

Chinese PhD students in Australian universities during a pandemic: Toward social justice through recognition

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The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted global higher education. For international students in Australia, ongoing issues of being commodified (and de-humanised) have been brought to the forefront by scholars including Fazal Rizvi and Betty Leask. Literature from doctoral students is signalling isolation and disconnect along with the emergence of capacities of resilience that make explicit the role of relationships within the academic community (see US-based essay from Lizhou Wang and Tessa DeLaquil). Chinese international PhD students studying in Australian universities during the pandemic have had to navigate isolation along with the consequences of geopolitical tensions between the two countries. Through the social justice lens of recognition, inspired by Freya Aquarone and colleagues' recent book, we present analysis from interviews with 15 Chinese doctoral students from three Australian universities. The interview conversations created space for the Chinese PhD students to reflect on how they are navigating the pandemic as people and international research students, the impact on their research process, and the role of relationships with their advisory teams. The study participants were in different stages of their PhD programs, and we invited them to reflect by comparing experiences before and during the pandemic. Influenced by the changing relationships with advisors, many students discussed their journeys as a process of negatively (re)shaping their sense of agency, belonging, and identity. The lens of recognition is contested yet the consensus view is a move from 'being seen' to 'being valued' as a full human being within a community. Our analysis illuminates instances of recognition with Chinese students able to share vulnerabilities of the pandemic that stretched beyond 'being a PhD student' with instances where recognition was not realised through fragmentation of being seen as a student only. Our study contributes new collective insights into how Chinese international doctoral students experience recognition to move us toward social justice. We argue that the pandemic is an opportunity to rethink and revalue recognition as a core tenet of social justice in higher education—one that should always be present in the student-supervisor relationship.