



An Agenda for Change:

Supporting Chinese Postgraduate Students Studying Media and Communication in Australia

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Recent years have seen increasing educational ties between China and Australia. Australian government statistics report that 40.6% of international students studying at tertiary level in May 2012 came from China (AEI, 2012). This situation has prompted many Australian and Chinese universities, including Schools of Media and Communication, to actively seek to develop mutually advantageous partnering opportunities within the globalised education market.

Within this context, however, a major challenge for institutions is the provision of support for students who are studying in Australia, remote from the familiarity of home linguistic, cultural and educational environments. Although most international students struggle to varying degrees to adjust to the different educational and intercultural expectations and practices of Australian universities, research suggests that Chinese postgraduate students in particular face distinct challenges, as do the academics who teach them (Li 2012; Wang & Shan 2007).

Given the importance of the Chinese market, and our obligation to provide quality educational, social and cultural experiences, there is an urgent need to provide learning support for Chinese students that is tailored to their disciplinary learning, and that eases their educational and social adaptation into Australian university programs in media and communication.



There is also a need to assist lecturers to better understand Chinese students' previous learning contexts, including what China identifies as the critical disciplinary skills in media and communication, and how these compare with those in Australia. To date, little is known in Anglophone cultures about teaching and learning practices in Chinese universities.

In response, we have developed an innovative collaborative project that involves five Australian and two Chinese universities and which is funded by the Office of Teaching and Learning.

The project is designed to nurture dialogue and mutual understanding between Australian and Chinese academics 'based upon a mutual respect for and recognition of contemporary Chinese and Anglophone realities, knowledge and perspectives' (Ryan 2010, p.55).

It also seeks to develop new pedagogical approaches, teaching resources and student learning materials for use in both countries. This paper reports on the agenda for the advancement of the project, and also presents findings from the pilot research which informed the trajectory of the larger, collaborative project.

Over the last two years, we conducted a pilot study with the aim of making an initial exploration of contemporary Chinese and Anglophone tertiary education 'realities' as interpreted by Chinese postgraduate media and communication students studying on an Australian masters program.

We drew participants in the pilot study from three cohorts of masters students at different stages of their studies in Australia. This enabled us to gain a 'tiered' perspective and a better understanding of students' expectations, their learning experiences, and the challenges and adjustments they negotiated at different stages of their course.

We interviewed participants in the pre-masters program at the university's language development centre, in their first semester of study, and also at the conclusion of their program up to 18 months later. The interviews and focus groups enabled us to collect rich qualitative data of student's interpretations of academic life as they experienced it in Australia and contrasted it with their memories of studying in China.



Areas explored included:

- Perceptions with respect to quality teaching and learning in both China and Australia
- Preparation for, perceptions of, and knowledge about Australia and expectations of the experience
- Difficulties encountered in learning and engaging with the media in Australia
- Reflections on the value of their learning in Australia
- Advice for future students coming from China to study in the media and communications program

Findings from the pilot study present a unique picture of the Chinese postgraduate experience as elicited from the participants themselves. Their lived experiences of learning in both China and Australia enabled participants to identify specific areas where their experiences and perspectives 'clashed'.

Significant disconnects were reported between:

- Preparation for, and participation in Australian academic and social discourse communities
- Perceptions of good teaching and learning in Australian and Chinese contexts
- Knowledge developed in Australia and application and utility with respect to this knowledge in China

These findings point to the need for genuine institutional collaboration between Chinese and Australian academics to maximise support for Chinese students studying media and communication in Australia. Information from the pilot study has played a significant role in framing the agenda and methodological approach for the larger collaborative project which is funded by the Office for Teaching and Learning, and which commenced earlier this year. Because it is still in its early stages, results will not be presented here although we outline in this paper how the pilot research has informed the larger project and its agenda: Chinese and Australian academics will work together to develop and implement a research-based innovative model of best practice.



It is intended that possible outcomes will include a customised toolkit of learning and teaching resources (materials, techniques, practices and pedagogies) with practical guidelines for employing culturally blended pedagogies and strategies to enhance student learning and lecturers' professional development in the disciplinary area of communication and media. The collaborative study will aim to move beyond mutual respect and recognition of different Anglophone and Chinese cultural 'realities' in order to engender a spirit of reciprocal learning and responsibility that will sustain and nurture partnering arrangements between Australia and China now and into the future.

Website: www.murdoch.edu.au/Research-capabilities/Collaborating-For-Success

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