

0657

Studying for a Master's Degree Overseas: Experiences and Transitions of Chinese Students in a UK University

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Background

The researches at the master's level are increasingly important, as the enrolment of master's programme is growing dramatically.

As Biggs (2007) claims, there is little anxiety of adjustment for those international students who come from Anglo-Celtic backgrounds, where there is a high degree of correspondence between learning-teaching in their heritage culture and learning-teaching in the new culture in which they now find themselves. By contrast, overseas students who received Confucian-heritage cultures may encounter problems, when they are studying in western universities with different pedagogical cultures. Indeed, their transitions may not be only occurred from learning in China to the UK, but also from learning in one language to learning in a second, as well as from one subject to another, and from one level of study (undergraduate) to a higher one (postgraduate).

Although there is a growing pool of literature relevant to Chinese learners and their experiences of studying at overseas universities, most of these studies focused at the undergraduate level. Furthermore, very little research has employed a longitudinal approach to investigate the learning experiences of the master's degrees of overseas students.

Research Questions

This study aims to explore experiences and transitions of Chinese students, who have completed first degrees in China, and are subsequently studying on master's degree programmes in the UK. Three big research questions were allocated as follow:

(1) Main research question

How do Chinese educated graduates experience learning and teaching as they progress from a first degree in their homeland to a master's level programme in a host university?

(2) Supporting research question

Most specifically,

(2a) How do they experience the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate level of study?

(2b) How do they experience the transition from a Chinese university to western university?

(2c) What do they experience learning and teaching wholly conducted in English language?

(3) Other relevant question

This study will be alert to two other potential transitions.

(3a) Where appropriate, how do they experience the challenges studying a subject that is different from main subjects of undergraduate level?

(3b) How do they experience living and learning in western culture/social settings?

Methods

This study carried out in the year of 2008/09. Three sets of interviews were undertaken in November 2008, March 2009, and May 2009.

Seven subjects were interviewed from three master's programmes at the University of Edinburgh (n=21), namely MSc Education, MSc Finance and Investment, and MSc Signal Processing and Communications. Reasons for selecting informants are as follow.

(1) Chinese students who have been living in western countries less than one year were selected as respondents. Since they were fresh undergraduates when they applied for British master's degrees, it could be assumed that they still possessed Chinese traditional values and they were familiar with Chinese teaching-learning model.

(2) MSc students at Edinburgh University were chosen. Because of their intellectual maturity, they would be more capable of expressing ideas than undergraduates.

(3) Due to a big number of Chinese students involved, these three programmes were preferred.

Frame

Pusch's continuum (1979) and Hofstede's argument (1986) were directly related to this research at the step of data analysis.

Pusch (1979) elaborates a learning continuum based on the cross-cultural learner's view (cited in Wan, 1999, p 5). According to this continuum, it can be expected that after Chinese students come to a western university, the first shock may be caused by diverse cultures ("Ethnocentrism"). Once they access to new learning-teaching modes, they possibly begin to be aware of the differences between home and host educational environments ("Awareness"). After understanding merits and drawbacks of the new learning styles, they perhaps accept what they could accept ("Acceptance/respect"). For the learning approaches which they really appreciate, they would adopt practically ("Appreciation/valuing" and "Selective Adoption").

Moreover, themes were analyzed with the assistance of Hofstede's arguments (1986). Three relevant dimensions show in pairs, namely individualism versus collectivism, big versus small power distance, and weak versus strong uncertainty avoidance. Hofstede (1986) believes that in countries characterized by collectivism, teachers occupy the main role of controlling the whole class activities, in the purpose of education which is to learn 'how to do' in a society. Contrarily, in nations presented as individualism (e.g. UK), classroom activities are conducted with the aim of learning 'how to learn' and self-achievement. Secondly, as for power distance dimension, Hofstede (1986) identifies it as large (e.g. China) and small one (e.g. UK). In the UK, student-teacher relations are informal and student-centred. Nevertheless, in large power distance nations (e.g. China), hierarchy and formal student-teacher relations are particularly displayed in the tertiary education. Thirdly, Hofstede (1986) points out that whereas in high uncertainty avoidance nations, students are anxious about uncertain and unstructured learning settings and tend to avoid contradicting to teacher's authority; in low uncertainty avoidance countries, students feel ease to face unstructured learning context and learning aims.

Research findings

The results showed that although at the beginning some Chinese overseas students accepted the western means of teaching and learning only reluctantly, finally they would possibly take appropriate actions to facilitate themselves accommodating easily and quickly. Furthermore, while the most common problem for Chinese overseas students was the language difficulty, other problems were perceived as difficulties caused by cultural diversities. They may feel easier to adjust, if the university

could provide appropriate services or subjects, such as the mentoring program. A series of supporting projects may be more helpful.

This study perhaps gives some directions to future researches. Since the teachers' authoritative status in the Chinese culture, the Chinese pedagogies and classroom behaviour may be seemed as teacher-centred. Therefore, when future researchers prepare to assess the learning quality of Chinese students, they should take the fact that Chinese students are more likely to study passively than western students into account. Eventually, this study, which gives a close insight on Chinese students in the UK, contributes to help British educators to know how Chinese students learn and how to improve the quality of learning and teaching.

References

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