underrepresented students, the SES learner identity encompasses multiple dimensions. I have identified three key tendencies that define this learner identity: Variable, primarily reinforced by academic factors and cultivating other positive identities and attitudes.

Variable and Unstable

The SES learner identity is often characterised as unstable and often variable and significantly influenced by students' ongoing learning
experiences and academic achievements in the university. As highlighted in Chapter 6, some students mention that although they are generally considered intelligent to be enrolled in an elite university by others, they still experience strong anxiety and a lack of confidence when they are uncertain about their intelligence or how their academic performance compares to their peers at the beginning of their higher education journey. The performance of students' SES identity seems to vary among individuals depending on their early-stage academic evaluations. Some students continue to achieve better academic outcomes after a major exam or the first semester, while others do not. This establishes a new academic hierarchy that acknowledges students' relative academic position in the university, which significantly affects their confidence.

The SES learner identity is also influenced by the effective learning methods that students developed during their prior experiences in secondary education, which led to positive learning outcomes. These experiences often serve as a reference or default approach to learning when students initially enter elite universities. Our interview results indicate that some students tend to revert to their old studying strategies when faced with new challenges in university learning. However, our interview data also highlights one of the most common learning challenges: the gap between secondary school and university. This implies that some efficient learning methods that previously brought students good academic outcomes at the secondary level may no longer be efficient in the university context.

For underrepresented students, the SES learner identity may exhibit greater
volatility. This can be examined from two perspectives. Firstly, a certain percentage of our interviewees are first-generation students. While their SES learner identities are also influenced by their success in the admission process to elite universities or their prior experiences in secondary education, they often lack the family support that contributes to the stability of such identities. For instance, students whose parents have undergone higher education or have similar elite university backgrounds can serve as important references for them when facing learning challenges. Apart from providing guidance, families with greater cultural or social capital are more likely to offer positive support, which could possibly contribute to the stability of students' SES learner identity. In this regard, Hyomin's observation serves as valuable evidence.

“I have a friend whose parents are capable of arranging for her to conduct interviews with people who used to have held high-level positions in the enterprise for a report related to business management. While this may not be something prohibited in the university, I personally find it quite unfair.”

(Hyomin 2nd interview)

In Hyomin's case, we can observe that certain families provide greater support for their children's learning. Other Chinese interviewees also provide similar examples where some of their peers avail private academic writing services or personal tutors to enhance their academic performance. From the perspective of learner identity, students capable of additional support and resources for learning could possibly be more advantageous in maintaining stable SES learner identities. Therefore, for our target underrepresented
students, who often come from disadvantaged backgrounds or are first-generation students, the development of their SES learner identity largely depends on the ongoing academic outcomes they achieve throughout their higher education journey, which tend to be relatively unstable and various from time to time.

Secondly, over half of our participants were admitted to elite universities through special admission programs (SAPs), and this sometimes also brings more volatility to students’ SES learner identity. Although SAPs are often designed to promote diversity and attract students from various backgrounds, offering a more flexible approach to admissions, still, securing a place in elite universities through these pathways is never easy. For our target students who had gone through SAPs, the SES identity stemming from the admission process is relatively more complex compared to other students. On the one hand, being admitted to an elite university is undoubtedly a significant achievement. From a general public perspective, people do not typically differentiate between students admitted through SAPs and other kinds of admission routes; the reputation of the university holds more importance. From this point, our underrepresented students admitted through SAPs face similar societal expectations as their peers. Not to mention that many of them bear the added burden of being first-generation students. On the other hand, within the university campus, the learner identity of these students as successful learners can sometimes be more uncertain compared to other students, as they have never proven themselves through the ‘ordinary competition’.
In other words, the SES learner identities of SAP students are often not firmly secured in the early stages of their higher education journey. During this period, their identities as successful elite university students have not yet been supported by their actual learning outcomes within their respective universities, and this is likely to bring them extra pressure to prove themselves. Additionally, underrepresented students are more likely to lack additional academic support or guidance than some peers. As they transition into higher education, encountering negative learning experiences or challenging obstacles (such as time management issues) can weaken their SES learner identities. Consequently, these experiences can also have a detrimental effect on students' confidence in managing their learning.

**Academic Performance as the Fundamental Determinant**

Based on our interview data, we have observed both directions of trajectories in the development of our participants' SES learner identities. For some individuals, like Ming or Ying from Case Study 2 (refer to Chapter 8), their SES learner identities tend to become more solid and resilient as they accumulate more experiences in higher education. However, for others, such as Timothy and Ban, there is a notable decline in their SES learner identities over time.

Delving deeper into these distinct trajectories, the discussion on the formation of underrepresented students' learner identities in Chapter 3 provides a useful framework for analysis. The identified factors that influence learner identities, as outlined in Chapter 3, exhibit varying degrees of impact on students' SES learner identities, and this observation is further
substantiated by evidence from our interview data.

Overall, students' academic performance emerges as the primary determinant of the strength of their SES learner identity. Our data reveals that while students generally acknowledge the diverse definitions of success at the university level, many also recognise that academic achievement remains the fundamental aspect within elite universities. In this regard, Tsai and Armin present different observations that ultimately converge upon the same conclusion.

**Researcher:** “How do you regard a student to be successful in your university?”

**Tsai:** “I would say to learn and master all the professional knowledge or develop skills for employment in the future.”

**Researcher:** “Anything other than academic scope?”

**Tsai:** “Developing social life, I guess. It’s good to meet different people at the university, or maybe getting an internship will be nice…but I think academic learning is the most basic part, after all, the fundamental reason for us to be here in the university is to study.”

(Tsai 1st interview)

“If you are not academically brilliant, you won’t be respected as a typical student who can represent this university. Those who are known by everyone else, no matter what achievement they are remembered for, basically are all very good at studying. I think it is quite reasonable that smart people can do anything well…Learning outcomes are the most fundamental thing that makes
As we observe, despite their differing expressions, both Tsai and Armin view academic achievements as the fundamental criteria for students to be deemed successful in elite universities. Tsai’s perspective reflects a common traditional attitude within the Confucian heritage context, which places a high value on study as the foremost priority in education. On the other hand, Armin’s case offers insights into the notion of “the right to speak” as an elite university student. From either standpoint, if a student does not excel in their university studies, it signifies a noticeable weakness within the elite university context, making it challenging for them to be recognised as a successful student. These perspectives also shed light on one of the common reasons why students often experience pressure to succeed.

In addition to academic success, social relationships also play a significant role in the formation of the SES learner identity. A good example of this can be seen in the case of Chang from Case Study 4. Chang’s case stands out as he exhibits the typical qualities associated with the SES learner identity, despite lacking a sense of self-perceived academic achievements that substantiate his identity as a successful learner. Instead, his SES learner identity is rooted in the extensive social connections he possesses (refer to Chapter 8). Regarding the connection between social relationships and the SES identity, Yuhan’s case offers valuable insights into how students' development in social
relationships, self-confidence, and the formation of their SES learner identity are interconnected.

**Yuhan:** “I think successful university life is you do well both in obtaining a good grade and having a fulfilling social life, but the latter is something I am not quite satisfied with myself…Studying is something easier for me. I am an introvert person. Sometimes I wish I could have better social skills like some people do. On some social occasions, like the ball, I normally feel a bit uncomfortable and will likely stick with my close friends who live together in the same dorm.”

**Researcher:** “Do you find it difficult to develop social relations with different people in the university?”

**Yuhan:** “Ummm… Yes, I think it could be challenging for me. Sometimes I can make it smoothly, but sometimes I just don’t feel confident at all. I am not a cool or popular student at all, however, sometimes I kind of imagine myself having my university life like theirs…”

(Yuhan 2\textsuperscript{nd} interview)

Yuhan’s case serves as an illustration that while she doesn’t display any concerns about her academic performance, she exhibits a lack of confidence in social situations. This lack of accomplishment in social aspects diminishes the prominence of her SES learner identities. This stands in stark contrast to students like Ying from Case Study 2, who have managed to experience positive outcomes in both academic and social domains, thus solidifying their SES learner identities (refer to Chapter 8).
In summary, based on the discussions above, we can conclude that the primary factor influencing students' SES learner identities is their academic performance. However, it is important to note that possessing SES learner identities does not necessarily imply having top grades in elite universities. Rather, it signifies that students have a secure self-perception of their relative academic position within the university. This further indicates that they have developed effective learning methods that enable them to meet the basic academic expectations in elite educational settings. When students exhibit stable SES learner identities, it tends to suggest a positive transition into higher education.

On the other hand, students' social relationships also play a role in shaping their SES learner identities. As demonstrated by the cases of Chang and Yuhan, the level of social achievement can significantly impact the distinctiveness of the SES learner identities displayed by students. In general, we observe diverse trajectories in the development of SES learner identities among our target students. This further supports our earlier discussion that these identities are variable and encompass a wealth of details related to their transition experiences.

**Cultivating Other Positive Identities and Attitudes**

So far, we have established that the SES identity is a kind of significant learner identity commonly observed among students in elite Asian universities. It is influenced by factors such as the nature of elite universities, societal values, and students' ability to adapt to university learning and could explain students' pressures to succeed in elite surroundings. In this section,
our attention will be directed towards examining the implications of students' SES learner identities.

Upon exploring our research data, it becomes evident that students' SES learner identities have a profound impact not only on their overall confidence in elite universities but also on the cultivation of other positive identities and attitudes. A noteworthy tendency arises among many students: the more stable their SES learner identities, the stronger their sense of belonging to their respective universities. This aligns with Osterman (2000), that learners' sense of belonging is highly related to their academic engagement. Building upon previous discussions, this can be interpreted as when students fulfil the fundamental social expectation of being intelligent and academically proficient (at least not below average), they experience a greater level of comfort and confidence in embracing their identity as elite university students.

Furthermore, as previously discussed in the same section, students' SES learner identities serve as a reflection of their transition experiences into higher education and specifically highlight the development of their learning abilities. At this point, the scope of the SES learner identity also extends to encompass their ability to understand the university value systems and to fit in. With this understanding, it is reasonable to assert that the SES learner identity can strengthen students' capacity to face challenges and engage in problem-solving at universities. Notably, our interview data consistently support this perspective.

“Although from my point of view now, taking eight courses in my first
semester was definitely a crazy decision, and I was indeed super desperate at that time, it is actually a precious learning experience. Just like people say: what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. By surviving through that experience, I not only learned how to organise my learning schedule better but also developed a tougher mindset. After that, when I encounter difficulties, I often think that since I can solve that challenge before, so can I this time.”

(Wei 2nd interview)

Wei’s case demonstrates that her SES learner identity became more solid as she successfully completed all her academic tasks in the first semester and gained a better understanding of the university environment. Moreover, the increasing stability of her SES learner identity has also strengthened her ability to face challenges with a more positive attitude. It is evident that her confidence in her own abilities has significantly grown.

In conclusion, revisiting the concept of the SES learner identity highlights its multifaceted nature. As discussed in this section, students’ SES learner identities can impose pressures on our target underrepresented students while also having positive implications. Furthermore, these identities are closely intertwined with students’ development of their identity as elite university students and their overall higher education experiences. Moving forward, the next section will delve into another common learner identity that emerged from the data analysis of interviews with our target students: the learner as responsible student meeting expectations identity.
7.3 The Responsible Student Meeting Expectations ‘RS’ Identity

The responsible student meeting expectations (RS) identity, alongside the SES identity, is a prevalent tendency among our focused underrepresented students, highlighting their distinct position within elite universities. It serves as a comprehensive framework that enables us to explore the process through which students derive meaning in their pursuit of higher education. Moreover, it offers detailed explanations for various phenomena that emerged from our interview data in Chapter 6. These encompass the pressures experienced by underrepresented students in their quest for success, the determination displayed by some participants to complete their current university programs despite losing interest in their chosen fields, and the common challenges associated with time management in learning. By adopting the RS identity perspective, we gain valuable insights that address these inquiries and observations. The ensuing paragraphs will delve further into this perspective to provide a more profound comprehension.

7.3.1 Formation of the RS Identity

Establishing a clear understanding of how students’ RS identity is shaped can be seen as an exploration of why our targeted underrepresented students in the Asian higher education context exhibit a tendency to view university education as a mission. In this context, students are like ‘mission achievers’. Based on our analysis of research data, I have identified the two primary sources that contribute to the development of students’ RS identity among our participants.
Investing in Higher Education: Embracing Responsibility and Commitment

For many of our underrepresented students, being accepted into the most desirable and globally ranked world-class universities is an exhilarating experience often described as a ‘dream come true’ or ‘something I never thought possible before.’ However, alongside the excitement, there is also a significant sense of responsibility and commitment and the accompanying pressure that cannot be overlooked when understanding underrepresented students’ higher education experiences.

As discussed in preceding chapters (refer to Chapters 1, 3, 6), higher education is often perceived as a significant investment by individuals and families, requiring substantial resources such as finances, time, and effort. In our research context, it is common to observe that these considerations extend beyond the individual level and become a family issue. From the perspective of social mobility, higher education offers access to ‘positional goods’ that contribute to social prestige and income-earning potential (Hirsch, 1976;Marginson, 2006). Pursuing higher education can provide individuals with better preparation for the job market and potentially increase their value and competitiveness. Additionally, it is commonly associated with bringing improvement to their families. However, before the anticipated benefits materialise, the decision to invest in higher education carries certain risks or brings changes that can impact the entire family.

Among our underrepresented students, the majority, with the exception of a few who qualify for scholarships, either obtain study loans or rely on financial
support from their families to cover the costs of their higher education. In the case of my participants, the latter scenario is predominant. This financial dependence tends not only to be a burden to the family but also significantly influences how students perceive and shape their identities as university students and are closely intertwined with a sense of responsibility. An illustrative example is Ying from Case Study 2, who demonstrates a strong motivation to attain a university degree and enter the job market promptly to contribute to the family's financial expenses. Moreover, there is a hint of guilt in her demeanour for relying on her family's financial support (refer to Chapter 8). Another supporting example is the case of Sie, which further sheds light on the potential impact of investing in higher education on the family:

“Because I study at the university in Shanghai, my mom quit her original job and moved to Nantong, which is about two hours away from Shanghai. She wants to be at a closer distance to me and says it would be easier to take care of me. My dad is still working in Chengdu. So, currently, my parents and I are living separately in three different places…Although I have told my mom that you don’t need to do that, it seems that this is the way she prefers. I can understand she feels lonely at home without me, and in recent years she’s not close to my dad. My parents are turning into their early sixties, they are getting old, and somehow, I feel bad about leaving them and going to Shanghai for university…”

(Sie 2nd interview)

Sie's case extends our attention to the impact of investing in higher education on families beyond a financial perspective. While the value of the
opportunity to study at a prestigious university is clear to people, it can bring about significant changes in family dynamics. In Sie's situation, it is understandable that these sudden changes have affected her mother. She is fully aware that these transformations in the family's life are a direct result of her pursuit of higher education, creating a sense of responsibility and commitment. Consequently, she feels compelled to give her all and make the most of this opportunity. This perspective offers a reasonable explanation as to why students often persevere in completing their university degrees despite various challenges and why quitting becomes an incredibly difficult decision for them.

**Family and Social Expectations**

Another significant factor influencing the formation of students' RS identities is the presence of expectations, both from families and societies. Regarding external expectations, family expectations play a prominent role. Through my interviews with the participants, it became evident that our focused underrepresented students do not exclusively come from financially disadvantaged families. In fact, some of the interviewees perceived their families as financially capable. However, regardless of their financial circumstances, families consistently exhibited a strong willingness to support their children's pursuit of higher education. This commonly observed value in both Singapore and China is deeply ingrained in certain traditional cultural factors.

In the context of the Confucian heritage, education holds a distinct reverence. It embodies the belief that studying in a traditional manner is not
only refined but also represents the most esteemed path to social mobility. Additionally, there is an ideal for education that success is attained through diligent effort. Consequently, it is the duty of parents to provide their children with adequate resources, while it falls upon the children to exert their utmost effort in their studies. In the contemporary era, this translates to achieving educational success. Specifically, it means obtaining degrees from prestigious universities in my research context. It is evident that students are driven by a clear mission to achieve in this regard.

For our underrepresented students, both the traditional perspective on education and family expectations can be extended to a societal level. When they gain admission to prestigious institutions of higher education, societal expectations also come into play. Lao Wang's case provides a compelling illustration of this phenomenon.

“Several days before my departure to Shanghai, my father organised a dinner in the restaurant, inviting some relatives and friends. The topics of conversation were around the university and my plans for the future…There are some things the elders repeatedly told me that night like I have to achieve success in the university as soon as possible and provide my father with a comfortable life, or I will definitely earn lots of money as a graduate from a prestigious university. Some also told me that I must study hard…”

(Lao Wang 2nd interview)

Lao Wang's experience exemplifies common societal perspectives regarding higher education, which are closely tied to the improvement of the
family's circumstances and the potential for greater prosperity. Furthermore, the phrase 'You must study hard'\textsuperscript{25} echoes the traditional values and mindset toward education prevalent in the context of Confucian heritage. It underscores the belief that academic success is the fundamental essence of education. These societal expectations shape the desired character and traits of university students, based on collective cultural conditions, and emphasise the responsibilities they are expected to fulfil.

In conclusion, the RS identity is prominently exhibited by our target underrepresented students in elite Asian universities. Its origins can be traced back to the investment perspective, as students usually rely on study loans or financial support from their families to afford a university education. The former source of funding entails the pressure of future repayment, while the latter is associated with a sense of responsibility and commitment, aligning with societal expectations. The RS identity encompasses the expected qualities and nature of elite university students. Moving forward, the following section will delve into the specific traits that define the RS learner identity, as uncovered through my research analysis.

### 7.3.2 The Tendency of the RS Learner Identity

In this section, I will delve into the tendency of the RS learner identity. Firstly, it exhibits a distinct sense of purpose. As previously discussed within

\textsuperscript{25} The phrase "You must study hard" (Chinese: 你一定要用功讀書 or 你一定要好好讀書) is frequently echoed by elders as well in my life, and I believe many individuals have encountered similar sentiments within the context of Confucian heritage. This statement implies more than simply exerting effort in studying; it also encompasses a utilitarian mindset. In my interpretation, it signifies the imperative to achieve academic success.
this section, students’ missions in universities stem from practical considerations and societal expectations surrounding the character and traits of elite university students and higher education. The former may encompass financial pressures faced by students and their families when it comes to financing their education. The latter, deeply intertwined with social mobility, family expectations, and societal values, may manifest as a sense of responsibility or commitment. In essence, both elements contribute to the fulfilment of a fundamental purpose: obtaining a valuable diploma from a prestigious university. This accomplishment serves as students’ foundational responsibility and measure of success throughout their higher education journey. Thus, the RS learner identity takes shape. In the subsequent section, I will provide further insights into how students engage in learning within the university environment from the perspective of the RS learner identity.

Time-Pressed Mindsets

Two recurring phenomena are frequently observed among our target students which are deeply connected with the RS learner identity. Firstly, the majority of participants strive to graduate on time or expedite their graduation process. This sentiment was particularly evident among the 16 Singaporean students I interviewed, which is not limited to male students who usually already spent extra two years in the army. Secondly, time management emerges as the most prevalent learning challenge faced by our target students. The following paragraphs delve into the first phenomenon and examine the perspectives of Thomas, Melissa, and Kwang to shed light on the matter:
“A university degree is like a must-have nowadays. You have it, you are only at the same starting point; if you don’t have it, you won’t get any high-end job… I regard it as a necessary process, but the point is to get a good job in the future… I do have a part-time job now, I feel ok, my grade is ok, it doesn’t need to be perfect, and I plan to graduate in four years.”

(Thomas 1st interview)

“No, I am not going to apply to graduate school. I want to get employed right after graduation. Four years is quite long enough, and I haven’t started earning money.”

(Melissa 1st interview)

Researcher: “If you don’t feel interested in your current major now, why don’t you consider making some change?”

Kwang: “It’s too late to start over again, and I don’t really want to spend more time on this, and it’s hard to be sure I’ll like it if I change my major to something else.”

(Kwang 2nd interview)

The aforementioned cases reflect how students attribute paramount importance to graduating on time, driven by the perception of time spent in university as a cost. In essence, students display a strong aversion to ‘wasting’ any additional time on campus without yielding economic productivity. Furthermore, students often express concern about aligning their life schedules with societal expectations. For instance, they frequently refer to age and assert that individuals should naturally attain financial independence
or establish a stable occupation at a certain age. This mindset can also be explained through a societal expectation perspective, as it provides individuals with a framework of how an ordinary life should unfold within the broader social context.

Based on this understanding, the RS learner identity can be seen as a component of this societal structure, compelling students to fulfill their mission - graduating on time, achieving financial independence, and becoming an economic producer by a specific age or within a certain timeframe. Such thoughts appear to be deeply ingrained in a certain percentage of the students I interviewed.

Students' RS learner identities serve as constant reminders of their missions as both elite university students and underrepresented individuals. Whether it is the need to repay study loans, shoulder family responsibilities, or meet societal expectations, these factors provide clues into why students often face immense pressure to succeed. Among the various missions that students pursue in university, I discovered that the pursuit of timely graduation has a significant impact on students' learning experiences. This, in turn, leads us to the second prevalent phenomenon observed among our interviewees which we mentioned earlier: the occurrence of learning challenges related to time management issues.

Some students adopt the strategy of enrolling in as many courses as possible during the first two years or creating a tightly packed timetable in order to ensure timely graduation without the risk of program extension (refer
to Chapter 6). However, this approach often presents additional challenges for students in terms of scheduling, leaving them with limited time for studying. As a result, their learning quality is likely to be affected.

In summary, students' RS learner identities often lead to a sense of time pressure, influenced by their perceptions of their personal circumstances and various societal expectations. This affects their outlook on university life, future plans, and their approach to learning. The next section focuses on the analysis of the learning attitudes embedded in students' RS learner identities.

Utility Oriented Learning Attitude

Based on the earlier discussions, students' RS learner identities exhibit a clear sense of purpose. Whether it is the expectations of timely graduation or the ultimate goal of obtaining a university diploma, these missions contribute to the cultivation of an attitude that prioritises utility as the foundation for decision-making. When examining the learning experiences of our target students in their universities, I discover ample evidence that aligns with this perspective.

**Researcher:** “You mentioned that you were interested in Chinese Classics last time. Have you ever taken any related courses at the university so far?”

**Ming:** “No, I have never taken any related courses at the university. Normally, my course schedule is quite well-arranged, so it would be hard to take any planned course away just to fit the time for other unnecessary courses specifically… Anyway, I can also read classics online or elsewhere.”

(Ming 2nd interview)
**Researcher:** “What do you consider as important criteria when you are deciding which course to sign up for?”

**Antonio:** “I will take the required courses as my priority. For other courses, the time of that course must be arrangeable and not overlap with other courses.”

(Antonio 1st interview)

**Ayness:** “For me, I prefer courses which are useful and can help my future career development.”

(Ayness 1st interview)

The cases of Ming, Antonio and Ayness exemplify a clear sense of logic when discussing their course scheduling and preferences. Their approach is rational, practical, and, most importantly, driven by utility, which aligns with the tendency of the RS learner identity. In fact, the responses given by them also reflect a prevailing atmosphere I often perceive among our target students, that they usually show a kind of conservative attitude. It is rare to see students leaving room for exploration or pursuing uncertain paths. Instead, they tend to make decisions with certainty, ensuring that they are on the right track to accomplish their missions.

Some students have even mentioned employing more extreme learning strategies. For instance, in order to secure a strong academic performance for graduate school applications, they deliberately opt for courses with more lenient grading standards. Such behaviour further illustrates the impact of the
RS learner identities. As elite university students burdened with multiple commitments and societal expectations, the pursuit of their missions often takes precedence over their personal interests in studying, emotional well-being, and even the overall quality of education at universities.

In summary, students’ RS learner identities encompass the various expectations placed upon them as elite university students. These identities shape distinct learner attitudes observed among our underrepresented students, characterised by efficiency, rationality, and a focus on utility. The RS learner identity allows students to establish a clear sense of purpose in their pursuit of prestigious higher education. It serves as a stabilising force during challenges and difficulties. However, due to its strong emphasis on purposefulness, there is a potential risk of limiting students' willingness and opportunities to explore alternative possibilities throughout their university journey.

7.4 The Reflexively Negotiating Diverse Identities ‘RNDI’
Identity

The reflexively negotiating diverse identities belong to the third commonly observed and identified kind of identity among our target underrepresented students in elite universities. Unlike the previously discussed SES and RS identities, which tend to be continuously present in students, the reflexively negotiating diverse identities (RNDI) identity is more intermittent in nature. It works with the contrast between students’ underrepresented and elite identities and serves as a key perspective in addressing identity conflicts and tensions frequently encountered by students. Additionally, various phenomena
observed during students’ transition and learning experiences, as discussed in Chapter 6, can be better understood by considering the perspective of the RNDI identity. This includes issues such as lack of confidence or negative attitudes towards online courses. In the following paragraphs, I will focus on clarifying the sources of students' RNDI identities.

7.4.1 Formation of the RNDI Identity

Students’ RNDI identities can be observed in various scenarios, primarily stemming from social categorisation. When individuals are classified according to specific labelling criteria or logic, they tend to perceive their own distinctiveness within their surroundings, thus becoming representatives of a particular group. In the context of my research, the participants were defined as ‘underrepresented students’ in elite Asian universities, which is a result of the same categorisation logic. Defining them as such, in translation means to put focus on their unique characteristics that stand in contrast to the prevailing environment of elite universities.

Therefore, the RNDI identity emerges intermittently, signifying the emergence of contrast, both within and outside the campus. In the following section, I will delve into discussions regarding both aspects of the RNDI identity.

Students’ Underrepresented Backgrounds

According to the categorisation logic used in my research on underrepresented students (as discussed in Chapter 5), the classification of students as ‘underrepresented’ does not necessarily imply that they constitute
an absolute minority within elite universities based on statistical data. Rather, it refers to certain tendencies exhibited by these students that contrast with the prevailing nature of elite universities in Asia.

Following this trail, our participants come from specific underrepresented backgrounds, which are differentiated by various factors such as cultural, geographical, capital, or expectations. These factors influence their perceptions of the differences between themselves and the elite university surrounding, including values, habitual behaviour patterns, and social interactions. Students who possess these distinguishing qualities are aware of them, articulate them to others, or feel a lack of respect based on these differences, these all contribute to what can be termed as their RNDI identities. To illustrate this point, let us examine the cases of Xiawen and Hank as examples.

"Because I am from Xingjiang, so people always regard me as the Uyghurs, but I am Chinese. At this university, only a few people are from Xingjiang, so I am frequently identified or remembered as ‘the girl from Xingjiang’…Some also call me ‘Dilreba26’ as a nickname, I don’t mind…However, something I don’t really like is that people sometimes have a thought that for us students in Xingjiang, it is easier to be admitted to top universities, or as soon as people learn where I am from, they might start to say every single thing they know about Xingjiang, which usually contains lots of strange perspectives or misunderstanding. I feel tired of explaining these things every time."

26 Dilreba Dilmurat (ئيلىبە دەئەوەرەت) is a famous Chinese actress of Uyghur ethnicity.
“When I was assisting in organising hall activities, my colleagues complained that some freshmen thought the activity fees were too expensive. Our colleagues were quite displeased with this. However, to some extent, I can understand this feeling. Just like when I first entered university, I was also frightened by the fact that university life requires spending so much money.”

In Xiawen’s case, she serves as the representative of Xinjiang within her social circle. Her friends naturally associate her with anything related to Xinjiang. Through her interactions with people, Xiawen can discern the stereotypes typically associated with individuals from her group. On a different note, Hank’s case demonstrates that some students’ concerns about the cost of university social life are understandable to him, while others find it difficult to comprehend. From the perspective of the RNDI identity, Hank is able to empathise with those who consider the activity fees to be too expensive.

In other words, the RNDI identity can also be seen as an individual’s process of becoming aware or empathetic, which is significantly influenced by their unique tendencies and social backgrounds. By adopting the perspective of the RNDI identity, we can delve deeper into issues of inclusiveness within the current educational environment and provide reasonable explanations for common phenomena observed among our targeted students in their universities.
The Brand Tag of Elite Universities

Looking at the broader social context, students' RNDI identities extend beyond the confines of the university campus. The identity of being an elite university student itself serves as a distinct social label. In this regard, Ban's case, discussed in Chapter 6, offers valuable insights. Ban recounted being invited to speak at his high school, sharing his university experiences with the students. He emphasised that at that moment, he felt the pressure to conform to the societal expectations of an elite university student – to appear intelligent, independent, positive, and well-organised (see Section 6.3.1 for further details).

Indeed, as previously discussed in this chapter, the perception of an elite university student in the public eye often entails success, influenced by the general public's perception of the university's reputation and the competitiveness of its admissions. While this can create social pressure and expectations for students, it also grants them a certain degree of influence and the right to express themselves.

Outside of the campus, students often assume the role of representatives not only for their university but also for the larger notions of elitism, success, and professionalism. Carrying the prestigious brand of their university, they enjoy certain social advantages, such as enhancing their resumes and gaining access to elite social circles. However, an intriguing observation from our interviewees is that their RNDI identities, particularly in external settings, reflect their confidence in the university experience, which is closely intertwined with their SES identities. In this regard, we can observe starkly
different RNDI identities exemplified by Mao in Case Study 3 and Timothy.

“Yes, of course, this is a good university, but that’s not the most important point. There are all kinds of people here, some people struggle with learning as well, it is not like everyone is a genius. I mean it may be quite hard for people to see that difference easily, but eventually, others will find out how good you are…”

(Mao 1st interview)

“It’s a good university, but it is not very easy here, everyone is very smart, and the atmosphere of competition is quite strong… Honestly, I still don’t feel like I belong to this university…”

(Timothy 1st interview)

When examining these two cases together, we observe contrasting expressions of their personal perceptions towards their respective universities. Mao, who has achieved the Academic Excellence Award (refer to Chapter 8), demonstrates a remarkable level of self-confidence and provides comprehensive and insightful perspectives about her university. On the other hand, Timothy exhibits noticeable uncertainty regarding his identity within the university, which aligns with his own perception of not being successful in his academic journey.

From the perspective of the RNDI identity, Mao highlights the significance of individual abilities as the essence of an elite university, which is a reflection of her strong and unwavering SES identity shaped by her positive learning
experiences in the university. On the other hand, Timothy's expression suggests the pressure he feels in navigating an elite university, indicating that he may be facing challenges in his academic journey. At this point, both Timothy's SES identities and RNDI identities are both less clear and stable compared with Mao’s.

In summary, students' RNDI identities are shaped by social categorisation, including their personal backgrounds and external societal expectations. These identities can also reflect their experiences and encounters in higher education, leading to further discussions on related educational issues. The subsequent focus of this discussion will be to present the tendencies of the RNDI learner identity.

7.4.2 The Tendency of the RNDI Learner Identity

In this section, the tendency of the RNDI learner identity will be presented. Firstly, the RNDI learner identity is reflexive. As mentioned earlier, it involves contrasts between the individual and their surroundings, as well as the individual's process of becoming aware or empathetic in relation to these contrasts. In the context of elite universities, our data reveal that underrepresented students often face identity conflicts in their learning and transition experiences. In such situations, the RNDI learner identity plays a crucial regulatory role, enabling students to navigate challenges and adapt to their environment.

Navigating Identity Conflicts: Understanding and Negotiating

An evident common tendency among our underrepresented students in
elite universities is the multifaceted and complex nature of their identities. As discussed earlier, these identities are primarily shaped by the contrasting tendencies they possess in relation to their surrounding HE environment. Consequently, identity conflicts frequently arise among our participants, as exemplified in Hank's case, where conflict emerges from differing perceptions of the value of money in relation to hall activities. It is important to acknowledge that such gaps often reflect disparities in socioeconomic backgrounds or assumptions about a shared university lifestyle, all of which are integral to one's identity. In this context, the RNDI learner identities of students play a crucial role in navigating these identity conflicts.

Students' RNDI learner identities extend our views on learning in the university beyond academic knowledge and skills. They encompass a wider range of aspects, including establishing relationships with others, engaging with their surroundings, integrating into the university community, and acquiring diverse perspectives and values through learning and showing respect. Some of our focused students demonstrate a clear understanding and express significant improvement in these qualities through their university experiences.

**Racheal:** “Some people I once felt that I would never talk to or be friends with them, eventually became my very good friends in the university, and I am very glad about it. I used to regard them as strange, very different from me or someone I just didn’t like for no reason, but maybe it’s me who is the strange one...It’s great that you see different people in this place, and you can see something good in them...”
Researcher: “Why do you think those people are very different from you?”

Racheal: “I don’t know, maybe just how they look, the way they talk, or I am just not sure yet they will be interested in someone like me.”

(Racheal 2nd interview)

Racheal's case exemplifies a transformation in views and attitudes towards people, which occurs through the process of building positive relationships. Initially, she experiences negative feelings towards certain individuals due to perceived differences or uncertainty, which may be attributed to identity conflicts influenced by cultural factors or unique life experiences. However, for Racheal, establishing relationships with these individuals becomes a valuable learning experience. Throughout this process, her RNDI learner identities play a crucial role in enabling her to understand and negotiate her own position and differences with others, ultimately leading to personal growth and change.

Providing More Information for Others

Although it has been mentioned earlier that social labels resulting from social categorisation can lead to misunderstanding and pressure, they also have positive implications when it comes to learning. For instance, Annie shared a case highlighting her awareness of such a perspective based on her learning experiences in Singapore.

“My English accent is obviously different from Singaporean natives. I sometimes feel a bit challenging to communicate fluently with natives, because they normally speak fast and with a distinctive accent, which might also combine with Chinese or other languages. However, my accent is also
distinctive to them, this actually helps me with some situations. When the Singaporean people notice that I am not a native because of my accent, or when I explain this point to them, they are likely to slow down or provide extra explanations for me.”

(Annie 2nd interview)

As an international student, Annie faces challenges related to language barriers and unfamiliarity with the local environment, which is a common obstacle for foreigners. However, her RNDI learner identities enable her to recognise the positive implications of her distinct identities. This awareness allows her to provide additional information to others, enhancing the effectiveness of conversations. It is through this understanding that unique identities can also be beneficial in building social relations and facilitating learning. Interestingly, this perspective can be linked to some students’ negative perceptions towards online courses. They perceive online courses as hindering in-person classroom interactions between teachers and students, leading to teachers being less aware of students’ learning status, as exemplified in Hyomin’s case (refer to Section 6.5.2).

Hyomin raised a similar point regarding the significance of in-person interactions in facilitating better understanding between individuals. This highlights that the presence of additional contextual information and heightened awareness can greatly enhance communication. This perspective is also highly relevant in addressing identity conflicts. It underscores the value of students’ RNDI learner identities in guiding them through a reflective process.
Empowering Motivation: Self-Actualization and The Duty as a Group Member

Students' RNDI learner identities not only play an important role in guiding individuals through reflective processes but also have the potential to enhance their motivation for learning and self-improvement. In a previous case discussed involving Ban, who shared his university experiences with high school students, it was mentioned that he was strongly aware of the social expectations placed on elite university students. However, these social expectations can have positive implications beyond merely creating pressure. While stereotypical expectations placed on elite university students, such as always being well-organised or intelligent, may not always hold true, there are still positive values associated with these social expectations that can serve as encouragement for students to pursue self-improvement. Our interview data provide examples that support this point, demonstrating that students' RNDI learner identities have the capacity to motivate students, not only to meet social expectations but, more importantly, to strive for self-actualisation.

Researcher: "Do you have any notable experiences related to your ethnic minority identity in your university?"

Nei: "I think people's common impression of ethnic minorities is something like traditional clothing, dancing, or some cultural stuff, which is funny because somehow they imagine us like we are not living in modern life. I was even asked 'Why you don't look like a Zhuang?'. . . I also have a feeling that

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27 The Zhuang people (壯族) are an ethnic group who mostly live in the region in Southern China.
people sometimes think that we are not smart, I mean in the academic sphere. I don’t know, it’s not a good feeling, but you can’t just argue with people and expect they will change. The only way is probably to achieve something… It seems to be hard to make some difference right away, but I do feel I want to do something about it.”

(Nei 2nd interview)

In Nei’s case, her perceptions of prejudice and stereotypes towards ethnic minorities extend beyond ordinary social expectations. While this time, it may be a bit hard to say that there are still some positive values in people’s words. Still, Nei’s RNDI learner identities have enabled her to gain a deeper understanding of reality and her role within her ethnic group. Furthermore, Nei’s expression reveals her sense of duty towards her group, driven by a desire to address misconceptions and change people's perspectives based on her own experiences at the universities.

In summary, the RNDI learner identity is undoubtedly a significant learner identity exhibited by our focused underrepresented students. It is characterised by its intermittency and reflexivity, playing a vital role in guiding students towards a deeper comprehension of the differences and influences that arise within their higher education environment and helping them navigate relevant challenges and identity conflicts. Examining students' RNDI learner identities can provide valuable insights into their learning and life attitudes, as well as their experiences of transitioning into higher education.
7.5 The Participant Competitive Player for Social and Financial Positions ‘CPP’ Identity

Finally, in this section, we will explore the fourth learner identity that emerged among our target students: the participant competitive player for social and financial positions (CPP) identity. This identity is closely related to the SES and RS identities, and it remains an integral part of students’ higher education journeys in elite universities. The CPP identity represents students’ volunteering to pursue higher education, akin to individuals participating in a real-life game where they strive for personal growth and success within society.

The CPP identity as well provides a comprehensive framework for understanding various phenomena commonly observed among our students. It sheds light on why students often exhibit signs of lacking confidence, feeling uncertain about their future, or experiencing stress from the pressure to fit in. In the following paragraphs, I will delve into detailed discussions on the formation of the CPP identity and explore its tendencies as a learner identity.

7.5.1 Formation of the CPP Identity

Games often embody competition, and where there is competition, there are winners and losers. This inherent nature of the CPP identity highlights its competitive and interactive essence. Students who secure the opportunity to study in elite universities, achieve exceptional academic outcomes, or obtain coveted high-end jobs do so by competing with others. In many ways, the CPP identity aligns with the SES and RS identities, as they all propel individuals forward. However, the CPP identity differs in that it emphasises
students' perceptions of interaction and adaptation to their surrounding from a competitive standpoint.

‘Life Race’: Past, Present, and Future

Most of our participants not only perceive themselves as having the invaluable opportunity to study at prestigious universities but also possess a broader perspective on the ‘life race.’ As the well-known phrase goes, “Life is a marathon,” suggesting that it is a long and continuous journey. The trajectory of one's life, influenced by past experiences, leads to the present, and every choice made in the present will shape the future. This understanding sheds light on the nature of social distribution, where our students have the privilege to study at elite universities while others do not, and their future will continue to be shaped by their ongoing experiences in universities. It is through students' awareness and understanding of these dynamics that their CPP identity is formed.

As mentioned earlier, the phrase “dream come true” is commonly used by some of our students to express their achievement of being enrolled in a prestigious university. However, what exactly makes it a dream? Based on the expressions of some of our interviewees, it can be reasonably deduced that students may have already embraced the role of game participants long before entering university, and this realisation often occurs at a much younger age.

Researcher: “Can you tell me what your university means to you?”

Zhao: “I think it means a precious experience that influences me a lot. It is
also my dream, I have always been working on pursuing it.”

**Researcher:** “What makes you consider it as your dream?”

**Zhao:** “When I was in elementary school, I knew about these great universities, and people say they only take the best students… I always have a mind that I want to be the best.”

(Zhao 1st interview)

“Ever since very little, I have had a mindset that I will go to the university, it is like a sure thing. Although neither of my parents has ever studied at any university, they seem pretty sure about the same thing too… I never considered going to Polytech, I think by that time my considerations were not about the difference between JC and Poly. Instead, it’s more about university.”

(Jayleen 1st interview)

From the cases of Zhao and Jayleen, it becomes apparent that even though they may not have a clear idea of what a university entails at a young age, they have likely internalised certain value judgments about universities and the notion of a desirable life. These value judgments may stem from their life experiences, societal norms, or their parents’ perspectives. Under these influences, our students have engaged in numerous games throughout their growth journey, each step bringing them closer to elite universities.

For our underrepresented students, who often face a lack of certain social advantages in the competitive landscape, such as cultural or social capital, their current enrollment in esteemed universities naturally signifies the culmination of their past efforts. Their CPP identities exemplify these values
and reinforce their commitment to continuing to pursue this path. Additionally, it is evident that their self-identities are significantly reliant on their status as elite university students, given their current advantageous position in the ongoing marathon of life.

**Mastering the Rules and Sustaining Progress**

Being cognizant of their advantageous position in the ongoing journey of life, students' self-identities have not only grown stronger but also become intertwined with their present elitism path. So, what lies ahead? Based on my interview findings, for the majority of participants, the next step is securing a promising job in the future. This holds true for individuals identifying with both the RS and CPP identities. However, in addition to addressing societal expectations and the significance of higher education, the CPP identity revolves around recognising the dynamics at play and the implications they carry. In essence, it involves sustaining progress. After all, why would a winner give up on a game they are currently winning?

For those who currently hold a winning position, particularly individuals situated advantageously in their pursuit of social mobility or a desirable life according to societal norms, maintaining their winning streak is of utmost importance. This is particularly relevant for my research participants, who currently occupy prestigious positions in elite universities. For them, everything that unfolds within the university holds significance: their academic pursuits, learning experiences, and social connections, all of which have the potential to shape the trajectory of their life’s marathon. Consequently, their success hinges upon identifying and mastering the rules that will not only
maintain their winning streak but also propel them forward.

“I will apply for graduate school… My current study (History) has no advantage in employment… For graduate school, I will have to maintain my GPA level better at least beyond 2.7, and probably to obtain a TOFEL grade of more than 100 as well…”

(Xiawen 2\textsuperscript{nd} interview)

“Internship experiences are a must because those will be quite helpful for future employment, and it is quite common, I think. It will be nicer if you have already gained some practical experience in an enterprise before graduating. I plan to go for it in my third year.”

(Diane 1\textsuperscript{st} interview)

As we can see from the cases of Xiawen and Diane, both individuals demonstrate a clear comprehension of how to sustain their current path to the future and have developed corresponding plans and ideas. Furthermore, it is apparent that our target students commonly recognise the significance of securing a good job as their next significant challenge. Their CPP identities serve as reflections of their heightened awareness, thoughtful considerations, and the factors that drive them to make consequential decisions.

In summary, the CPP identities of our target students are shaped by their awareness and understanding of the concept of life journey and the dynamics of society and competition. These identities can be influenced by social norms, individual life experiences, and others’ perspectives. For our target
students, their CPP identities serve as reflections of their self-identity, their understanding of their environment, and their decision-making process as they strive to secure their present and future. In the following section, I will delve deeper into the tendencies of the CPP learner identity.

7.5.2 The Tendency of CPP Learner Identity

Competitiveness, interactivity, and predictability are inherent tendencies of the CPP identity. This identity not only encompasses the essence of social stratification but also provides hints on how individuals interact with others and their surroundings based on this essence. Furthermore, CPP identities as well imply individuals’ internal processes of reasoning and predicting their present and future, rooted in a comprehensive understanding of life and the dynamics that shape their outcomes.

When delving deeper into the examination of students’ CPP learner identities, the emphasis will be placed on understanding their inclination towards volunteering, their multifaced interactions with others, and their dedication to the future. In the subsequent paragraphs, a comprehensive exploration of the tendencies inherent in the CPP learner identity will be presented.

Encouraging Persevere

Despite the varying learning experiences and adaptability observed among our underrepresented students in elite universities, there is a common attitude prevailing among them - the acceptance of higher education as their personal choice. Even when facing evident challenges or negative circumstances, such
as losing interest in their current field of study or struggling academically, they tend to embrace their situation rather than seek immediate change or withdrawal. Among my participants, only a few show a clear inclination to deny their decision to study at elite universities.

This aligns with the observed phenomenon among other participants, where they exhibit a tendency to remain in their current circumstances rather than seek change. This can be understood through the lens of the CPP identity, wherein students possess a strong awareness of the interconnectedness between their present situation, past experiences, and future outcomes. Consequently, making a decision to change implies potentially undermining the value of previous efforts, beliefs, and achievements. Moreover, such a decision often accompanies a profound sense of uncertainty about the future, as exemplified by Kwang's case mentioned earlier in Section 7.3.2, where he emphasised that even if he were to opt for change, there is no guarantee of a better outcome.

From the cases of Jack and Kwang, it appears that CPP learner identities tend to discourage students from questioning or denying their previous experiences or decisions. Moreover, these identities serve as a constant reminder to students of their voluntary choice to pursue education in elite universities. Despite encountering challenges, perceived inequalities, pressures, or confusion, they continue to exert influence, urging students to persevere. Ultimately, the decision to persevere lies with the students themselves. However, it is important to note that the CPP learner identity does not solely function as a kind of disciplinary force. On the contrary, it can also
provide positive implications when addressing common learning challenges.

**Researcher:** “Have you ever experienced negative learning experiences or terrible academic outcomes? If yes, how would you deal with them?”

**Yuan:** “Yes, of course. For me, I always tell myself not to think too much about what has already happened, just let it go and focus on the next one... ‘It is natural for things to have ups and downs,’ or ‘You can’t always get things right.’ That’s how my friends and I sometimes encourage each other.”

(Yuan, 1st interview)

Yuan’s case illustrates another facet of the CPP learner identity. It provides an explanation rooted in the nature of competition or the environment, which assists students in overcoming negative experiences and shields them from losing confidence in learning. Yuan’s CPP learner identity implies a similar perspective to that of gaming or competitions, where winning or losing is simply part of the norm. From this viewpoint, positive implications can also be derived for students.

**Enhancing Students’ Adaptability**

As mentioned consistently throughout this thesis, it is expected that students will encounter gaps and challenges during their transition from secondary education to higher education. This is particularly true for the underrepresented students who were the focus of this study, as they possess unique tendencies and come from distinct social backgrounds that contrast with the general elite university population. These students establish their identities as elite university students by establishing efficient learning methods.
and learning the ways of the university, which refers to the process that involves becoming aware, understanding, and practising a specific value system. These adapting processes subsequently shape students’ perspectives, behaviours, and lifestyles.

Students’ CPP learner identities can expedite their process of adaptation, and this can be explained from both academic learning and fitting-in perspectives. From an academic learning standpoint, CPP learner identities shed light on the students’ reality within elite universities. It suggests that if they do not swiftly acquire knowledge and establish effective learning methods that contribute to their current success, they may sow the seeds of failure for their future and squander all the efforts they have invested thus far. Thus, CPP learner identities assume the role of a disciplinarian, motivating students to persevere and shielding them from setbacks, as discussed in the previous section. Consequently, these identities become a driving force that propels and sustains students’ learning in elite universities. In this context, Sie’s case can provide insights and support this argument.

“Every time when the result is not as expected, I probably feel frustrated, but these are likely to make you improve as well… My family has been a great motivation for me. I always feel vigilant that I should never let all my previous efforts go to waste, such a thought is like my faith that helps me deal with challenges.”

(Sie, 2nd interview)
Sie's case clearly illustrates the tendencies of CPP identities, which indicate her vigilant attitude towards her circumstances as a realistic consideration. This attitude enables her to possess stronger adaptability when confronted with setbacks.

On the other hand, from a social perspective, the inherent tendencies of the CPP learner identity - competitiveness and interactivity, are evident in students' process of fitting in, including their interactions with others and their environment. For instance, students' interactions with their peers are multifaceted. Their CPP learner identities not only foster a sense of competition to achieve their current success but also shape their belief that learning from others can be beneficial in pursuing the same goal.

At this juncture, the case of Ying from Case Study 2 exemplifies the advantages of fitting in through establishing connections with diverse individuals. One of her strategies involves seeking assistance from people who share similar backgrounds or positions within the university. These people not only offer Ying advice and emotional support, but they also serve as valuable references in her process of acclimating to university life (refer to Chapter 8).

Drawing upon individuals from similar backgrounds as points of reference, as demonstrated in Ying’s case, significantly enhances her adaptability within the elite university setting. This is just like using a strategy guide in a game, which aids in effectively tackling challenges. Within this context, students’ CPP learner identities reflect their recognition of the link between the
significance of achieving present success and the necessity of fitting into the environment. Consequently, students are likely to be motivated to foster positive relationships with others and acquire new knowledge and skills.

**Limited Presence of Autonomy**

A phenomenon observed among our target students is the limited presence of autonomy, evident through their expressions and the interview interaction process. While they may possess clear ideas or plans regarding their current role as university students and their future trajectory after completing higher education, they struggle to articulate the reasoning behind these ideas or plans. This phenomenon indicates that although our students are generally positioned as leaders within the life marathon’s perspective and are likely to occupy desirable societal positions in the future, there is a sense of confusion that permeates these processes.

Regarding students’ higher education journey, the previously discussed types of learner identities reflect that external considerations often take precedence over their personal interests in learning, such as students’ desire for timely graduation, which allows them to become economically productive sooner. In addition to relevant discoveries, the CPP learner identities further shed light on the existence of potential identity conflicts in this context.

As game players in the ongoing life marathon, students in their current leading positions – elite universities appear to prioritise efforts towards ‘making things right’ rather than discerning their personal values or desires. As previously concluded in Section 7.3.2, a utility-oriented attitude often
characterises students’ learning behaviours and decision-making logic. Students commonly gravitate towards the most certain, efficient, and expedient paths that promise present and future success. However, this inclination can give rise to potential problems. Our data findings indicate that students frequently display a lack of confidence and some even exhibit disinterest in their selected study majors. Furthermore, a discernible sense of confusion permeates their language at times. These phenomena can be comprehensively understood and potentially explained by speculating through the perspective of the CPP learner identity.

Although CPP learner identities encompass the significance and students’ voluntary pursuit of elite higher education, they lack the intention of individual autonomy and free will. This gives rise to the identity conflicts mentioned earlier, as these predetermined CPP identities adopted by students from a young age may facilitate success in the life race, as expected by their families or society. However, this success does not necessarily guarantee an inherent connection between these identities and individuals’ true nature or temperament. It is evident that both the RS and CPP learner identities tend to discourage exploration and questioning. Such tendencies of these identities are likely to contribute to students’ identity conflicts. A compelling example of this is evident in the case of Jack from Case Study 1. His journey demonstrates a complete progression and transformation, starting from an initial state of excitement and success, gradually leading to the emergence of identity conflicts, and ultimately culminating in his departure from the elite university (refer to Chapter 8).
In summary, the CPP learner identity exhibited by underrepresented students in elite universities carries significant implications for their higher education journey, encompassing both positive and negative aspects. On the one hand, it serves as a motivator for improvement, encourages learning from peers, and fosters resilience by providing guidance in navigating learning challenges. On the other hand, it poses potential risks, such as increased stress and the emergence of identity conflicts due to its disregard for individual temperament. Additionally, these identities underscore the potential lack of autonomy in education within the context of Asian elitism.

7.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented four distinct learner identities that have emerged from the thematic data analysis process of our focused 32 underrepresented students. Discussions have also gone through their formation and tendencies, as summarised in Table 7.6.1. These learner identities, namely the successful elite university student ‘SES’, responsible student meeting expectations ‘RS’, reflexively negotiating diverse identities ‘RNDI’, and competitive player for social and financial positions ‘CPP’, shed light on the experiences and perspectives of the participants. Along with my interpretations, these identities offer valuable insights into the dynamics of student engagement, learning, and transition within the context of Asian elite higher education.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Successful Elite University Student (SES)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tendency and Keyword</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuity from past learning success.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Varies depending on success, so that it can be unstable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The foundation of the elite university student identity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Academic success, social success and fitting in.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Relevant Phenomenon</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Pressure to Succeed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Negative emotions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Different trajectories of transformation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Various attitudes and perceptions towards HE experiences.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Implication</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Enhance other identities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Affect confidence and sense of belonging/identity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Affect the validity of elite university students.</td>
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<td>4. Reflect on transition experiences.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Responsible Student Meeting Expectations (RS)</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Tendency and Keyword</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Purposeful work towards responsibilities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focused on what is useful for the completion.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Responsibility to parents, society and financial investment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Giving low priority to personal interest.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Relevant Phenomenon</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Pressure to Succeed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. The desire for Timely Graduation.</td>
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<td>4. Determination in finishing HE.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Implication</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Establish meanings for HE.</td>
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<td>2. Cause time management issues.</td>
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<td>3. Discourage exploration.</td>
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<td>4. Discourage withdrawal or change.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Reflexively Negotiating Diverse Identities (RNDI)</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Tendency and Keyword</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Comes to the fore intermittently.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflexive.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Working with the contrast between underrepresented and elite identities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negotiating tensions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relevant Phenomenon</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Stereotypes and prejudice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Identity conflicts.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Different levels of confidence.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Negative attitude toward online coursing.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Reflexively Negotiating Diverse Identities (RNDI)

| Implication | 1. Aware of social facts.  
|             | 2. Navigate identity conflicts.  
|             | 3. Enhance Adaptability.  
|             | 4. Enhance communication.  
|             | 5. Empower motivations as a group member. |

### Competitive Player for Social and Financial Positions (CPP)

| Tendency and Keyword | Continuous.  
|                     | Competitive.  
|                     | Perseverance on the current path.  
|                     | Life Race.  
|                     | Focused on winning the university success battle.  
|                     | Unreflective of their deeper interests, following the expected path. |

| Relevant Phenomenon | 1. Pressure to Succeed.  
|                    | 2. Awareness of the link in a vertical timeline.  
|                    | 3. Confusion about what direction they really want.  
|                    | 4. Lacking Confidence and Autonomy.  
|                    | 5. ‘Make things right’ rather than discerning. |

| Implication | 1. Encourage navigating challenges.  
|            | 2. Enhance Adaptability.  
|            | 3. Encourage Perverse.  
|            | 4. Discourage withdrawal or change.  
|            | 5. Motivate improvements.  

**Table 7.6.1 Characteristics of The Four Learner Identities**

The SES learner identity serves as the cornerstone of students’ identity as elite university students. It encompasses the essence of elite universities, which are renowned for their competitiveness and desirability, shaping the social labels and expectations associated with these institutions and their students. Existing literature on the topic, including studies reviewed in Chapter 3 by Osterman (2000), Trowler (2010), and MacFarlane (2018), often
emphasises the positive correlation between student's academic achievements and their overall university experience. This aligns with my own findings, which indicate that students who perceive themselves as academically stable tend to exhibit a more positive attitude. Moreover, I have observed that such a positive attitude is closely linked to a more pronounced display of the SES learner identity.

Furthermore, the SES learner identity plays a crucial role in the transition of underrepresented students into elite higher education, significantly impacting their confidence levels and overall development of positive attitudes. This identity influences their sense of belonging within the university and shapes their subsequent experiences throughout their higher education journey.

The RS and CPP learner identities highlight the considerable influence of social factors on students' learner identities, aligning with MacFarlane's (2018) emphasis on the socially constructed nature of learner identity. These two identities provide a broader perspective on students' higher education journey by offering insights into the meanings and values that unfold over time. Drawing on Sfard and Prusak's concepts of 'actual identity' and 'designated identity' as discussed in Chapter 3 (2005), we gain valuable insights into understanding students' RS and CPP learner identities. These concepts provide a useful framework for comprehending the complexities and nuances of students' experiences and perceptions.

Students' RS learner identities reflect their higher education journey, which encompasses aspects such as family investment, responsibility, pressure from
reality, and social expectations. On the other hand, CPP learner identities centre around a continuous perception and understanding of social stratification, competition, and relevant dynamics. Both identities can be viewed as a form of ‘designated identity’ that demonstrates a clear commitment to the future. However, there is a distinction between them. While the RS learner identity focuses on fulfilment, the CPP learner identities place greater emphasis on securing their position or success. Although both identities aim to propel individuals forward, they differ in their approach and priorities.

In addition, this study also revealed that while both the RS and CPP learner identities have positive implications as drivers of guidance and motivation for students, they also have their respective downsides. The RS learner identities reflect a time-pressed learning mode, which often leads to issues with time management for students. This finding can potentially explain the time management issues identified by Van Der Meer et al. (2010) and Bisbee (2019), as reviewed in Chapter 6. Van Der Meer et al. (2010) focused on first-year students, while Bisbee (2019) focused on first-generation students. Apart from time management issues associated with the RS learner identities, they also underscore students’ reluctance to embrace change or explore uncertain paths.

On the other hand, students’ CPP learner identities reflect a practical awareness and understanding of social dynamics. However, they also seem to reveal a lack of respect for individuals’ temperament and aspirations. As a result, our research data also highlight the phenomenon of students
experiencing identity conflicts and exhibiting a lack of autonomy in their higher education journey.

Finally, unlike the other three learner identities, the RNDI learner identity tends to emerge intermittently. It specifically reflects the numerous transition experiences of our underrepresented students, with a focus on the differences and contrasts between our students and their surroundings. Previous literature reviewed in Chapter 3 has highlighted that underrepresented students often experience feelings of being ‘alienated,’ discomfort, isolation, or difficulty in finding peers with similar life experiences or backgrounds in universities (Thomas, 2012; Soria & Stebleton, 2013; Stubbs & Murphy, 2020). These findings are generally consistent with our results from data analysis, which indicate that our students commonly experience identity issues during their transition into universities.

Students' RNDI learner identities not only reflect their awareness of identity issues, value gaps, and social misunderstandings but also highlight the intrinsic process through which they comprehend and navigate relevant scenarios. These identities demonstrate students’ tendencies and attitudes in managing conflicts and coping with transitions. Moreover, the RNDI identities are characterised by reflexivity, as they contribute to individuals' internal learning processes, enhancing their adaptability and communication with others.
The Timeline for the Identities Before, Through and Beyond Higher Education

Figure 7.6.1 illustrates the distinct nature of the four learner identities based on a vertical timeline derived from the interview data. While it presents a general trend observed among our interviewees, it may not capture the individual nuances of every participant’s personal experiences. To facilitate understanding, I will provide a concise guide to interpreting the figure.

![Figure 7.6.1 The Four Learner Identities over Time](image)

The blue line represents the constant presence of SES learner identities, encompassing students’ positive experiences in secondary education, admission competition, and ongoing university learning. The broken blue line signifies the inherent instability and variability of SES learner identities, which depend on the ongoing university experiences.

The yellow line depicts the RS learner identity, which tends to emerge and become more pronounced after students assume their new identity as elite
university students. The green line, closely tracking the yellow line, represents the CPP learner identity. It indicates that students’ life ideas and values have been influenced by social perspectives from a young age. Both the RS and CPP learner identities provide a broader outlook that extends students’ considerations towards the future.

Finally, the red line illustrates students’ RNDI learner identities, which appear intermittently. The distribution of the red line suggests that these identities are more likely to encounter identity-related issues during the early stages of their higher education journeys, particularly during the transition period. By examining these different properties over time, we gain insights into the dynamics of learner identities and their relevance to students’ higher education experiences.

In summary, these identities represent the distinctive characteristics exhibited by our target underrepresented students, as presented in Table 7.6.1. They can be discerned through data analysis and are something possible to feel during the interview process. These identities can be likened to various filter lenses that enable us to perceive different facets of students’ higher education experiences and offer explanations for observed phenomena. While different identities may converge at certain points, each provides unique perspectives that enrich our capacity to understand and interpret our experiences.
Chapter 8
Findings – Case Study

8.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the stories of four underrepresented students that I have selected from the pool of 32 interviewees. Each of these students represents one of the four target elite universities in this study. All four of these students have experienced various changes during their time at the university.

The primary focus of these case studies revolves around three main points. Firstly, I will provide a detailed background context for each student, laying the foundation for a close examination of their higher education experiences. Secondly, I intend to concentrate on the students' transition into university. This section will address key interests of the study, including noteworthy discoveries such as the challenges encountered by students on campus, their perceptions of the university, the strategies they develop to overcome problems, and their trajectories on change. Lastly, I will illustrate the tendencies of the learner identities of these case study students, drawing discoveries through students’ experiences.

All four of the case study students participated in two interviews. In presenting these cases, I have combined the two interviews to create a complete narrative. This approach allows for a clear observation of the changes these students have undergone since embarking on their higher
education journey. Similar to the previous findings chapters (Chapters 6 and 7), I place significant value on presenting the students’ original expressions through interview quotes and my interpretations of these conversations in specific contexts. After presenting the four case study stories, I will provide a comprehensive analysis before concluding this chapter.

8.2 Case 1: The Story of Jack

8.2.1 General Description

Jack is a nineteen-year-old first-year student at University G in Shanghai. He hails from a town in an inland western province in China. Jack completed his education at one of the top public high schools in the provincial capital, a school that many parents aspire to send their children to. Jack's academic journey in high school was highly successful, leading to his acceptance into University G—an esteemed institution in China with a prominent international ranking. However, after completing two semesters at University G, Jack made the decision to apply for an authorised interruption of his studies. I conducted two interviews with Jack, similar to most of our interviewees. Upon comparing the two interviews, I observed a contrasting attitude from Jack towards the university and the process of learning. In the initial interview, I detected no significant indications of his intention to leave the university. Nevertheless, in the second interview, Jack's descriptions revealed clear negative learner identities, as expressed through his statements:
“I am not feeling happy in a Chinese university”.

“Well… to be honest, I am not sure whether I am interested in my major”.

(Jack 2nd interview)

8.2.2 Expectations: Honor, Proud, and Pursuing Betterment

To comprehend Jack’s motivations for leaving University G, I amalgamated the two interviews into a cohesive narrative. The first interview yielded numerous significant insights and provided a wealth of contextual information.

Jack's father works as a professional driver in a larger city located in another province, while his mother is employed as a factory operator. Despite never having attended university themselves, Jack's parents firmly believe in the value of education and consider it a worthwhile investment. According to Jack, his parents adopt a frugal approach to their finances, yet they never hesitate to allocate resources for his education. For instance, despite the family's modest means, they decided to rent an apartment near the high school to create an environment conducive to Jack's focused preparation for the Gaokao (the national college entrance examination in China).

Following the Gaokao, Jack was encouraged to apply for a special admission program specifically designed for students hailing from remote areas, which University G offers. Jack provided an account of his experiences after gaining admission into this program:

“I never really think of entering University G before. It feels like something impossible… When my teachers encouraged me to try the special admission
program, I still didn’t feel like that was a real thing to happen. I just gave it a try… The moment I was admitted to University G, everyone was so excited. My name was on a giant red banner on the school building. I became famous in high school. Suddenly I received lots of messages congratulating me. I even went to the principal's office to meet the principal. He said I brought honour to the school… My teachers in school told my parents that this was a spectacular success. This makes them very happy. My parents mention University G a lot to others”.

(Jack 2nd interview)

Finally, Jack’s acceptance of the offer from University G came as no surprise. In the second interview, Jack mentioned that it felt like a decision "made by everyone." While he was undoubtedly thrilled for himself, this decision seemed predetermined the moment he received the good news. This notion of a decision "made by everyone" reflects the weight of societal expectations placed upon individuals. These expectations originate from teachers, friends, family members, parents, and the broader society. University G is highly coveted, symbolising a significant accomplishment and a beacon of hope for the future.

Jack underscores the difficulty he faced in deciding to leave University G. He feels as though he is letting everyone down, particularly when he reminisces about the joyous smiles and congratulations he received from others a year ago. At that time, his parents proudly proclaimed, "Our son is the first in our family to attend university, and it's one of the top institutions in China!" However, these days, mentions of University G have become scarce.
Jack preferred to keep the interruption of his studies a secret, indicating the impact not only on those around him but also on the prevailing atmosphere within Chinese society. He expressed the following sentiment:

“The last thing I want to do now is to explain to everyone why I made such a decision. This decision might look stupid to others, but I am just tired of talking about it anymore…”.

(Jack 2\textsuperscript{nd} interview)

8.2.3 “I Must Prove Myself”: Undertaking Identity Conflicts

Jack assumes multiple identities within University G, and these identities appear to be one of the sources of pressure for him. Jack gained admission to University G through a special admission program, a circumstance he, like other students in similar situations, was reluctant to disclose due to the fear of judgment. This reveals two important aspects about Jack. Firstly, he places significant value on others' opinions, indicating that their reactions can easily influence his emotions and overall university experience. Secondly, he lacks confidence in this new environment, acutely aware of the disparity in Gaokao scores between regular admission students and those admitted through special programs. This awareness contributes to his feelings of insecurity and pressure.

Simultaneously, the unstable identity of being a special admission student conflicts with his other identity as a top student in high school. The latter identity represents a strong sense of confidence in his academic abilities, stemming from his successful experience in high school. Consequently, Jack's
approach to reconciling these two identities was to strive for improved grades at University G. The concept of self-proving featured prominently in the first interview, as he expressed:

**Jack:** “I must prove myself. I am better than this… Even though people might think I have taken advantage of the special admission program, I don’t think it is a problem. All I need is some more time to get used to the university… I can handle my study…”

**Researcher:** “About the special admission program, has anyone ever said something like this to you?”

**Jack:** “Well… I mean, people probably won’t judge you using direct language, but you can definitely feel that they are comparing”. “I am no worse than others”.

(Jack 1st interview)

In his conversations, Jack exhibits a range of emotions. He still possesses a certain degree of confidence, given his past status as an outstanding student in his school. Despite experiencing academic struggles at the university, he generally holds the belief that he can improve and overcome these challenges. However, Jack also experiences intense pressure and anxiety, primarily stemming from the conflict between his various learner identities. Not only does he find it difficult to accept that his grades have suddenly fallen below the class average, but he also struggles to recapture the same level of academic success he once enjoyed. It is evident that even though others may not directly accuse him of exploiting the special admission program, he places significant pressure on himself to achieve good grades.
8.2.4 Transition into the University and Unbalanced Lifestyle

Although Jack had a clear strategy for establishing himself at University G, things did not unfold as smoothly as he had anticipated. Three points warrant examination in this regard. Firstly, the curricular structure at the university differs significantly from that of high school. Secondary education in China typically revolves around an exam-oriented system, which fosters a specific learning style characterised by intensive time investment. This approach emphasises hard work, extensive practice, memorisation of question patterns, and the development of exam skills. Jack attempted to replicate the successful learning model from high school.

However, university curricula are more diverse, necessitating different approaches to learning and problem-solving across various courses. Based on feedback from my Chinese interviewees, it is common for students to experience a similar shock during their first semester when they realise that the strategies that worked in high school are no longer effective. Consequently, by persisting with his old learning method of spending excessive time in the library, Jack is less likely to bridge the gap between high school and university learning.

Secondly, Jack refrained from participating in any extracurricular activities. According to him, this choice was made in order to focus more on his studies. I observed that Jack lacks an understanding or imagination of a balanced university life. One possible reason for this may be his failure to engage in orientation activities, which are crucial for establishing connections with peers and seniors. Another reason could be deeply rooted in his anxiety surrounding
his identities and the associated expectations. It appears that Jack perceives
academic achievement as the primary means through which he can gain a
sense of fulfilment at the university.

“Before my grade is improved, studying should be my priority… I normally
study in the library. I think I can’t really study in the dormitory …”.

**Researcher:** “What do you think a successful university life is like?”

**Jack:** “I think the essential thing is to study well and master your
professional knowledge”.

*(Jack 1st interview)*

Thirdly, Jack's excessive focus on studying in the library has resulted in
weak social connections with others. This situation hampers his ability to
cultivate a sense of achievement or belonging and limits the diversity of his
learning experiences. Jack appears to have limited exposure to learning from
his peers, even those residing in the same flat. However, many Chinese
interviewees emphasise the significance of flatmates' role during the transition
to the first year of university. Peers can offer valuable support as high school
graduates assimilate into the unfamiliar environment of higher education.
Unfortunately, Jack's relationships with his flatmates and classmates are
somewhat strained. He finds it challenging to integrate into any group all of a
sudden seamlessly.

“I don’t think I can study with my flatmates because they always play online
games in the dormitory… I think there was a time they invited me for dinner,
and I didn’t go. But, after that, I feel they are very close to each other…
Sometimes I don’t know what to say to them”.

**Researcher**: “How about teamwork? Are there any group assignments in the course?”

**Jack**: “Yes, there are. I have no problem with teamwork”.

**Researcher**: “Do you ask classmates questions or sign up for any academic supporting programs?”

**Jack**: “I don’t need any support from the university. Yes, I sometimes ask questions and search online by myself”.

(Jack 1st interview)

### 8.2.5 Summary: The Loop

Looking at Jack's transition progress at University G, it is evident that he did not successfully adapt. Ultimately, after two semesters, he made the difficult decision to leave the university. There is a noticeable shift in Jack's demeanor between the two interviews. In the first interview, he expressed mostly positive views about the university, still believing that his decision to enter University G was the right one. However, in the second interview, his stance became more firm and different. He began to speak more about himself and his own perspectives. For instance, Jack mentioned that he did not choose his department based on his interests, but rather selected one from the options provided by the special admission program. He now considers this decision a "terrible idea." However, in the first interview, when asked if he was interested in his studies, he responded positively. I have summarised similar changes that occurred in Table 8.2.1.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>1st Interview</th>
<th>2nd Interview</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major in Study</td>
<td>Interested</td>
<td>Picked on the list</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prestigious University</td>
<td>A good choice</td>
<td>Horrible idea</td>
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<tr>
<td>Value the most</td>
<td>Self-proving</td>
<td>Make his own choice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning Challenges</td>
<td>Not Enough Time</td>
<td>Wrong environment</td>
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| Table 8.2.1  Changes Occurred in Jack's Case Between the Two Interviews |

Discovering such significant changes within a span of six months is a rarity in my interviews. These transformations also shed light on the formation of Jack's learner identity. Jack's story exemplifies common issues related to class distinctions. Although there are now more special admission programs available for students from diverse backgrounds, it does not guarantee a seamless and successful transition into university.

In Jack's case, his identity as a special admission student and a top performer in high school both contribute to the pressure he experiences. By attempting to replicate his successful high school learning methods, he inadvertently misses out on numerous opportunities to establish connections with his peers. It becomes a chain reaction where the more time Jack devotes to his studies, the narrower his lifestyle becomes. Additionally, the more Jack seeks to validate his self-worth through academic achievements, the less he is exposed to new learning patterns (refer to Figure 8.2.2).
In summary, similar to other students at University G and the participants in my study, Jack underwent a period of transition during his first year at this prestigious university. However, he is unlikely to become a senior at University G who will offer encouragement to incoming students in the future, as he has made a different choice. Will he have a better experience at a university abroad? Only time will tell. Nonetheless, it is commendable that Jack possesses the strength to share his story and does not appear overly disheartened. Perhaps, when he expressed, "I am not feeling happy in a Chinese university," it signifies that he is already contemplating alternative possibilities for his university experience.
8.3 Case 2: The Story of Ying

8.3.1 General Description

Ying, a twenty-one-year-old second-year student at University K in Singapore, embarked on her higher education journey in her second year. This was possible due to her prior graduation from a polytechnical college (Polytech), granting her the opportunity to skip her first year at the university. While University K boasts a stellar academic reputation as one of the world's most prestigious higher education institutions, it remains uncommon for Polytech graduates like Ying to progress to university education. Over the course of two interviews, a noticeable transformation can be seen in Ying's identity. Overall, she exhibits more positive and steadfast learner identities after completing two semesters at University K.

“I was quite intimidated at first because I have a mindset that people here in University K have been studying more stuff than me …”.

(Ying 1st interview)

“It feels like home. I like my friends here. I enjoy my university life…”.

(Ying 2nd interview)

8.3.2 Strong Sense of Responsibilities and Commitments

A common dilemma among Singaporean students is whether to pursue studies at a Junior College (JC) or a polytechnic college (PC) after completing the N-Level certificate. This decision not only determines their post-secondary education but also plays a pivotal role in shaping their future career prospects.
For Ying, the choice came relatively quickly. She opted to enrol in a polytechnic college, driven by practical considerations. The polytechnic route offered a swifter path to the job market compared to JC. Moreover, it provided a vocational-oriented education system with a wide range of course offerings. Being raised in a working-class single-parent family, Ying acknowledged the importance of being realistic about her aspirations for the future.

“Never, I never really think about it (studying at University K). I maintained an ok grade in PC. In some moments, I realised that I could have a chance to go to university… I feel strange and familiar with a famous university like University K. Everyone knows about it in Singapore. So do I, but I never think it has anything to do with me. It's not a dream nor a goal”.

(Ying 1st interview)

Instead of a Cinderella story, Ying's opportunity to study at University K can be described as an unexpected outcome. The decision to pursue university education involves numerous considerations. In addition to meeting academic requirements, financial constraints posed a significant challenge for Ying. Her mother, who worked in a restaurant, single-handedly raised Ying and her younger brother. Throughout her childhood, Ying was accustomed to shouldering household chores and taking care of her younger sibling. Naturally, she shared the responsibilities of the family with her mother. As a result, Ying's initial plan after graduating from Polytech was to find employment to provide for her family. This determination to support her family remained steadfast even as she embarked on her journey at University K.
“I plan to graduate as soon as possible… It’s not only about myself. My mother will retire in the next few years, and my brother is still in school”.

(Ying 2nd interview)

**Researcher:** “Normally, how do you choose which course to take in University K? What do you value the most?”

**Ying:** “I consider more for the job. I want to learn knowledge or skills which are useful for work or helpful for me to get a good job… I am practical ”.

(Ying 1st interview)

**Ying:** “I like Arts and painting, but I take it more like my hobbies. In Singapore, it is impossible to do this as your job, only if you are the most talented”.

**Researcher:** “Have you taken any related courses at University K?

**Ying:** “No, I haven’t”.

(Ying 1st interview)

For Ying, pursuing a university education entails investing additional time and money, so it must be deemed worthwhile. Many of her choices reflect a utility-driven mindset where practicality takes precedence. When selecting her courses, for example, she considers their potential relevance to future job prospects. Similarly, Ying explains her choice of major in University K—a technology-related field—based on the shared belief in Singapore that such professions offer high-end jobs with better salaries.

Interestingly, Ying perceives herself as somewhat distinct from her...
university peers. Whether influenced by her unique life experiences or her background in a polytechnic institution, she occasionally feels a disparity in values. She expresses surprise at the frequency with which her University K friends dine out, go shopping, or skip classes. These observations contribute to a sense of detachment from her peers. Nevertheless, Ying appears more focused on fulfilling her responsibilities than on integrating into the University K community or forging friendships. Once she committed to the opportunity to study at University K, her primary concern became completing it.

Researcher: “Do you like your study at University K?”

Ying: “Not really (Laugh).”

Researcher: “What do you think is the biggest obstacle to doing something you really like?”

Ying: “I would say it is how reality is. What you really like could be separate from what you do in the future…I did spend more time in education than others who started working at an early age. I know my responsibilities. I am not from a rich family. I need to be practical….”

(Ying 1st interview)

“I rarely skip any class because I would feel guilty. It doesn’t feel like the right thing to do here. I am wasting money…”

(Ying 1st interview)

“I used to think, even if I can’t make many friends here, it’s ok, as long as I can finally graduate”.

(Ying 2nd interview)
8.3.3 The Outstanding Polytech Graduate Identity

From the interview with Ying, it is evident that her identity as an older sister responsible for caring for her family carries significant influence. Many of her decisions and actions are deeply intertwined with her family responsibilities. In addition to her care provider identity, Ying's identity as a Polytech graduate is another prominent factor that shapes her learning experience at University K. The impact of her Polytech identity on her learning is significant. This can be examined on two levels.

First, from an intrinsic perspective, Ying, like some other interviewees, highlighted an uncomfortable feeling when interacting with her peers during the first semester. This feeling stems from a lack of self-confidence. In Ying's department, the majority of her peers are graduates from junior college and have been studying at University K for an additional year. Despite being older than most of her second-year classmates, she grapples with a strong sense of insecurity. On the one hand, being relatively unfamiliar with university life, she does not want to appear ignorant as an older Polytech graduate student. On the other hand, she must learn all the aspects of university life from the beginning swiftly. Consequently, there is an intense conflict within her learner identity.

“It seems that they always know what to do. Somehow, I am always catching up. Sometimes I prefer to discuss with other friends who are also from Poly when there are things I don’t understand”.

“I did participate in the orientation camp, but it was with other freshmen of
the same year, not my classmates. I have friends from the camp… That’s important for me, and I guess it is because we are closed at the starting point. I feel more comfortable asking them questions”.

(Ying 1st interview)

Ying strongly perceives that simultaneously adapting to a new environment while concealing her negative emotions can be exhausting. Furthermore, she finds it challenging to integrate into groups where her classmates have already established relationships over the course of a year. Consequently, she experiences a persistent lack of belonging from the outset. Nevertheless, over time, Ying has developed a proactive problem-solving strategy - cultivating stronger connections with other Polytech graduate students at University K. She finds solace in seeking their assistance and engaging in discussions, as she believes they possess a better understanding of each other's circumstances. However, it is important to acknowledge that this approach also reflects Ying's preconceived notions about other students, shaping her progressions in developing interactions with JC and PC students.

“I think many JC students are quite having a sense of living a fulfilling university life, sometimes our conversations are about who went on a trip or some plans for applying for exchange programs in the future… I used to feel pressured about these conversations, but actually, this opened my mind and changed me quite a lot”.

(Ying 2nd interview)

“In many aspects, some points Poly students can easily understand what I
am talking about because we all experienced the same way. For example, sometimes I can sense some kind of hidden language implied by some JC students that studying in Poly is never an option they would have considered. I think this is hurting, and my Poly friends can immediately understand what I meant”.

(Ying 1st interview)

On the other hand, from an extrinsic perspective, the Polytech identity is more public compared to the care provider identity. Ying perceives that it is widely known that she is a graduate of a polytechnical college in her life circle at University K, making it a prominent aspect of her identity. This public recognition has two notable impacts. Firstly, Ying perceives a sense of exclusion. As a Poly student, who does not belong to the 'default' group at University K, she encounters stereotypes and preconceived notions from others. Even when treated politely, these assumptions can be hurtful. Secondly, the distinct Polytech identity adds to the pressure of her academic journey. Graduates from polytechnical colleges pursuing university studies remain relatively uncommon, resulting in heightened social expectations and a lack of understanding from peers. These factors contribute to Ying's feelings of stress.

“Sometimes, after a brief chat with people, they learn that I graduated from Poly, they ask me more questions about polytechnical college… a guy once asked: ‘Everything all right in university?’ I know he didn’t mean to be impolite, but he reminded me that I am from somewhere else”.

(Ying 2nd interview)
“One common stereotype is that they assume we must be the best student in PC with top GPA to enter university”.

(Ying 1st interview)

“Of course, I understand that somehow, I represent Poly students in this environment, that was stressful because you are likely to stand at a lower position. Due to this, I used to be motivated to prove that I could be better than JC students”.

(Ying 2nd interview)

8.3.4 From an Outsider to a ‘Home Player’

Comparing the two interviews, a clear developmental trajectory emerges in Ying’s life at University K. In the first interview, she extensively discusses the challenges she faced in learning and the conflicts arising from different identities. The awareness of value gaps and her distinct Poly student identity seemed to weigh heavily on her, causing stress and discomfort. Furthermore, the unique pathway of Poly students entering university presented its own set of challenges during the adaptation process.

However, in the second interview, Ying exudes more confidence. It becomes apparent that she has successfully overcome some challenges that used to cause stress to her. Ying adopts a strategic approach by initially building connections with individuals she feels more at ease with, such as other Poly students, first-year students, or hall friends. Ying perceives this strategy to be effective and beneficial. While it may appear as though she is retreating into a comfort zone, establishing positive connections with various
individuals greatly expands her social networks. The second interview, conducted after completing two semesters at University K, provides indications that she has become actively engaged in university life.

**Researcher:** “How’s your second semester at University K?”

**Ying:** “Well, it was cool. I enjoyed it a lot even though it’s getting busier… I participate in the student association and the volleyball team… and I am currently working on an innovation project with several people. We are looking to attend a contest…”.

**Researcher:** “Are your project partners your Poly friends? (Laugh)"

**Ying:** “(Laugh) Come on, there are many different people in our project team!”

(Ying 2nd interview)

Another aspect that drew my attention is the notable shift in Ying’s attitude towards University K after six months. Previously, she depicted herself as an "outsider" at the institution, indicating her feelings of panic and a lack of belonging. However, in the second interview, there is a marked absence of such negative expressions. An intriguing remark from Ying during our discussion of volleyball matches between University K and other institutions stood out. She expressed her enjoyment of playing on the home court, feeling a sense of pride in representing the university. Most significantly, she now finds joy in her experiences at University K. As we can see there are significant contrasts from the two interviews.

“It feels like they are already used to the university, and I am joining this
environment, which I am unfamiliar with, like an outsider”.

(Ying 1st interview)

“When you are playing on the court wearing the jersey, when you see your friends or someone you don’t even know cheering up for you, it is not only about win or lose… I treasure everything in University K…“.

(Ying 2nd interview)

8.3.5 Summary: A Positive Transition Example

Ying's experience at University K serves as a successful example of transition. The transition process was generally smooth, despite the initial obstacles commonly faced by students from underrepresented backgrounds. Eventually, Ying found her own rhythm and pace at the university. However, it is important to note that replicating such success in an elite institution like University K is not always guaranteed. Overcoming these obstacles is no easy feat. Adapting to the university's curriculum framework, especially when studying alongside younger and more experienced classmates, requires exceptional problem-solving skills and a positive mindset.

While Ying's positive transformation is evident, it is crucial to acknowledge that a successful transition is often influenced by multiple factors. According to Ying, she considers herself fortunate to have encountered a fellow Poly student named Lee during her time at University K. Lee, as Ying identifies as a kind and supportive third-year senior, played a pivotal role in her higher education journey. It was through Lee's invitation that Ying became part of the Poly student community, and Lee served as an inspiring role model for her.
Ying was able to learn about university life with Lee's guidance quickly and also gained access to Lee's social network, including valuable connections with core student association members.

In conclusion, Ying now demonstrates positive learner identities at University K. She has the potential to become a role model for other underrepresented students and represents new possibilities for them. However, it is important to recognise that not all underrepresented students may have the opportunity to encounter a key person like Lee. Behind Ying's successful experience, we still observe numerous challenges faced by underrepresented students in terms of learning and identity formation in university. The personal effort, intelligence, and individual characteristics play significant roles in shaping students' higher education experiences.

8.4 Case 3: The Story of Mao

8.4.1 General Description
A bright, sharp, and confident student - that is my initial impression of Mao. She is an eighteen-year-old first-year student at University W in Shanghai, hailing from a northeast province in China. Similar to numerous other high-achieving Chinese students, she graduated from the most competitive public high school in the capital city of her province. Mao consistently ranks among the top students, both in high school and at University W. In terms of academic performance, she exhibits no apparent signs of encountering the common learning challenges that often confront first-year students during transition. In fact, she was even awarded the Academic Excellence Award in
her first semester. However, despite her achievements, Mao sometimes appears to be discontented with her university life at University W. Through the two interviews, we can discern traces of identity conflicts within her.

_Researcher:_ “What is the most enjoyable part of University W?”

_Mao:_ “Freedom. I don’t like the lifestyle in middle school… but if you ask me whether I feel free now, well, I don’t know, it is complicated…”

(Mao 1st interview)

8.4.2 University W: A ‘Grudging Decision’

Unlike the typical student who takes pride in gaining admission to an elite university, Mao exhibits a completely different attitude towards her enrollment at University W. She refers to it as a "grudging decision." Initially, her aspirations were solely focused on gaining admission to one of the top universities in Beijing, for which her Gaokao scores were more than sufficient. However, University W presented her with a scholarship opportunity in her desired field of study. Consequently, she faced a choice between pursuing a subject she wasn’t passionate about in Beijing or selecting her preferred major in Shanghai. Ultimately, she opted to accept the scholarship from University W. On the surface, this appears to be a logical decision, considering that University W is also highly esteemed both in China and internationally. Nevertheless, Mao felt a sense of annoyance because she was unable to secure a scholarship in Beijing. As a result, she harbours a dislike for University W right from the start and continues to hold onto the belief that she truly belongs in Beijing, as revealed during our first interview.
Researcher: “How do you feel as a student at this university?”

Mao: “It’s okay here. Honestly, I never thought I would be here… I did not do well in Gaokao, and some people whose grades are lower than mine in high school have gone to better universities”.

(Mao 1st interview)

Mao struggles with a sense of identity at University W, yet her intellectual prowess enables her to grasp the ways of university learning and life quickly. Despite being just a first-year student, she not only received the Academic Excellence Award\(^28\) but also actively participates in the belly dance society and holds a part-time job. It is remarkable to contemplate how she manages to handle these roles and activities. Mao attributes her exceptional adaptability to the environment in which she was raised. Her parents separated when she was seven years old, leading to frequent relocations and living with various relatives. She emphasises that this experience instilled in her the importance of independence. It is also the reason she accepted the scholarship and sought employment - to secure financial independence. Mao is accustomed to taking care of herself and maintains a certain emotional distance from others, including family members, peers, and friends. I interpret this as a manifestation of her underlying insecurity, which is intricately linked to her inner conflicts at the university.

“I don’t want to bother people or be sponsored by my dad or anyone in the

\(^{28}\) This means that her academic performance ranks first in her class.
family… the worst thing is that they feel they can tell you what to do…”.

(Mao 1st interview)

“I live whatever life I want, as long as I am paying for myself”.

“The only one I can rely on is myself”.

(Mao 2nd interview)

8.4.3 Sense of Distance and Identity Conflicts

Mao found it relatively easy to establish connections with others at University W, primarily driven by her academic achievements. People would approach her when she attained top grades. Mao tends to perceive interpersonal interactions as ‘transactional’ rather than genuine friendships. Consequently, she maintains a certain emotional distance from others, prioritising a more utilitarian approach. When she requires information or assistance from her peers, she views it as an exchange where she provides academic advice or knowledge in return. Mao firmly believes that this pragmatic approach is necessary for survival in society.

“When people suddenly start a small talk with you, it is more likely that they are going to ask for something from you”.

“I got my part-time job from a girl, but I also shared my note with her…”.

(Mao 2nd interview)

As we can see, Mao’s strong self-confidence is rooted in her outstanding academic performance. Her identities as a scholarship recipient and an
academic award winner not only serve as advantages for establishing social connections but also act as shields protecting her self-esteem. However, at University W, Mao often experiences a sense of alienation from identity conflicts. During daily conversations, she sensitively perceives the disparity between herself and others in terms of their identities.

To comprehend this, we must first examine Mao's identity as an underrepresented student in an elite environment. Mao, being Mongolian, a first-generation student, hailing from a remote area, and perceiving herself as growing up in a non-traditional family uses the term “fancy” to describe some of her peers who come from comparatively more privileged backgrounds. These peers may have highly educated parents, hail from large cities, or have grown up in nurturing families. Mao believes that compared to her intellectual capabilities, these contextual identities pose greater challenges for others to understand. She tends to be sensitive to these identity conflicts, which possibly makes it challenging for her to establish close relationships with people.

“Two things people commonly think I am cool at the university. First, I have top grades. Second, my tattoo”.

(Mao 1st interview)

“Once a guy was moving from one dormitory to another, his parents helped carry things. That is crazy for me”.

“Many students in this university, may never understand the other’s life
because they are from good families and naturally think 'things should be like that'… of course, people can tell that I am clever, but it's they have no idea what I have experienced…”.

(Mao 2nd interview)

According to Mao, she perceives elite universities mostly in a competitive dimension, which is more about individuals pursuing the outcomes in future. Thus, inclusiveness and a friendly atmosphere are not regarded by her as the essence of an elite university. To illustrate this, she cites her friend Teng as an example. Mao and Teng were classmates in primary school. According to Mao, Teng seemed to have poor academic adaptability at university and was described by Mao as a "fallen student." Mao believes that students who enter elite universities can experience two extremes - either they successfully navigate the university curriculum, or they struggle and eventually give up. Teng's situation somehow resonates with Mao's own anxieties at the university.

Mao's description reflects her sense of anxiety and insecurity regarding identities at University W. She strongly believes that if it weren't for her exceptional academic performance, which aligns with the common expectations for elite university students, she could easily find herself labelled as a "fallen student" within such an esteemed environment, similar to Teng. Witnessing others who share certain identities struggle to fit into the elite setting further fuels her scepticism toward the higher education system. This solidifies her perception that elite universities prioritise utility over inclusivity.
Mao’s experiences at University W encompass various identity conflicts. On the one hand, she is highly confident in her ability to achieve successful learning outcomes, as perceived by others. On the other hand, she experiences insecurity due to her underrepresented identity within the elitist environment and in comparison to her peers.

“I have seen some students like Teng here. They can’t get any success in academics… eventually, they just do anything else but study”.

“I believe that students who can enter this university are not stupid… but the reality is even if you are struggling in anything, that’s nothing special… I am doing all right because I am the kind of people university wants…”.

(Mao 2nd interview)

8.4.4 Hidden Learner Identities as An ‘Isolated Learner’

Mao’s learning methods described by her have no significant difference or change between the two interviews. She continues to employ an effective learning method and maintains steady grades, consistently ranking in the top 5 of her class during her second semester. While she no longer holds the title of Academic Excellence Award winner like in the first semester, Mao does not seem to mind. She leads a busy life, and she shows no sign of doubting her own intelligence. She not only appears successful in learning but also conducts herself in a well-behaved manner. However, Mao’s learner identities exhibit a certain hint of fluctuating, combining both positive and negative aspects simultaneously. Beneath the surface, her mental state draws more attention. It is evident that she frequently experiences a sense of discomfort.
As a result, during the second interview, we delved into various aspects of her university life and explored the factors that contribute to her feelings of unease. Throughout these conversations, Mao exhibits signs of possessing a learner identity as an isolated learner.

There are two noteworthy points to consider. First, Mao is a first-generation student, and her family maintains a noticeable distance from her. Consequently, she lacks a sense of being supported and understood by her family, leading her to develop a tendency to navigate challenges on her own without seeking help or assistance from others. Second, Mao encounters more challenges in the social aspect, making it difficult for her to obtain support from her peers. As a result, she has developed a habit of independent learning. As previously mentioned, integrating with many of her peers is challenging for her, and she often feels a sense of discomfort or awkwardness in social interactions. As a result, she tends to keep a clear distance from others and relies on her exceptional academic achievements to protect herself. This limited sense of empathy or support during her higher education journey may contribute to her feelings of stress and loneliness, as observed in our interviews. Instead of solely describing her learning progression as independent, it is also plausible to view her as isolated.

“When I returned home during Chinese New Year, I found it’s tiering talking to my relatives… When I just described something that happened in University W, sometimes they think I am showing off… My aunt sneered at me. She said: Yes, you are a university student right now, but you still must
respects your elders…”

**Researcher:** “Have you ever experienced facing learning or fitting in challenges during a transition where you needed to seek help from others?”

**Mao:** “I’ve never been used to doing many things with a bunch of people. I think there is nothing particularly big for me when fitting in, and I am quite all right working on my own.”

(Mao 2nd interview)

The other point to consider is Mao's confusion about her future, which I attribute to her uncertainty regarding her identity. In various environments and with different individuals, she struggles to find a sense of belonging. Mao discusses her observations on the competitive nature of Chinese society and the realities of attending an elite university like University W. Despite excelling in this competitive environment, she paradoxically expresses fatigue and dissatisfaction. This contrasting attitude may indicate a potential crisis and a message that she is unsatisfied with her current life.

**Researcher:** “What do you think you would most like to do in the future?”

**Mao:** “A middle school teacher in some remote places, I guess.”

**Researcher:** “That’s different from what you are majoring in now. Can you tell me why?”

**Mao:** “I think what I mean is an alternative education school… In that case, I can tell something else to young students other than being successful or increasing competitiveness…”. 

(Mao 2nd interview)
8.4.5 Summary: Beyond What It Looks Like

From Mao's case, we can discovered that hidden struggles exist and can easily be overlooked. Despite attending University W, an elite institution in East Asia, Mao perceives herself as an underrepresented student with multiple identities. However, her inner conflicts are unique and not easily understood by others. On the surface, she appears to have an enviable life, attending a prestigious university in Shanghai, receiving a scholarship, winning academic awards, and showcasing her talent in belly dance. Yet, there is a deeper complexity to her experiences. One statement that left a strong impression on me was when she said, "But they just want to be friends with whom they imagine me to be" and "I am the kind of people university wants." Mao's higher education journey, as an ethnical minority student from a separated family in Northeast China, striving to enter elite universities in Beijing, to a university student who grows tired of the constant competition, is a reflection of identity conflicts and could be the contrasting expectations we have for an inclusive and open university environment.

8.5 Case 4: The Story of Chang

8.5.1 General Description

Chang, a twenty-two-year-old second-year student at University P in Singapore, shares a common experience with many Singaporean males by serving in the army for two years before pursuing higher education. Initially, attending University P was seen as a fulfilment of his parent’s expectations and an opportunity for a vibrant social life. However, despite spending two years at this prestigious institution, Chang continues to question his chosen
path. Additionally, he has encountered persistent learning obstacles throughout his four semesters.

During our two interviews, Chang exhibited signs of confusion and perseverance, indicating the influence of his family and the impact of his higher education experience. On the other hand, Chang also shows strong confidence in the social aspect of his university life. Through Chang's case, we gain extensive attention to the coexistence of divergent learner identities. These identities show, to some extent, the struggles faced by underrepresented students from similar backgrounds in elite universities.

“The most enjoyable part of the university is that I have some really good friends here…I am quite involved in social activities. I love spending time with them”.

(Chang 1st interview)

“I am heading for my third year in this university… I can’t just start over again suddenly”.

(Chang 2nd interview)

8.5.2 Parental Expectations and the Effects

Studying at University P holds significant meaning for Chang, as it not only fulfils his parents' expectations but also serves as an opportunity to bridge the gap between him and his father. To understand this, we must delve into Chang's upbringing. He comes from a working-class family, with his father being an immigrant from Malaysia working in a shipping company and his
mother employed as a cosmetologist. Chang has an older brother, Mike, who chose to pursue a career as a tattoo artist from a young age, which his father disapproved of, attributing the decision to their mother’s influence. Instead, their father had high hopes for both sons to become university graduates and attain higher social status.

The weight of these expectations places pressure not only on Chang but also on his mother. Therefore, sending Chang to university has become important. Meanwhile, Chang has always felt a distant connection with his father due to his frequent business trips. Consequently, he sees fulfilling his father’s expectations as a means to mend their strained relationship. These parental expectations are not uncommon from our interviewees, as some students face similar pressures to pursue upward mobility or fulfil their parents’ unfulfilled dreams. Chang, overall, maintains a generally positive attitude towards his educational journey, from studying in junior college to gaining admission to University P. Despite being aware of the conflicts and disagreements that occurred within his family, choosing this path still seems like a favourable decision for him. After all, University P is renowned and highly sought after.

“I still remember that period. Every phone call with my dad, he asks if there is any response from the universities… This is something he really cares about a lot. So I felt very excited when receiving the offer from University P, and he was so excited…”

(Chang 1st interview)
**Researcher:** “What University P means to you and your parents?”

**Chang:** “It’s a brilliant university. For my parents, it is something they never have a chance to pursue. They are proud of me for studying at University P.”

(Chang 2nd interview)

This context had an initial impact on Chang's learner identity at University P, which can be viewed from two perspectives. Firstly, upon embarking on his higher education journey, Chang's lifestyle underwent a significant transformation. Engaging in numerous social activities posed challenges for him in terms of time management. The busyness associated with his social life made it difficult for him to concentrate on his university studies. During Chang's second interview, he attributed this challenge to a perceived lack of freedom in his previous educational trajectories.

“I rarely had my own time when I was studying in JC. In contrast, Mike has a much freer life than me… The lifestyle is totally different at the university. You can make your own decision, and others will treat you like an adult. For example, my mom no longer takes it for granted that I should come home for dinner (and Mike doesn’t because he needs to work). Now, even if I decided to skip a class, I don’t need to explain to anyone”.

“When I am home, they no longer say something like: ‘It’s very late, go to bed or ‘Have you finished your study?’…”.

(Chang 2nd interview)

Based on Chang's account, several indications suggest his strong desire for
a life of freedom. It is true that in our target universities, students generally enjoy greater autonomy in managing their time compared to their secondary education period. However, effectively organising their time remains a common learning challenge for students, as discussed in Chapter 6. In Chang’s case, there appears to be an imbalance between the time he devotes to academic tasks and his involvement in social activities, resulting in poor academic performance.

Furthermore, Chang exhibits confusion regarding his future. On the one hand, having achieved his primary goal of entering a reputable university and fulfilling his parents’ aspirations, he no longer possesses a clear sense of purpose as he once did. Although he remains on the chosen path of higher education, the road ahead lacks a distinct direction. On the other hand, being a first-generation student, Chang's parents never had the opportunity to attend university themselves. Consequently, their guidance and expectation concerning Chang's future or university life are limited. Consequently, it is evident that Chang continues to grapple with the expectation of becoming an independent and responsible student within the elite university environment.

“It feels awesome when I finally can decide how to spend my time”.

(Chang 1st interview)

**Researcher:** “How do you imagine the future? What do you want to do?”

**Chang:** “I will graduate, that’s for sure. Well, honestly, I am not quite sure… Finding a job, I guess?”

**Researcher:** “Do you share your university life with your parents?”
Chang: “Yes, of course. They often ask me about my studies, but we may not go into some details. I usually tell them: everything is fine…”

(Chang 2nd interview)

8.5.3 Perseverance in Finishing the Higher Education Journey

During the second interview, Chang expressed his sense of confusion regarding his experience at University P. For a considerable period of time, Chang firmly believed that attending this institution was the correct path for him. However, I observed that he displayed a somewhat evasive attitude towards his current university life, particularly in relation to the academic aspect.

Researcher: “How was your last semester?”

Chang: “Well, almost like that… I feel good now because I am interning next semester”.

Researcher: “Oh, that’s good. You feel excited about the internship?”

Chang: “Not really, it’s just that I feel like I can finally rest… It was a bit overwhelming… It’s good that I don’t have to study for the coming semester”.

(Chang 2nd interview)

In addition to time management issues, Chang faces two significant learning challenges: a lack of sense of achievement and a lack of interest in his chosen major at University P. Chang is pursuing a major in an IT-related field, which demands specialised skills and extensive study across various subjects. According to him, his grades consistently hover on the edge, reflecting his awareness of the learning struggles he encounters. It is
noteworthy that Chang's attitude towards his major exhibited considerable variation between the two interviews.

“I had chosen this major because it's cool… I thought these things looked interesting when I was in junior college… Yes, I can say I like it”.

(Chang 1st interview)

**Researcher:** “How do you feel about your current major? Do you still remember how you made a choice?”

**Chang:** “I may have just made a smart choice… it’s easier to get a nice job with my profession… it’s logically the best option”.

(Chang 2nd interview)

I noticed Chang’s anxiety at University P when he explicitly expressed his dissatisfaction with his current major during the second interview. What struck me was his reluctance to consider making a change, despite losing interest in his academic field. He voiced concerns about the perceived unreasonableness of giving up on University P within the Singaporean context and the potential disappointment it would bring to his parents. This revealed the challenge he faced in confronting his true thoughts, as it meant confronting a certain level of denial regarding his past choices.

Despite facing academic difficulties in recent semesters, the idea of quitting appeared more embarrassing to Chang than his actual academic setbacks. He stated a preference for completing his bachelor's degree under these circumstances rather than facing criticism from others. This description
underscores Chang's tendency to adopt a passive approach to learning, reflected in his learner identities. From the moment of admission to selecting a major and deciding whether or not to make a change, he consistently makes decisions that lack a sense of confidence and independence.

“I am already twenty-two years old; I don’t think it is reasonable to spend more time on other things…”.

(Chang 2nd interview)

8.5.4 Identity Conflicts: Significant Gap in Confidence

Chang exhibits distinct identities between academic and non-academic aspects at the university. In the non-academic realm, he effortlessly fits in. Unlike some students from underrepresented backgrounds who struggle to adapt to peers and the elite surrounding, Chang has developed positive relationships with his people at University P. His easygoing personality enables him to establish a good rapport with others. He perceives himself to be well-liked, actively participates in hall life and university communities, and can be considered successful in this regard. During the interviews, Chang emphasised the helpfulness of his social connections when facing challenges.

However, the academic aspect tells a different story compared to his social life. Not only does Chang struggle with poor grades, but he also harbours uncertainty about his interest in his chosen major. He admits to concealing his academic weaknesses, aligning with the common expectations for an elite university student - intelligence and confidence in academic learning (Please see Chapter 6). Failing to meet these expectations, Chang experiences stress
and displays negative learner identities.

“I can’t just let my friends feel that I am struggling because everyone is smart and doing similar things here. That doesn’t look good”.

(Chang 2nd interview)

Chang's learning issues are closely tied to his time management problems. In his first year at University P, he tends to prioritise invitations to activities, social gatherings, and events. However, effectively managing his time poses inherent challenges for a first-year student. Moreover, studying a complex IT-related field adds further difficulty. When Chang invests excessive time and energy in his social life, it inevitably detracts from his study commitments. Complicating matters, the curriculum in Chang's department includes interrelated courses across semesters, creating a sequential structure. As a result, his academic pursuits become trapped in a vicious cycle, hindering his progress.

“I have been very active since my first semester… now I look back to the old junior college days, I found my life during that time quite boring, and I always regret it…”

(Chang 1st interview)

“In my second semester in year one, I failed a course. This has caused problems with the course schedule for the next semester. It’s a mess…”

(Chang 2nd interview)
From the preceding discussions, we can observe the coexistence of different identities in Chang's case. On the one hand, there is the 'social king identity,' which instills in him confidence and a sense of self-worth. He enjoys popularity among his peers, and this source of social belonging is a significant aspect of his experience at University P. Furthermore, active participation in campus life also aligns with some common expectations placed upon elite university students. Consequently, Chang perceives himself as feeling secure, valued, and accomplished when engaging in social activities, contributing to his perception of success at University P. Moreover, as Chang mentions these positive social achievements and relations are beneficial and supportive for his integration into the university and navigating challenges.

On the other hand, there is the 'reluctant student' identity, which evokes feelings of inadequacy, insecurity, and being overwhelmed. Chang's identification as an elite university student is precarious and uncertain, primarily because he lacks the distinguished academic achievements commonly associated with elite university students in Singapore. While he may confidently discuss various topics, his academic performance does not align with these expectations.

These two contrasting identities create internal conflicts and bring stress to Chang. As a result, he gradually shows passive learning attitudes through his learner identities, striving to maintain only threshold grades to graduate while seeking a sense of accomplishment in other aspects of university life. Consequently, Chang displays low autonomy and interest in learning, reflecting a negative learning style. To a certain extent, these learner identities
shed light on his confusion regarding the future.

**Researcher:** “Have you ever thought of asking your friends for help when you are facing some hardships in academic learning?”

**Chang:** “Most of the time, we don’t talk about course stuff…When you are sharing some time, those studying things are your business… Even some of my friends found out I failed the course; they didn’t ask anything about it…”

**Researcher:** “Have you developed any learning strategies?”

**Chang:** “I think I know better what decisions I need to make. I will not take too many courses and choose some ‘good courses’… For some general education courses, it is quite easy to get a better grade. But, of course, those are always popular”.

“The other reason I can never drop off my current lifestyle is my friends. They are the main reason I love this place!”

(Chang 2\textsuperscript{nd} interview)

8.5.5 Summary: Another Kind of Learner Identity Progression Trajectory

When examining Chang's two years of higher education experience at University P, we can see a significant transformation in his learner identities. Like many students from underrepresented backgrounds, he encounters learning shocks and challenges upon entering the university. However, unlike others who may become trapped in stress and negative emotions due to a lack of progress, Chang shifts his focus towards extracurricular activities in university life, where he feels more confident and accomplished.
During our interview, Chang expressed his enjoyment of university life at University P. He portrayed himself as an outgoing, confident, and articulate young man. Nonetheless, I noticed a noticeable disparity when discussing topics related to learning and academic experiences. Chang responded with slower and less detailed answers compared to other subjects. I have identified three distinct tendencies in learning from his learner identities.

Firstly, Chang demonstrates an acceptance of his negative academic learning experiences at University P without displaying a strong desire for improvement or higher grades. One of the key reasons for this attitude is his engagement in other successful university experiences, such as being popular and actively participating in campus activities. These are as well positive learning experiences to a certain extent. As a result, Chang does not seem to be lacking a sense of achievement.

Secondly, Chang exhibits a lack of concern for academic learning at University P, attributing it to a lack of interest in his major. He frequently emphasises that he is not a good student. However, I discovered that, to a certain extent, Chang possesses the typically expected qualities of an elite university student. He demonstrates intelligence, creativity, and the ability to solve problems independently. From this perspective, he not only has the ability to learn but also seems to be confident in having effective methods of dealing with things.

Lastly, we can observe Chang's confusion regarding both his current stage of learning and the future. Despite his dislike for his major, he remains
committed to completing his bachelor's degree. It appears that he seeks to
strike a balance between various considerations, including meeting family
expectations, maintaining a preferred lifestyle, and developing a practical
understanding of Singaporean society and the labour market. In summary,
while Chang's current higher education experience may be perceived as
unbalanced and characterised by evasive learner identities, he has
established his unique way of navigating life at University P.

8.6 Analysis

8.6.1 Transitions Experienced by the Four Students

All four case study students have undergone distinct transition processes
within their respective universities. As observed, they demonstrate varying
degrees of transformation between the two interviews conducted with me. In
the following section, I will delve into the specific details of their
transformations.

Among the cases presented in this chapter, Ying's experience serves as a
typical example of a positive transition. As she described, her early days at
the elite university were fraught with immense discomfort. Ying not only stood
out from her peers due to her different educational background (Polytech), but
she also entered the university at a different starting point compared to her
classmates (she started in year 2). These factors initially made her feel like an
outsider, posing unique learning challenges. However, Ying successfully
forged connections with individuals she found more relatable or those who
shared similar backgrounds, including Lee, a senior who also graduated from
Polytech. According to Ying, these individuals provided valuable support and guidance, enabling her to assimilate into university life more comfortably. Consequently, she exhibited increased confidence and a stronger bond with the university during the second interview.

Similarly, Chang exemplifies the positive aspects of his elite university experience. He takes pleasure in socialising with friends and actively engaging in campus social networks. Many expected qualities of an elite university student are evident in Chang, such as confidence, expressiveness, creativity, and a strong sense of university identity. However, there is a stark contrast in his academic pursuits. Chang not only struggled with failed courses in previous semesters but his confusion and detachment from learning became increasingly apparent between the first and second interview. Despite recognising his lack of interest in his current field of study, Chang remains resolute in completing his university education. Consequently, his lifestyle reflects a simultaneous separation and balance. While he derives a sense of accomplishment within the elite university setting, he also grapples with negative learning experiences that have contributed to his unique learner identities.

Jack's case holds significant importance as the sole student among my research participants who made the decision to discontinue their studies at an elite university. Confronting the disparity in academic achievements between secondary school and university, Jack's learning experiences reflect a common challenge faced by underrepresented students - the inability to replicate the high grades they attained in school, which leads to stress and
negative emotions. Additionally, Jack faced immense learning pressures stemming from his unique identity as an enrolled student in a special admission program. Eager to achieve academic success, he attempted to emulate the successful learning model he had employed in the past by dedicating almost all his time to studying. However, this highly unbalanced lifestyle resulted in negative experiences at the elite university. Jack's perspectives and attitudes toward universities underwent a complete transformation between the two interviews, ultimately leading him to terminate his higher education journey.

In contrast to Jack, Mao did not exhibit such pronounced changes between the two interviews. She did not face some of the common learning challenges experienced by other underrepresented students. Based on my interactions with Mao, I observed her maturity, intelligence, and excellent academic performance. From a fitting-in and learning perspective, Mao appears to be a seasoned elite university student. She has effective learning strategies, has received academic awards, and holds a part-time job. However, beneath these outward signs of success, I discovered that she frequently grapples with identity conflicts. Upon entering the elite university, Mao seemed to experience a distinct sense of distance when interacting with both family members and peers on campus. Her descriptions revealed a lack of acceptance. This phenomenon persisted throughout the two interviews. Nevertheless, in the second interview, I noticed a greater integration into university life. When discussing her involvement in the belly dance society and performances, her tone differed significantly from her portrayal of being an "outsider" and her understanding of interpersonal relationships and
societal realities. Instead, it exhibited a sense of enjoyment and active participation.

8.6.2 Discoveries from the Four Students’ Learner Identities

In analysing the higher education experiences of the four case study students, I aimed to establish connections and identify significant trends in their learning processes and transitions through their learner identities. Through this analysis, I have identified three key points that offer valuable insights and reflections.

Low Personal Interests

First, these four students generally exhibit a low level of personal interest in their studies at elite universities. Jack, Ying, and Chang all express a clear lack of enthusiasm for their chosen majors. Interestingly, Jack's perception of his field of the study underwent a significant shift between the two interviews, transitioning from considering it a "cool idea" to deeming it a "horrible decision." Both Singaporean students emphasised that their choice of major was primarily driven by future career considerations. It is worth noting that both Ying and Chang mentioned an interest in the arts, but deemed it "unrealistic" to pursue or make a change. Mao, on the other hand, initially selected University W due to her preference for the major and scholarship considerations. However, when asked about her future career plans, she responded differently, indicating potential changes or confusion regarding her current major.
For these four students, embarking on higher education seems to have become an obligatory path, even for Jack, who plans to explore other universities abroad. Regardless of experiencing learning setbacks or acknowledging a lack of interest in their studies, there are likely other significant factors at play, such as family responsibilities, external expectations, or societal values. In cultures influenced by Chinese traditions, there is often an emphasis on immediate productivity after graduation or the notion of not giving up on something once started. These factors can significantly impact the experiences of underrepresented students in our study. Consequently, students may prioritise a university’s reputation over their genuine interests, as it may hold greater perceived benefits for future employment prospects.

In this context, students are more likely to develop negative learner identities. Chang’s case exemplifies this point. He demonstrates a passive attitude towards learning, where acquiring new learning methods or overcoming challenges is not his priority. Instead, his primary focus is on meeting the minimum requirements for graduation. The student’s perceptions of their majors and university learning prompt broader discussions about personal interests and the fundamental question of how we perceive higher education. As East Asia experiences widening participation and the expansion of higher education, it raises the question of whether placing more non-traditional students in elite universities presents a new set of challenges. For a more in-depth exploration, please refer to Chapter 9.
Students’ Perceptions Affect How Learner Identities Are Formatted

Secondly, a significant finding from these four case studies is that the process of developing learner identities is dependent on students' perceptions of others, the environment, and themselves. These perceptions can be either objective or subjective. Objective perceptions pertaining to straightforward aspects such as students' university lifestyle, grades compared to their peers, or the gap in learning achievements between school and university. For example, both Mao and Jack achieved excellent grades in high school. However, while Jack experienced self-esteem issues due to negative learning experiences at the university, Mao displayed confidence in her learning methods and adapted well to the academic intensity. These differences contribute to their distinct learner identities. Jack, akin to someone constantly searching for an exit in a maze, continuously seeks change and strives to find an efficient learning approach. However, within the elite higher education environment, he struggles to find his place and lacks a sense of accomplishment. In contrast, Ying and Chang managed to find their comfort zones at the university, often through connections with friends and support from others, which is precisely what Jack lacks.

Conversely, Mao appears more relaxed in her approach to learning and allows things to flow naturally. Even when she didn't sustain the grades for the Academic Excellence Award in the second semester, she didn't seem overly concerned. Indeed, Mao still outperforms most of her peers. She never doubts her qualification to be a student at this elite university. In this regard, Mao's displayed learner identities are stable and positive.
Students' subjective perceptions also influence the establishment of their learner identities. Taking Ying and Mao as examples, both mentioned feeling like outsiders in the university. While we can infer aspects such as identity conflicts or institutional expectations from their experiences, the actual nuances of these experiences may vary from person to person. One fundamental reason is that students' subjective awareness of others or the environment is also shaped by their unique characteristics, personal growth contexts, and life experiences. For instance, Mao's perspective on interpersonal relationships is deeply influenced by her upbringing, making her less inclined to work or study collaboratively with her peers.

It would be risky to solely attribute the learner identities displayed by these students to the higher education system. However, whether it is objective or subjective awareness, these findings highlight the specific challenges faced by underrepresented students, particularly first-generation students. Often, their family members are unable to provide effective support beyond the university level, such as sharing personal experiences, offering advice, or setting successful examples of university life. Consequently, first-generation students are more likely to navigate the university independently. Furthermore, based on my interviews, only a very small number of students indicated utilising any support programs offered by the university. For further discussions on these topics, please refer to Chapter 9.

**Extracurricular Activities and Learner Identities**

Thirdly, the analysis of these cases suggests that extracurricular activities could have significant implications on students' learner identities. Among the
four cases discussed in this chapter, Ying, Chang, and Mao all participated in various extracurricular activities, and these activities influenced their learner identities in different ways. For Ying, her interactions with individuals from university societies, including students from different departments and academic years, as well as fellow Polytech graduates, have helped her develop a better understanding of the university environment. According to Ying, these interactions provide valuable insights into others’ experiences and foster her own learning abilities. She displays a strong ability to learn and is not overly concerned about challenges or problems, likely due to the collective supportive force she feels from her connections.

Although Chang's academic performance at the university may not be outstanding, he possesses commendable qualities as a learner. As described in this chapter, Chang is expressive, confident, creative, and actively engages in leadership roles within university societies. These attributes indicate his independent problem-solving and learning capabilities, which can be attributed to his extensive involvement in extracurricular activities. However, these activities also present challenges in terms of academic learning and time management. Interestingly, according to Chang, he feels more confident in engaging in group discussions or delivering presentations for academic tasks. These aspects contribute to the learner identities he displayed during our two interviews.

Conversely, Mao presents a contrast to Chang. She does not have as close of relationships with others or spend as much time participating in university activities. Most of the time, Mao appears to be intelligent, independent, and
somewhat aloof. However, on certain topics, she speaks more like an ordinary young student. For instance, when discussing her part-time job, she expresses complaints about the people she encounters and her colleagues, similar to how most individuals would. This stark contrast with some of her claims during our interviews, such as "relationships revolve around interests," is notable. Similarly, when Mao shared photos of her belly dance performances, I observed her happiness and satisfaction. While two interviews might provide limited insight into a person's intrinsic changes, it seems reasonable to consider that extracurricular activities can indeed influence students' learner identities.

Overall, the analysis of these cases highlights the role of extracurricular activities in shaping learner identities. For Ying, such activities foster learning abilities and provide a supportive network, while for Chang, they contribute to independent problem-solving skills. Mao's case demonstrates the complexity of these influences, where her limited participation in extracurricular activities does not align entirely with her claimed learner identity. Further examination and exploration of this topic are warranted.

8.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented four case studies of selected underrepresented students, highlighting their unique experiences in higher education and transition trajectories. These case studies provide extensive details about their individual HE journeys. Furthermore, a comprehensive analysis was conducted, encompassing an overview of their transition experiences and an exploration of the learner identities they exhibit. In the upcoming chapter, I will
delve into further comparative discussions that integrate the case studies and the four distinct learner identities introduced in Chapters 7 and 8. These discussions will contribute to a deeper understanding of the similarities, differences, and implications of these learner identities.
Chapter 9
Discussions and Conclusion

9.1 Introduction

This chapter presents discussions, and the conclusion of this thesis, structured into four key sections. The initial section encapsulates the conclusions derived from the previous findings chapters, providing a succinct summary of the key discoveries presented throughout the thesis. Then, the second section focuses on discussions that draw comparisons across multiple levels, utilising the research findings obtained throughout this study. This comparative analysis encompasses institutional and regional levels, offering a comprehensive understanding of the research subject.

The third section engages in the examination of social justice. Drawing upon the justice principle derived from pertinent theories outlined in Chapter 3, I will evaluate underrepresented students’ experiences in higher education and provide a value judgment. This critical analysis delves into the intricate dynamics of social justice within the educational context. Lastly, in the concluding section, I offer implications and the final conclusions derived from this doctoral research, marking the end of this thesis. These conclusive remarks aim to comprehensively synthesise the research findings and their broader significance within the field. The implications of this research contribute to the existing knowledge base and may guide future research endeavours in related areas. Additionally, this section establishes a connection between the research discoveries and the initial research
questions and objectives, outlining how they have been accomplished through the study.

9.2 Summary of Key Findings

In this section, I will outline the key findings derived from Chapters 6 to 8: the findings and case study Chapters of this study. These identified findings will serve as the foundation for subsequent comparative analyses and discussions on matters pertaining to social justice within this Chapter.

9.2.1 Key Findings of Chapter 6

Chapter 6 presents the findings regarding the learning and transition experiences of underrepresented students within elite Asian universities. These findings encompass aspects such as their perceived process of fitting in, encountered learning challenges, the impacts they face, identified phenomena among students, as well as my observations regarding their attitudes and displayed characteristics. The condensed details are provided below:

Pressure to Succeed is the Most Outstanding Characteristic

Throughout the course of conducting 62 interviews with our targeted underrepresented students, a prominent theme that emerged consistently was the experience of 'pressure'. This pressure was implicitly reflected in various aspects of the interview discussions, highlighting its prevalence across different contexts. The students expressed pressure from various considerations, including academic performance, social integration, financial worries, familial obligations, and personal growth. However, these various
pressures tend to converge into a collective pressure, commonly known as the students' pressure to succeed in higher education.

**Additional Pressure on Special Admission Programs Enrolled Students**

Among our cohort of 32 underrepresented students, it is noteworthy that over half of them gained admission to elite universities through Special Admission Programs (SAPs). This study has uncovered that while SAPs offer a more inclusive pathway for students from diverse social backgrounds, they also tend to introduce additional pressures to students, as observed in both the Singaporean and Shanghai contexts. SAPs can sometimes create a sense of differentiation from their peers, leading some SAP students to experience feelings of panic or lack of confidence during the early stages of their higher education journey.

**Identity Formation of Underrepresented Students in Elite Universities**

Underrepresented students establish their new identities in elite universities through an ongoing process of fitting in during their transition into higher education. This process entails embracing their new identity as students of elite universities and adopting the value system of their respective institutions. Specifically, students must undergo the experience of perceiving, understanding, and practising these values as they are expected to do so within their academic environments. Throughout this transformative journey, students often exhibit a tendency to lack confidence, experience confusion, or encounter identity conflicts.
Time Management: A Key Learning Challenge

Our data indicate that a majority of participants from both Singapore and Shanghai mentioned facing learning challenges stemming from time management issues. Among the various types of learning issues resulting from poor time management, three challenges stand out as the most common. Firstly, students often struggle to allocate sufficient time to academic tasks due to their involvement in socialising, extracurricular activities, or part-time employment. The allure of social engagements and the pursuit of other interests can detract from their ability to prioritise academic responsibilities. The second challenge lies in unrealistic expectations, where students enrol in excessive courses or face a disconnect between their expectations and the reality of university life. These unrealistic demands can create significant time management difficulties, as students find it challenging to balance their academic commitments effectively. Thirdly, digital distractions emerge as another prevalent issue mentioned by some students, further complicating their ability to manage time effectively for learning. The temptation and allure of digital platforms can divert their attention away from their educational pursuits, hindering their ability to allocate time efficiently.

Negative Attitude Towards Online Learning

During the data collection period, which encompassed the COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 periods, students shared valuable insights regarding the learning challenges they faced within this context. Notably, one common issue raised by our target students is the difficulty of accessing online courses. This observation highlights the disadvantages experienced by these students, such as inadequate resources or lack of prior experience, resulting in technical
difficulties and learning obstacles. Furthermore, the shifting dynamics of classroom interactions under the pandemic context have also emerged as a prominent concern, with students expressing a perceived lack of teacher presence. Consequently, our students have displayed a tendency to develop a negative attitude towards online learning.

9.2.2 Key Findings of Chapter 7

Chapter 7 provides an analysis of four distinct learner identities derived from our study of underrepresented students in Singapore and Shanghai. These learner identities are classified as The Successful Elite University Student (SES), Responsible Student Meeting Expectations (RS), Reflexively Negotiating Diverse Identities (RNDI), and Competitive Player for Social and Financial Position (CPP). These learner identities shed light on how students perceive themselves as learners within the context of elite Asian universities, encompassing their tendencies, approaches, attitudes towards learning and various aspects of life, as well as their decision-making processes. Our students’ manifestation of these distinct learner identities reflects their unique aspects of identity and their experiences during the transition and learning journey within their respective universities. The condensed details are provided below:

**Successful Elite University Student (SES) Learner Identity**

The SES Learner Identity serves as the cornerstone of students' overall identity as elite university students. It stems from their prior learning successes or positive experiences, such as their successful admission to the university. The SES learner identity, however, can be subject to variation
based on students' ability to maintain their success throughout their ongoing higher education journey. Consequently, it can be a source of instability and significantly impact their confidence and sense of belonging within the university. Students’ perceptions of success in elite universities are primarily contingent upon their academic performance. Furthermore, positive experiences within society or fitting in with the university environment also play a pivotal role in shaping and strengthening their SES learner identities.

**Responsible Student Meeting Expectations (RS) Learner Identity**

The RS Learner Identity encompasses the perspective of underrepresented students regarding the significance of pursuing higher education, particularly in elite universities. It reflects their commitment to purposeful work and the fulfilment of responsibilities towards their families, society, financial investments, and self-actualisation. These identities often prioritise meeting external expectations over personal interests in learning. Students’ RS learner identities tend to encourage them to focus on acquiring knowledge and skills deemed valuable for completing their university degree. As a result, they develop a utilitarian-oriented approach towards learning and decision-making.

**Reflexively Negotiating Diverse Identities (RNDI) Learner Identity**

The RNDI Learner Identity emerges intermittently, primarily when underrepresented students navigate the contrast between their underrepresented status and the elite university environment. Our students often manifest their RNDI learner identities during the initial stages of their transition, where they frequently encounter identity conflicts and challenges related to fitting in. The RNDI learner identity reflects a reflective and adaptive
approach, guiding students as they negotiate and reconcile their various identities. It signifies the inner journey of perceiving, understanding, and navigating identity-related issues or difficulties, shedding light on their tendencies and experiences throughout their university journey.

**Competitive Player for Social and Financial Position (CPP) Learner Identity**

The CPP Learner Identity, similar to the RS Learner Identity, highlights the perspective of underrepresented students regarding the significance of pursuing higher education. However, it places greater emphasis on socially interactive aspects, such as competition and social status distribution. Students’ CPP learner identities are often established well before their higher education journey begins and are heavily influenced by family perspectives and societal values. The CPP learner identity reflects students’ perceptions and understandings of the cause and effect of the "life race" across their past and future, with their current status as elite university students positioning them as "winners." This identity encourages their perseverance in pursuing social and financial positions in the future and discourages exploration, change, or giving up. The CPP learner identity reveals underrepresented students’ tendency to prioritise competition over their self-understanding or interests, their confusion about following the expected path, and their lack of learner autonomy.

**9.2.3 Key Findings of Chapter 8**

Chapter 8 presents the narratives of four underrepresented students who were selected from a larger group of 32 interviewees. Each of these students
represents one of the four target universities in our study and has undergone significant transformations within their respective institutions. The case study aims to report the higher education experiences of these students by presenting comprehensive and detailed narratives that include contextual information crucial for enhancing our understanding. The condensed details are provided below:

**Case Study 1: Jack – University G  (Shanghai)**

Jack's case study stands out as highly distinctive among our 32 participants. Unlike the others, Jack made the decision to end his higher education journey at an elite university. His experience in higher education showcases a comprehensive progression and transformation, beginning with initial excitement and success, gradually encountering learning issues and identity conflicts, and ultimately resulting in his departure from the elite university.

A clear pattern of a vicious circle emerges in Jack's case. He displays an imbalanced lifestyle at University G, devoting a significant amount of time to studying without reaping positive learning experiences or outcomes. Jack consistently emphasises his need to prove himself, influenced by his past success as a top student in middle school and the pressure he feels as an SAP student. This imbalanced lifestyle not only hinders his social connections but also affects his overall well-being. Jack's case highlights the immense difficulty that students face in abandoning their current approach to higher education, as they encounter strong social pressures.
Jack's experience sheds light on the challenges faced by underrepresented students in elite universities. It emphasises the need for comprehensive support systems that address not only academic success but also well-being and social integration. By understanding the unique circumstances and experiences of students like Jack, institutions can better tailor their support services to ensure a more inclusive and supportive environment for all students.

Case Study 2: Ying – University K (Singapore)

Ying's case serves as a notable example of a successful transition experience. Similar to many of our underrepresented students, Ying initially faced moments of panic and challenges when trying to fit into the university environment. She specifically highlighted the pressure to succeed in higher education due to family responsibilities. As a Polytechnic college graduate, Ying's path to University K differed from that of most of her peers, as she started Year 2. This unique circumstance made it even more challenging for her to adapt to university life. Initially, she struggled with establishing stable academic performance and forging positive social relationships, leading to a strong sense of identity conflicts and feeling like an "outsider." However, by seeking support from individuals from similar backgrounds or social groups, Ying gradually began to feel more comfortable and at ease.

Additionally, Ying's case exhibits a significant transformation between the two interviews, indicating positive progress. Additionally, her emphasis on the role of a "key person" who provided support and played a beneficial role in her transition into higher education highlights the unpredictable nature of students'
experiences in elite institutions.

**Case Study 3: Mao – University W  (Shanghai)**

Mao's case exemplifies the intricate nature of underrepresented students' transition to an elite environment, offering a broader perspective on identity issues. In terms of academic performance, Mao has not encountered significant learning challenges and has managed to achieve successful outcomes with top grades. However, she exhibits a low sense of belonging within her respective university and frequently grapples with identity conflicts.

Unlike the majority of Chinese students in the research context who take pride in their identity as elite university students, Mao does not seem to share the same sentiment. Whether it is her identity as a first-generation student or as an ethnic minority, both contribute to her feelings of discomfort and alienation. Mao's case underscores the importance of considering factors beyond academic performance when underrepresented students strive to accept and construct their new identities as elite university students. While academic performance is often regarded as the primary determinant, other aspects and needs should not be overlooked, as they have the potential to influence the overall higher education experience in negative ways.

**Case Study 4: Chang – University P  (Singapore)**

Chang's case exemplifies the diverse pathways through which underrepresented students can form their learner identities within elite institutions. Despite perceiving himself as academically unsuccessful at University P and consistently expressing a lack of confidence in academic
discussions during the interviews, Chang maintains a strong sense of belonging and a confident identity as an elite university student.

For Chang, fulfilling family expectations and completing his university degree are his primary commitments. Although he is aware of losing interest in his academic major and lacking a sense of achievement in learning, he does not appear inclined to make any changes. Instead, he derives a significant sense of achievement from his outstanding social skills, active social life, and positive relationships with others at the university. This highlights the diverse and multifaceted trajectory of students' transition experiences and how their identities take shape.

It is important to recognize that students like Chang can find alternative paths to form their identities and experience success beyond traditional academic measures. Their social skills and interpersonal relationships can contribute to a sense of achievement and belonging within the elite university setting. Thus, understanding the varied routes and factors that influence learner identities is crucial for comprehending the complexities of underrepresented students' experiences in higher education.

**Across the Four Case Studies**

The four case studies presented in Chapter 8 highlight the significant heterogeneity in the higher education experiences and transition trajectories of underrepresented students in elite Asian universities. Jack, Ying, Mao, and Chang demonstrate distinct tendencies and approaches to learning and fitting in. Additionally, Chapter 8 summarises three common tendencies shared by
these case study students, which have a significant impact on their formation of learner identities.

Firstly, these students generally exhibit a low interest in their current academic majors within their respective universities. This lack of interest influences their perception of higher education and contributes to the emergence of identity conflicts commonly observed among underrepresented students. The disconnect between their academic pursuits and personal passions can create challenges in finding meaning and purpose in their university experiences.

Secondly, the formation of learner identities is influenced by both objective facts and subjective perceptions. Objective factors, such as grades, living environments, and curriculum frameworks, serve as the foundation for cultivating learner identities and are more easily understood. However, students’ subjective perceptions, shaped by their unique life experiences and social backgrounds, also play a significant role in shaping their learner identities. Understanding the contextual information surrounding students’ subjective perceptions is crucial for comprehending their identity formation process.

Lastly, the case study students’ experiences indicate that extracurricular activities exert a noticeable influence on their learner identities, both positively and negatively. Engaging in extracurricular activities can enhance students’ adaptability and provide a sense of achievement. However, participation in such activities can also pose challenges in terms of time management,
potentially leading to learning challenges.

Overall, the diverse experiences of these case study students underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of underrepresented students' higher education journeys. By recognising the role of students' interests, subjective perceptions, and extracurricular activities, institutions can better support the formation of positive and meaningful learner identities among underrepresented students in elite universities.

9.3 Comparative Discussions

This section engages in comparative discussions based on the findings presented in Chapters 6-9, aiming to provide answers and potential insights to the research questions. Drawing on the four distinct learner identities introduced in Chapter 7, these discussions will be conducted at two levels: Institutional and Regional. The following paragraph will initiate the comparative discussions at the institutional level.

9.3.1 Institutional Level

In this section, the objective of these discussions is to uncover potential insights that go beyond individual experiences and provide a broader understanding from a collective standpoint. By employing the four distinct learner identities introduced in Chapter 7 as our analytical framework, we can unravel the intricate dynamics within institutions and their influence on underrepresented students. This analytical approach will facilitate a comprehensive examination of the institutional landscape and its implications for these students.
Perceptions of Specialised Universities: Students' Recognition and Preferences

Among the four targeted universities in Singapore and Shanghai, two of them are widely acknowledged by our study participants for their specialisation in the field of science and technology, with one located in each city (University G in Shanghai and University P in Singapore). On the other hand, the remaining two universities do not possess the same level of recognition for their specialisation. It is important to note that, according to Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) higher education institution classification guide, all four universities should fall under the categories of 'Comprehensive' or 'Full Comprehensive' institutions. However, our findings suggest that students generally have a shared understanding of these institutions' classifications, which may deviate from the classifications suggested by relevant authorities.

Interestingly, within this context, some students automatically perceive the other two universities as being stronger in humanities or liberal arts. This perception is noteworthy, as it reflects the students' beliefs regarding the strengths and specialities of these institutions. Furthermore, our interviews revealed an intriguing pattern: most students from universities without a specialised label view both universities in the same city as desirable options. In contrast, some students from the two specialised universities, which are widely recognised for their specific expertise, exhibit a clear preference for their own institutions.

Most of the academic majors chosen by these students are related to the science and technology spheres. Their strong preference for their own
institutions is accompanied by a more prominent display of CPP learner identities, suggesting a clear sense of purpose in choosing their academic fields with future employment prospects in mind. These students have a distinct perception of university education as a preparation for specific highly professional careers.

While students from different fields or studying in the other two universities also view university education as a preparation for future employment, their description of it tends to be more general in nature. For these students, their RS learner identities take on a more prominent role in affirming the significance of obtaining an elite university education for pursuing promising positions in the future. In contrast, their CPP learner identities are less assertive and exhibit a more moderate stance.

By comparing students from highly recognised science and technology specialised institutions with other students, we can observe differences in how they perceive their higher education plans and exhibit distinct tendencies in their understanding and implementation of the transition from university education to future employment, as evidenced by their CPP and RS learner identities.

9.3.2 Regional Level

In this section, the analysis will further explore the regional level, offering a broader scale of comparison that goes beyond the individual and institutional levels discussed previously. Two primary discussions will be presented in the following paragraphs. The first comparison will centre on the examination of
the transition and learning experiences of underrepresented students within the specific contexts of cities. The second comparison will aim to present relevant findings at the national level. Both discussions will be conducted utilising the framework of the four distinct learner identities introduced in Chapter 7.

**Fitting into The University but Also the City**

At the regional level, students enrolled in the four universities located in Singapore and Shanghai exhibit distinct patterns in their transition experiences. Specifically, students attending the two universities in Shanghai demonstrate a notable presence of RNDI learner identities, which stem from their perception of disparities between themselves and the city. This observation can be further examined from two perspectives. Firstly, all 16 students enrolled in the Shanghai universities originate from various regions within China, indicating that the process of transitioning into university life extends beyond the confines of the campus environment. Secondly, a significant proportion of these students come from rural areas, highlighting the potential influence of the urban-rural contrast on their transition experiences.

The students enrolled in Shanghai universities, particularly those hailing from rural areas, exhibit clear and distinct RNDI learner identities that reflect a sense of reverence and their perception of occupying weaker positions within power dynamics. Similar to the narrative of striving for upward mobility, these students come to Shanghai to pursue elite higher education, signifying their pursuit of improvement from their original contexts. As a result, they display a propensity to accept and adapt to their new environment, rather than
engaging in direct confrontation or unwavering persistence when faced with identity conflicts. These newly adopted identities are influenced by their life experiences in Shanghai and, in turn, shape the development of other learner identities, such as SES and CPP learner identities.

As one of China's largest and most globally connected cities, life in Shanghai is characterised by a fast-paced and competitive environment. Within this context, students' CPP learner identities tend to be reinforced, as they have ample opportunities to witness the dynamics of elitism and immerse themselves in such an atmosphere. Consequently, students often assert that they possess broader perspectives and demonstrate a strong commitment to building a promising future in major cities like Shanghai, as they tend to show a low willingness to return to their hometown after graduation.

Furthermore, students enrolled in Shanghai universities exhibit a tendency to gauge success based on individuals or their surroundings. Consequently, their SES learner identities reflect a strong inclination towards comparison with others. They frequently adopt a comparative mindset, which is closely intertwined with their pursuit of achievement.

In contrast to the situation in Shanghai, the implications of transition and fitting in at the city level are less pronounced for students enrolled in Singaporean universities. Among the 16 interviewees from Singapore, the majority are native students. Consequently, their entry into university primarily entails a shift in their educational pursuits rather than a significant change in their living environment. As a result, their RNDI learner identities are not
primarily shaped by identity conflicts related to environmental stimuli. Under this context, the RNDI learner identities of students enrolled in Singaporean universities are primarily shaped by identity conflicts related to elitism or the disparity between individual aspirations and societal expectations. These conflicts are closely intertwined with their RS learner identities. Further discussions on this topic will be explored in the subsequent section of this comparison.

This comparison highlights a distinct contrast in the development of students' learner identities based on the environmental perspective when comparing different cities. Students enrolled in Shanghai universities confront identity conflicts not only during the process of assimilating a new identity as elite university students but also as active participants in a highly competitive metropolis. The city's dominant and influential nature significantly shapes the progression of students' identities, surpassing the influences from their original contexts. As a result, these students display a heightened attachment to the city and its potential for upward mobility, as they perceive it as a gateway to a more promising future.

Conversely, Singaporean students exhibit fewer signs of learner identities influenced by shifting environments. This is primarily attributed to the geographical reality that they remain within the same city without experiencing a significant regional disparity. Instead, their RS learner identities manifest with greater clarity and stability, signifying a deeper connection to their original family or life context.
The Gap in Students’ Pride as ‘Prestigious’ University Students

One notable trend among our target students is that those enrolled in Shanghai universities consistently display a greater sense of self-awareness and pride in their status as prestigious university students, in comparison to their counterparts enrolled in Singapore universities. This inclination can be examined from two distinct perspectives.

Firstly, continuing from the previous discussions, it is evident that students enrolled in Singapore universities demonstrate a lesser impact of shifting environments on their learner identities due to geographical factors, leading to stronger attachments to their original family and living context. Consequently, their RS learner identities tend to exhibit greater clarity and stability. In contrast, students enrolled in Shanghai universities experience significant environmental changes that give rise to identity conflicts, resulting in a distinguishing tendency. Furthermore, our data reveal an interesting finding: Chinese students tend to display stronger CPP learner identities when considering the significance of higher education, whereas Singaporean students are generally more influenced by their RS learner identities.

Through the lens of Singaporean students' RS learner identities, it becomes evident that a strong social value framework, as discussed in Chapter 7, influences their perspectives. This framework provides individuals with guidance on how an ordinary life should unfold within the broader social context. It not only shapes their learner identities and decision-making processes but also presupposes that the higher education journey will ultimately align them with the familiar social values prevalent in Singaporean
society. As a result, Singaporean students tend to exhibit RS learner identities characterised by a conservative and utility-oriented learning attitude, as well as a strong motivation for timely graduation. Consequently, their sense of identity and pride as prestigious university students is not as pronounced, as they have not veered significantly from the social value system they are accustomed to.

Chinese students attribute different meanings to pursuing elite higher education. Their pronounced CPP learner identities reflect the harsh reality they perceive in a populous and competitive country, which some have witnessed within their family or broader contexts. As a result, the opportunity to study at a top-tier university is highly valued, as it represents a significantly more promising path to the future compared to the majority of their peers. Within this context, Chinese students take pride in elitism, as being prestigious university students is seen as a natural outcome. In a vast country where people lead vastly different lives, success is heavily influenced by comparisons with others. This aspect significantly shapes the SES and CPP learner identities of Chinese students.

Secondly, considering students' perceptions of Singapore's domestic higher education landscape can shed light on why Singaporean students generally exhibit less pride as prestigious university students. Based on the accounts of several Singaporean interviewees, while they acknowledge the incredible academic reputation and global rankings of their respective universities, some still perceive studying at a domestic university as 'less privileged.' These students mentioned that individuals with greater family backgrounds or
financial means would prioritise pursuing higher education overseas. This reveals that Singaporean students also engage in comparisons with their peers, but in the opposite direction compared to Chinese students. For some of them, attending a domestic university possibly carries a connotation of being second-class and reflects their perceived societal position and social class bias.

In summary, the comparison between Chinese and Singaporean students reveals a noticeable disparity in their pride as prestigious university students. Chinese students commonly exhibit strong CPP learner identities, reflecting the competitive nature of their society and the significance they attach to pursuing elite higher education. On the other hand, Singaporean students' prominent RS learner identities reflect the stability and strong social frameworks present in their society. This finding is consistent with the earlier discovery that students' RS and CPP learner identities sometimes display a duality. Additionally, when it comes to comparing themselves with their peers, Chinese and Singaporean students demonstrate different trends, further emphasising the cultural and societal distinctions between the two groups.

9.4 Social Justice and Relevant Discussions

This section presents comprehensive discussions that integrate the major findings of this study with the concept of social justice. It explores three central topics that are closely aligned with the research questions: identity conflicts, teaching quality, and autonomy. These discussions lay the groundwork for deriving further implications, which will be presented in the subsequent section.
9.4.1 Identity Conflicts and Pressures

Based on the major findings and comparisons presented thus far, it is evident that underrepresented students, who are the focus of this study, commonly experience identity conflicts during their transition into elite Asian universities. These conflicts can be perceived as a progression of negotiation between the students' original identities, which are rooted in their underrepresented social backgrounds and contrast with the elite universities and the corresponding expectations, and the newly adopted identities that emerge from their higher education journeys.

Power Relations Between Students and Universities

The identity conflicts experienced by our students reflect not only the differences in values and social expectations but also the power relations between the students as consumers and the elite universities as providers. The findings from our students suggest that they have a tendency to submit to these power relations and view them as a natural occurrence. Moreover, the fact that elite universities are highly desired in both China and Singapore further solidifies their role as positional goods. In this context, our focused students' RS or CPP learner identities often express their strong perceptions of the value associated with their current university brand and its commitment to pursuing social mobility and a promising future.

As discussed in Chapter 2, both Singapore and China have an increasing focus on social justice after achieving their goals of establishing world-class universities and securing competitive positions on the global stage. In this context, the distributive equality approach becomes apparent as efforts are
made to adjust the composition of students and provide increased admission opportunities to individuals from diverse social backgrounds. This is evident in the fact that more than half of our focused students participated in special admission programs (SAPs). However, it is important to acknowledge that while special admission programs (SAPs) may contribute to admission diversity, they can also place additional pressure on students. These programs carry strong labels, as they deviate from the traditional competitive approach to securing a university position. As a result, students enrolled through SAPs may feel the weight of these labels and face challenges related to perceptions of their abilities and achievements.

‘Assimilation’ as the Hidden Language

This phenomenon suggests that despite efforts to promote inclusivity in higher education, there remains a significant expectation for students to assimilate into the elitist culture prevalent within our focused Asian elite universities. These expectations contribute to the identity conflicts experienced by students, as they grapple with the dominant identity of being elite university students. This dominant identity encompasses students’ perceptions, understanding, and the progression of their practices toward an elitist value system. Students often recognise that adopting this value system can be advantageous for their higher education journey and future prospects.

Aligned with numerous studies that have concluded that underrepresented students often face more identity issues in elite universities (e.g., Thiele et al., 2016; Stubbs & Murphy, 2020; Attridge, 2022), it is evident that these students typically occupy a lower position in the power relations between themselves
and the universities. For instance, Attridge (2022) points out that students navigate and manage their identities in various ways, constantly negotiating how closely they align with the expected identity within and beyond the university space. She highlights that these expectations could permeate academic content, teaching styles, interests, and even speech patterns.

Following this understanding, in my research context, I further discovered a common tendency among students to perceive the task of navigating and overcoming identity conflicts as their personal responsibility or as a shared challenge faced by all students. This perception may stem from their position as underrepresented students and the additional pressures they encounter within the university environment. This tendency helps shed light on why these students consistently exhibit signs of carrying the burdens associated with various learner identities.

From the perspective of educational equality, it is evident that the predominance of elitism in our focused universities may overshadow the genuine goal of inclusivity. This leads to the propagation of a hidden language that promotes conformity and adherence to specific norms and expectations within elite universities. While students with sufficient cultural or social capital, such as those whose parents have also attended elite universities and can serve as their guides and references, may have an advantage in their transition to higher education, our target students, who come from diverse social backgrounds and many of whom are first-generation students, may encounter significant pressures only to conform to the prevailing elitist culture and norms. As argued by Brighouse and Swift (2006) and Swift (2003), such disparities are likely to harm the fairness of educational outcomes (refer to
Chapter 3). Moreover, this not only could limit underrepresented students’ ability to express their individuality and unique backgrounds fully but also presents them with additional challenges in terms of learning and fitting in.

In summary, the findings of this study suggest that underrepresented students in our focused elite Asian universities consistently encounter identity conflicts, which arise from power dynamics between students from diverse social backgrounds with unique life experiences and the prevailing elitism within the university context. Our students generally demonstrate a tendency to conform and navigate various identity struggles and challenges during their transition to higher education. Furthermore, these identity struggles are often perceived by our students as their responsibilities or as an inherent aspect of the identity of being a "proper university student." When considering the diverse impacts observed among students, in line with the perspectives on justice proposed by Brighouse (2000) and Rawls (2001) as reviewed in Chapter 3, it becomes apparent that disparities exist that undermine the fairness of education. Therefore, these circumstances highlight the presence of potential injustice within the framework of educational equality.

9.4.2 Students’ Perceptions of ‘Teaching Quality’ in Elite Universities

Previously presented research findings on underrepresented students' SES learner identities underscore the significance of their sense of achievement, both academically and socially, in relation to the attainment of their identity as elite university students. Specifically, academic performance plays a crucial role in shaping students’ confidence within the context of these esteemed institutions, thereby aligning with the prevailing elitism prevalent in such
environments. However, the data collected in this study suggests that students frequently attribute their academic achievements primarily to their personal efforts in learning and adaptability to the university curriculum. They tend to separate the role of teachers in their academic success or in helping them overcome learning challenges.

Furthermore, some of our students even express direct criticism of the "teaching quality" at their respective universities. These students, characterised by their RNDI learner identities, often perceive a significant gap in teaching styles between their previous schooling experiences and their current university education. It is evident that they also clearly realise that they are expected to adapt to the new teaching and learning dynamics and acquire knowledge incidentally, just like the case described by Attridge (2022).

**Subpar Teaching Quality as ‘Expected Part of Educational Journey’**

In a broader context, beyond those specific students who express concerns about teaching quality, it is observed that most of our underrepresented students share a common understanding that, as university students, they bear the personal responsibility of actively engaging in learning, seeking assistance when needed, and overcoming challenges. Moreover, it is noteworthy that our students generally view encountering subpar teaching quality in the university environment as a normal and expected part of their educational journey. They tend to perceive it as commonplace to come across instructors who may not excel in their teaching abilities. This perception also shows a prevailing expectation among our students that, as elite university students, they are expected to possess the necessary skills and intelligence
to navigate their academic journeys independently, without relying heavily on their teachers.

Students' criticisms and perceptions of teaching quality in their respective universities can be seen as a reflection of the broader context surrounding the global trend of pursuit and increasing emphasis on establishing world-class universities. The role of elite universities has been at the centre of research in this regard. As our target universities strive to attain global recognition and compete on an international scale, there may be a tendency to prioritise research excellence and reputation over teaching quality. This focus on achieving world-class status can sometimes overshadow the importance of providing high-quality teaching and support to students. As a result, students may experience discrepancies between their expectations and the actual teaching practices within their institutions.

Unstable Teaching Quality and Higher Education Experiences

Drawing from Anderson's (2012) perspectives on the educational adequacy approach, the findings related to students' perceptions of unstable teaching quality in elite universities and their passive acceptance of this reality can be viewed as problematic. Firstly, echoes Anderson's concept of "authority hierarchy", this situation stems from the unequal distribution of authority, as previously discussed in relation to the power relations between students and universities. The perception of unstable (even poor) teaching quality by students reflects the possible arbitrary nature of educational quality within elite universities. This randomness has the potential to result in disparities in students' higher education experiences.
In the pursuit of achieving relational equality for educational justice, as emphasised by scholars such as Gutmann (1987), Anderson (1999), and Satz (2007), it becomes essential to not only acknowledge the potential problems in teaching quality but also to address them in order to make improvements. In elite universities, this task can be particularly challenging, especially for underrepresented students who already face the constant pressure of negotiating their alignment with the expected identity within elitism settings. This additional pressure further complicates their learning experiences and highlights the need for interventions that alleviate the burdens they face.

In summary, this section explored the issue of inclusiveness in teaching and learning within the framework of elitism. The findings of this study indicate that underrepresented students in elite Asian universities perceive the teaching quality to be unstable and consider it a normal aspect of their university experience. They tend to view it as their personal responsibility to adapt and overcome challenges under the expectations of elite university students. This not only reflects the current state of global higher education, where world-class universities hold dominance, but it also sheds light on additional barriers faced by underrepresented students.

9.4.3 Confidence, Autonomy, and the Quality University Education

Two significant findings emerge from the exploration of the four different learner identities introduced in Chapter 7. First, it is evident that underrepresented students in our study generally lack self-confidence. This lack of self-confidence can be attributed to various factors, particularly related to the identity conflicts they experience. Specifically, their SES learner
identities demonstrate the pressure to succeed in elite universities as they are expected to meet certain expectations as elite university students. Their RNDI learner identities underscore the challenges and uncertainty they face in fitting into the university environment during their transition. Additionally, their RS and CPP learner identities reflect the confusion they feel between their own aspirations and the expectations imposed on them by the pursuit of higher education. This confusion contributes to their lack of self-confidence and highlights the complexity of their experiences within the university setting.

Furthermore, the second significant finding is that underrepresented students in our study exhibit a moderate to low level of autonomy as learners in their pursuit of higher education, specifically with their choices about what and where to study. This finding suggests that our students may rely heavily on external guidance and support, and may feel less empowered to take ownership of their learning experiences. This lack of autonomy is particularly concerning as a diminished interest in academic learning often accompanies it. A noteworthy tendency among our students is that many of them express a loss of interest in their academic pursuits or a lack of genuine passion for their chosen fields of study. Instead, their primary focus is on gaining admission to a prestigious university or selecting a path that is believed to offer clear advantages in terms of future employment. These external considerations often overshadow personal interests and the exploration of genuine passions.

The Link Between Students’ Confusion and Lack of Autonomy

In the above-discussed context, our underrepresented students predominantly exhibit RS or CPP learner identities, which guide them in
navigating the challenges of transitioning to higher education and progressing towards future employment. However, despite their determination to pursue their chosen path, students often display a notable sense of confusion. This confusion is evident in their inability to articulate the reasoning behind their choices or decisions based on their own autonomy.

Although students may express a waning interest in their chosen majors, they commonly remain motivated to complete their university degrees without the willingness to make significant changes. However, what stands out is the absence of clear and compelling descriptions that reflect an intrinsic passion for pursuing elite higher education beyond external considerations. While factors such as employment preparation, meeting family expectations, or pursuing utilitarian self-actualisation are commonly cited, there is usually a lack of explicit accounts that emphasise an internal drive and genuine enthusiasm for their chosen academic pursuits. This finding suggests a potential mismatch between the external motivations and pressures that influence their decision-making processes and the cultivation of a genuine passion for learning and growth.

The accumulated findings relevant to this current discussion, which include the lack of confidence and autonomy among underrepresented students, as well as the potential mismatch between their self-aspirations and future career paths, raise a critical question about the quality of university education provided to these students. These concerns encompass various aspects previously addressed, such as teaching quality and the pressures of conformity, but more significantly as the centre of discussion in this section,
they seem to highlight the restricted avenues for students’ self-expression and exploration on the journey of higher education.

A Quality University Education

As discussed in Chapter 3, students' learner identities not only reflect their perceptions of their learning experiences and transition into university but also offer insights into their understanding of higher education. Zgaga's theory (2009) provides a useful framework for examining our targeted students' perspectives on university education. According to Zgaga, higher education serves four fundamental purposes: preparing students for future employment, fostering advanced knowledge and innovation, facilitating personal development, and equipping students to be active citizens in a democratic society. In light of this framework, our students generally exhibit through their learner identities a stronger grasp and engagement with the first two purposes, while their perception and engagement with the latter two purposes appear to be relatively weaker. This possibly implies that our students may have limited awareness of the intrinsic values of university education that are not immediately apparent.

Certainly, it is understandable that many students view university education as an investment for future outcomes. However, it is important to consider the philosophical perspective of Dewey (1897), who emphasises the value of education as a process of living in the present. From this standpoint, it becomes evident that our students are often overly focused on meeting expectations, overcoming challenges, and conforming to societal norms, neglecting the significance of embracing the present moment and the intrinsic
value of learning. This inclination to prioritise future aspirations over the present moment is a blind spot for many students and could be a reasonable explanation for why our underrepresented students commonly experience confusion, a lack of autonomy, and diminished confidence, which ultimately contribute to a sense of despondency.

In light of this, it is essential for a quality university education to encompass holistic educational values that prioritise nurturing students' passion for learning and life. Additionally, from the perspective of educational adequacy, as highlighted by Rawls (2001), the role of education should also enable individuals to appreciate and participate in the cultural life of society, enriching both the personal and social aspects of their lives. These notions underscore the intrinsic values of university education and learning.

In summary, while it may be challenging within the scope of this study to determine whether our underrepresented students have a lesser ability to recognise these intrinsic values, their learner identities suggest a certain tendency. Nonetheless, striving towards fostering awareness of these values should always be a worthwhile goal in the pursuit of social justice in higher education.

9.5 Implications and Reflections

In this section, I am going to discuss the implications and potential contributions to knowledge that have emerged from this study. These findings have implications for students, educators, and researchers, each of which will be discussed separately in the following paragraphs. Furthermore, I will
provide reflections on the scale of the study as a whole.

9.5.1 For Students: The Value of a Balanced Life

If someone were to ask me what I would like to provide my students with as a teacher, beyond imparting professional knowledge or skills, my response would be twofold: fostering kindness and instilling an appreciation for the importance of a well-balanced life. Particularly with regard to the latter point, it aligns closely with the concerns I have raised throughout the process of data collection and analysis, as well as the major findings of this study.

In my eyes, our focused students in this research are generally clever, expressive, ambitious, and well-mannered. Each student has their own unique narrative and has followed a distinct path that has led them to their respective elite universities. Such an accomplishment is never an easy feat. The learner identities of these students, as captured in this research, often convey a sense of urgency, as if they are racing to catch a train and hastening towards their next destinations.

From the standpoint of our underrepresented students, it is evident that they bear a significant commitment to meeting social expectations and fulfilling family responsibilities. As a result, their learning attitudes often revolve around a strong emphasis on purpose, utility, and desired outcomes. However, the prevalent conditions of confusion and perseverance that accompany their higher education journeys highlight a crucial aspect that may be underestimated in their university education: the importance of inspiration and the recognition of diverse opportunities.
Boulton and Lucas (2011) emphasise the significance of emphasise intrinsic growth in self-understanding within the university context, asserting that it should be considered equally important as advancements in science and technology. They further argue that the pursuit of meaning, self-reflection, and understanding of one’s actions and the world is inherent to human nature, and the exploration of these deeper values in university education has profound utilitarian implications. This perspective once again highlights the ongoing discussion on the importance of a quality university education. In the modern era, characterised by strong forces of globalisation and a fast-paced lifestyle, considering these intrinsic values of university education can offer valuable insights.

In summary, a balanced life is multifaceted, catering to individuals' diverse needs in different aspects of life. It not only underscores the value of having an open mind towards various possibilities but also highlights the importance of leading a life where individuals feel a sense of passion and fulfillment in their choices. Moreover, it involves embracing autonomy and reasoning in decision-making processes. A quality university education should encompass these principles, extending beyond specific student groups or prestigious institutions.

9.5.2 For Educators: Inclusion Rather Than Assimilation

The word ‘pressure’ encapsulates my overall observations of our students, as it manifests in diverse forms through their expressions, both explicitly expressed and subtly implied. As elucidated in different chapters of my study, underrepresented students experience a pervasive pressure to succeed,
which permeates their diverse learner identities. This pressure to excel as elite university students can be attributed to distinct types, including the need to fit in, meet societal expectations, attain academic accomplishments, and navigate through challenges.

These pressures, as previously discussed, stem from identity conflicts that students encounter, rooted in the power dynamics between them and the universities. Underrepresented students often exhibit a strong identification with the expected identities within the elite university environment. They commonly perceive these pressures as inherent aspects of the higher education journey and as their personal responsibilities. This underscores the disadvantaged position that students find themselves in when pursuing higher education.

Particularly in the context of elite universities, as implied by our underrepresented students' CPP learner identities, there is a prevalent recognition that they willingly undertake the demanding and competitive journey of elite higher education due to their voluntary. Consequently, students often perceive identity conflicts, fluctuating teaching quality, waning interest in their academic majors, and the need to conform to the elite value system as inherent aspects of their university experience. However, despite these progressions, students are likely to develop stronger adaptability or better learning skills, and gradually be shaped into the expected elite university students. However, despite navigating through these challenges, students may develop increased adaptability and refined learning skills, gradually conforming to the expectations of being elite university students.
Nonetheless, this adaptation process does not necessarily guarantee that students have a clear understanding of their own aspirations or sufficient opportunities and space to explore them at their age. Instead, the overwhelming nature of dealing with identity conflicts and the pressure associated with them tends to overshadow the exploration of deeper values inherent in university education.

Based on the preceding discussion, it is essential for educators to recognise the power dynamics between students and educational institutions. Such awareness highlights the reality that, for certain students, simply attaining an equal starting point with their peers can be an immensely challenging task. As evidenced by the diverse learner identities of our underrepresented students, it appears that assimilation remains an underlying expectation during their transition into higher education. However, in supporting underrepresented students, as well as any students, Quinn (2016) stresses the importance of shifting our perspective away from perceiving them as lacking or requiring assimilation. Instead, it is crucial to acknowledge the need for broader changes within the higher education sector to address issues of diversity and equality.

In the pursuit of enhancing diversity and equality in the higher education sector, particularly within elite universities, the findings of this study particularly suggest that, in providing support to students, it is crucial for educators to cultivate an understanding that undergraduate students commonly experience confusion or uncertainty regarding their present and future aspirations throughout their higher education journeys. As James et al.
(2021) highlighted, young students entering tertiary education in postindustrial societies often choose their courses amidst widespread uncertainty regarding future career prospects. Additionally, our study aligns with these findings by recognising that students' motivation to pursue higher education is multifaceted. It can be viewed as a long-term investment, as emphasised by Grove (2012), or influenced by cultural narratives that shape perceptions of a fulfilling life. These cultural narratives play a significant role in influencing individuals' motivations and aspirations, as advocated by Alexander (2003).

Based on these understandings, it is natural that students would need more space and time to explore what their self-aspiration really is. James et al. (2021) also highlight the importance of authenticity, passion, and self-exploration in the process of learning, which is insightful as a potential mindset to balance students' sense of uncertainty or lack of autonomy. For educators, providing students from diverse backgrounds with support and creating an environment that encourages self-reflection and exploration can be instrumental in helping them navigate the complexities of career decision-making and personal growth.

In conclusion, despite the cliché nature of advocating for inclusion over assimilation, the prevalence of assimilation is still evident, as supported by the main findings of this study. However, recognising the power dynamics between students and institutions and gaining more understanding of students' experiences can be beneficial in expanding our perspectives beyond our own experiences. This is also how I perceive my study to contribute to knowledge and promote social justice. Despite the commonly seen challenges
of heavy workloads and limited time in universities nowadays, it is essential for educators/academic staff to prioritise inclusion and engage in ongoing reflection. By doing so, we can strive towards creating a more inclusive and equitable educational environment.

**9.5.3 For Researchers: Dealing with the Random Factors in Students’ Transition**

Among our underrepresented students, each individual undergoes a unique trajectory in their transition into higher education. Even students who come from similar social backgrounds can exhibit distinct learner identities and have contrasting experiences within universities. While contextual factors and prior experiences contribute to these differences, there are also random elements that can significantly impact their higher education journey. A prime example is Ying from Case Study 2, who highlighted the importance of chance encounters. In her case, she had a fortuitous meeting with a senior who provided invaluable support during her integration and transition process (refer to Chapter 8 for further details). Reflecting on Ying’s experience raises the question: Would her journey have unfolded differently had she not encountered this influential person?

On another note, several of our students have shared their experiences of learning challenges brought about by online courses. It is observed from their experiences that the growing reliance on online learning platforms seems to exacerbate the disparities in teaching quality, which in turn affects their academic progress and is likely to further influence the development of their SES learner identities. Antonio’s case provides a particularly extreme
example, as he mentioned encountering technical issues that caused him to miss classes for a duration of two weeks (For details please refer to Section 6.5.1). Additionally, our students often perceive such obstacles as something they have to navigate on their own, as they are heavily expected to be self-reliant in elite university settings.

Random factors, as highlighted in the preceding paragraphs, can play a significant role in students’ transition into higher education. This observation is particularly relevant for our underrepresented students, who often exhibit fluctuating and unstable learner identities during the initial stages of their university careers. Random encounters and experiences can have a profound impact on students’ transition journeys. Moreover, these factors not only underscore the high susceptibility of students but also prompt us to reflect on the development of appropriate support systems within universities.

With the growing emphasis on social justice in higher education, there has been a shift in focus from simply increasing access to ensuring students’ success. As a result, it seems that researchers will also need to grapple with the influence of random factors in students’ transition experiences. At the same time, scholars have made significant contributions to understanding the influential factors in higher education transitions, whether, through specific aspects or comprehensive models for various social groups, the inherent randomness of these factors poses a challenge. Adapting specific models or research findings may not fully capture the complex and unpredictable nature of these random factors.
In summary, this study has identified random factors that emerge during students' higher education journey, which potentially have a significant impact on their transition experiences. This indicates that our underrepresented students exhibit susceptibility during the early stages of their careers. Furthermore, it remains uncertain whether the current support systems in our target universities effectively ensure students' success. Two pieces of evidence from our data support this assertion. Firstly, our students generally display a low inclination to seek out support programs from universities. Second, as discussed earlier, our students tend to perceive obstacles and challenges as a natural aspect of university education. These findings prompt relevant discussions as the extension of random factors in students' transition experiences. Moreover, these discussions underscore potential avenues for future research in this field, such as well-structured peer support systems that might help students when they encounter random difficulties.

9.5.4 Limitations and Self-Reflections

This section presents my self-reflection on the limitations of this study before delving into the final conclusion of this thesis. I am going to discuss three topics. Firstly, the discussion focus is on how my personality and perspective may have influenced the process I conducted this study. Secondly, I will address the challenges regarding the diversity of our students' backgrounds. Lastly, limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic will be covered.
Research Conduct and My Personality

As outlined in Chapter 1, the development of this study stems from my personal life experiences. I am confident in my genuine concerns and passion for this research, which not only reflects my academic interest but also embodies my core values as an individual – a deep respect for others. This mindset not only cultivates good manners but also fosters a sincere appreciation for the life experiences and values of others with equal dignity. This inherent advantage proves beneficial in conducting qualitative research such as the present study, which relies heavily on extensive interactions and conversations. Such a personality often allows me to earn the trust and likability of participants, thus facilitating the collection of rich and informative interview data.

Additionally, it is important to note that it also helps me in ensuring and enhancing the authenticity and plausibility of my research data, as these qualities are considered significant in qualitative research by Baggini (2017) and Walt (2020). The friendly and interactive atmosphere, along with the establishment of a strong mutual trust relationship between the interviewees and myself, enables me to delve closer to their authentic opinions, even on sensitive and personal matters. This not only enhances the plausibility of my data but also increases the comprehensibility of my research findings.

However, while this personality trait has provided advantages in establishing rapport with participants, it has also presented certain limitations in conducting my research. Firstly, I observed that the boundary between participants and myself could occasionally become blurred during the
interview process. This created challenges in maintaining strict interview discipline. For instance, when students placed their trust in me, they tended to share more information, leading to longer interviews and an abundance of unnecessary data. Consequently, this increased my workload during the data analysis phase. Additionally, participants sometimes sought advice from me, which posed a dilemma regarding the appropriate level of professional distance between us.

Secondly, closely related to the previous point, I observed a phenomenon during the second interviews. As students became more familiar with me and gained an understanding of my research interests, they exhibited a tendency to "help" me by trying to provide answers that aligned with my research direction. Although I consistently encouraged them to provide genuine responses and politely rejected their attempts to tailor their answers, I still sensed their inclination to provide information that they believed would be beneficial for my study. Consequently, I approached the interpretation of the interview data with caution, maintaining a heightened awareness of the potential influence of participant expectations. In some instances, I deliberately maintained a clear distance from the interviewees, which occasionally made me feel uncomfortable.

Thirdly, as discussed in Chapter 6, time management is identified as a common learning issue among our target students. Interestingly, I also face similar challenges in my own PhD journey. Due to my outgoing personality and active involvement in various social activities, finding a balance between my academic pursuits and other aspects of life has been a constant
challenge. While I believe that my social engagement has played a crucial role in developing critical thinking skills and fostering a deeper understanding of humanity, it has made time management more demanding. However, I remain committed to finding ways to effectively manage my time and strike a healthy balance between my academic career and personal life.

**Challenges from Students’ Diverse Backgrounds**

In this research, I have adopted a diversity approach rather than an intensive approach in defining my target student population. Unlike similar studies that often concentrate solely on a specific social group, underrepresented students in this research were classified based on the disparity between their social backgrounds or experiences and the defining characteristics of elite universities (for detailed information, please refer to Chapter 5). As a result, the sampled students in our study do not strictly belong to a single labelled social group. Furthermore, these students are enrolled in four distinct elite universities located in two cities.

This research setting has yielded a rich array of informative and multifaceted findings. However, the diverse backgrounds of our interviewees have presented two challenges. Firstly, the data analysis process was demanding and time-consuming due to the variations in students' background contexts, educational systems, and even the languages used during the interviews. These factors required significant time and effort to ensure quality interpretation and analysis of the data. Secondly, the nature of the interviewees' diversity may limit the direct generalisation of the study's findings to some other cases or specific scenarios.
To mitigate the potential limitations arising from the diverse nature of my research setting, I have incorporated comparison analysis as a major component of this study. By identifying commonalities across diverse backgrounds, I aimed to establish a basis for generalisation. Additionally, I have presented both aggregated findings, as demonstrated in Chapters 6 and 7, and individual case studies in Chapter 8. This multi-approached presentation of findings enhances their applicability for future research.

**Limitations Imposed by the COVID-19 Pandemic Travel Restrictions**

The entire research framework was developed in 2019, during my first year as a doctoral student, prior to the global COVID-19 outbreak. However, a significant portion of this study was conducted during the pandemic period, presenting one challenge and two limitations. The challenge emerged when I had to conduct interviews from June 2020 to September 2021, a period during which I was in Taiwan due to the pandemic. While being in the Asian time zone facilitated scheduling interviews with participants, I also had to consider overlapping time slots for online collaboration with my supervisors in the UK. This added complexity to the tasks at hand.

Moving to the discussion of limitations, I encountered two challenges due to the travel restrictions imposed during the pandemic. Originally, I had planned to visit Singapore and China for face-to-face interviews and to establish deeper connections with academic staff on campus. However, these plans had to be cancelled, and all interactions were conducted online. This change in circumstances resulted in two limitations. Firstly, without the opportunity to establish in-person connections, it was more difficult for me to leverage my
socially-friendly personality traits. This possibly made it more challenging to approach target students or seek assistance with research requirements, such as accessing university statistical data.

Secondly, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought significant changes to university education in recent years, which has affected the context in which my research was conducted. As a result, my original plan to primarily focus on investigating the transition experiences of first-year students may have been limited. To mitigate the impact of this transformation, I implemented a backup plan to include both first and second-year students in my study, striving to align as closely as possible with my original research design and objectives.
9.6 Final Conclusion: On the Way of an Endless Journey

This study investigates the higher education experiences of 32 underrepresented students enrolled in four elite Asian universities. The findings of this research shed light on various aspects, including the students’ learning and transition experiences, the common challenges they face, and the emergence of four distinct learner identities resulting from their perceived higher education experiences. Building upon these findings, comparative analysis and discussions intertwined with social justice implications are presented, offering perspectives that contribute to further discoveries and reflections on the current state of higher education.

In responding directly to the research questions of this study, I have identified heterogeneous transition trajectories among our students within the specific higher education context in Asia. Overall, the experiences and self-perceptions of our students from diverse underrepresented social backgrounds indicate that identity conflicts pose the most significant challenges and obstacles for their success in higher education. These findings are consistent with numerous studies conducted in other contexts. From a perspective of social justice, it becomes evident that identity conflicts rooted in students’ underrepresented backgrounds or identities can potentially threaten the fairness of higher education, whether in terms of educational equality or adequacy. Institutional and societal factors play a crucial role in shaping how students develop their learner identities, as demonstrated in the comparative discussion highlighting the different tendencies observed among Singaporean and Chinese students as learners.
Returning to the initial motivation behind this research, my belief in the inherent value of education to improve people's lives has been a guiding force throughout the entire process of conducting this study, and it has served as a compass, influencing the decisions I made and helping me navigate through the challenges and uncertainties encountered during the study. While I strongly recognise that this research is an ongoing journey and may still have plenty of room to grow and evolve, I take pride in the effort and dedication I have put into aligning my values with practices. It is through this process that I have come to appreciate the profound significance of doctoral education and the opportunity it provides to contribute to the pursuit of noble ideals.

Conducting this research and engaging with students from prestigious world-class universities has been an invaluable learning experience for me. Throughout my doctoral education and the extensive process of completing this thesis, I have come to recognise the multitude of factors that have contributed to my ability to undertake this research. I consider myself privileged and fortunate to have been granted such an opportunity. As someone deeply committed to social justice, it is crucial for me to continuously remind myself that my achievements are not solely a result of my own hard work and talent. There are countless individuals and circumstances that have played a role in shaping my path. With this understanding, I remain grateful and humble for the accomplishments and recognition I have received thus far, and I am dedicated to using my knowledge and experiences to make a positive impact on others.
The question of whether this research promotes social justice is both a complex and subjective one. While I believe that this study has the potential to contribute to promoting social justice, it is important to acknowledge both the confident and unconfident aspects of answering this question.

Confidently, the research findings shed light on the experiences and perspectives of underrepresented students, providing a platform for their voices to be heard and their positions to be identified. By sharing their encounters and insights, this study has the potential to enrich the knowledge and understanding of others, expanding their perspectives and reminding them of the possibilities that exist beyond their own viewpoints and experiences. In this sense, the research has the capacity to contribute to promoting social justice by amplifying marginalised voices and challenging existing biases or misconceptions.

However, on the unconfident side, it is essential to recognise that the impact of this research on the broader social environment is uncertain. While it is meaningful for my personal education and awareness, it may be challenging to justify the tangible changes it brings about in society. Promoting social justice requires not only research but also collective action, policy changes, and structural transformations. Therefore, the direct influence of this study on real-world outcomes may be limited. Nonetheless, I view this study as a part of a larger collective effort towards social justice, with the understanding that research alone may not bring about immediate change but can contribute to the groundwork for future exploration and transformation.
Moving forward, I anticipate myself to keep striving to maintain an attitude of gratitude and humility, cherishing every opportunity to contribute to the betterment of society. I am committed to continuing my efforts to promote social justice and ensure that the privileges I have been granted are used to uplift others and create meaningful change. This is the meaning of an endless journey.

Figure 9.6.1

An Endless Journey
Reference


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# Appendix 1: List of Interviewees

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## Appendix 2: Consent Form

The Moray House School of Education

Ethical approval: consent form cover sheet

<table>
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<th>Title of project:</th>
<th>Exploring and comparing underrepresented students’ learner identities between elite universities in Singapore and Shanghai</th>
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<td>Student or staff application:</td>
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<td>Age group of participants:</td>
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Exploring and comparing underrepresented students’ learner identities between elite universities in Singapore and Shanghai

Participant Information and Consent Form

This project is a PhD project looking at the topic of exploring and comparing underrepresented students’ learner identities between elite universities in Singapore and Shanghai. The focus of this research is to understand and compare the learner identities of different students in the four elite universities. By doing so, it is possible to gain a better understanding of modern Asian higher education systems.

The project will address issues of ‘social justice’, which involves relative concepts of ‘underrepresented students’ or ‘mainstream culture’. I intend to examine elite universities through the perspective of educational equality and diversity. The ultimate purpose of this research is helping to build a more inclusive and welcoming higher education environment for everyone.

The following questions aim to ensure that you are aware of my role as interviewer, and how the information you share with me during our interview will be used in the research project:

Please tick the boxes beside the statements you understand, and sign and date the bottom of the page. I will leave you with your own copy of this information and consent form.

☐ I understand that I am being interviewed as part of the ‘exploring and comparing underrepresented students’ learner identities between elite universities’ research project at the University of Edinburgh.

☐ I understand the purpose of this research and that I am able to ask questions about it at any time, and I am free to withdraw my consent for involvement with this research project at any time.

☐ I understand that all raw research data will be preserved in a password-protected computer backed up on the University’s secure OneDrive cloud storage service for ten years until 2030.

☐ I understand that there are two interviews in this project. I will get a reward of 15 USD for the first interview; 35 USD for the second interview.

☐ I am willing for this interview to be digitally recorded and transcribed for use as part of the research project.

☐ I am willing for anonymised extracts from this interview to be used as part of the research.

☐ I understand that anonymised extracts from this interview may appear in publications relevant to this area of research.

Interviewee: _____________________________ Date: _____________________________

Interviewer: Yu-Tang Huang Date: _____________________________

Contact address: Yu-Tang Huang, Moray House School of Education, The University of Edinburgh, Old Moray House, Holyrood Road, Edinburgh EH8 8AQ

If you have any queries or concerns, please get in touch with Yu-Tang (Oliver) at:

or Dr Peter Evens at:
Appendix 3: Core Interview Questions
– First Interview

Exploring and comparing underrepresented students’ learner identities between elite universities in Singapore and Shanghai

This is the first interview.
Explain the study and answer any participant questions.
The interview will last no more than 90 minutes.
Participants can skip answering any questions, and they are free to withdraw from the study at any time.
Tell participants that they will get 15 USD as a reward for the first interview; 35 USD for the second interview.
Get signed consent forms.

- Questions specifically for participants in Singapore.
- Questions specifically for participants in Shanghai

1. Please tell me about yourself. (Participants will describe for 2 to 5 minutes)
   1.1 Confirm basic information with participants. (Age, Major subject, Degree aiming for, Original City, Ethnicity and Financial Support Status)
   1.2 Where did you finish your high school education?
   1.3 What are your motivations for participating in higher education?
   1.4 How did you decide which school to go to?
   1.5 Please tell me about your personal experience of streaming education in Singapore. What program did you participate in primary and secondary levels? What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of streaming education?

2. What was learning like in your final year of high school?
   2.1 Can you tell me about the high school subject that was most similar to your University degree?
   2.2 What were the classes like for that subject?
   2.3 What assessed work did you have to do?
   2.4 What did it take to be a successful student in that subject?

3. How do you feel about your current higher education experiences?
   3.1 What was your first impression of this university?
   3.2 What course or course or academic work are you currently working on?
   3.3 What does this school mean to you? Being a student in this school, what do you think might be different from students in other universities?
### 1. What do you think ‘a learner’ is? Can you explain it?

1.1 How would you describe the relationship between the two concepts: ‘a learner’ and ‘a student’?

1.2 What do you expect to learn in university? (Including your major degree contents, professional knowledge, or anything other than this)

1.3 What are your learning tools at school? Where does your learning in school often take place?

1.4 How do you choose which course or academic program to participate? What are the most important criteria to you?

### 2. Let us talk about your friends and classmates in your university.

2.1 Tell me about the people you have met in university. Are they different (backgrounds, ethical groups, or sub-cultures, etc.) from your friends or classmates in high school?

2.2 Tell me about one or two of your best friends in your university. What makes you best friends?

2.3 Are your classmates from similar places and backgrounds to you, or are they quite different?

2.4 Do you notice any differences in how your diverse classmates experience university?

2.5 Please describe your overall experiences of being in Shanghai. Do you think these are influencing the way you approach being a learner/student?

### 3. Being a learner in your university, what are the challenges?

3.1 Tell me about any academic work or projects you are currently working on. Are they all going all right?

3.2 If possible, please tell me one or two examples of problems or difficulties you have met so far in your university which are out of your expectation.

3.3 How did you realise those problems? What were your solutions?

3.4 Is there any support you can reach when you are facing learning difficulties? Can you describe it?
Appendix 4: Core Interview Questions
– Second Interview

Exploring and comparing underrepresented students’ learner identities between elite universities in Singapore and Shanghai

This is the second interview.
The interview will last no more than 30 minutes.
Participants can skip answering any questions, and they are free to withdraw from the study at any time.
Tell participants that they will get 35 USD for the second interview.

1. **How are you at university recently?** *(Current status)*
   1.1 Could you briefly describe your previous semester? Which part are you most satisfied with? Which part do you think is the most struggling?
   1.2 What courses did you choose this semester?
   1.3 Any academic work or project you are currently working on?
   1.4 Are you (still) participating in any extracurricular activity?
   1.5 Do you have any goals for yourself in the new semester?

2. **Please tell me your memory or impression of the previous interview.** *(Linkage or transform between 2 interviews)*
   2.1 Do you think your learning status is better, worse, or has not changed since the last interview? Why do you think so?
   2.2 Have the learning difficulties you mentioned last time improved?
   2.3 Are there any new learning difficulties or challenges?
   2.4 Have you tried to make any changes in learning methods or lifestyle?
   2.5 In the past half year, have you sought assistance from any university programs?

3. **What do you think of the freshmen in university?** *(Dig out Learner Identities through self-reflection)*
   3.1 What do you think they might probably be struggling with?
   3.2 What do you think might be the biggest gap between freshman students’ expectations of the university and reality?
   3.3 What advice would you give them?
   3.4 Please introduce yourself again to me, and focus more on your characteristics or values.
   3.5 Are you satisfied with your life on campus? Why or why not?
   3.6 Do you think you can eventually solve the problem in most cases?
   3.7 Are you a confident student or not? Why?
4. What do you think ‘a learner’ is? Can you explain it?  
   (Learner Identities, transition and future)

   4.1 What do you think of your identity as a university student now?
   4.2 How would you describe the relationship between the two concepts: ‘a learner’ and ‘a student’?
   4.3 Do you think you have successfully integrated into the university and learned how to be appropriate? Tell me more details.
   4.4 Tell me what you think of the future now. When you think about the future, what words will you use to describe how you feel?
   4.5 Some people say that in this era, learning does not have to be in the classroom, do you agree? Why or why not?
   4.6 What is the meaning of studying at university?