

Chinese international students' satisfaction levels with their learning experiences in New Zealand

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Abstract

The export education industry has become the fourth biggest industry in New Zealand. China has been the largest source country for this lucrative industry. However, ever since 2003, Chinese student numbers have been on the decline. The present study, conducted from July to September 2007, adopted qualitative and quantitative approaches, involving 86 Chinese students in a questionnaire survey and 20 in interviews, attempted to identify and assess the causes for this decline. The study shows that Chinese students have a low level of satisfaction, which is related to their negative perceptions of their experiences inside and outside universities. They rated academics' teaching competence and styles positively, along with university programmes and structures, but gave low ratings to academics' understanding of their academic needs, availability to help them outside class times, and a sense of responsibility for them. Low satisfaction levels were also related to students' difficulties in accessing local employment. Racial prejudice and discrimination were also contributing factors. It is recommended that host institutions provide training programmes to academics, management and general staff to develop their cultural sensitivity to cater to the needs of international students, adopt different approaches to teaching and management, provide adequate support and pastoral care, and lift Chinese students' satisfaction levels to a par with those of other international students in New Zealand.

Introduction

The export education industry has become the fourth biggest industry in New Zealand, creating thousands of jobs and contributing billions of dollars to the economy. New Zealand, however, is competing with other strong competitors, such as the United States, the UK, Australia, and Canada. According to the figures provided by the New Zealand Immigration Service (2007), the number of full fee-paying international students in New Zealand in June 2007 was 90,995. Yet there has been a steady decline in the number of Chinese students from 66,093 (55.4 percent of the total) in June 2004 to 37,231 (41 percent of the total) in June 2007. First-time student visas issued to Chinese students by the New Zealand Immigration Service dropped from 14,154 in 2003 to 2,465 in 2007 (Education New Zealand, 2007).

In 2007, the I-graduate International Student Barometer survey received 3,862 student responses, 45 percent of participants being Chinese international students. Although a large majority of international students (81 percent) were satisfied with their learning experiences in New Zealand, Chinese students from Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong were the most critical and felt less satisfied than other international students (Archer, 2007).

The current study, conducted from July to September 2007 using questionnaire surveys and interviews, aimed to explore some of the major issues that were likely to have contributed to Chinese students' low levels of satisfaction.

Review of the literature

Studying in a different country creates for international students a range of adjustment problems, particularly academic, socio-cultural and psychological adjustments (Ward & Kenney, 1993). Problems arise from differences in the linguistically determined discourse of intercultural and interpersonal communication, and the cultural distance of the communication patterns of the participants (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Generally, the closer the student culture is to that of the host community, the easier the interaction and adjustment will be (Mehdizadeh & Scott, 2005). While engaging in 'cultural learning', international students have to make academic adjustments in a

new territory where there are different patterns of teacher-student interactions, classroom cultures, academic requirements and expectations, and different concepts and definitions of what constitutes good teaching and learning (Ward et al, 2001).

Asian students have difficulties adjusting to the Western culture of learning where Socratic dialogical practices are the norm, featuring “questioning, criticising, refuting, arguing, debating and persuading” (Major, 2005, p. 85). Many factors influence Asian students’ socio-cultural and academic adaptations, such as English language skills, prior learning experiences, beliefs, cultural values, conceptions of learning, personal traits, and motivations (Berno & Ward, 2004). These factors also impact upon Asian students’ levels of satisfaction with their learning and social experiences. Byrne’s (2001) study of learning experiences of Asian and Caucasian students indicates that Asians were more depressed, had more fears of loss of face, held more negative beliefs about the self and the world, and perceived they received less social support when compared to Caucasians.

Loorparg, Tait, Yates, & Meyer (2006) noted that the Eurocentric curricula in New Zealand disadvantage non-European students in their academic acculturation, reinforce cultural superiority, and impose cultural values upon international students who hold different cultural values. Student learning experiences and their satisfaction with them reflect student attitudinal outcomes and perceptions of the educational quality of the host institution (Donald & Denison, 1996; Rautopuro & Vaisanen, 2000).

Chinese international students’ levels of satisfaction with their learning experiences in New Zealand are often low (Sherry, Bhat, Beaver & Ling, 2003; Newall & Daldy, 2004; Sandbrook, 2006). Sherry, Bhat, Beaver & Ling (2003) studied students’ perceptions of services experienced by both domestic and international students and found significant differences between the two groups, with international students perceiving services as being much lower quality. Newall and Daldy’s (2004) survey at AUT in 2003, Ward and Masgoret’s national survey in 2004, and Sandbrook’s Massey University’s survey in 2006, all came to similar conclusions that Asian students were less satisfied with their learning experiences in New Zealand than other

international students, and Chinese international students were less satisfied than other Asian students.

To find out why Chinese students were least satisfied with their learning experiences in this country, the New Zealand Ministry of Education commissioned the University of Waikato's Ho, Li, Cooper & Holmes (2007) to survey more than 80 Chinese students at language schools, high schools and tertiary institutions. The study revealed a huge gap between Chinese students' expectations and what they perceived as the New Zealand reality, which related to social and cultural differences that made it difficult for them to adapt, loneliness and isolation, language problems, study shock, inability to handle issues of freedom and responsibility, the rising New Zealand dollar, different lifestyles "far from their pampered lives in China" (Ponniah, 2007, para. 5), and increasing uncertainty about future employment prospects both back in China and in New Zealand.

The current research study attempts to further explore Chinese students' perceptions of their learning experiences in New Zealand to gain a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to their low-level satisfaction.

Research methodology

This study adopted a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches in an attempt to gather the precise data and gain a better understanding of contextual influences (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000). Data were collected via a questionnaire survey and semi-structured face-to-face individual interviews. The questionnaire survey was intended to identify the converged themes and the scope of the issues under investigation and the interviews provided the researchers with an opportunity to probe and ask follow-up questions about the respondents' opinions and attitudes towards the issues identified in the questionnaire survey.

The questionnaire survey

Participants in the survey were: (1) full-fee paying Chinese international students originally from mainland China; and (2) students who were studying or had studied at a New Zealand tertiary institution for at least one semester. All were recruited using online advertising and the snowball sampling technique, N = 86. The sample comprised 64 current students and 22 graduates¹; it included 47 males and 39 females. Ages ranged from 20 to 35 years, mean 25.6 years. Two-thirds of the respondents lived in Wellington, with the remainder in Palmerston North, Auckland or Christchurch, with the exception of four respondents in China. Most participants (62.8 percent) either were studying for or had completed their bachelor's degrees. Twenty-one (24.4 percent) were or had been postgraduate students. Seven (8.1 percent) were either studying for or had completed diplomas. One (1.2 percent) was a PhD student, and three participants identified their qualification as 'None'.

The questionnaire includes both closed and open-ended questions. The 5-point Likert scales adopted in the questionnaire rate participants' attitudes or feelings ranging from either (1) strongly dissatisfied to (5) strongly satisfied, from (1) very poor to (5) very good, or from (1) not at all to (5) very much,.

The questionnaire includes three main sections. The first section was intended to identify the background information of the student participants, such as age, gender, time in New Zealand, current location, and qualification. It also asked about the participants' intention to apply for New Zealand permanent residency, their assessment of the value of their study in New Zealand, and their willingness to recommend others to study in New Zealand. The second section consists of five themes that examine students' satisfaction with teaching-related factors and several aspects of learning contexts, services at their institution, social experiences, and sources of help and support. At the end of the questionnaire, two open questions were asked to obtain suggestions, recommendations, or comments.

¹ In this study, 'graduates' refers to students who have graduated from the university and are no longer enrolled.

The questionnaire was presented in the Chinese language and the data collected were analysed via SPSS. The original data from the returned survey were double-checked and the frequency tables for all the questionnaire items were thoroughly examined.

The semi-structured interviews

The interview selection criteria were: (1) any student who had participated in the student survey and was willing to be interviewed; (2) the first 10 males and first 10 females who responded to the invitation to be interviewed; and (3) those whose location was in Wellington. The participants in the interviews were nine males and eleven females, ages ranging from 22 to 30 years, with a mean age of 25.5 years. Fourteen interviewees were current students and six were graduates, and had been in New Zealand between one and six years.

The interviews were individual and semi-structured, using both open-ended and closed questions. The interview questions covered three key areas: learning experiences, social experiences, and purposes, plans and expectations. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin and took around 30 minutes. Fourteen interviews were audio-taped, while six participants were not comfortable with their conversations being recorded in this way, so notes were taken instead.

All the tape recordings of interviews were transcribed and translated into English. The transcriptions and notes were analysed to identify themes. For ethical considerations, all participants were coded with numbers.

The limitations of the research design

For reasons of time and financial constraints, the snowball technique and online advertising were applied to recruit participants, which generated a non-random sample in this study. The student survey was conducted through self-administered questionnaires so it is possible that some respondents might have wrongly interpreted some questions. It is also possible that the interviewees' opinions, when translated,

were misrepresented. Finally, the sample was small so the results may not accurately represent the views of the general Chinese student population in New Zealand.

Results

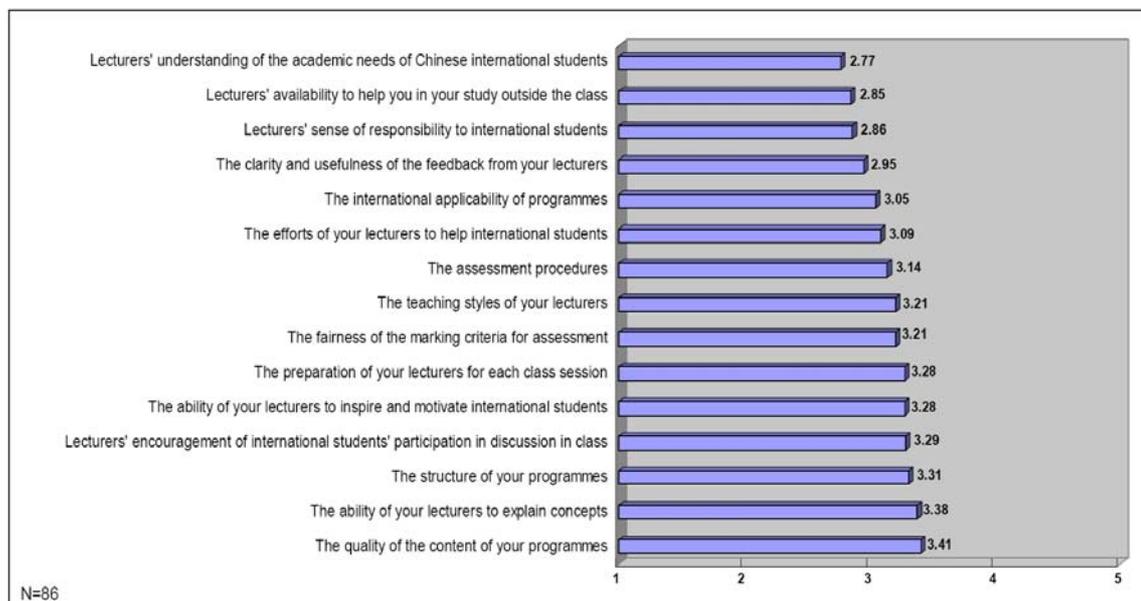
This section reports the findings from the study by examining the data relating to Chinese students' perceptions of, and their level of satisfaction with, their learning experiences in New Zealand tertiary institutions involving teaching, services, study plans and purposes. It will also study the gains of studying in New Zealand and challenges such as prejudice and discrimination that face Chinese students.

Teaching-related factors

As in Figure 1, mean ratings of teaching related factors were between 2.8 and 3.4, indicating Chinese international students who completed this survey were moderately satisfied with those aspects of teaching at their tertiary institutions.

The Chinese students were most satisfied with the quality of their programmes, the ability of lecturers to explain concepts, and the structure of programmes. In contrast, students were least satisfied with lecturers' understanding of the academic needs of Chinese international students, lecturers' availability to help them with their study outside the classroom, lecturers' sense of responsibility for international students and, the clarity and usefulness of the feedback from their lecturers.

Figure 1: Ratings of satisfaction with teaching-related factors



Note: 1=strongly dissatisfied; 3=moderately satisfied; 5=strongly satisfied

Satisfaction with teaching varied by gender (see Table 1), with males generally being more satisfied than females. Using the Pearson Two-sided Chi-Square Test, the difference between males and females in satisfaction with lecturers' ability to explain concepts was found to be significant at 0.034 (N=86). While other findings are not statistically significant, possibly associated with the relatively small N, nevertheless a non-significant but discernible trend can be identified whereby females' satisfaction is lower in most instances.

Table 1: Ratings of satisfaction with teaching-related factors: males and females

<i>Teaching Related Factors</i>	<i>Mean</i>		<i>Asymp.Sig. (2-sided) (N=86)</i>
	<i>Males (N=48)</i>	<i>Females (N=38)</i>	
1. The quality of the content of your programmes	3.54	3.24	0.268
2. The structure of your programmes	3.44	3.16	0.296
3. The international applicability of programmes	3.17	2.99	0.502
4. The ability of your lecturers to inspire and motivate international students	3.38	3.16	0.697
5. The ability of your lecturers to explain concepts	3.48	3.26	0.034
6. The preparation by your lecturers for each class session	3.42	3.11	0.120
7. Lecturers' understanding of the academic needs of Chinese international students	2.85	2.66	0.296
8. Lecturers' encouragement of international student participation in discussion in class	3.42	3.13	0.124
9. The efforts of your lecturers to help international students	3.23	2.92	0.180
10. Lecturers' sense of responsibility for international students	2.96	2.74	0.517
11. Lecturers' availability to help you in your study outside class time	3.00	2.66	0.234
12. The teaching styles of your lecturers	3.23	3.18	0.376
13. The clarity and usefulness of the feedback from your lecturers	3.02	2.87	0.449
14. The assessment procedures	3.17	3.11	0.173
15. The fairness of the marking criteria for assessment	3.17	3.26	0.635

Note: The table reports mean ratings where 1=strongly dissatisfied; 3=moderately satisfied; 5=strongly satisfied.

Services at tertiary institutions

Over half the students (52.3 percent) viewed the overall quality of services at tertiary institutions as average, while about a quarter (24.4 percent) rated the overall quality of services good or very good, with about another quarter (23.3 percent) rating them poor or very poor.

As shown in Table 2, student associations and catering services were rated lower than other services, with 46.5 percent considering student association services and 41.9 percent catering services as either poor or very poor. Furthermore, 38.4 percent perceived services in relation to accommodation and career guidance, as poor to very poor. By contrast, 59.3 percent described library services as good to very good. Also,

47.7 percent described computing services and 41.8 percent learning support services as good to very good.

Table 2: Ratings of quality of services at tertiary institutions (N=86)

<i>Aspects of Services</i>	<i>Very poor</i> %	<i>Poor</i> %	<i>Average</i> %	<i>Good</i> %	<i>Very good</i> %	<i>Not Applicable</i> %	<i>Don't know</i> %
Learning support services	4.7	2.3	51.2	39.5	2.3	-	-
Language skills support	3.5	11.6	47.7	33.7	2.3	1.2	-
Computing services	7.0	10.5	34.9	41.9	5.8	-	-
Library services	2.3	9.3	29.1	51.2	8.1	-	-
The services of the International Student Office	5.8	12.8	45.3	29.1	5.8	1.2	-
Student associations	22.1	24.4	32.6	12.8	2.3	5.8	-
Student orientation services	10.5	25.6	45.3	11.6	1.2	-	5.8
Career guidance	12.8	25.6	38.4	16.3	2.3	4.7	-
Counseling services	5.8	20.9	44.2	23.3	1.2	4.7	-
Accommodation services	8.1	30.2	34.9	12.8	4.7	9.3	-
Sporting facilities	5.8	9.3	40.7	23.3	9.3	11.6	-
Medical health services	4.7	19.8	38.4	22.1	8.1	7.0	-
Financial advice services	7.0	22.1	34.9	15.1	2.3	2.3	16.3
Catering services	8.1	33.7	34.9	16.3	3.5	3.5	-

Students were less knowledgeable about services offering financial advice and student orientation. Fourteen (16.3 percent) participants did not know whether their institutions had financial advice services, and five were unaware of student orientation services.

Moreover, some participants knew of the availability of services, but did not use them. These services included sport facilities (11.6 percent), accommodation (9.3 percent), medical health (7.0 percent), student association (5.8 percent), career guidance (4.7 percent), counselling (4.7 percent), catering (3.5 percent), financial advice (2.3 percent), language skills support (1.2 percent), and international student office (1.2 percent).

As shown in Table 3, male students generally rated the quality of all the services as “good” to “very good” more than females. In particular, males felt services such as

counselling, sporting facilities, accommodation, and medical health services were better than did females. The Pearson Two-sided Chi-Square Test indicated that the difference in satisfaction between males and females was found to be significant with medical health services at 0.019 (N=86), and accommodation services at 0.01 (N=86). Although the result of library services is not significant at 0.05 levels, it is close to it.

Table 3: Ratings of satisfaction with aspects of services: males and females

<i>Aspects of services</i>	<i>Good to Very good</i>		<i>Asymp.Sig. (2-sided) (N=86)</i>
	<i>Males (N=48)</i>	<i>Females (N=38)</i>	
	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	
Learning support services	43.8	39.5	0.657
Language skills support	37.5	34.2	0.321
Computing services	56.2	36.8	0.138
Library services	68.7	47.4	0.055
The services of the International Student Office	43.7	23.7	0.149
Student associations	20.9	7.9	0.490
Student orientation services	18.8	5.3	0.169
Career guidance	23.0	13.2	0.208
Counseling services	35.4	10.5	0.122
Accommodation services	31.2	2.6	0.010
Sporting facilities	41.7	21.1	0.062
Medical health services	39.6	18.4	0.019
Financial advice services	25.0	7.9	0.145
Catering services	27.1	10.5	0.078

Purposes and plans

It was evident that different students had varying purposes, plans and expectations when they considered coming to New Zealand. In the interviews, nearly all (18 out of 20) stated that their main purpose of coming to New Zealand was to complete a degree, while seven (35 percent) indicated that improving their English language skills was also a major reason. Two out of 20 participants considered immigration opportunities were their main purpose in studying in New Zealand.

Moreover, to “acquire knowledge” (20 percent), to “be more independent” (15 percent), to “experience different cultures” (15 percent) and “lifestyles” (5 percent), to

“make friends with people from other countries” (5 percent) and to “get overseas work experience” (5 percent) were considered additional purposes.

Seven participants (35 percent) had achieved their initial study purpose, which was to attain a bachelor’s degree or a diploma, while four had gone on to gain higher qualifications than originally intended. A main reason for this was an inability to find satisfactory employment in New Zealand.

Participant 8, who initially intended to get a bachelor’s degree but had gone on to complete her master’s degree, had wanted to find a local job relating to her undergraduate degree but was unsuccessful. She thought that gaining a higher qualification would advantage her in the New Zealand job market. After obtaining her higher qualification, however, she found herself over-qualified.

On the whole, most participants had amended their study plans. Twelve out of 20 participants stated their original plans had been to obtain an overseas qualification and then return to China, but then had decided to gain some work experience or apply for New Zealand permanent residency. This change was mainly influenced by increasing competition in China, so that New Zealand qualifications now offered less competitive advantage. The prospect of returning to China qualified but without work experience appeared unappealing. In addition, the agreeable living environment, in particular the beautiful natural scenery and the attractive state social welfare system also influenced decisions to stay. Participant 10, who had been in New Zealand for more than three years, had a clear purpose:

I didn’t initially consider working here. I just wanted to complete my degree as soon as possible and then go back to China. But later, I knew the competition for jobs in China was becoming increasingly tough. Returned Chinese students had few advantages... so I think I should get some relevant work experience in New Zealand before I can go back home.

Like Participant 10, other participants, who initially had little or no willingness to work in New Zealand, eventually changed their minds, feeling that relevant work experience would provide some competitive advantages for the future. Participant 15 said that after she had taken many papers relevant to New Zealand, she wanted to

apply the knowledge she had acquired through working here, and felt getting some suitable local work experience would be valuable. Participant 11 also stated:

If I have a New Zealand qualification and suitable work experiences [in New Zealand], it is obviously better than having a qualification only.

In addition, some participants indicated their plans were changeable and that they were uncertain about their future. They felt that international students did not have fair opportunities competing with local graduates for employment in New Zealand, especially for new graduates without local work experience and for those whose studies were not highly specialised, such as business majors. Therefore, they wanted to go back to China to look for jobs. Nevertheless, they also worried that they might not be able to find a good job once back home, because they had been away for a number of years, needed to re-adapt, and were uncertain whether they would have competitive advantage in the Chinese job market.

I'm not doing what I planned. I'm working in a small shop as a sales person, and this is not what I wanted. I expected to find an office job relevant to my studies but it's hard... If I go back home, a bachelor's degree will not be competitive. I don't think I can find a good job in China either... I'm not sure about my next step. (Participant 7)

If I cannot find a good job in New Zealand, I will go back [to China]. However, I'm a little afraid of returning because it may be worse than staying [in New Zealand]. I'm confused... (Participant 12)

Benefits of learning in New Zealand

Chinese students differed widely in terms of the benefits of learning in New Zealand. In the questionnaire survey, 36 percent of participants considered their education in New Zealand was good value for money, whereas 27 percent of them considered it was not, and 37 percent were unsure. Results from the interviews also showed that different students had various perceptions of the benefits. Half perceived becoming much more independent as a major benefit.

I was protected and shielded by my parents... but now whatever problems I meet, I have to face them and solve them by myself... my

ability to solve problems has improved, my ability to be independent and to think is also improved... overall, for me [the benefit of studying in New Zealand] was to be more independent. (Participant 6)

Slightly less than half (45 percent) of participants felt that changing their way of thinking and developing critical thinking were benefits, while 40 percent considered they had improved their English language skills. Two other significant benefits were improved knowledge and being more open-minded (30 percent), as well as friends made, especially those from other countries (25 percent). Other benefits included improving interpersonal communication and problem solving skills, and becoming more confident.

Academic differences and difficulties

In general, participants viewed New Zealand higher education more positively than that of China. They mentioned that students were encouraged to be independent and critical thinkers, and were encouraged to develop and use analytical and problem solving skills in New Zealand tertiary institutions, whereas Chinese higher education put less emphasis on these skills. For Participant 12, who had got his bachelor's degree in China and just completed his masters' degree in New Zealand when the interview was done, his description was illuminating:

In China, lecturers indicated clearly what books you needed, what the textbook was, lecture notes, and provided everything [in relation to the lectures], which was not cultivating your ability to think independently... The only thing you needed to do was passive learning... But teaching here [in New Zealand] is more enlightening... you need to search for books by yourself and think independently, and there is no exact standard answer... (Participant 12)

Other differences were that New Zealand tertiary institutions had more assignments, a more flexible learning environment, and a requirement that students focus on the whole learning process rather than just final exams. Participant 3, for example, stated:

When I was studying in China, I passed the final exams which means I passed [the paper]... in New Zealand universities, a final result of [a paper] included a general assessment of assignments and final exams, or some small test... If I only focused on final exams, I would fail... (Participant 3)

Furthermore, differences in learning and teaching styles were also noted. Eight participants show their learning in New Zealand depended very much on themselves rather than others. Some had positive perceptions of studying independently. Participant 15, who had studied at a Chinese university for one year, indicated that local study required independent study skills. Her lecturers only provided a general direction and encouraged her to think by herself. She thought she had far more space to express her opinions in her assignments here than in China. Participant 12 likewise stated that through independent study, he learnt to have more initiative in learning and thinking more freely, expressing views in assignments without restrictions. Also, participant 4 claimed that independent learning encouraged her to find something she was really interested in.

Compared with the participants above who perceived independent study positively, some participants found it a challenge to study independently in a system where the lack of *guan*² from their teachers was apparent.

The most important thing about studying here is that it depends on self-control... self-motivation. In China, lecturers are motivators. Here, nobody will *guan* you. If you did very badly in your assignment, it is your own problem... (Participant 7)

If you have questions and don't take the initiative to ask lecturers, lecturers will not initiate this communication with you. Except during in-class communication, lecturers will not *guan* you... Learning in New Zealand requires a high level of self-control. (Participant 17)

When asked about learning difficulties associated with studying, most participants (16 out of 20) noted insufficient English language skills were a major barrier to their study, which caused problems:

Language was the main barrier. It determined whether you understood lecturers clearly in the class, whether you understood the requirements of assignments clearly, and whether you could express yourself clearly. (Participant 2)

Furthermore, aspects of language problems in written assignments were commonly mentioned. Participant 18 said it was difficult to complete an assignment with several

² *Guan* (Chinese): The concept of *guan* means “to govern”, “to care for”, and “to monitor”.

thousand words when he had only recently passed his IELTS test and had just started university. Similarly, Participant 3 recalled emotionally his experience of his first written assignment, saying, “How could I write 2,000 words in English?” Although Participant 9 had been in New Zealand nearly six years, she felt she was still unable to “completely break away from a Chinese way of expression” in her English writing. Participant 4 explained that she thought she had expressed her ideas clearly in her assignments, but her lecturers did not think so.

In addition, 14 out of 20 students mentioned difficulties in understanding the requirements for assignments, especially in their initial period of study. They thought the requirements of assignments were quite different from those in China. In particular, the requirements concerning references were a major problem leading to loss of marks. Participant 1, who got his first degree in China and a postgraduate diploma in New Zealand, stated that there was no requirement for references for most assignments when he studied at a university in China, but it was an important marking criterion in New Zealand. Similarly, Participant 4, who completed a diploma in China, now doing her postgraduate studies in New Zealand maintained,

Giving clear indication of reference in assignments is required [in New Zealand], but it was not necessary to do this in China. Although you might need to give indication of reference in some assignments in China, the requirements were not as strict as in New Zealand. This is the main difficulty for me in assignments. (Participant 4)

Differing writing requirements caused a major barrier with participants simply not knowing how to write assignments when starting local university studies. Participant 8:

I didn't know how to do assignments... the writing styles for assignments in China are different from those in New Zealand. I had no idea even how to start assignments at the beginning of my university studies. (Participant 8)

Some also described frustration with assignments requiring them to investigate business-related issues in local organisations. They felt “totally lost” and “had no idea about where and how to find” local information. Participant 10 had taken more than two weeks to find an organisation:

I remember my first assignment required me to investigate an issue in an organisation and then write a 2000 word report on the issue... I had no idea about where and how to find an organisation. Nobody could help me... I asked many organisations. Some of them were not relevant to my topic; some were not interested in my investigation, and some of them just refused without any explanation... It was very frustrating. (Participant 10)

Moreover, a greater requirement for student oral presentations than in China was perceived as a significant difficulty. Participant 19, in New Zealand for nearly two years, said:

I am nervous even if I do presentations in Chinese. There were few presentations in Chinese classes, but you have to do them often in New Zealand. (Participant 19)

Prejudice and discrimination

The New Zealand Government views export education as an important industry that can generate billions of dollars to invigorate the country's economy. International students are given an impression that they are welcome, but when they arrive, they feel they are discriminated against.

All student participants agreed that they experienced a varied degree of prejudice and discrimination inside and outside universities in New Zealand in both learning and in the New Zealand working context. Some felt that some lecturers disbelieved the ability of Chinese students, or just personally disliked Asian or Chinese students. These lecturers were not friendly, answering their questions without patience. Participant 11 mentioned that when a lecturer put a question to students, she wanted to answer it, but the lecturer would not pick her. When it happened many times, she lost her desire to answer lecturers' questions. Participant 4 also complained:

When New Zealand students asked questions, the lecturers talked a lot about their questions. They were kind and answered them with a smile. However, when Chinese or Asian students asked questions, even if they expressed themselves clearly, the lecturers would answer only briefly without smiles. (Participant 14)

Participant 13 shared similar views, stating that some staff spoke with local students in a kind and friendly way, but when faced with Chinese students, they became standoffish.

Many participants experienced prejudice or discrimination at work. Participant 7, who worked at a fast food shop, stated:

One day, when I was working, a white man came to the shop. He seemed to be drunk, and shouted at me: “you are just a visitor, you should go back to your place”... Another time, a middle-aged woman ran into the shop, beat the table angrily, and said to me: “Hurry up and make your burgers! You have very bad skin!” (Participant 7)

This participant felt distressed: She had thought New Zealand was very friendly with a low level of prejudice and discrimination. She wondered how such things could happen and felt that criticising her skin was a personal attack.

Other participants received unfair treatment at work, but described prejudice from local supervisors and workmates more than from customers. They felt their supervisors criticised them more frequently than their local peers, even if they performed at a similar or better level than their local workmates.

When I was working in the supermarket, I had much more work pressure and a higher load than my local workmates... because my supervisor criticised me frequently. In fact, I think my local workmates did not do better than me, but [the supervisor] criticised me only... There were five or six Chinese working there. We all resigned within three months, because all of us felt discriminated against. I was the last one to leave.

Some participants felt they did not have fair opportunities when applying for jobs, and their name and ethnicity were barriers to employment. Participants 8 and 20 (both graduates) expressed a strong belief in discrimination in job opportunities:

When you sent your CV to employers, they always asked you whether you were a New Zealander. If you said “No”, you would not have any chances... not only would you not have a chance to get the job, you would not even get an interview. (Participant 8)

Many employers would first ask you if you have PR. If you don't have it, basically you will lose chances. (Participant 20)

Participant 12, who had a master's degree, tested the levels of discrimination himself by sending two CVs to the same employer. The content of the two CVs was almost the same, but with different names, one Chinese, and the other English. The CV with the English name was offered an interview, whereas the CV with the Chinese name was rejected. He thought this was obvious discrimination, so planned to return to China because he thought there was no opportunity for fair competition for jobs in New Zealand for Chinese international students.

A quarter of the participants mentioned they suffered from insults, either verbally or through physical gestures, from strangers in New Zealand. Abuse such as "You fucking Chinese!" and "Hey Chinese, go back to your own country!" made the participants feel angry and unsafe.

New Zealand media, perceived as having orchestrated prejudice and discrimination against Chinese, especially international students, were strongly criticised by six participants. They felt the Zealand media often exaggerated issues facing Chinese students, such as car accidents and murders. Participant 6 queried why only Chinese students driving without licences and having car accidents were big news, and whether it meant there were no other people driving without licences or having car accidents in New Zealand. If this was not the case, why were the media always focusing on Chinese students?

Car accidents or murders could happen anywhere. Why does the New Zealand media focus only on Chinese car accidents or Chinese murders... The "suitcase murder" [which happened in April, 2006] was reported a lot, and some newspapers even used several pages to report it... (Participant 14)

It was felt that media over-reporting of isolated cases aroused negative attitudes in New Zealanders towards Chinese international students, and it was irresponsible to make generalisations to twist the views of the New Zealand general public regarding Chinese students.

Discussion

The foregoing discussion suggests that Chinese students were satisfied with certain aspects of teaching and services but dissatisfied with others. Low levels of satisfaction were related to students' differing perceptions of pastoral care and the roles of academics and host institutions, to their experiences of language difficulties, prejudice and discrimination, and the uncertain prospects of future careers. At the end of the section, some recommendations are proposed to address these issues.

Differing expectations around 'guan'

Differences in learning and teaching contribute to conflicting expectations between teachers and students from different cultural backgrounds (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997; Li, Baker & Marshall, 2002). Chinese students positively viewed the independent learning fostered in New Zealand, but felt a lack of *guan*, care or supervision.

In Chinese tertiary institutions, if a student fails an assignment or an exam, teachers usually talk with the student and find out reasons for the failure. But this does not usually seem to happen in New Zealand tertiary institutions. This may arise from the different perceptions of teachers' role in New Zealand and China. Chinese teachers usually take responsibility for students' academic performance as well as their moral well-being (Biggs & Watkins, 2001), but New Zealand teachers usually feel responsible only for academic instruction. Therefore, compared with Chinese teachers, local teachers seem to lack *guan* in terms of pastoral care.

For many Chinese students, the teacher is someone who can be trusted and is a person they can depend on. This is especially important for those who leave their family members and close friends to study in a new country. They tend to regard staff members at host institutions as an important source of social support for them. Some participants mentioned they needed not only academic instructions, but also personal counselling from tertiary staff, for example, with regard to tenancy contracts, legal issues, or 'after-hours' learning and life support.

Given the importance placed on *guan*, some Chinese students require more support than is currently provided by the New Zealand Code of Practice for the Pastoral Care of International Students (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2003). Specifically, students expected more opportunities to communicate with their lecturers outside class to receive more help with course work and more support from teachers for personal advice.

One possible explanation for the perceived lack of out-of-class communication is the differences in communication styles in the classroom. Interpersonal communication in New Zealand classrooms is low context (Hall, 1976), where communication styles are direct, and students are encouraged to participate in class discussions and express their ideas verbally (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). In contrast, the Chinese classroom is typically high context (Hall, 1976), where verbal communication skills are not emphasised. The uneasiness Chinese students often experience in speaking in the class is somewhat a result of heightened concern for relational outcomes (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). For example, asking ‘stupid’ questions would result in loss of face, asking questions which other students already know the answers to would waste other students’ time, and in particular, speaking in a second language may not allow the speaker to express themselves clearly. Hence, Chinese students prefer to ask lecturers questions outside the classroom one-to-one rather than exposing themselves in front of their peers.

In addition, teacher-student interpersonal relationships are hierarchical in traditional Chinese culture, where teachers are perceived as givers and students as receivers who are not expected to contradict the teacher (Ching, 1992). The Chinese classroom is described as teacher-dominated with students passively receiving knowledge (Mok et al, 2001). Although some researchers have argued that this is a stereotype of Chinese or Asian classrooms (e.g. Kennedy, 2002; Littlewood, 2000), disturbing the teacher’s presentation or arguing with them in the classroom is still perceived as impolite.

The perceived lack of support for Chinese international students’ personal or general needs by their host institutions relate to Chinese students’ perceptions of the teacher’s role. New Zealand teachers are expected to give academic instructions but not

necessarily take responsibility for students' moral well-being. Students' personal and family problems are not regarded as their responsibility and teachers focus on inside rather than outside classroom interactions (Biggs & Watkins, 2001). They are usually not available after working hours, because they tend to see their professional responsibility as ending after working hours (Ho, 2001). However, the role of Chinese teachers is perceived very differently, where their primary role is to transmit knowledge and educate students in morals (Zhang, 2006). This means Chinese teachers have responsibility both for students' academic performance, and for instilling right behaviours in the classroom and guiding students in daily life (Ho, 2001). Chinese teachers focus on both formal interactions in the classroom and informal interactions outside the classroom. A Chinese teacher sees inside and outside the classroom contexts as "requiring a different responsibility, with a different style of interaction" (Biggs & Watkins, 2001, p. 282). Therefore, in Chinese students' minds, communicating with teachers outside the classroom on personal or general issues is reasonable and desirable.

This study revealed satisfaction with academics' teaching competence and styles, and with university programmes and structures. Yet, in students' view, New Zealand academics lacked a sense of responsibility to care for international students and had insufficient cultural sensitivity to understand students' academic, linguistic, social and psychological needs. Participants gave relatively high ratings to some support services, such as library, computing, language skills support, and learning support, but low ratings to others: catering, accommodation, orientation programmes, career guidance, and student associations.

Language barriers

Early cross-cultural research findings have shown that English language difficulties are a major challenge for Asian international students who study in New Zealand (Campbell & Li, 2006; Lin & Yi, 1997; Merwood, 2007; Mills, 1997). This study indicates that although international students must pass the IELTS test before they can begin tertiary study, passing this test does not necessarily mean they have met the language requirements for New Zealand tertiary studies.

IELTS requires compositions consisting of a few hundred words, whereas written assignments at university typically require thousands of words, which is a significant leap. Therefore, for many Chinese students first embarking on tertiary study, English language skills, in particular writing skills, become a huge obstacle, thus ongoing English language studies are perceived as necessary.

Prejudice and discrimination

This study has revealed that prejudice and discrimination are more strongly reflected in the work context than in the learning context, in line with Ward & Masgoret's finding that:

More than half of the international students reported that they had never experienced discrimination from teachers, administrative or support staff at their institutions or from other international students. This proportion dropped, however, when reference was made to New Zealand students and people in the wider community (2004, p. 58).

Generally, student participants with part-time jobs were dissatisfied with their working environments and experienced unfair treatment at work. Some respondents lacked fair opportunities when applying for local jobs, especially new graduates applying for full-time work. This is consistent with previous findings that ethnicity influences selection decisions, and that Asian applicants, especially Chinese, are disadvantaged in New Zealand (Wilson, Gahlout, Liu, Mouly & Ho, 2005). Chinese international students spend a number of years locally to gain their qualifications, often studying courses in a New Zealand context, so a proportion of them will want to gain experience and apply their knowledge in this context.

Furthermore, the New Zealand mass media are thought to exhibit more negative than positive attitudes to Chinese students; this has promoted a negative public image of them (Li, 2007). According to Li, "the news reports cover only isolated events or cases that often fail to accurately reflect the reality of the large body of the student population" (p. 24).

Uncertain employment prospects

Clearly, the changing environments in both New Zealand and China have impacted on many Chinese students' decision making. Many participants' original plan was to gain a qualification, then return to China. However, they had to change their plans during the course of their studies, now intending to gain practical work experience in New Zealand and, if possible, permanent residency.

Yet many participants still felt confused about their future because they struggled with a dilemma. They knew they would face strong competition amongst domestic and returned students in job markets on returning home. In recent years, more and more Chinese international students have returned to seek jobs after completing their overseas studies. Returned students with qualifications from the USA and the UK are perceived as having more competitive advantage than students with New Zealand qualifications. Many Chinese view New Zealand as a low cost education provider where it is easier to obtain a student visa. Compared to the USA and the UK, its universities are perceived as lower quality (Li, 2004). Thus, New Zealand qualifications, no longer seeming to offer competitive advantages, have left many graduates feeling that the prospect of returning to China with a qualification but without suitable work experience is not attractive. Also, being away from home for a number of years creates significant changes in their life style and ways of thinking change, causing uncertainty about an ability to re-adapt to life in China.

Yet even through many participants changed their plans to include working locally, finding a good job is extremely difficult for new international graduates with English as a second language and who lack local work experience. Given that employment discrimination against particular ethnic groups exists in New Zealand, Chinese applicants feel particularly disadvantaged in the work context (Wilson et al, 2005).

A large majority of students expected to find employment and have New Zealand local experience to enable them to gain a competitive edge on return to China, and also to obtain permanent residence. However, most had difficulties in achieving these goals. Furthermore, they reported discrimination they had experienced inside and beyond university.

Recommendations

The design of tertiary programmes and courses needs to consider international students' situations. It is not realistic to expect undergraduate students, especially first-year students, to go into local organisations to conduct investigations, given that international students have difficulty accessing such enterprises.

Tertiary institutions should organise social activities to help international students in adapting, and provide opportunities to help them mingle with both local students and other international students.

Academics need to be aware that teaching international students requires professional knowledge not only in their academic discipline, but also in intercultural communication. If teachers lack knowledge about students' cultures, they may not understand students' learning needs, and thus may not properly facilitate their studies.

Chinese students should understand that the purpose of study in New Zealand is to experience local cultures and the educational system, including new teaching and learning styles. Chinese students need to adapt to the tertiary education system rather than waiting for host educational institutions to adapt to them.

Although passing IELTS is an entry requirement of host tertiary institutions, students need to be aware that getting good marks in IELTS does not mean having the capability to perform well in tertiary studies. Thus, they need to continuously improve their language skills in reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Conclusions

This study revealed that Chinese students were satisfied with academics' teaching competence and styles, and with university programmes and structures. Yet, in their view, New Zealand academics took little care of international students and had insufficient cultural sensitivity to students' academic, linguistic, social and psychological needs. Participants gave relatively high ratings to some support services, such as library, computing, language skills support, and learning support, but

low ratings to other services: catering, accommodation, orientation programmes, career guidance, and student associations. A large majority of students expected to find employment for local experience to enable them to gain a competitive edge on return to China, and also to obtain a New Zealand permanent residence. However, most had difficulties in achieving these goals. Furthermore, they reported the discrimination experienced inside and beyond university. It is recommended that university programmes be designed to meet the needs of international students, that academics develop cultural awareness to enable them to understand and facilitate international student learning, and that Chinese students make efforts to adapt to the new learning environment and to improve their language skills.

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