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Exploring Chinese postgraduate students’ academic adjustment experiences in Australia

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From 1990 to 2003, Australia’s share of the global market in cross-border degrees grew from 1% to 9%. Full-fee paying international students now constitute one quarter of enrolments and China has become Australia’s largest source of international students. Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to provide insights into the academic adjustment experiences of a group of Chinese postgraduate students in Australia. To capture the richness of individual cultural and learning experiences for these students, a qualitative approach in gathering data was adopted. Using interviews with 10 postgraduate coursework students from Mainland China, this study investigates a range of academic adjustment issues confronting Chinese postgraduate students in Australian universities. These issues include English language proficiency, learner responsibility, participation in class, assessment and academic conventions. The paper concludes with recommendations for supporting and facilitating the effective adaptation process for international students.

Key words: international education, Chinese students, academic adjustments

Context

Full-fee paying international students in Australia now constitute one quarter of enrolments, and education is Australia’s third largest service export. In 2003, international students provided the universities alone with US$1.3 billion in fee revenues. Between 1990 and 2003, Australia’s share of the worldwide population of cross-border students grew from 1% to 9% (Marginson, 2007, p.229; OECD, 2005). Australia has become the third largest education provider at degree level behind the USA and the UK (Novera, 2004). China is one of the most important markets for Australia’s international education sector. The largest numbers of international student enrolments in 2005 were from China (AEI, 2006). Statistics show that 322,776 enrolments were international students in Australia in 2004, among which, 68,857 enrolments were Chinese students (DEST, 2005).

International education will continue to bring Australia more benefits if the international students can achieve a successful experience in Australia. One main factor to the success of international students is their adjustment, not only to the academic demands of Australian universities, but also to the social and cultural environment (Novera, 2004). Andrade (2006) argues that as nations set strategies to attract international students, they must also consider the educational and cultural experiences of these students in the destination country. Exploring the international students’ perspective in terms of what the educational offerings mean for them, is one direction taken towards assuming accountability. Against this
backdrop, this study seeks to provide insights into the academic adjustment experiences of a
group of Chinese postgraduate coursework students in Australian universities.

**Relevant literature**

Recent research on international students’ experiences in host countries generally addresses
several aspects, including cultural, psychological, social and academic adjustments (Edward & Ran, 2006; Hewitt, 2002). Academic adjustment of international students from a non-English background in English-speaking universities has been highlighted by many researchers (Andrade, 2006; Hanassab & Tidwell, 2002; Handa & Fallon, 2006; Ramburuth, 2001; Trice, 2003). Some scholars argue international students often encounter two fundamental problems in Australian universities: inadequacy in English and issues concerning new styles of learning. The language requirements for entering universities cannot guarantee that international students possess the necessary communicative or receptive ability (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997; Kiley, 2003). Incompetence in academic English and their lack of understanding of the requirements for critical analysis or referencing can be underlying reasons for their poor standard of writing and for plagiarism (Handa & Fallon, 2006). Plagiarism amongst international students has drawn the attention of a growing number of researchers (Barrett & Malcolm, 2006; Brennan & Durovic, 2006; Handa & Power, 2005; Leask, 2005). As “foreign students in alien classrooms” (Hellsten, 2002, p. 12), their previous experiences and successful approaches of learning in previous studies may lead them into an intense state of “learning shock”, confusion and frustration (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997, p.28). Despite the widespread report of the difficulties international students encounter, they are generally satisfied with their experiences in English-speaking universities and make reasonable adaptation to their cultural and institutional demands (Lee & Wesche, 2000; Schutz & Richards, 2003; Senyshyn et al., 2000).

Andrade (2006) examined 58 empirical studies related to the adjustment and academic achievement of international students in the USA (36), Australia (9), Canada (7), the UK (2). Most of the studies reviewed were published between 1996 and 2005. These studies are divided into four areas: comparisons of domestic and international student adjustment; analyses of professors’ and students’ views of adjustment challenges; student insights about their experiences; and support services. In general, international students have greater and different adjustment challenges than domestic students. Challenges are related to difficulties with English language and culture which affect both academic and social adjustment. International students lack confidence in their English abilities and fear making mistakes, which may inhibit their class participation. Academics often misinterpret the behaviours of international students and need greater understanding of their academic, social, emotional and psychological challenges. They can make pedagogical adjustments to support the needs of international students.

International students were often treated as if they were a homogeneous group and differences among them are only rarely considered (Andrade, 2006; Handa & Fallon, 2006; Trice, 2003). Hanassab and Tidwell (2002) examined the needs and overall experiences of 640 international students at one American university. The results indicate that the African and Asian students had the highest overall needs. The undergraduate students reported a greater need for services than did the graduate students. The authors strongly recommended that investigating international students more specially, taking into account variables such as gender, academic field, region and degree objective is important for a more complete knowledge and understanding of these students.
There is a growing body of literature on Chinese learners over the decade (Biggs & Watkins, 1996; Chan, 1999; Kennedy, 2002; Watkins, 2000; Watkins & Biggs, 2001a, 2001b); some recent studies explore Chinese international students’ adaptation to universities in English speaking countries (Bamford et al., 2002; Edward & Ran, 2006; Gourlay, 2006; Nield, 2004; Skyrme, 2005; Zhang & Xu, 2007). Drawing on the interviews, Zhang and Xu (2007) explored the learning experiences of eleven Chinese postgraduate students at one North American university. Participants observed that they were expected to be informed, committed and active learners in American universities. They commented that the American students were “extremely brave” and sometimes “rude” in class because they often made uninvited “interruptions” and asked “silly questions”. Most of Chinese students were very cautious and sometimes felt “alienated” in class. Some encountered difficulties in adjusting to the different learning expectations.

Gourlay (2006) interviewed seven Chinese postgraduate students at one university in the UK and identified three challenges for these students: lecture comprehension, use of source of materials and participation in interactive groups. They were unwilling to ask questions in class or participate in group discussions due to lack of language confidence. Their initial unfamiliarity with the concept of plagiarism and writing difficulties may lead to plagiarism. Bamford et al. (2002) also observed that when participating in group discussion, Chinese postgraduate students may perform more passively and place little value on peer-group discussion. However, Hong Kong Chinese students in Nield’s study (2004) rated group projects as their most preferred method of assessment. Group work was preferred because the students were able to share pressure, ideas and workloads and learn from one another. Those students who disliked group work did not give any reason that could be described as cultural. The reasons that they gave were pragmatic and simply concerned group dynamics.

Previous studies have deepened our understanding of Chinese international students’ experiences in English speaking universities. However, relatively little is currently known about Chinese postgraduate coursework students’ academic adjustments in Australian universities (Su, 2006; Zhang, 2005). The specific needs of these students have also been insufficiently researched. Su (2006) indicates that Chinese postgraduate students have different perceptions of academic tasks and adjustment challenges from domestic students. Zhang (2005) argues that Chinese postgraduate students’ learning as creating meaning and achieving personal knowing in the new learning context has displayed a close connection between critical reflection and situated learning and self-directed learning. Informed by the previous research, this study seeks to provide a better understanding of Chinese postgraduate students’ adaptation process in Australian universities.

**Research method**

To capture the richness of individual cultural and learning experiences for these students, a qualitative approach in gathering data was adopted in this study. The use of qualitative approach helps to provide readers with real-life translation of what is being conveyed. Interviews are often employed as an effective tool to understand people’s experience and to suggest useful explanations or interpretations to collected qualitative data (Krathwohl, 1997). Therefore, face to face interviews of individuals are appropriate for the research purpose of exploring the Chinese students’ perspective on their adaptation experiences in Australian universities.
Ten Chinese postgraduate students, 4 males and 6 females, participated in the study conducted in 2006. They obtained their Bachelor’s degrees in Mainland China before studying Master courses (Accounting, Engineering, IT, Interpreting & TESOL) in two universities in the Australian Capital Territory. They had studied for two to four semesters in these universities. Their ages ranged from 23 to 28 and the mean age was 25.5 years old. Five participants had prior working experience in China. They were interviewed by the second author individually for approximately 30-60 minutes. All interviews were administered in Mandarin in order to capture articulate and developed responses. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim and translated from Chinese into English.

The interpretive method of analysis involved reviewing the transcripts several times to locate commonly occurring themes that are representative of the academic adjustment issues. The authors employed several indicators relevant to this study and sorted the data by emerging themes. The information was then put into wall charts using the contextual matrix developed by Miles and Huberman (1994). Thus, preliminary categories were formed. The final stage of data analysis involved summarising the original data (Ritchie et al., 2003, p.229). The authors compared the summaries through each category and then refined the categories to ensure all perspectives had been covered. To preserve the participants’ confidentiality, pseudonyms are used in this study.

Findings and discussion

English language proficiency

The participants reported their lack of English language proficiency in communication and academic writing. Most participants did not have enough confidence in class because of inadequate English. The language requirements for entering universities could not guarantee they “participate in class activities effectively or complete assignments up to a certain academic standard” (Lucy). They employed various strategies to improve their English language proficiency, especially in listening and speaking. Watching TV, listening to news, and making friends with local and international students were reported as the most useful strategies to improve their language capability.

Talking with them can help you change your thinking style when speaking English. You will be accustomed to speaking English. It doesn’t mean you can speak very well, but at least you may speak fluently and be less influenced by your mother tongue (Nancy).

Upon my arrival, I didn’t know many Chinese people, so I have to communicate with other international students in English, even when we played basketball. My English improved a lot. Another suitable way is to watch TV programs. …The news program is repeated every several hours, and it’s really helpful (Sam).

“Having the readiness and awareness to speak” was viewed as essential in learning English. Because of the strong influence of Confucian Heritage Culture, most respondents were reluctant to ask questions in class. They were afraid of “losing face” if making mistakes. Some participants made efforts to actively participate in class discussion and debate.

My lecturer encouraged me to speak more in tutorials, and I thought speaking out after all could benefit me. I forced myself to speak, gradually I adjusted myself to speak in class, and I made some progress (Lucy).
This finding confirms the existing literature that international students often encounter a problem of inadequate English (Andrade, 2006; Gourlay, 2006), but they can improve their English proficiency by adopting a range of effective strategies. A deficit model which blames the students is inappropriate (Watkins & Biggs, 2001b). Understanding and encouragement from lecturers and their pedagogic adjustments could enhance international students’ confidence in using English and ease their transition to new academic environments.

**Learner responsibility**

The respondents commented that the teaching and learning approaches in Australian universities were different from those in Chinese universities. They initially experienced anxiety, confusion, and frustration. The teaching methods in Chinese universities are mainly viewed as teacher-centred, didactic rather than student-centred and problem-based learning. Australian academics tend to attach more importance to practical skills rather than theoretical knowledge. They provide students with more autonomy and cultivate their self-directed learning and independence. Many respondents emphasised that students are expected to be responsible for their own learning in Australian universities.

Most Australian teachers use inquiry learning as the teaching approach and only give you an outline and rough idea. You have to search for information and do your research independently to enrich your knowledge. A large proportion of learning is expected to be acquired outside the classroom (Sam).

The Chinese teacher is generally expected to be responsible for students and you are treated like a kid. If you don’t hand in your assignment, he will call you or let the monitor talk to you. But in Australian universities, if you don’t hand in your work, nobody will care, nor will you get any mark (Jack).

Most respondents commented that Chinese teachers usually followed the prescribed textbooks while the teaching contents in Australian universities were more practical and closely related to contemporary practices. Tom, a student from IT course, commented:

The teachers in Chinese universities focus more on theories and teach students ‘hand by hand’. The students might get high marks, but what they have learnt may not be closely connected with the practice. But the Australian teacher is different; he really acts as a guide. He may know you have the ability in programming, but you probably don’t know how to use a certain computer language, which may be required for a certain programming task. The teacher will then generate a task based assessment, which forces you to learn by yourself. In the process of problem solving, you become familiar with this programming language (Tom).

This finding suggests that the relationship between teachers and students in Chinese universities is more like parents and children. It is mainly teachers’ responsibility to make students achieve good academic performance; while in Australia, students are expected to be self-reliant and take responsibilities for their own learning. This finding confirms the observations in Zhang and Xu’s (2007) study on Chinese students’ adaptation to learning in the USA, i.e. being an informed, committed and active learner. It also supports the general view that “learning shock” is mainly caused by international students’ previous learning experiences and assumptions (Ballard & Clancy, 1997).

**Participation in class**

The students found it challenging to adapt to the different learning environment, particularly participation in discussion and debate. They had only experienced lecture format in Chinese
universities, and were afraid of losing face in class. Inadequacy in English was another barrier which prevented them from actively participating in class activities or asking questions.

I couldn’t understand why they have tutorials, since we don’t have this type of class in Chinese universities. Why do they spend so much time discussing? What the teachers need to do is just to give us the answers. …..Why do they let us read and find the answer by ourselves? Why do we bother to discuss and present the answers to the teacher? …..That’s time wasting. What we need is the answer and to learn it by rote (Sam).

Some classmates like to argue with teachers as long as they have questions, especially those Australian students. Sometimes I also wanted to ask questions, but I was afraid that others will laugh at me. I hesitated. Maybe all the students can understand except me. Most Chinese always care about ‘saving face’, and another problem is language (Nancy).

Criticising or challenging others’ opinion was considered difficult and sometimes culturally inappropriate. A typical comment is from Lucy:

The most obvious thing is that teachers here always ask us ‘why?’, and you have to think about that and present your opinion. That means you should have critical thinking and challenge others’ opinions. But I thought they are experts or scholars, and how could their theories be wrong? We assume that the knowledge in books is always right, but it’s not the case in Australia. Australian teachers put more emphasis on your opinions and your reflections. But now I can see the point (Lucy).

However, other respondents argued that they did not ask questions in class because they wanted to “reflect on the content delivered” after class. They preferred to raise “good questions” rather than “superficial” or “silly questions”.

I usually don’t ask questions in class as I need time to digest the knowledge. I need reflection before asking questions. I believe some questions raised by Australian students were too simple. If they thought about them for several seconds, they would easily find the answer. I prefer to review the lessons after class and reflect on them. If I still can’t understand, I will ask. The questions raised in class might be very superficial, while those after reflection would be profound (Jane).

There is some evidence from the literature and the study that supports the general view that Chinese students are used to teacher-centred learning and showing respect for authorities (Chan, 1999; Watkins & Biggs, 2001a). However, some students in this research did not ask questions in class because they value thoughtful questions which are raised after sound reflections. This finding is consistent with the observation that Chinese students are not passive but reflective (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Zhang, 2005).

**Assessment**

In Chinese universities assessment is mainly based on final exams while assessment in Australian universities may have various components, such as assignments submitted over the semester, presentations, group projects, exams and class participation. In their undergraduate study, the participants used most of their class time to take notes, which “prevented them from listening carefully what the teachers taught and from thinking at spot”. They were accustomed to reviewing the notes before exams. Sam recalled his learning experiences of cramming for exams in a Chinese university:
When I studied in my previous university, before exams, a couple of friends and I usually chose a small restaurant near the university and spent the whole week memorizing all the course materials. We had a meal at noon, then kept reading, and went back to dorm room at ten at night (Sam).

Sam indicated that the assessment forms in Australia made him change his learning strategies accordingly, and exams were no longer a pressure:

The process of acquiring knowledge in Australian universities is more like a Chinese old saying “Success will come when conditions are ripe”. We can’t neglect any assignment. As long as you fulfill them, you’ll surely acquire the knowledge. It becomes part of you. You needn’t cram for the exams any more. The teacher wants your idea rather than what you have memorised from the book. I won’t feel the pressure from the exam if I managed to obtain good scores for my previous assignments (Sam).

Most respondents considered group project as a good way to share ideas among students and to learn from others’ experiences. They acknowledged that completing group assignments could “develop the team spirit” among the group members, which was also a new experience in their academic adjustments. Group assignment is also “an effective way to review the lectures and clarify confusing concepts” (Cindy). However, most participants also indicated that they preferred individual assignments to group projects due to pragmatic reasons and concern for group dynamics. For instance, not everyone may put in equal effort and sometimes group projects can be very time-consuming or even a waste of time.

One of our group members never discussed with us, nor did he finish his part. We had to do it for him, but he complained that he couldn’t understand our points. On the presentation day, he was late. This made us really annoyed (Lucy).

From the literature and the research there is some evidence that supports the conventional view that Chinese students show a preference for individual assignments rather than group work (Bamford et al., 2002; Gourlay, 2006). However, cultural factor does not seem to be a determinant because those students who disliked group work did not give any explicit reason that could be described as cultural (Nield, 2004).

**Academic conventions**

Plagiarism amongst international students has drawn the attention of a growing number of researchers in recent years (Barrett & Malcolm, 2006; Handa & Power, 2005; Leask, 2005). The findings in this study indicated that the students came to understand Australian academic conventions and realized the serious consequence of plagiarism. When analysing the reasons of intentional or unintentional plagiarism among some Chinese students, most respondents believed that the definition of plagiarism in the Chinese academic convention was different from that in the Australian convention. They reported that many teachers in Chinese universities did not emphasise referencing conventions. Students were only required to list the related books they had read in the bibliography.

We have different conventions. We as Chinese often say ‘just like A said,’ and we needn’t use reference. But it’s not the case here. When I did my research for my Bachelor’s degree in China, I did quote others’ words without acknowledgement. At that time, I didn’t have the awareness at all (Lucy).
Other reasons include language barrier, seeking a shortcut, and time management issues. Nancy commented that “language is a problem. Sometimes, I don’t know how to express my idea in good English. And maybe the teachers can’t detect it”. Tom indicated that “some students couldn’t manage their time properly. When the due date approaches, plagiarism is a shortcut”. In this study, few students knew the Western academic conventions before studying in Australia. Lucy reported that before she began her coursework, she was informed of the issue of plagiarism by her sister who studied in Australia.

I knew it before I came, and I practiced on purpose. I learnt referencing from a book, which taught me how to make summaries and how to paraphrase. I had a general picture of correct referencing (Lucy).

Most respondents commented that they had understood the necessity of referencing, and tried their best to adjust to the new academic conventions. Sam indicated that “you won’t learn much if you copy others’ work, nor will it benefit your future job”. John also emphasised that “if you want to develop yourself in the global market, you must have the awareness. Avoiding plagiarism should be internationally accepted”. Some participants provided suggestions on avoiding plagiarism. For example, Tom recommended that “if you read more books, understand the concept of what you’ve learnt, you’ll have your own idea”. The study highlights the need to examine the underlying reasons for international students’ plagiarism. Understanding their previous educational experiences and providing assistance to their adaptation to the new Western academic conventions is recommended.

Conclusion

This study was limited to the perspectives of ten Chinese postgraduate students in two Australian universities. Generalisation of the findings to other Chinese students should be cautioned. Moreover, this study only focused on the perspectives from Chinese postgraduate students and did not include the perspectives from Australian academics. Further research which covers a larger number of Chinese postgraduate students and Australian academics who teach them is needed for a more complete knowledge and understanding of these students. Despite the limitations, this study is significant in that it provides insights into some academic adjustment issues confronting Chinese postgraduate students in Australian universities. This paper argues that during this period of adjustment and learning it is appropriate for Australian academics to respect the academic cultures of their students by acknowledging the students’ previous educational experience, and to adopt strategies that support and facilitate the effective adaptation process for international students.

References


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