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A Qualitative Study on Chinese Postgraduate Students' Learning Experiences in Australia

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***Abstract:** This paper presents a qualitative study exploring the learning experiences of Chinese postgraduate students in Australian universities. In the past decades, international student enrolments in Australia have grown rapidly in all education sectors. Thousands of Chinese students come to study in Australia every year and China has become Australia's largest source of international students. This study investigates Chinese postgraduate students' motivations to study in Australia, the challenges they face and strategies they adopt to achieve cultural and academic adjustments. This research is significant in that it investigates the learning experiences of Chinese students, particularly from the perspective of postgraduate students. This study involves ten Chinese students from mainland China who enrolled in Master Courses in two Australian universities in the ACT. An in-depth face-to-face interview method was employed. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim and the transcripts were translated from Chinese into English. Exploring their learning experiences provides Chinese learners intending to study in Australia and Australian academics with a better understanding of the challenges Chinese postgraduate students are faced with and strategies they have adopted to achieve cultural and academic adjustments in Australian universities.*

***Key words:** international education, social cultural adjustments, academic adjustments*

Introduction

With the rapid development of global economies, an international market has been generated for the graduates with international education backgrounds (Stacy, 1999, p.76). The international

movement of students has now become a business to some countries (Ryan & Zuber-Skerritt, 1999, p.4). Due to the economic reasons and attractive reputation of its education system, Australia has positioned itself as an exporter of higher education programs (Hewitt, 2002). International education is Australia's third largest service export (DEST, 2004). Australia has become the third largest provider at degree level behind the United States and the United Kingdom (Novera, 2004, p.475). China became Australia's leading source of international student enrolment in 2004 (DFAT, 2005, xii). Statistics show that 322,776 enrolments are international students in Australia in 2004, among which, 68,857 enrolments are 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). Academic success enhances personal confidence and status, helping students to fit in; and research suggests that social and personal adjustments to life in the host country are important to academic adjustment (Hellsten, 2002).

However, international education is not just for recruiting international students or exporting education. Its aim is for cultivating students to be equipped with cross-cultural awareness and communicative competence, more capable and competitive in global professional market (Stacy, 1999, p.77). Due to different cultural and educational backgrounds of international students, higher education is accordingly becoming more diverse (Hewitt, 2002). Education providers should hence recognise the needs and expectations of international students from different cultural backgrounds, and effectively assist them to achieve their goals (Stacy, 1999, p.77).

Given the increasing number of Chinese students, there is a need to explore their learning experiences in Australian tertiary education. This study investigates ten Chinese postgraduate students' learning experiences in two Australian universities, examines the cultural shock and learning difficulties they have encountered, the challenges they have met and the strategies they have adopted to make social cultural and academic adjustments. It therefore explores strategic approaches to learning and teaching at individual and institutional levels that address the increasing diversity of the student body in the international education context.

Literature Review

Previous studies suggest some relevant issues facing international students studying abroad; for instance, pressures to succeed from both students themselves and their families, lack of competent academic skills, and misunderstandings from academic staff (Durkin, 2004; Ramsey, Barker & Jones, 1999). However, relatively little research has been conducted to investigate

learning experiences of Chinese postgraduate students who study in Australia. This study is informed by the gap in the literature and intends to address the issues identified.

Push and Pull Factors

Previous research interprets the worldwide pattern of international students' motivations to study abroad as a combination of "push" and "pull" factors (see Bamford et al., 2002; Mazzard et al., 2001, p.3). "Push" factors refer to those that operate within the source country that serve to encourage students to make decisions to pursue international study (Mazzard et al., 2001, p.3). "Pull" factors, on the other hand, are those operating within the host country and make that country appealing to international students. Mazzard, Kemp and Saver (1997) argue that the "pull" factors involve several key aspects: the level of knowledge about the destination country, recommendations, cost issues, environment, geographic proximity, and social link to the destination country. Some research focuses on Chinese students' studying in the U.K. (Davey, 2005; Edwards & Ran, 2006). However, relatively few studies have been conducted to examine motivations of Chinese postgraduate students studying in Australia (Mazzard et al., 2001; Yao, 2004).

Social Cultural and Academic Adjustments

Recent research on learning experiences of international students in host countries generally involves several aspects, including cultural, psychological, social and academic adjustments (Edwards & Ran, 2006; Hewitt, 2002). Despite the widespread report of the difficulties international students encounter, Church (1982) concludes in his study that the majority of international students make reasonable adaptation to their cultural and institutional demands. According to Edwards and Ran (2006), it would be inappropriate to consider academic issues separate from the other aspects of the student experiences. Therefore, this study examines the learning experiences of Chinese postgraduate students, including both their academic adjustments and social cultural adjustments.

Social and cultural adjustment measures the degree to which people acculturate or accept another culture and its way of life (Li & Ching, 2000). People are faced with different cultural conventions and "culture shock" is the most commonly mentioned issue when research is conducted about the experience of people who encounter different cultures (Burke, 1986). International students need to adjust not only to the academic environment but also to unfamiliar physical and social environments (Bamford, et al., 2002). It is argued that understanding international students' cultural adaptation from a psychological perspective is an effective way to explore their learning experience (Zhang, 2002).

Previous studies suggest some strategies how international students can adjust to social and

cultural environment. Making friends and taking part in different social activities can, to some extent, release them from their stressful life. Students can assimilate into the culture by participating in extracurricular activities (Kauffmann, Martin, & Weaver, 1992, p.65). Li and Ching (2000) argue that everyday contact with another culture can help the social and cultural adjustment of a person, and the adjustments may assist one's personality development.

Academic adjustment has been highlighted by many researchers studying international students' learning experiences (e.g. Bamford, et al., 2002; Kiley, 2003). Some scholars argue that overseas students often encounter two fundamental problems in the Australian education: inadequacy in English, and issues concerning new styles of learning (see Ballard & Clanchy, 1997; Kiley, 2003). The language requirements for entering universities of English-speaking countries cannot guarantee that international students possess the necessary "native-like communicative or receptive ability" (Bamford et al., 2002, p.3; Kiley, 2003). Incompetence in academic English may be related to problem with plagiarism (Biggs, 1999). Plagiarism amongst international students has drawn the attentions of a growing number of researchers (see Edwards & Ran, 2006).

When international students first participate in Australian class, they usually bring their own culturally different attitudes toward knowledge. Their successful approaches of learning in previous study, previous experiences and assumptions may lead them into an intense state of "learning shock" (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997, p.28). These previous educational experiences may lead to unexpected results. The most significant difference in Australian and overseas contexts, for example, in China, is the "nature of the education system: the ways in which teachers conduct their classes and the ways in which students are trained to study" (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997, p.10). Australian tertiary education expects students to be independent and to engage in critical thinking. They should do more than simply reproduce knowledge; they should question and challenge the ideas of others and forward their own opinions and ideas. Postgraduate students are especially expected and encouraged to have more ability in finding new interpretations and creating new knowledge (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997, p.13; Durkin, 2003).

Chinese students are often regarded as making extensive use of rote memorization, at the expense of understanding and creativity. They tend to be more passive, less participative and less creative in class compared to those from other countries (Chan, 1999). When participating in group discussion, they may perform more passively (Bamford et al., 2002). According to Woodrow's study (2001), Chinese students show a preference for working alone rather than in groups, and they place little value on peer-group discussion.

However, some reinterpretations have been conveyed in recent studies. For example, Biggs (1994) argues that Chinese students are regarded as making greater use of memorisation, but not necessarily as rote learning. Dahlin and Watkins (2000) indicate that Chinese students view

understanding as a “deep impression” and a long process that requires considerable mental effort, while Western students typically regard understanding as a process of sudden insight. In addition, as Cortazzi (1996) suggests, Chinese students are not passive but reflective. Chinese students value thoughtful questions, which are typically asked after sound reflection. Less thoughtful questions may be laughed at by other students (Cortazzi, 1996). In the learning process, they have a need for rapid and constant correction instead of uncertainty and ambiguity (Kennedy, 2002). Specific learning and teaching problems may arise due to some perceived cultural issues. There is, however, only a small body of literature focusing on international postgraduate student learning (see Kiley, 2003). This paper is significant in that it informs the field about international student learning, in particular from the perspective of Chinese postgraduate students.

Research Method

An in-depth qualitative interview method was employed in this study. The use of qualitative methods helps to provide readers with real-life translation of what is being conveyed (Krathwohl, 1997, pp.229-230). The researchers are allowed to become engaged in the details and specifics of the data, and therefore “get close to an individual’s perspective” (Kayrooz & Trevitt, 2005, p.110). 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 participants’ perspective on their learning experiences in Australian universities.

Ten Chinese postgraduate students, 4 males and 6 females, were involved in this study. They all received tertiary education and obtained 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 Australian universities prior to taking part in this study. Their ages ranged from 23 to 28 and the mean age was 25.5 years old. Five participants had working experience prior to pursuing their postgraduate courses in Australia.

A pilot interview was conducted and minor modifications were made to ensure the interview questions were clear and manageable. Upon receiving the consent forms, the participants were interviewed by one of the authors individually for approximately 30-60 minutes in March, 2006. All interviews were administered in their mother tongue Mandarin in order to capture articulate and developed responses. All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim and translated from Chinese into English.

In the first stage of data analysis, the researchers/authors employed several indicators relevant to

this study. Then, the information was systematically arranged into wall charts using the contextual matrix developed by Miles and Huberman (1994), to sort the data by theme and concept. Thus, preliminary categories were formed. The final stage of data analysis involved summarising the original data (Ritchie, Spencer & O'Connor, 2003, p.229). The researchers compared the summaries through each category and then refined the categories to ensure all perspectives had been covered.

Findings and Discussions

As can be seen from Figure 1, the findings are categorised into three main sections: motivations of studying in Australia, social cultural adjustments, and academic adjustments. The discussions provided Chinese learners and Australian academics with more insightful understanding of the Chinese postgraduate students' learning experiences. In order to safeguard the identities of the respondents and preserve their confidentiality, pseudonyms are used in this study.

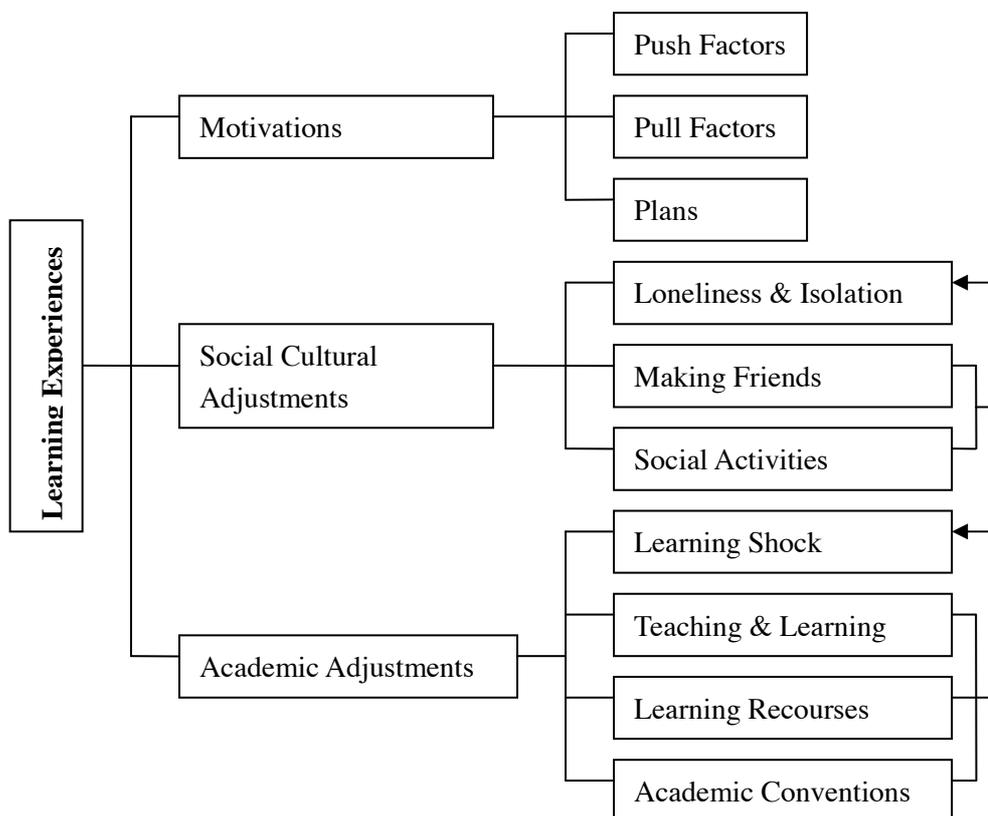


Figure 1 Learning experiences of Chinese postgraduate students in Australia

Motivations of Studying in Australia

Push Factors

The findings indicated that the motivations of these participants studying in Australia are mainly directed by the “push” factors (Mazzard et al., 2001, p.3). The majority of the participants believed that obtaining a Bachelor degree cannot ensure them to be competitive in the Chinese employment market. The competition of entry into postgraduate education is fierce. Five participants who had working experiences argued that upgrading academic qualifications was one of the reasons for them to pursue postgraduate study. However, it was very challenging for them to compete with new graduates from universities in China. Therefore, they decided that pursuing postgraduate courses abroad was effective for their professional development.

Moreover, some participants stated that they wanted to study abroad to meet their parents’ expectations. Others wanted to seek the opportunities for English language improvement, or for the social and cultural benefits of living and studying in a Western country. Moreover, other reasons were mentioned, including easily changing into another major (Linda), having the desire to experience a much fairer academic environment (Tom), and viewing postgraduate study in China less valuable (John).

The findings revealed that the fierce competition in Chinese higher education, limited places in postgraduate courses and increasing competition in the employment markets prompted these interviewees to study abroad after they graduated from Chinese universities. They intended to improve themselves personally and professionally to strengthen their competitive ability and employability in the globalised context.

Pull Factors

The findings showed that Australian education policy and immigration policy play a very important role in attracting Chinese students to pursue postgraduate courses in Australian universities. Some respondents indicated that the first option for them was the United States. However, due to the strict visa policy after the tragic attacks of September 11, 2001 in the U.S.A., they chose to study in Australia. Furthermore, possibility of getting permanent residence permission, working opportunity, cost issues, reputation of the host universities, safety, social link, Western culture and natural beauty were also considered. Sam illustrated why he chose Australia as his destination country:

The quality of Australian education is pretty high, and I will hopefully qualify for, and obtain permanent residency status. After graduation, I would like to stay and work in Australia for a couple of years to gain some working knowledge and experiences of the Australian business, cultural and social environment. I believe these experiences will be

invaluable and very helpful to my future development. Expense is another concern to me. Compared with living expenses in European countries, the cost of living in Australia is affordable. Moreover, I enjoy the climate very much (Sam).

The evidence therefore suggests that the reasons why Australia has become Chinese students' wishful destination lie on several aspects: favourable visa and migration policies, good reputation of Australian universities, affordable studying and living cost, and promising employment market. This finding also supports Mazzard et al.'s (2001) argument about the significant role of "pull" factors in destination decision-making of international students.

Plans after Graduation

The findings revealed that different participants had different plans for their future. Half of the respondents (five) had plans of staying in Australia after obtaining Master degrees. However, Australia was not the only place where they wanted to work. John explained "I will possibly go to some more competitive countries, such as, U.S.A., Germany or going back to China, for my professional development". Two female participants (Cindy and Lucy) made it explicit that they would return to China for professional development after graduation. Cindy, a girl from Shanghai, emphasised:

I think I'll go back to China. I have experienced so much and have known what the outside world looks like. The most important is that the cultural difference is really obvious and I find it difficult to assimilate into their culture, and I can still feel discrimination to some degree. I can get a good job back in China with my degree and competence (Cindy).

This study suggests that despite the attractive employment prospect of foreign countries, some Chinese students still prefer to return to China. With the rapid economic development and favorable Chinese policies for returned overseas students in recent years, they may have more opportunities in China than in their host countries (Zhu, 2005).

Social Cultural Adjustments

Homesickness and Isolation

One issue highlighted in previous studies is that many international students feel lonely, isolated and experience culture shock upon arrival in Australia (see Edwards & Ran, 2006; Robertson et al., 2000). However, the findings in this study revealed these Chinese postgraduate students also had the feelings of loneliness and isolation, but nobody mentioned experiencing obvious cultural shock in daily life. Only a few participants mentioned they felt homesick upon arrival. Jane commented that "I felt terrible when I first arrived here and missed my family very much." Some did feel lonely, but reported they were able to keep their feelings under control. Others

mentioned that they were too busy to feel homesick. For example, Linda argued that “I didn’t have homesickness at all, and felt everything was so natural”. Vivian shared her view and explained that “I didn’t feel homesick or isolated for I had so many goals. I was busy to adjust myself to the new environment and was preoccupied with my exams”. Tom enjoyed studying in Australia:

I was very excited when I came here. I was not familiar with the local environment at that time. I got up very early everyday and tried to find accommodation. I was really excited and didn’t have a strong feeling of homesickness even later. That was probably because of my relatively high efforts and willingness to assimilate (Tom).

This study indicates some differences from previous research, which emphasises international students’ loneliness and isolation. It should be noted that the participants in this study are postgraduate students. They had previous tertiary educational experiences in their home country and some had working experiences before studying abroad. Therefore, they tended to be more mature, goal-oriented and independent than undergraduate students. Moreover, the prolonged process of learning English, increasing influence of Western culture in China, and their own curiosity towards the host country may have psychologically prepared them well and thus reduced their feeling of homesickness and isolation.

Making Friends

When describing their strategies to overcome loneliness and isolation, most participants mentioned making friends and taking part in activities both on campus and in community could enrich their lives and help them better understand the Australian culture. Most participants enjoyed making friends with local and international students, learning new information, and improving English language and cross-cultural communication competency. However, they found it difficult to have close relationship with other non-Chinese international and local students. The main reason seemed to be language and cultural differences. This finding confirms the previous research that language proficiency prevents international students from acquiring effective communication skills, which makes it difficult to make friends with locals (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). In this study, the majority of the respondents had more Chinese friends than international and local friends. Jack explained the meaning of friendship from his point of view:

I only associate with those who lived in the same block or did group assignments with me. Although Australians would communicate with us forwardly, their culture prevents them from having close relations with us. The real friends are those from whom you can seek help even at 3 in the early morning, but they won’t feel annoyed at all (Jack).

Jack’s argument reflected his tendency of making friends with those who could have close relation with him and listen to him with patience and consideration. However, because of

different cultural backgrounds, this type of friendship could only be sought from other Chinese students rather than local or international students. Among the three different friendships found among overseas students, namely monocultural, bicultural and multicultural friendship (Bochner, 1994), these Chinese students were likely to seek support through monocultural friendships. This finding also supports Edwards and Ran's (2006) observation that Chinese students prefer to seek emotional support from other Chinese students who have better understanding both of their previous experiences and of the challenges now facing them.

Participating in Social Activities

All the respondents commented that they wanted to participate in activities held on campus and half of them had the experiences of being volunteers of on campus activities, for example, the Orientation Week, Open Day of universities, and students' associations. They reported to have learnt a lot about how Australian university students organise their campus activities, and enhanced their personal development with respect to language, cultural experience and open mindedness. John cited an example to illustrate his sense of achievement and pride in voluntary activities:

I'm a member of postgraduate and research students association of our university. My job is to assist the social club to organize some activities. I feel confident. I can contribute in a positive way while simultaneously convincing them that Chinese students are not inferior to others. I get the feeling of being acknowledged and being respected. (John)

However, some indicated that not all activities were suitable to them, such as parties in pubs, due to different culture backgrounds and different age spans. Most local students who lived on campus were undergraduate students. They were keen on parties, and drinking was a must. This study suggests that apart from friendship, taking part in different social activities can also release the Chinese students from their stressful life and reduce their isolation. This finding is congruent with the previous research that international students can assimilate into the host culture by participating in extracurricular activities (Kauffmann, et al., 1992, p.65). It is also suggested that universities should organize a range of activities for mature-aged postgraduate students to assist them in adapting to the social relations in Australia.

Academic Adjustments

Learning Shock

The findings revealed that when first receiving Australian tertiary education, most of the respondents had experienced some discomfort, confusion, or even struggle. This was largely influenced by their previous learning experiences and different attitudes toward knowledge (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997). A lack of English language proficiency was reported in daily

communication and particularly in academic writing. Most participants believed that they did not have enough confidence in class because of inadequate English. The minimum requirement of language for entry could not ensure they participate in class activities effectively or complete assignments up to a certain academic standard (Lucy). This study suggests that before being admitted to Master courses, international students' English language proficiency should be further strengthened even if they have achieved 6.5 scores in IELTS tests. Moreover, the language courses or foundation courses should be closely linked to university academic requirements and therefore ease their transition into more academically oriented work.

Some interviewees found it challenging to adapt to the different learning environment. The class delivery in Chinese tertiary education is mainly lecture-oriented to which the Chinese students have been accustomed. The majority of respondents regarded student involvement as a new challenge in tutorial attendance, because it is not the class component in most Chinese universities. They could hardly tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity and preferred to obtain the accurate answer directly from the teachers rather than through laborious research or group discussion, which confirmed Kenney's (2002) observation about Chinese learners.

The findings indicated that many interviewees may have different assumptions of knowledge and feel more comfortable with surface learning approaches. Criticising or challenging others' opinion was considered difficult. International students are the products of their respective cultures and their individual experiences of education within their countries. It is important to recognise their very different assumptions and attitudes to knowledge. This finding supports the previous research that learning shock in Australian classroom is mainly caused by the previous experiences and assumptions from cultural differences (Ballard & Clancy, 1997). 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 were 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 emphasise more on your opinions and your reflections. But now I can see the point (Lucy).

Chinese students are often considered to be quiet in class, and in this study most respondents stated that they were reluctant to ask questions in class. Their reasons covered several aspects: being accustomed to keeping silence in class, language barrier, lack of confidence, and having no idea. However, some respondents argued that the reason why they did not ask questions was that they wanted to reflect on the content delivered after class. For instance, Jane commented that "I seldom ask questions in class as I need time to digest the knowledge. I need reflection before asking questions". She further explained that "the questions raised in class might be very superficial, while those after reflection would be profound". This finding is consistent with

Cortazzi's (1996) argument that Chinese students are not passive but reflective and they value thoughtful questions that are raised after sound reflections.

Improving Language Proficiency

Although they had some confusion at the beginning of the courses, all the interviewees seemed to have discerned the differences in the teaching approaches, and made great efforts for academic adjustment accordingly. They undertook various strategies to improve their English language proficiency, especially in listening and speaking. Watching TV, listening to news, watching movies and making friends with local and international students were reported as the most useful methods to improve their language capability. Having readiness and awareness to speak was viewed as a key point in English learning. For instance, Nancy emphasised that making friends was really helpful in building up her self-confidence. She further explained that "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". The findings indicated that studying abroad may provide a good language environment for international students and they are expected to make full use of it to achieve successful academic adjustments.

Teaching and Learning Approaches

Most respondents commented that teaching and learning approaches in Australian universities were dramatically different from those in Chinese universities. Several explicit distinctions were reported in comparing their learning experiences in the host providers and their previous home providers in terms of role of teachers, teaching content and assessment. The teaching methods in Chinese universities were mainly viewed as teacher-centred, didactic, and transmissive rather than student-centred and problem-based learning. Students were expected to be passive recipients of "objective" knowledge rather than independent learners. Australian academics appeared to attach more importance to practical skills rather than theoretical knowledge.

The role of Australian teachers was believed to be greatly different from that in Chinese tertiary education. Teachers in Australian universities were considered as facilitators of the students' own independent pursuit of knowledge, not as executives or managers. They provided students with more autonomy and tried to cultivate their self-directed learning and independence. Many respondents stressed that students should be responsible for their own learning in Australian universities. For instance, Jack argued that:

The Chinese teacher is usually supposed 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 score (Jack).

The finding suggests that the relationship between teachers and students in Chinese universities is more like parents and children. It is taken for granted in China that if the students do not have good achievement, it is the teachers' responsibility. However, in Australia, students are supposed to be self-reliant. These Chinese postgraduate students are expected to be more independent learners and shift from the reproductive learning approach to the analytical or speculative learning approach which is valued in Australian universities (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997)

Most respondents commented that what they studied in Chinese tertiary education was mostly from textbooks. Teachers usually followed the prescribed textbooks, although they may give students some relevant course materials. The majority of the respondents believed that the teaching content in Australian universities was largely connected with contemporary practice, especially in the case of those subjects closely related to modern technologies. Sam, an IT student, gave an example to illustrate his view: his teacher changed the teaching plan right after the Microsoft Corporation promoted a new version of specific software. This suggests that the updated and practical content is welcome by students, while teachers in Chinese universities are expected to accumulate more practical experiences and to enrich teaching contents.

Great differences in assessment between Chinese tertiary education and that of Australian universities were reported. In Chinese universities assessment is mainly based on final exams while assessment in Australian universities may have various items, such as assignments submitted throughout the semester, presentations, exams and class participation. Sam indicated that the assessment forms in Australia prompted him to change his learning strategies accordingly, and exams were no longer a pressure to him:

The process of knowledge acquiring 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 have managed to obtain good scores for my previous assessments (Sam).

Most interviewees regarded group assignment as a good way to share ideas among students and to learn from others' experiences. They acknowledged that completing group assignment could develop team spirit among group members, which was also a new experience in their academic adjustments. However, it should be noted that most of them preferred individual assignments to group assignments. One reason was that some group members' lack of responsibility had dampened their enthusiasm for group assignments. The majority believed that Chinese students were more responsible for the group work. Another reason was that it was often regarded as waste of time. Lucy had a disappointing experience and claimed that "one of our group members never discussed with us, nor did he finish his part. We had to do for him, but he complained that he couldn't understand our points. On the presentation day, he was late. This

made us really annoyed”. This finding confirms Woodrow’s (2001) observation that Chinese students show a preference for working alone rather than in groups. This study also suggests that many Chinese students want to have more control on their assignments and do not want to be held in play.

Utilising Learning Resources

The findings revealed that the most frequently used learning resource by the interviewees when confronted with difficulties was the internet. Reference books, discussion with classmates, and consultation with teachers were also mentioned. Some interviewees reported that the assistance from their classmates or friends with English as the native language could also be viewed as an efficient resource. Linda reported that she would seek help from her Canadian friend through email after she finished the assignment, and her friend would help her “proofread the assignment and check grammatical errors if any”. Lucy had similar experience and stressed that she gained a lot from her local classmates and “made explicit improvement in writing”.

Some interviewees reported that academic skill program was also a good resource for study. However, others held different opinions. Some respondents believed that the academic skills program did not suit them. Vivian, an Interpreting student, stressed that: “I can hardly find any resources which can give me assistance. There is an academic skills program, but it’s not for me”. John, an Engineering student, commented that “the academic skill program can only provide you with some general knowledge, such as, how to prepare presentation. It’s not very useful to me”.

The findings indicated that most respondents held positive views about study skills programs run by Australian universities. However, it was pointed out that the study skills program was distinct from the language support program. Respondents suggested targeted programs for postgraduate students and study skills support should not be limited to language support. Australian universities could provide a wide range of workshops and assign specialised staff to improve international postgraduate students’ academic skills in different disciplines.

Following Academic Conventions

Previous studies show that plagiarism amongst international students has attracted the attention of a growing number of researchers (see Edwards & Ran, 2006). In this study all the interviewees realised the serious consequence of plagiarising and penalties after a certain period of study. When analysing the reasons of intentional or unintentional plagiarism among some Chinese students, some interviewees believed that the definition of plagiarism in Chinese academic convention was different from that in Australian convention. The majority reported that many teachers in Chinese universities did not emphasise referencing convention, and

students were only supposed to list the related books they had read in the bibliography. John stressed that “before I came to Australia, I didn’t know what plagiarism is at all”. Other reasons were also raised by the interviewees, including language barrier, trying to find a shortcut, saving times, and fluke.

In this study, only a few knew this convention beforehand. Lucy reported that before she began her coursework, she was informed about plagiarism by her sister who had already studied in Australia. “I knew plagiarism before I came, and I practiced the right referencing convention on purpose. I learnt it from a book, which taught me how to make a summary and how to paraphrase. I had a general picture of correct referencing”. All the interviewees admitted that they had understood the necessity of referencing, tried their best to adjust themselves to this academic convention, and often reminded themselves of serious consequences of plagiarism. Sam stressed 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. Tom recommended that “if you read more books, understand the concept of what you’ve learnt, you’ll have your own idea”.

This study suggests that international students should be made aware of the academic environment in the Western countries prior to studying abroad, such as different types of classes and assessment in the host countries, use of learning resources, and issues related to plagiarism. Australian universities are expected to increase the awareness of their international students to make successful adjustments to the academic norms and conventions.

Conclusion

This study was limited to the perspectives of a relatively small size of sample, which consisted of ten Chinese students who had obtained Bachelor degrees in Mainland China before pursuing their Master’s degrees by coursework in two Australian universities. Generalisation of the findings to other Chinese students, who have different educational backgrounds or study in different countries, should be cautioned. More significant results could be achieved by a larger scale study. Moreover, this study only focuses on the perspectives of Chinese students rather than perceptions from Australian academics. Further research which covers a larger number of students and academics is needed to present a more comprehensive picture of Chinese postgraduate students’ learning experiences in an international education context. Despite the limitations, this study is significant in that it explores strategic approaches to learning and teaching at the individual and institutional levels that address the increasing diversity of the student body in the international education context.

Some of the key findings in this study are congruent with observations and analyses from

previous research on international students, for instance, a combination of both push and pull factors in studying abroad (Mazzard, et al., 2001); the tendency of Chinese students for monocultural friendship (Edwards and Ran 2006); the role of extracurricular activities in helping international students assimilate into the host culture (Kauffmann, et al., 1992); learning shock due to different assumptions of knowledge and previous learning experience (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997); and Chinese students' preference for individual assignments rather than group work (Woodrow, 2001). However, it is important to note that Chinese postgraduate students in this research did not seem to have a very strong sense of loneliness and isolation or cultural shock as was typically seen from previous studies (Hewitt, 2002; Zhang, 2002). Nor did they admit that they were truly rote or passive learners as misinterpreted by some westerners (see Kennedy, 2002). This study therefore indicates the complexity of research on Chinese learners and cautions again the danger of sweeping generalisations.

This study suggests that Australian academics need to work with international students in bridging the cultural divide and facilitating them in social cultural and academic adjustment. Australian universities need to adopt a range of strategies to address international students' need, such as providing more targeted academic skills programs, organising activities for mature-age international students and assisting them in adjusting socially in the host culture. Chinese universities are expected to prepare Chinese students for further personal and professional development in a globalised context. More importantly, international education should also foster students' global understanding and development of skills for living and working more effectively in a diverse world.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

1. Why did you decide to go abroad to pursue your postgraduate study? Why did you choose Australia as your destination? What plans do you have for your future after graduation?
2. How did you feel when you first arrived in Australia? Were feelings such as loneliness and isolation an issue? How did you cope with them, if any? Did you make friends with other students?
3. Have you joined any club or student organisation on campus? Do you think that students are well informed about campus or social activities and events? Have you taken part in any of these activities, and if so, in what way do you feel they have contributed to your personal development?
4. Did you feel confident to participate in classroom activities when you commenced your study in Australia? What do you think of your English proficiency at that time? Do you think you have made improvement in English and what strategies have you adopted?
5. What do you think of the role of a teacher? How do you feel about the teaching method adopted by the mainstream Australian academics? What, if any, do you feel are the main differences between the teaching methods used in China and those used in Australia?
6. Are you willing to participate in group discussions (both in class and in group projects) and what is your specific role? Do you have a preference to working alone or in groups? Why?
7. What would you do if you experienced difficulties in your studies? Do you feel you have made full use of the learning resources provided?
8. Have you ever plagiarised, either intentionally or unintentionally? What do you think are the main reasons for some Chinese students to plagiarise? Did you make efforts to adjust to the academic conventions in Australian universities and how?