

A Preliminary Investigation into the Major Concerns of Chinese Students Preparing to Study Abroad: A Practical Approach to Facilitating Student Transition

By Joseph Davies

This preliminary investigation proposes a simple and practical methodology that both identifies and addresses the major concerns of Chinese undergraduate students preparing to study abroad. The aim of the study is to highlight potential problems in order to facilitate the transition of students who study abroad. This method seeks to prepare international students for the major differences in academic expectations, lifestyle and culture.

The study focuses on Chinese undergraduate students preparing to complete their degrees at partner universities based in the UK, the US and Canada. However, the suggested methodology can be easily utilised for students of other nationalities. The primary data presented were collected by asking three student focus groups to complete a questionnaire: 1) Chinese undergraduate students preparing to study abroad, 2) Chinese undergraduate students currently studying abroad, 3) British and European undergraduate students based in the UK studying alongside Chinese students.

The findings were analysed, and common, significant concerns are highlighted and discussed herein. Ideally, the findings can be used to promote a dynamic and interactive learning platform that fully prepares students for their international education. By implementing this suggested methodology it is anticipated that student satisfaction would have the potential to be increased, which will in turn lead to a stronger future collaboration between the partner universities and an increase in future international student recruitment.

Introduction

As recent global trends develop, globalisation has seen an exponential rise in international flows of information, people, financial capital, knowledge, technology and enterprise (Appadurai, 1996; Scholte, 2000). A fine example of how globalisation has impacted upon recent society can be found within the education sector and, in particular, the internationalisation of tertiary education (Lam, 2006; Brown, 2008; Kelly, 2009). For instance, it is estimated that by 2020 the total global demand for international student places will

reach 5.8 million (Böhm et al., 2004).

As English is one of the most widely used languages worldwide, studying in an English speaking country presents a significant number of employment advantages especially for students originating from less developed countries (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Punto & Krishna, 2011). Such opportunity brings about strong competition and it is paramount that consumers (international students) are satisfied with the service they receive. Sweeney and Ingram (2001) define student satisfaction as "the perception of enjoyment and accomplishment in the learning

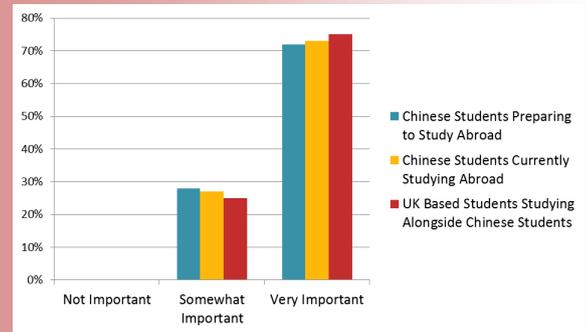
environment" (p. 57). Not only has student satisfaction been shown to correlate strongly with learning (Guolla, 1999) but from a financial perspective, if students are satisfied with their international experience this is likely to enhance future international student recruitment. This is particularly important for universities based in England given the recent rise in domestic students' tuition fees (Paton, 2011). However, when considering "student satisfaction" for international students certain factors must be considered (Gu, 2009).

Methodology

This preliminary study aims to identify and analyse the major concerns Chinese undergraduate students have about studying abroad. Ideally, common factors will be identified and acted upon by suggesting potential solutions. There were three focus groups identified for this study. Focus Group 1 was comprised of 212 Chinese undergraduate students currently studying in China preparing to complete their degree programmes at partner universities based in the UK, the US or Canada. Focus Group 2 was comprised of 40 Chinese undergraduate students currently completing their degree programmes in one of the above mentioned partner universities. Finally, Focus Group 3 was comprised of 12 British and European undergraduate students who are currently studying or have studied in the UK alongside Chinese undergraduate students (hereafter referred to as UK based students).

Students were invited to complete an anonymous questionnaire comprised of both closed and open-ended questions providing both quantitative and qualitative data for analysis. The idea behind introducing Focus Groups 2 and 3 into the study was to provide further triangulation for analysis and to establish if students' pre-departure concerns were the same concerns shared by Chinese students currently studying abroad. Furthermore, the opinions and data collected from British and European UK based students who study alongside Chinese students could be used to gain an understanding of potential social, cultural and/or interactive difficulties Chinese students may face when studying abroad but from the perspective of host students.

Figure 1. Question: how important is it for Chinese students to learn about university life abroad?



Three questions informed the direction of this study:

RQ1: What are the major concerns of Chinese students preparing to study abroad?

RQ2: Do these concerns corroborate with the reality of studying abroad, i.e. do they match the concerns of Chinese students currently studying abroad?

RQ3: How can this information be used to help better prepare Chinese students for their international student experience?

This preliminary investigation aims to have two benefactors: initially, international students preparing to study abroad and, secondly, the partner institutions which are providing the educational services.

Results

Quantitative data analysis

For Chinese international students, the importance of learning about foreign university life cannot be underestimated with over 70% of all three focus groups indicating that this is very important (Figure 1). Figure 2 interestingly highlights differences between the three focus groups with regard to how strongly they agree Chinese students have been well prepared for studying abroad. 42% of UK based respondents either strongly disagreed (17%) or disagreed (25%) with the statement in comparison to just 11% of Chinese students (Group 1) who either strongly disagreed (2%) or disagreed (9%).

Figure 2. Question: to what extent do you agree that Chinese students are well prepared for studying abroad?

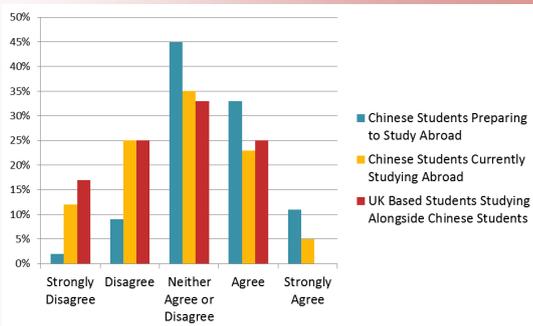


Figure 3. Question: to what extent do you agree that you would be more comfortable if your university took more time to prepare you for studying abroad?

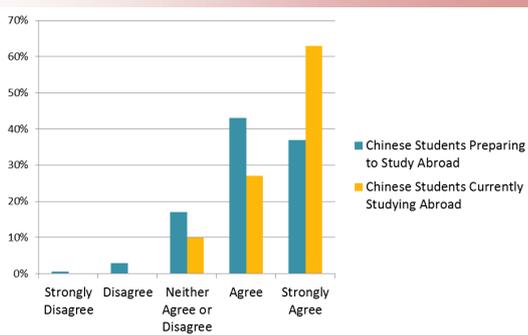


Figure 4. Question: how often do you contact students studying at your partner university on the same programme?

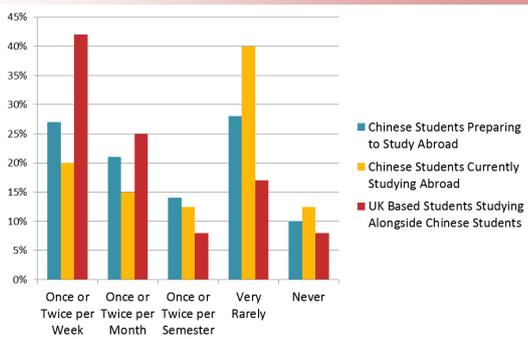
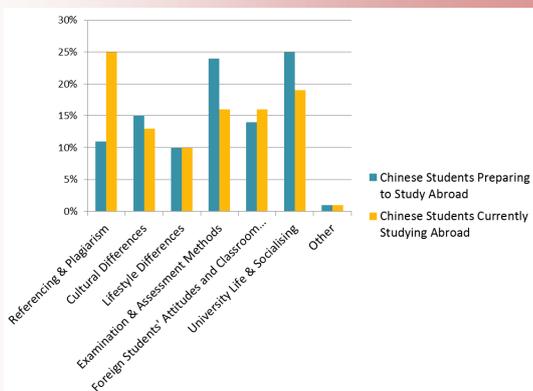


Figure 5. Question: what do you think is the most important aspect to learn about western university life?



Furthermore, 85% of all Chinese students agreed they would be more comfortable if their university took more time to prepare them for studying abroad (Figure 3).

Figure 4 highlights a distinct lack of communication between students studying at partner universities with 38% of Chinese students currently preparing to study abroad contacting other Chinese students at their partner university very rarely (28%) or never (10%). Similarly 52.5% of Chinese respondents currently studying abroad very rarely (40%) or never (12.5%) contacted current Chinese students preparing to study abroad on the same programme. On the other hand, and somewhat surprisingly, 42% of UK based respondents contacted current Chinese students preparing to study on their programme once or twice a week (see discussion).

Figure 5 shows that Chinese respondents believed it is most important to learn about university life and socialising, examination and assessment methods, and referencing and plagiarism. In addition to the results shown in Figures 1-5, surprisingly, 69% of Chinese respondents preparing to study abroad did not know who to contact with questions about studying at their partner university. From the perspective of host students, 100% of British and European UK based students found it either challenging (33%) or somewhat challenging (67%) to work and study alongside Chinese students. Further to this point 75% of those UK based students either agreed (58%) or strongly agreed (17%) that the Chinese students on their course do not interact with UK based students.

Qualitative data analysis

The two major concerns shared by all three focus groups were identified as the Chinese students' lack of English ability and the lack of integration between Chinese and host students. Both focus groups 1 and 2 also agreed that lifestyle differences, examination and assessment methods, personal safety and matters pertaining to referencing and plagiarism were all significant aspects of concern.

Both Chinese focus groups stated they

would have strongly benefitted from extra culture classes and an increased number of English lessons prior to departure. Other suggestions included but were not limited to:

- Having more communication with current Chinese and foreign/host students at the partner university.
- Teaching and assessing in the same style as the partner university.
- Providing referencing and sourcing exercises.
- Inviting past Chinese students to share their experiences of studying abroad.
- Engaging in foreign exchange visits.
- Using English to teach all classes.
- Providing more opportunities for students to develop their academic writing skills.

UK based student suggestions centred on the Chinese students' poor English ability and the lack of integration between Chinese and UK based students. They suggested providing Chinese students with an English-speaking (host/UK based student) "buddy". Further suggestions included providing Chinese students with compulsory extra language classes and organising compulsory social events where Chinese students are encouraged to integrate with UK based students. Appendix A provides a series of student quotes taken directly from questionnaire scripts (only spelling and major grammatical errors have been edited). It is interesting to gain an insight into the individual thought processes of students representing each of the three focus groups.

Recommended solutions

The results presented in Figure 2 imply that international student preparation could be improved. The question is how can universities realistically achieve this? Based upon the author's personal experience of preparing Chinese students to study abroad and the results presented herein, potential solutions will now be suggested.

Both Chinese students' English ability and cultural and social integration between Chinese and host students could be improved if Chinese students communicated more often with host

and Chinese students currently abroad. Such pre-departure communication should be focused and directed towards informing students about cultural and university lifestyle differences. It may be worthwhile to introduce online communication as a compulsory element of a language module. Such online discussion groups could be hosted using an interactive online teaching platform such as E-learn, or Blackboard (Essel & Owusu-Boateng, 2011; Speece, 2012).

A further solution could be foreign exchange visits. For example, cohorts of UK based undergraduate students studying at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) visit Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (GDUFS) annually, attending lectures and partaking in groupwork activities (Bibby & Horn, 2012). As these students will be working together in the UK, this initial meeting and interaction based in the comfort of the Chinese students' home environment is extremely reassuring. Further to academic participation, social and cultural activities are organised, encouraging students from both groups to interact outside of the classroom.

Pre-departure academic workshops delivered in English could also be introduced, covering topics such as formal assessment styles, referencing and plagiarism, the difference between lectures and seminars, accessing and utilising peer reviewed sources, critical thinking and analytical skills. It is paramount that such issues are explained to Chinese students well in advance of their departure date. For instance, as Tait (2012) points out, plagiarism may in fact be culturally constructed.

A simple and mutually rewarding solution would be to assign Chinese students a host student "buddy" or "mentor" upon arrival. Such a system would undoubtedly allow the host student to develop in terms of their cultural adaptability and willingness to communicate within culturally diverse teams (Adler, 2008). This will encourage the Chinese students to use English more frequently, offering them the opportunity to interact with a foreign student and develop their cultural awareness.

Discussion

Language not only impacts the ability to learn,

but can also lead to decreased confidence among students (Ramburuth & Tani, 2009). This in turn leads to other well-noted problems such as the lack of interaction between Chinese students and local host students. Despite all three focus groups wanting more interaction and communication with one another, the English ability of Chinese students preparing to study abroad must first be developed. Once achieved, it is the author's assumption that this will improve the confidence of Chinese students, leading to increased cross-cultural integration upon arrival at the partner university.

Wu (2009) proposes the concept of "face" as a key variable and influential factor that can explain the complexity of Chinese students' reluctance to communicate in western university classes. Without an understanding of such cultural implications, which are rarely expressed in western society, both staff and students based at host universities may find it difficult to work with Chinese students. Gopal (2011) highlights that many lecturers are not trained to deal with students of other cultures and this may have a negative effect upon both the suitability of the teaching received and student satisfaction of Chinese students studying abroad.

The results of this preliminary study are not the first to have noted a correlation between international students' English ability and their international student experience (Halic et al., 2009; Ramburuth & Tani, 2009; Montgomery, 2010). As was observed in this study (Appendix A), with regard to the English accent of foreign lecturers and students, Halic et al. (2009) identified that international students struggled to comprehend what was being discussed in lectures. A further example of language impacting negatively upon the social interaction between host and Chinese students is the host students' fear that what they say in English may be misinterpreted as being racially or ethnically insensitive (Montgomery, 2010).

This provides further evidence of the need for pre-departure communication and, where possible, integration between Chinese students and host students, so they can become familiar with each others' cultural perspectives and colloquial language patterns. Such language challenges should not just be ignored, leaving international students to simply adjust upon arrival at the host university. Instead, faculty

members should utilise examples that mitigate the impact that the host language can have, providing time for international students to adapt (Croese, 2011).

One of the author's pre-determined assumptions was that there would be very minimal, if any, contact between Chinese students preparing to study abroad and host students. However, having made a connection during the foreign exchange visit organised by UCLan and GDUFS (Bibby & Horn, 2012), results showed that the majority (42%) of British and European UK based students contacted the Chinese students once or twice a week (see Figure 4). It is, however, doubtful that this is representative of all partner programmes and, if anything, such results highlight how successful foreign exchange programmes can be in preparing Chinese students for studying abroad, especially with regard to social and cultural integration between Chinese and host students.

The results identify a clear uniformity regarding pre-departure concerns of Chinese students and their perceptions about what improvements are required. Importantly, the findings have correlated well between focus groups. If the concerns of all three groups can be addressed this will undoubtedly prove beneficial for all parties involved. This paper was intended as a preliminary investigation with the hope of further data being gathered to supplement and enhance the findings within. With this in mind the largest criticism of the study must be the relatively small sample size, especially for focus groups 2 and 3 and the fact that the size of the three focus groups differed significantly. Nevertheless, the results presented herein should certainly provide a useful insight into the perspectives of all three student groups in order for future research to be conducted in response to this study.

Conclusion

As the rate of globalisation accelerates, international higher education partnerships are here to stay. This preliminary investigation has identified the key concerns related to studying abroad of three closely related groups of students. The findings presented in this paper, coupled with the experience of the author in preparing Chinese students to study abroad, have been utilised to propose practically

applicable methods to address such key concerns. Ideally the methods and data presented in this paper will be easily transferrable to suit students originating from other cultures and, with further follow up research, a more precise picture of the major concerns international students have about studying abroad can be presented.

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Appendix A

Student quotes taken directly from questionnaire scripts (only spelling and major grammatical errors have been edited)

Focus Group 1 - Chinese Students Currently Preparing to Study Abroad

Q. Please list your 3 biggest worries/concerns about studying/living abroad.

2nd year undergraduate, preparing to study in Canada.

1. My reading and writing is not good even though we have classes here.
2. The way people talk is different from the way people talk in classes here.
3. For the difference in culture, I am afraid of making friends abroad.

2nd year undergraduate, preparing to study in the UK.

1. I am worried that I can't listen to the teachers clearly, maybe they have some accents and speak too fast.
2. I am worried that foreign people will look down on Chinese people.
3. There are more safety dangers, for example more theft.

Q. Can you suggest some ways in which your Chinese university could prepare you more for studying abroad?

2nd year undergraduate, preparing to study in the UK.

1. Training us to write longer essays (about 10,000 words or so).
2. Giving us more opportunities to communicate with foreign students in our partner university.
3. Introducing more information of the partner university like the studying style, dormitory etc.

Focus Group 2 - Chinese Students Currently Studying Abroad

Q. What has been the most challenging aspect of studying abroad?

3rd year undergraduate, currently studying in Canada.

I think it would still be the language. This is because although students get 7 or more in the IELTS exam, they cannot understand the instructors' words because instructors speak in different tones and speed.

3rd year undergraduate, currently studying in Canada.

I think students' writing and speaking are the most challenging aspects. If you want to compete with the native students and get good grades on your course, you really need to improve your writing and speaking because you have to do many presentations and write many essays on the final exam

Q. Can you suggest some ways in which your Chinese university could better prepare students for studying abroad?

3rd year undergraduate, currently studying in the UK.

1. Use the same way and standard for giving marks.
2. Do more practice to teach students how to think critically. Here in the UK it is not good enough to just use descriptive writing.
3. Create some courses to teach students how to paraphrase from the sources correctly.

3rd year undergraduate, currently studying in the UK.

1. Academic writing skills with Harvard Referencing.
2. Show some videos about current students' university life in the UK.
3. Provide foreign academic journal articles to read.

Q. What advice would you give to Chinese undergraduate students who are currently preparing to study abroad?

3rd year undergraduate, currently studying in Canada.

Try their best to learn English well in China, because all students will be treated equally in foreign universities. I mean instructors will not slow down the speed of speaking for you, because most students except you can understand the

instructors.

Focus Group 3 - British and European UK Based Undergraduate Students Studying Alongside Chinese Students

Q. Please list the 3 most challenging aspects of studying alongside Chinese students.

Student A

1. Chinese students have difficulty expressing their opinion.
2. Most of them have strong difficulties to meet the requirements when working in teams with non Chinese students. Therefore they often rely completely on the others' work and demonstrate a lack of autonomy.
3. Most of them do not try to integrate with non Chinese students or speak barely any English.

Student B

1. The language barrier, they seem to be unfamiliar with the English language.
2. They keep close with their own friends from China, not socializing with others.

Q. Can you suggest some ways in which your university could help the Chinese students adapt to studying abroad?

Student C

1. More visits from international students!
2. Some cultural activities based around the foreign country they are studying in.
3. Get the Chinese students to contact UK based students in order to ask questions that they may not want to discuss with teachers.

Student D

1. Arrange a short pre-visit.
2. Be assigned an English "buddy" or mentor.
3. Compulsory social events with U.K based students.

Q. What advice would you give to Chinese undergraduate students who are currently preparing to study abroad?

Student E

Learning the language as well as possible will help them to integrate better into student life. Also, try to interact with non-Chinese students, because they can help explain confusing parts of lectures.

Student F

Make sure your English is the best it can be, make lots of English friends as well as Chinese friends. Use the help provided by the University which helps the students adapt to life here better, including improving their English and exam technique.