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CS 11: Chinese Students' Learning Experience in the University of Northampton

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This case study focuses on presenting and discussing the learning experience of students from the People Republic of China (PRC) in the University of Northampton. The research on the Chinese students' learning experience in UK higher education is one of the most popular research topics (Roz and Helena, 2004; Huang, 2005; Gieve and Clark, 2005; Jin and Cortazzi, 2006). Since more and more Chinese families have financial abilities to support their children to receive higher education overseas, the number of Chinese student who study abroad has increased rapidly. The Chinese student group has become the largest international student group in higher education of the UK and the US (British Council, 2010; CNTV, 2010; Global Times, 2010). Because of this rapidly growing trend of Chinese students studying overseas, more research on topics relating with Chinese students' learning experience in overseas higher education is needed, in order to understand more about this trend. This case study will focus on reporting Chinese students' learning experience in a UK higher education institution (the University of Northampton), in terms of discussing and reviewing the impact of students' previous learning experience on their new learning experience in the UK when the cultural and social setting has been changed.

Key learning up front

- **CS 11.1.** International students' learning experience is impacted by changes of cultural and social setting which is different from their previous educational background. Learners in a new country will bring their existing cultural scripts of learning with them from home.
- **CS 11.2.** The cultural benefits which international students bring are far more important than the financial benefits, because the international students can make great contributions to the knowledge economy.
- **CS 11.3.** Both developed and developing nations benefit from the exchange of ideas and people brought by global academic competition.

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- **CS 11.4.** The challenge of international students' English language ability is not the only or most important issue. Other challenges include the social and cultural adjustments; international students' class contribution; and differences in study methods between their country of origin and the UK.
- **CS 11.5.** The UK expectation of critical participation in the class could involve confronting others; however this way of learning might not be considered as a positive practice by some learners who come from a culture of being self-critical.
- **CS 11.6.** It takes a number of years to move from searching for a 'correct' answer for a question to understanding the critical argumentation required for UK teaching and learning methods.
- **CS 11.7.** It is important to introduce to Chinese students the difference concerning the impacts of culture scripts, and this should be done before their higher education course begins.
- **CS 11.8.** This transformation of the learners' approaches to learning takes time to achieve. For a short time, for example one year, there are many things for Chinese students to learn in the entire academic, social, and cultural aspects of life.
- **CS 11.9.** The developments include: referring to a number of resources; a critical review writing style; willingness to participate in discussion activities; willingness to provide own opinions in the discussion.
- **CS 11.10.** Because of influences by both their teachers and their parents some students might be studying a subject about which they might not have great interest and understanding.
- **CS 11.11.** The TNE students researched have mixed learning experiences; although they had difficulties in the social domain when they progressed to the UK for the first time, they were confident about themselves and proud of their achievements in the TNE programme.
- **CS 11.12.** The TNE programme students had developed some survival strategies while they were in the TNE programme in China; frequently using Chinese to clarify and scaffold their learning.
- **CS 11.13.** The TNE programme students had difficulty in understanding assignment requirements, particular relating to independent research, perhaps caused by their previous survival strategies.

I have been in the UK for over ten years, and I also have had more than six years of study experience in the UK higher education. I am currently working on a Higher Education Academic (HEA) research project which is concerning strategic implications of international collaborations in Higher Education. My study experience of being a former international student in the University of Northampton, and my researching experience of being involved in the HEA

research project, have had a great influence on my understanding about the issues which are surrounding learning experiences in the different cultural and social settings, and in the different educational systems. In addition, my involvement of preparing and supporting the English for Academic Purpose (EAP) course for Chinese top-up students in September 2010, also provided a chance for me to analyse these issues from another different aspect.

Some parts of this case study will be written in the first person writing style, because this case study will include partly reviewing my personal learning experience, and partly analysing the research findings of other Chinese students' learning experience. The aim of this case study is to address the impact of Chinese students' previous educational background, and the impact of changing culture and social setting on Chinese students' learning experience. This case study will also identify some of the obstacles, challenges, and difficulties which the Chinese students would have experienced while they are studying in the UK higher education. My personal opinions and suggestions for overcoming these obstacles and difficulties will also be suggested.

Background summary

Because this case study is mainly focussing on presenting and discussing the Chinese students' learning experience in the UK higher education it is necessary to review the current situation of UK higher education and the world higher education development trend. It is also necessary to review the collaboration between China and the UK and the potential Chinese students for the UK higher education before the discussion of the issues which relate to Chinese students in the UK higher education.

The UK higher education sector has a high level of attraction for overseas students. According to UCAS (2010), the number of the applications for the full-time undergraduate course has increased for four years since 2006. By January 2010, the overseas applicants reached 71,105 which is an increase of 22.1% in comparison with 2009. The percentage of Chinese overseas students in the UK full-time undergraduate courses rose by 22.4% (UCAS, 2010). For the UK society, there is recognition of the financial benefits which have been contributed by international student's tuition fees. In addition, it is believed that the cultural benefits which international students bring to teaching and learning are far more important than the financial benefits, because the international students can make great contributions to the knowledge economy (Fearn, 2010). Knowledge is seen as a public good that benefits many individuals and nations. Both developed and developing nations will benefit from the exchange of ideas and people brought by global academic competition (Times Higher Education, 2010).

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For the world's educational situation, there are clear evidences which show the development trends for the globalisation of universities. This globalisation trend shows that more and more universities from different countries recruit students from overseas, for example by setting up partnerships and providing online degrees. These development trends are not just about the western universities looking for new markets, for example, some western universities set up university campuses in Middle Eastern and Asian countries; but they are also about the Middle Eastern and Asian countries looking for the partnership with western universities. For example, Shanghai in China is set to be a city for international campuses (Coughlan, 2011). UK higher education has also launched different forms of collaboration to follow these globalisation development trends, for example, some UK universities have set up campuses outside the UK as international branch campuses. The University of Nottingham is a major player in this movement. It has campuses in Malaysia and the Chinese city of Ningbo. It also plans to set up the third campus in Shanghai. According from the Higher Education Statistics Agency, there are more students studying on programmes which are offered by the UK outside the European Union than non-EU students studying in the UK (Morgan, 2011).

As has been mentioned before, the Chinese students group has become the largest international student group in the UK and in the US higher education. In addition, the Chinese university system will become the biggest university system in the world within a decade. There were more than 34 million graduates in the past four years (Coughlan, 2011). In China, millions of final-year high school students have to take the university entrance exams (Gaokao or literally "high-test") in order to qualify for entering into Chinese higher education. In 2010, there were nearly 10 million students who took these university entrance exams for an estimated 6.6 million university places. Therefore around 40% of the total students who took the exams had failed to enter into Chinese higher education (Liang, 2010). Despite this stressful selection process and the uncertain consequences of guaranteeing university places, Chinese families still believe that to get into university is a way of helping their children to get higher paid jobs and a bright future (Coughlan, 2011).

According to White (2011), numerous factors have great impacts on the rising number of Chinese students studying overseas. Obviously, the first factor is about the growing number of Chinese middle class families who are able to make investments on their children to study overseas, and they believe that this investment would be a valued path to lead their children for a better future. The second factor is about the previous overseas students who succeeded in their

overseas study and returned to China to take leadership roles in work places over the past decade. The third factor is about the China's Ministry of Education which encourages secondary schools to begin assisting students seeking overseas study options (White, 2011). To sum up, there are the potential opportunities for even more Chinese students to study overseas in the future. However, studying overseas is not a simple task for most of the international students.

Background to the problem and key issues

According to Bamford (2008), international students who came to the UK to receive higher education are facing many challenges from both academic aspects and life aspects. The challenge of international students' English language ability is not the only or most important issue. Other challenges for international students for studying in UK higher education include: the social and cultural adjustments of the international students; international students' class contribution; and different study methods between their country of origin and the UK (Bamford, 2008). My own experience of studying in the UK higher education has also involved dealing with all these challenges, therefore I would like to introduce some of these challenges more in detail as well as sharing my own experience in the following sections.

Culture scripts' impacts on students' learning experience

The concept of cultural scripts has been introduced by Welikala and Watkins (2008). This concept believes that the learner's previous cultural scripts have impacts on learners' activities for learning (e.g. writing) and the relationships for learning (e.g. teachers' role and status) when they are in a new learning situation. In other words, when the learners come for learning in a new country which has a different learning culture, they will bring their existing cultural scripts of learning with them from home.

Chinese students also belong to this learner category. In the early stage, they would structure their learning according to their previous Chinese culture of learning when they study in the new countries (Welikala and Watkins, 2008; Jin and Cortazzi, 2006). The best example to demonstrate this will be my personal learning experience of getting to know about the culture of learning in the UK, for example the idea of critical analysis.

In the UK society, the critical reviewing of other people's point of view is a very common cultural and social ethic. The critical reviewing and debating regularly happens on British TV programmes, in the newspaper articles, and in other political activities. This kind of British cultural script has impacts on people being critical when they are in the teaching and learning environment (Welikala and

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Watkins, 2008). Therefore, on the one hand, the British higher education academic approach expects students to consider critical responses to a particular discussion issue before they establish their personal ideas. This expectation is very unfamiliar for the Chinese students who are new to the British society and education system (Jin and Cortazzi, 2006). On the other hand, British students in higher education are comfortable to participate in a critical reviewing discussion situation of some particular issues. This form of critical participation in the class could involve confronting others in the class, however this way of learning might not be considered as a positive practice by some learners who come from the culture of being self-critical (Welikala and Watkins, 2008). To compare British and Chinese teaching and learning cultures; Chinese education contains parts of Confucian philosophy which mentions learners being expected to absorb pre-defined knowledge. The Confucian style of learning still has a great impact on the contemporary Chinese pedagogy (Turner, 2006).

Turning to the Chinese social aspect, to obey authority is an important value in the Chinese society (Zhu, Valcke and Schellens, 2007). This might be further developed by the Chinese single party political system. The Communist party uses the 'ideology of collectivism' system to influence citizen's interpersonal relationships and communication. There are two stages of this system's influence: the first stage, in the early years of the communist leadership, was the direct control over the citizens' interpersonal relationships and communication; subsequently, the second stage, was the indirect control over the citizens' interpersonal relationships and communication by using a strong watching system (Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey and Nishida, 1996). In Chinese society, the level of personal free expression remained at low level for a long time. The public communication takes the form of the passive recipient. Ordinary Chinese people will not express their individual expressions more than the controlling propaganda of the party (Shen *et al*, 2009).

I had only lived in the People's Republic of China and had been educated with Chinese style education before I came to the UK. The Chinese social background and the Chinese Confucian style of education have strong impacts on me. My epistemology and the foundation of the knowledge construction made me try to search for a "correct" answer for a question when I began studying in the UK in the early years. It took me a number of years to understand about the UK teaching and learning method and its relation with the UK society, therefore it took me a long time to understand the reasons of using critical arguments in the written assessments for the UK higher education.

According to Turner (2006), there is clear evidence which suggests that understanding the social setting and culture of learning has a contribution to the

development of Chinese students' academic confidence and performance (Turner, 2006). In order to improve Chinese students' learning experience and their academic performance in the UK higher education, I believe that it is important to introduce to Chinese students the difference concerning the impacts of culture scripts. This should be done before their higher education course begins. This kind of introduction should also include the differences between the UK education and Chinese education. The introduction should include both aspects: of what is the difference; and why they are different. This introduction will clarify and demonstrate the fundamental difference between Chinese education and British higher education to Chinese students. In the meantime, it is also demonstrating the need and the importance of referencing for written assessments.

The changes of learning experience over time

Turner (2006) suggested a range of differences of learning characteristics and expectations between Chinese university students and British students. However, learners' approaches to learning might change due to the impacts of the changing learning environment. In a constructivist or application-orientation environment, which in this case study is the UK education system, the learners tend to adopt a deeper approach to learning which is concerning analysing new ideas and linking the new ideas with their existing concepts and principles. On the other hand, in a more didactic-oriented learning environment, which in this case study is the Chinese education system, the learners tend to adopt a surface approach to learning which is concerned with the memorisation and tacit acceptance of information as isolated facts (Zhu, Valcke and Schellens, 2007). However, this transformation of the learners' approaches to learning takes time to achieve. For a short time, for example one year, there are just so many things for Chinese students to learn in the entire academic, social, and cultural aspects of life (Turner, 2006). My personal experience of learning approaches has been changed over time, due to the fact of spending year after year studying in the UK higher education. After I understood more and more about the requirements of the UK higher education, as well as improving my English, I developed some new learning approaches to satisfy these requirements better. For example, I developed a learning approach of critical review by reading a number of articles presenting different angles about the same topic, in order to understand it rather than to rely on looking for an "official" answer. My academic writing skills and style also developed, for example referring to a number of resources with a critical review writing style. Therefore, my thinking has changed from seeing the referencing requirements as a barrier to finishing an assignment, to becoming willing to produce good referencing based on what I had found and read. In the classroom, I became more willing to participate in the discussion

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activities with other non-Chinese students in the seminar. I also became more willing to provide my own opinions in the discussion rather than acting as a note-taker or a listener in the seminar group.

In recent years Chinese students' learning experiences have also changed due to changes in educational methods and general Chinese social developments. The Chinese students who came to the UK in the decade of the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, came from a highly selective system and they had high expectations of themselves and from their host university. In contrast, most of the Chinese students who are studying in the UK now are self-selected and self-financed. They study hard when they are in the UK, because of their family expectations of high grades, and they want to be employed in the newly emerging working fields (Jin and Cortazzi, 2006). In Chinese education culture, students' careers are influenced by both their teachers and their parents (Turner, 2006), therefore, some of the students might study a topic about which they might not have great interest and understanding.

When I was an undergraduate student in the University of Northampton, most of my friends chose to study accounting and finance as their major, because they thought that it would be easier for them to get a job after they graduated from accounting and finance. Turning to my personal experience, I chose to read for a marketing related degree which had much fewer Chinese students in general at that time. All my classmates in my 'advertising with design' course were native English-speaking home students. Therefore I found it difficult to participate in the class and follow what they were saying and thinking at the beginning of the course. However, this learning environment forced me over time to discover and adopt new learning approaches.

To sum up my personal experience of being educated in the UK higher education, I became more and more responsible for my own learning and became more independent in learning, living and making decisions. According to Chuah (2010), East-Asian children who are from the collectivistic cultures are dependent and expect their lecturers to help them solve problems. After they have learnt and got used to the Western education, they would eventually become more independent which is an important life lesson for them, and it far beyond the knowledge they learn from their course (Chuah, 2010).

The growth of the transnational education and its impacts on Chinese students' learning experience.

Since graduating I have been researching transnational education. There are a number of transnational education (TNE) programmes have been introduced to the Chinese educational sector. To take the UK Higher National Diploma (HND)

level course as an example, some of these courses have been validated by Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). In the initial stage of the SQA HND course, the Chinese students will be offered to study the courses which are provided by the partnership between UK institutions or Chinese institutions or agencies in China. The Chinese students will benefit from studying these courses without psychically moving to the UK, therefore they will benefit from saving the cost of living in the UK while they are studying. At the later stage of this course, the students will physically move on the top-up course in the UK to finish their last stage of this course. If they succeed, they will be awarded a UK degree in the higher education level (Burnapp & Zhao, 2010). These kinds of TNE programmes provide different study pathways for Chinese students. In fact, the Chinese students who follow this study pathway will have mixed learning experiences of studying both in China and the UK for a complete higher education course. So what are the learning experiences of these students?

In order to know something about these students' learning experiences, mixed methods research activities – quantitative attitude surveys and qualitative focus groups and interviews – have been carried out. These research activities were carried out in two stages. The first set of data was gathered during the students' induction period between August 2009 and September 2009. The second set of data collection activities was repeated four months later after the first term of the top-up or Master courses, therefore they would have had one academic term learning experience in the UK higher education.

The first set of research data has shown that the Chinese students from the TNE programme had experience of using of different approaches to their study when they are in China, e.g. the use of discussion and the use of practical examples to illustrate theory. Although they had difficulties in the social domain when they moved over to the UK for the first time, they were still confident about themselves and proud of their achievements in the TNE programme. They also felt that they had been well-prepared for their top-up degrees. An interesting finding has been established from the research, the TNE programme students had developed some survival strategies while they were in the TNE programme in China. These students frequently used Chinese to clarify and scaffold their learning. The second set of research data has shown that they had difficulty in understanding assignment requirements, particular relating to independent research. This might be caused by their previous survival strategies. For example, to use more Chinese information than English information to structure their ideas then translate their ideas from Chinese to English. An unexpected finding showed that the TNE students now in their top-up courses in the UK, still had difficulties of using the correct referencing methods which is a basic a requirement for the UK higher education. This research finding has raised a

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question about how authentic these TNE programmes in China are. According to Burnapp & Zhao (2010), the different social and cultural setting has impacts on the students' academic adaptation of a new course. This will again support the suggestion that the cultural scripts in different countries have effects on the teaching, learning and student experience.

Conclusion

This case study mainly focused on the Chinese students' learning experience in the UK higher education. This case study believes that students' learning experience will be influenced by the culture and social setting. The difficulties and challenges which Chinese students' have to face when they are studying in the UK higher education are caused by the cultural and social elements rather than just their level of English.

Chinese students' previous learning experience would impact on their learning method in the early stage when they move overseas. They would carry on using their existing study methods from their previous learning experience. However, their learning experience would change when they spend more time in the UK higher education, due to the fact that the cultural and social setting has changed, and therefore they would discover and adopt new study method to satisfy the requirements of UK higher education.

The case study also discussed the impacts on students' learning experience of changing cultural and social settings, by referring to primary research on Chinese students who studied transnational education programmes in China and then carried on their study in the UK higher education to complete their degree. The research findings show the positive relationship between the cultural and social setting and students' learning experience. To compare the same course in the UK and in China, Chinese students might have different learning experiences because the cultural and social setting is different and it might have impact on students' learning experience and the use of study methods. For example, the Chinese students from the transnational education programmes have developed survival strategies to make sure their progress in these educational programmes.

This case study recommends that the UK higher education institution should not just simply provide information about the UK higher education to the newly arrived Chinese students. This is just not enough. The more important things are: to make sure they are aware of the difference between the UK education and Chinese education; to make sure they understand the British culture; and to make sure they understand the cultural and social setting of the UK. These factors have impacts on their adopting the new teaching and learning

approaches in the UK higher education, and eventually it would impact on their learning experience.

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