

Give me wings to fly

– What can be done better to smooth Chinese students' academic adaptation experience at one Australian university?

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Abstract:

This presentation bases on a PHD research project, which is a detailed case study with the focus on exploring the academic adaptation experiences of a group of Chinese coursework postgraduate students studying in a faculty which is a popular choice of international students at one Australian university.

In twenty years, international education has become Australia's fourth-highest export earner and the second-largest service export industry (Australian Trade Commission, 2006). International students not only bring substantial revenue to Australian universities, but also bring challenges to their overseas study and their host universities. International students from the People's Republic of China play a significant role in this market with a 25% share of the market (Australian Government Australian Education International, 2006). For Chinese students and their families, coming to study in Australia is possibly the most significant academic investment in the students' life. Thus, there is high expectation for successful academic achievement.

Due to different educational background and culture, Chinese students have a different perception of their academic role and tasks than do Australian staff and students. Therefore, there is a very important and urgent problem: adjustment to the new educational environment. It is very clear that Chinese students have encountered challenges in their adjustment to studying in Australian universities, which have a great impact on the success of their academic achievement in Australia. The purpose of the presentation is: What can Australian universities and lecturers, as well as Chinese students themselves, do to smooth the adjustment experience?

The presentation includes three parts: 1. general background and relevant literature review of the project; 2. some results from the interviews with the lecturers, academic study support staff and Chinese students in the project, results on their understanding of the academic adaptation process; 3. discussions and suggestions for what can be done to improve the academic adaptation process.

Key Words:

international students, Chinese coursework postgraduate students, academic adaptation

Introduction:

“To understand is hard. Once one understands, action is easy.” (Sun Yat Sen, 1866-1925)

The internationalization of Australian higher education began during the 1980s. In 1985, the policy of enrolling overseas private students was introduced into Australian universities. Since then, more and more international students have come to Australia for their tertiary study. In the space of two decades, the number of international students enrolled in Australian universities now has grown to 100,799 (Commonwealth Department of Education, Training, & Science (DEST), 2006). Today, Australia has the largest proportion of international tertiary students per head of university students population of any of the other major providers of international education in the world (Australian Trade Commission, 2006). The most popular fields of study are Economics and Commerce. With the Australian government's decreasing funding of higher education, there is an increasing dependent on a new market for Australian universities: full-fee paying international students. International students from the People's Republic of China play a significant role in this market with a 25% share of the market (Australian Government Australian Education International, 2006). For Chinese students and their families, coming to study in Australia is possibly the most significant academic investment in the students' life. Thus, there is high expectation for successful academic achievement.

In twenty years, international education has become Australia's fourth-highest export earner and the second-largest service export industry (Australian Trade Commission, 2006). International students not only bring substantial revenue to Australian universities, but also bring challenges to their overseas study and their host universities. Some research (Gassin, 1982; Ballard, 1982; Bradley & Bradley, 1984; Ballard & Clanchy, 1984, 1988; Bochner, 1986; Bilbow, 1989; Burns, 1991; Watkins & Biggs, 1996) has shown that studying overseas and/or in a second language is exciting but challenging. Kirby, Woodhouse and Ma (1996) have detailed a triple challenge frequently encountered by Asian students who are studying in a second language: first, they have to master the content and concepts of their discipline; second, they have to do so through the medium of a language which they may not fully command; last, they often have to do this within an educational and cultural context quite different from their own. "These cognitive, linguistic and cultural challenges interact to restrict, or at least modify, the nature of learning" (p.141). With cultural, linguistic, intellectual and racial backgrounds which are very different from the local students, overseas students' needs, constraints, requirements, and problems will be different (Munro, 1988, p.5). Their different beliefs, values and attitudes to knowledge, to styles of learning and study can lead to study shock, and lead to an intellectual shock (Burns, 1991).

In the intellectual shock and among all problems international students have with their studies, the most blamed is the international students' English language level. "It is well established that if overseas students have any problems with their studies both they and their teachers will automatically assume the fault lies with their inadequate control of English" (Ballard, 1987, p.115). However, there is a strong interaction between language and culture, culture and curriculum content, culture and social needs. "The language issue, therefore is deeply embedded in other more subtle and complex issues" (Kennedy, 1995, p. 43). Maybe English proficiency is the most obvious factor instead of the most important factor. According to English language entry requirement into Australian universities, most of the students who come to study have achieved Band 6 or above in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), which guarantees at least a functional grasp of English.

It could be that both students and staff "overattribute problems to difficulties with English when, in fact, the problems stem from unfamiliarity with cultural norms or simply with the new environment" (Barker, 1991, p.83). It is well understood that international students have distinct previous learning experiences and are educated with distinct conception of learning, which are the basis for the learner's perception and interpretation of the learning context (teaching, assessment, curriculum, nature of learning tasks)(Samuelowicz, 1987). Consequently, international students have a different perception of their academic role and tasks than do Australian staff and students. Therefore, there is a very important and urgent problem: adjustment to the new educational environment.

There is substantial literature generally on the internationalisation of higher education in the Australian context; there is also a significant number of studies involving international students studying in the Australian context from teaching and learning methodological perspectives, but there is very little study of the challenges Chinese students encounter when they come to study in and adjust to the Australian context; there is also very little consideration to how these challenges may have been experienced from the Chinese students' perspective.

Methods:

Conceptual framework.

This study is a synthesis of phenomenology, ethnography and positioning theory. Positioning theory acts as a complementary framework. Phenomenology is "the study of phenomena as they present themselves in direct experience, is the study of the experience of the relationship between the individual and the object, is the study of a phenomenon as it presents itself in an individual's direct awareness" (O'Leary, 2004, p.122-123). Phenomenological studies are highly dependent on individuals, individuals' description of lived experience, also highly dependent on constructs (O'Leary, 2004). Positioning theory describes "what people do and how they do it when they are authorized or take themselves to be authorized to do it" (Harre & Moghaddam, 2003, p.8).

The foundation of this research is learning as seen from the learner's point of view, from the inside perspective (Marton, 1979):

It is important to characterize the qualitatively different ways in which individuals understand concepts, principles, and aspects of reality dealt with in their studies. In order to improve learning, it is necessary to find out the different ways in which students think about the content and to raise their consciousness of the way they set about the learning task (p.3).

Overarching methodology

The overarching methodology adopted in this study is **Case Study**. It is an exploration of a bounded system, a method of studying elements of the social through comprehensive description and analysis of a group with the emphasis on understanding the unity and wholeness of the particular case (O'Leary, 2004).

Precise methods used

Within the overarching methodology, case study, precise methods chosen in this study are: participant observation and interview.

The researcher in this study joined the lectures the group of Chinese students attending, took notes on site, and documented what the students actually do, but is unobtrusive. It is candid observation. The students knew the presence of the researcher as a research student, rather than as an economics student, from the beginning, from the first lecture. It is unstructured observation. The researcher observed and recorded data without predetermined criteria. The reason for using participant observation as a major data collection method is to understand the research setting (the academic culture in an Australian university), its participants (Chinese postgraduate students), and their behaviour (the adaptation process). By initially carrying out participant observation, it allows the researcher to develop interview questions connected to known behaviour, relevant to the students' real lecture experience. Furthermore, the answers to the interview questions can therefore be better interpreted. The researcher also can establish rapport with the interviewees, which ensures more productive and fruitful results.

Interview is "a method of data collection that involves researchers asking respondents basically open-ended questions" (O'Leary, 2004, p.162). The researcher in this study asked a group of Chinese postgraduate students, lecturers and staff in academic study support units open-ended questions developed from her observation notes. All interviews were tape-recorded with the consent of the interviewees. They were semi-structured interviews, which start "with some defined questioning plan and a few defined questions, but pursue a more conversational style of interview that may see questions answered in an order more natural to the flow of conversation, also be ready to pursue any interesting tangents that may develop" (O'Leary, 2004, p.164). An informal interview was used, a casual and relaxed form of interviewing that "attempts to close the gulf between the researcher and the researched, also attempts to establish rapport, gain trust, and create a more natural environment conducive to open and honest communication" (O'Leary, 2004, p.164). It is a face-to-face, one-on-one interview, which "allows the researcher control over the process and the interviewee the freedom to express his or her thoughts" (O'Leary, 2004, p.164).

For the second semester of 2005, a subject taught in the Faculty of Economics and Commerce was chosen and a formal class observation was undertaken for this study. Based on this observation, interview questions were developed. The lecturers teaching this subject and 15 Chinese students studying this subject were interviewed for the data of this study.

Analysis Approach

In this study, qualitative data coding is the main approach for category construction. "Well-handled, analytical coding is a prime way of creating conceptual categories and gathering the data needed to explore them. Coding is a first step to opening up meaning" (Richards, 2005, p.94). Three sorts of coding are adopted: 'descriptive', 'topic' and 'analytical' coding, which allows the researcher to return to the data to "inspect, interrogate and interpret" (Richards, 2005, p.86).

In the theme coding, raw data is read line-by-line and paragraph-by-paragraph to look for 'in vivo' categories, the categories well named by words interviewees themselves use (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this study, as in grounded theory, the concepts are mainly derived inductively from raw data without any preconceived notions, but also derived both inductively and deductively by "constant comparison" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). "In constant comparison, concepts and meaning are explored in each text and then compared

with previously analysed texts to draw out both similarities and disparities” (O’Leary, 2004, p.197). The interviews were analysed using the interview questions as the basis for a category search.

Results:

The results in this presentation focus on three aspects: suggestions for Chinese students, suggestions for Lecturers and suggestions for universities. These three aspects are divided into three sections: from the supporting staff’s point of view, from the lecturers’ point of view and from the Chinese students’ point of view.

From the supporting staff’s point of view

The researcher has interviewed three staff members working in International Student Services (ISS), Language and Learning Skills Unit (LLSU) and Teaching & Learning Unit (TLU) in the Faculty of Economics and Commerce respectively. There are three challenges the supporting staff have mentioned: language, expectation and homesickness.

Accordingly, the supporting staff has suggestions for Chinese students: First, be confident, critical and take risks. Be active and be involved. Besides the academic, students still need to build up with experiences of liaising, talking, interacting, integrating, not just with Australian students, but with students from over a hundred countries at the university. This is the chance to get to know such a range of students that students might not meet back home.

Second, be well-prepared, organized and obtain as much useful information as you can. The most important suggestions from the staff are: Be open, Be positive and Be engaged.

As well, there are some suggestions for lecturers. All of the support staff interviewed have noticed that the academic staff have much good will towards their students and they want to do the right thing. There are many things lecturers can do to include international students in their teaching. First of all, lecturers need to be explicit in their teaching. Lecturers need to share the knowledge with them, help them to be successful. Lecturers also need to explain jargons and discipline-specific words to international students. There are three key words of advice: incrementalizing, explaining and negotiating. It means that lecturers first incrementalize teaching, giving students opportunities to learn, then explaining while doing it, asking students how they do it at where they come from, last negotiating what needs to be done. In one phrase, it is about internationalizing the curriculum since it benefits everybody.

In sum, lecturers are suggested to make expectations as explicit as possible, show the procedures to achieve those expectations and give students time and practice.

When talking about suggestions for universities, the most important question is: How to support international students. There is a common believe that universities need to increase support at postgraduate level, such as more scholarships, as well as facilitate international students experiencing the Australian workforce under visa regulations.

From the staff’s point of view, there are two aspects for universities to consider. For students, universities need to understand the cohort that come through and set up opportunities for them to access the learning process. Academic orientation program also needs to be made compulsory for the students. Academic skills learning content needs to be imbedding within the curriculum at least in the first year study. For academic teaching staff and administration staff, universities need to facilitate them to learn new skills to accommodate the increasing number of international students. Each faculties need to take responsibilities as well. As supporting service units, they also ask for more resources from un iversities.

From the lecturers’ point of view

All the lecturers understand that Chinese students are under enormous amount of pressure, including family pressure, the students’ own desire to succeed and unfamiliarity in a new country, all of which result in huge challenges for Chinese students. According to the lecturers, there are three significant challenges for Chinese students studying in Australian university: language challenge, culture challenge and the challenge of lacking working experience.

The first challenge mentioned by the lecturers is language. The Chinese students' English is not so good, at least not confident. In the lecturers' opinion, because of language barriers, Chinese students need to spend much more time on assigned readings than local students do. It takes Chinese students a while to understand concepts because of the language. The subject is a language intensive one in some of the modules. Meanwhile, the lecturers agree that language is always an issue, but is not the most important problem. Practical experience, willingness to try to link the radical concepts to practical experience and different notions of what is acceptable learning in a university are the most challenging aspects for Chinese students.

The second challenge is culture barrier. In the lecturers' opinion, Australian higher education system doesn't value right answers but the reason for doing things, which causes ambiguity. A large number of Chinese students are really struggling with this aspect. They search for exact answers rather than questioning and arguing.

The last one is lacking of working experience. The majority of the Chinese students studying in this subject don't have industry/commercial working experience, therefore some of the subject concepts are very new and challenging to them.

Generally speaking, the suggestions the lecturers give to Chinese students are that Chinese students need more specific support and help, especially language help and extra explanation of differences between different systems. Meanwhile, Chinese students themselves need to be more open and active in seeking those help. It is the first suggestion the lecturers give to Chinese students. The lecturers kept on saying in interviews that they have tried their best to help, but in the end, it is still students' own choice, own decision. Chinese students have to take initiative and be confident as well.

For Chinese students, the second thing the lecturers strongly suggest is to learn to think and analyse questions, as well as expose themselves to different ways of thinking and doing things. The key issue is to be open and get involved. Good time management is also very important for Chinese students to study in Australia. In a sentence, the lecturers suggest Chinese students to take initiative in their study and learn to question and analyse.

The suggestions the lecturers would give to their colleagues are to be supportive, patient, and put in more resources to give international students proper feedback. There needs to be exposure of lecturers to foreign cultures; needs to be understandings of the differences of various cultures and culture barriers.

Another suggestion from the lecturers for their colleagues is to explain content and their expectations quite clearly to students. As lecturers, they should not only tell students what the requirements are but also show them the procedures to meet the requirements. Besides, among lecturers, sharing information and experiences about how to better accommodate international students in their teaching are also very necessary.

Meanwhile, lecturers also need to be very careful that not to dumb down the course. It is very easy and tempting to do, while there will be a huge doubt about the value of university degrees if doing that. All of them agree that the course should respond to the change of an increasing number of international students, but the course also needs to be challenging both for local students and for international students.

The cores of the suggestions for lecturers are understanding, patience and good communication between lecturers and international students.

Meanwhile, the lecturers have given some suggestions to universities. First, in the lecturers' belief, the most important question for universities to consider is whether it is a question of attracting more good students or just attracting more number of students. Universities should be very clear about their strategic plan for recruiting students, such as entry requirements, etc.

Second, the lecturers have noticed various degrees of reluctance among Chinese students when seeking help from their lecturers. Some additional help and specific support units will be very useful, which also make the lecturers' job easier, "a clear communication with international students what is expected and a peer support network will actually help international students come to grips with how to adapt in Australian-based

university learning". There is an immediate need for universities to not only support the market but also support Chinese students' experience in Australia. Universities need to give Chinese students' a positive and pleasant experience to take back to their home country for the benefit of substantive development of this market.

When talking about additional support, two of the lecturers have suggested pastoral care to the students during their study and getting students connected with people who can help them. Basically, the services are not enough.

The lecturers suggest that a specific orientation program, or a mentoring program, is needed for Chinese students. From the interview, all the lecturers realize that this is a large group, a very mixed, a broad and culturally diverse group and obviously there are differences between the Australian education system and the Chinese education system. But they are not sure about where the differences exactly are; they are a little bit uneasy for handling this group. The lecturers ask for more detailed information instead of isolated information about Chinese students' culture, background and the education system back in China. All the information needs to be more ready and available, especially about the differences from Australian culture and Australian education system and what can be done to bridge the differences.

In general, the lecturers advise universities to provide more specific, comprehensive and 'care to detail' support system for Chinese students, international students. They also suggest universities to give them more information on how to deal with differences both in culture and in education system.

From the students' point of view

In the first interview, the students attribute language barriers as the biggest challenge encountered in studying in Australian university, especially in the aspects of English listening and English writing.

In the second interview, most of the students have a strong feeling that they are tumbling on the way of their adaptation to Australian study. They are wondering is it possible for them to have a more detailed and Chinese-student's orientated assistance from university. All of them agree, "The experience from our senior Chinese fellow students is much practical and useful than what we learned from workshops, because we are all Chinese students with same background. The difficulties they met are the difficulties we are going through or going to meet."

The first suggestion the students give Chinese students/new comers is to find suitable accommodation and settle down before starting study at university. Most of the students had struggled with difficulties encountered in their daily life, such as accommodation, which took up much of their time which should be spent in their study. Some of them hadn't found suitable accommodation until the middle of the semester.

Second, collect as much relevant information as possible. The students suggest new comers get a general idea of study life in Australia University and do some preparation. The most important preparation is to make great efforts to practise and get used to Australian accent before coming. Listening and understanding will be the first challenge encountered in their study. In addition, after arriving in Australia, the students think new comers need some time to get used to Australian life, know Australian culture and make friends.

There is also a very good and important studying habit the students want to suggest new-comers when studying in Australia, that is a cycle of preparation before class and revision after class.

When talking about the suggestions for lecturers, all of the students think the majority of the lecturers are very responsible and respect that lecturers treat each student equally. The lecturers have the same requirements for international students and local students both in assignments and exams. In one sense, it is not very fair for international students. For assignments, international students can spend more time to prepare. But for exams, two hours' exam time has different meanings for international students and local students, who are doing same exams in their second language and native language. The students believe it is one of the reasons that they cannot finish all the exam questions. There isn't enough time for them to read and write. "Sometimes, what you write is totally different from what you think. You just don't know how to fully and properly express yourself." A couple of them expressed the same concern.

All of the students can understand lecturers when lecturers speak at normal or slightly slow speed. But they still suggest lecturers to keep international students in mind when they speak to local students. One of their suggestions for lecturers is to distribute more percentage of marks on assignments instead of on exams, which will lessen their pressure.

There are a couple of suggestions given to universities. In general, the students ask for more detailed assistance and guidance from university both in their life and in their study. In China, universities will arrange all the students' accommodation. Almost all the students thought that Australian universities would do the same thing. All of them have read relevant information in the university's pre-departure brochure before coming to Australia. But they not only didn't understand various kinds of accommodation available, but also didn't know how to make contact when they were still in China, since it is so different from China.

In the aspects of study, the students suggest the university provide them with comprehensive information, not just beautiful campus photos. "What we need most is experiences from our former Chinese students, for they know exactly what difficulties we will meet." There is also not enough information available about subject outlines and course structures both online and in brochures. The students only can access subject names before enrolling in subjects. It is not helpful for them to do preparations before coming to Australia, also not helpful for them to choose subjects after they begin their study in Australia. "The information is not open enough. And the guidance is not enough either. Lecturers simply introduce what this subject teaches and what that subject teaches, less than two minutes' introduction for each subject, then we have to decide which subjects we want to take. It is a very hard decision", one of them comments.

In the aspects of life, the students suggest university establish a university wide web BBS (Bulletin Board System), offering students a more convenient space (comparing to current adopted noticeboard) to exchange information about accommodation and second-hand books, etc, among themselves.

Conclusion:

Having beautiful dreams and great expectations, Chinese students fly over a hemisphere to study in Australia, while as Prescott and Hellstén's (2004) study suggests an "ill fit" between students needs and expectations and their subsequent experiences of educational offerings. This study proves the "ill fit". The Chinese students are winners in a comparatively high competitive Chinese education system. Mentally, it is hard for them to notice and accept that they are suddenly in a "disadvantaged" position when they come to study in Australia. No one, especially themselves, wants to blame their ability. Therefore, their English language ability becomes the escape goat. For Chinese students, they have passed IELTS before they are admitted into Australian universities, which means Australian universities acknowledge that their English language ability is not a barrier to their study in Australia. After they come into Australia and encounter all sorts of challenges, then they are told that it is because their language. Is it fair?

Chinese students well understand that English is their foreign language. They have studied very hard to pass IELTS entry requirement. Is it possible for Australian universities and lecturers to do more to help them with their language? Besides language, Chinese students also face huge challenges, such as living in a different country and studying in a distinct academic culture. Comparing to language study, a long-process improvement, welcoming and introducing Chinese students into a country and an academic culture are reasonably short process. Is it feasible for everyone to put more focus on the short-process aspects?

No one will deny that Chinese students have the ability to fly, but they still need wings. The wings are Australian universities and lecturers' assistances during their study in Australia, especially during their adaptation period. These assistances include making expectations and requirements explicit, as well as guiding the students through the whole process. Independence is precious, but when the students even cannot find the route, independence is scaring. What Chinese students need are more available, accessible and approachable guidance. That is the wings for them to fly.

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