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Undergraduate Background as a Critical Factor in the Learning Capacity and Skills of Chinese Master's Degree Students

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Names of other staff involved:

Terri Rees (RA)

Phil Megicks

Dominic McKeith

Title of project:

Undergraduate Background as a Critical Factor in the Learning Capacity and Skills of Chinese Master's Degree Students

Type of project: Case Study

Breakdown of project budget expenditure

A total of £2600 was awarded to this project for the following items-

(1) Staffing £1751

Part-time (Grade 5 pt 21) Research Assistant to assist in interviews and report writing

Working hours: 10 hours /week for 12 weeks @ £14.59 per hour

(2) Consumables and necessary materials £217

(3) Organisation of three focus groups £210

(4) Transcription service 20 hours @ £21.10 per hour £422

Please forward the final report to pedrio@plymouth.ac.uk by the **31st October 2012**

Undergraduate Background as a Critical Factor in the Learning Capacity and Skills of Chinese Master's Degree Students

Keywords: Chinese students, learning background, learning capacity, language, employment

Aims and focus of project

The project, a pilot study, was based on Chinese MSc students in the Plymouth Business School (PBS), with the aim of identifying learning differences and support needs between groups of Chinese master's students with different learning backgrounds in terms of where and how they completed their undergraduate studies.

The project focused on identification of disparities between different categories of students in terms of academic performance, learning, research and communication skills and the resulting data, although based on a small sample, identified specific academic support requirements for Chinese students.

Background/context to project

The internationalisation of higher education has resulted in increasing numbers of overseas students coming to study in the UK. As the largest single group, Chinese students, especially the Master's Degree students, have been the subject of significant attention in the pedagogic domain. Many studies have been undertaken, often comparative, with Chinese and home students as two distinct groups. (See for example Devlin, S. 2007).

What has not been fully recognised and addressed, however, is that the Chinese students are by no means a homogenous group, due to various factors and a significant difference is their educational background prior to studying in western educational institutions. More specifically, Chinese Master's Degree students may have completed their undergraduate studies in China, in the UK or elsewhere in the west or via a hybrid of Chinese / western courses. It is reasonable to envisage that these differences may have had profound impact on their knowledge structure, learning and communication skills and academic capacity. This may further suggest that students with different undergraduate backgrounds may require different academic support, facilitation and guidance on UK Master's courses.

The project aimed to investigate these disparities in order to identify how to design or refine teaching and coaching approaches accordingly to support students with different backgrounds. The study provides an evidence-based analysis of the implications of different undergraduate backgrounds and different learning cultures on the requirements for learning support for Chinese Masters level students, who comprise a significant proportion of the international student community. The analysis will be used to inform and improve the quality of the learning experience and ultimately the learning outcomes for such students.

References

Devlin, S. (2007). *Investigating the effect of language and culture on student interaction with and in WebCT*. Available at www.ics.heacademy.ac.uk/italics/vol6iss2/siobhan_devlin.pdf (Accessed 26/10/2011)

Methods used

Stage 1

- (1) A review of the literature was undertaken
- (2) A Research assistant was appointed
- (3) Interview questions were identified (Appendix 1)
- (4) Ethical clearance was obtained (Appendix 2)
- (5) The complete Chinese Master's level student population at Plymouth Business School was sampled

Stage 2

Data was collected via focus groups with MSc students in the following three categories:

- (1) Standard UK/Western countries undergraduate degree
- (2) Standard Chinese undergraduate degree
- (3) Any joint programme (Western + Chinese undergraduate degree, e.g. 3+1 or 2+2)

Stage 3

The data obtained from Stage 2 was analysed reported.

Results

The entire Plymouth University Chinese Masters population (n=73) was sampled for this project via email. At the time of sampling, there were fewer numbers of students at the university representing the group 1 and 2 categories and the number of responses from each group reflected this at 3 and 4 respectively. More students responded from the 3rd category but it was felt that in order not to skew the results, only a matching number (4) of these would be randomly selected. The number of responses, although low, was felt to be acceptable for a pilot project. Of the eleven respondents, three stated they had completed all their undergraduate studies in the UK, four had completed all their undergraduate studies in China (Group 2) and four had completed a joint programme degree, their last place of study being an English one (Group 3).

It was decided that small focus groups would facilitate ease of discussion and so two pilot focus group interviews were undertaken, during which students were asked to complete a very short questionnaire (Appendix 1) consisting of just six questions, after which the interviewer would follow up on some of the issues raised in the questionnaires. During the

focus group interviews, the responses shed light on some of the issues raised and confirmed the researcher's confidence in the range of questions asked.

Although it is noted that the number of respondents might make it difficult to generalise from the data at this stage, the data provided some interesting responses which will be used to follow up further in the forthcoming main study. In particular, it would appear that overall, there was greater diversity in the range of ratings for group 2 students. Conversely, there appeared to be least diversity of response within group 3. Furthermore, group 2 scored themselves lower than the other groups for question 1 about their learning and studying skills, with poor time management the reason most often cited. This suggests that there may be some support needed in this area.

Time management appears to be an issue across all groups and it might be useful in the main study to try to find out the reason for this and whether perhaps it is related to language – for example, it may be time consuming to translate everything before being able to work on something.

For question two, it would be useful to address the same question (about research) to an English control group before drawing any conclusions.

Half of all responses to question 3 alluded to weaknesses in speaking English and it would be interesting therefore, to find out how Chinese students feel about making presentations to nationally mixed groups – something they are generally required to do as part of their study.

Most of the question four responses alluded to lack of experience in the area of employment, particularly for the group 2 students. If replicated in the larger study, this may suggest that more work with students in this area might be prudent, whether through encouraging students to apply for, and work in, short term placements (two weeks for example) or through other means.

Question 5 raises another question about whether the enjoyment of teamwork is related to the constitution of nationalities in any given group. This may be worth considering for future research.

In terms of overall academic performance, only one student gave themselves a rating lower than six for their overall academic performance and this student was from group 3.

Students were asked what support they thought would be helpful to them and for communication skill support, it was suggested that more tutorials and groupwork or teamwork would be beneficial, as well as ensuring that students had more opportunities to deliver formal and informal presentations. English Language support was also suggested, although it is not clear whether the students were aware of the English language facilities already available at Plymouth University. One student said that when they first started their studies, their English was very poor and that translation takes time, therefore, they suggest, it may be a good idea for Chinese tutors to tutor them.

In terms of support for research skills, students suggested that more training about how to use the library equipment and resources efficiently would be useful and another suggested that time planning workshops would be useful, as well as more training about research methods.

One student suggested that it would be useful if the university could provide a brief introduction to English culture for international students at the start of commencement of their studies. Another suggested having more parties to aid communication skills.

In terms of employment seeking skills, more advice was wanted and there was also a suggestion that internships should be arranged for students. One student suggested that a CV checking service would be helpful, as would advice about interviews.

Overall, the data provided interesting insights into what sort of support might be useful to Chinese Masters students and this is the strength of this small scale study. However, at this stage, with a small number of responses, it is difficult to identify with any degree of certainty, any specific differences that could be linked to undergraduate background. For this, a larger study will be necessary that incorporates a range of more specific questions based on the responses and suggestions provided by the students in this study.

Dissemination

The results of this pilot study will be disseminated within the Plymouth Business School and entered onto the Pedrio database. A poster presentation was given at the 2012 PedRIO Conference. An oral presentation is under preparation for the VC's T & L Conference in 2013. An article based on the project data about support for Chinese students (of any undergraduate background) is also under preparation and will be submit to the International Journal of Management Education.

Appendix 1

Questionnaire

Name

Q1 On a scale of 1 to 9, where 1 is poor and 9 is excellent, how would you rate your study and learning skills? (example: time management and prioritising your workload; using the library effectively; ability to assess your own work; referencing correctly etc.)

Comment about or explain your scale mark here:

Q2 On a scale of 1 to 9, where 1 is poor and 9 is excellent, how would you rate your research skills? (example: research design; data collection; data analysis etc.)

Comment about or explain your scale mark here:

Q3 On a scale of 1 to 9, where 1 is poor and 9 is excellent, how would you rate your English communication skills? (example: writing in English; understanding English – written and spoken; speaking English etc.)

Comment about or explain your scale mark here:

Q4 On a scale of 1 to 9, where 1 is poor and 9 is excellent, how would you rate your employment seeking skills?

Comment about or explain your scale mark here:

Q5 On a scale of 1 to 9, where 1 is poor and 9 is excellent, how would you rate your teamwork skills? (example: getting along with others; fulfilling your own part; joining in decision making etc.)

Comment about or explain your scale mark here:

Q6 On a scale of 1 to 9, where 1 is poor and 9 is excellent, how would you rate your overall academic performance?

Appendix 2

Ethics approval

Jingjing Xu

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Terri Rees

Ref: PBS.UPC/FREAC/FREAC1011.37/clc

Date: 1 July, 2011

Dear Jingjing/Terri

Ethical Approval Application No: FREAC1011.37

**Title: Undergraduate Background as a Critical Factor in the Learning Capacity
And Skills of Chinese Master's Degree Students**

The Faculty Research Ethical Approval Committee has considered the ethical approval form and is fully satisfied that the project complies with the University of Plymouth's ethical standards for research involving human participants.

Could you please let us know how you are getting the basic data (on the student's backgrounds), to select the sample for the focus groups and interviews?

Approval is for the duration of the project. Should you wish to extend the project, you would need to seek further ethical approval.

We would like to wish you good luck with your research project.

Yours sincerely

(Sent as email attachment)

Dr Patrick Holden

Chair

Faculty Research Ethics Approval Committee

Plymouth Business School