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Recommended Citation

Heavey, A. Chinese students in Irish 3rd level Education. Masters Dissertation, Technological University Dublin, 2006.

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Chinese students in Irish 3rd level Education

Introduction

This paper aims to examine some of the issues Chinese students face in Irish 3rd level Education. I will look at some of the cultural, social and academic issues that may influence the quality of a Chinese students learning experience in a Western system. I will begin by looking at Irelands involvement with Chinese student recruitment and then briefly look at Chinas educational history. This will put the situation into context and allow me to examine some of the problems encountered by the Chinese student. I will explore the complexity of teaching someone from such a different cultural background. Finally I hope to address the importance of inclusion and what the foreign student can bring to both their own and their peer learning experience.

Why do we need to address equality in this context?

Living and especially studying in a foreign country is a challenge for anyone. However the degree of difference experienced by a Chinese student entering a western 3rd level system is significant. While it is important for these students to integrate during their time in Ireland, it is equally important for the Irish to reciprocate in term of a better knowledge, understanding and genuine respect for cultural and social differences. Having spent time traveling in China and experienced their culture first hand, I can only presume that Chinese students most see Ireland not so much as another country but as another world. I feel we need to facilitate this transition in every way possible to ensure they are equally valued and respected as learners.

Irish context

The influx of Chinese across this island nation illustrates two trends of globalization: the outward spread of China's people as well as it goods and the transformation of Ireland to a nation of immigrants'
(Business Week, 2004)

There are 60,000 Chinese now living in Ireland. In 1997, 300 Chinese students were enrolled in Irish Schools. In 2000 it and risen to 2500 student and in 2004 it shot up to 30,000 students (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Ireland, 2004)

Changes in higher education funding in recent years have encouraged universities and colleges to look overseas as a method of revenue earning. At a seminar entitled *Chinese Students in Ireland, New Opportunities, New Needs, New Challenges* held in Ireland in January 2001, The Minister for Education and Science, Dr Michael Woods extended a warm welcome to Chinese students and said '*international student mobility is an enriching experience, not alone for the individual student, but also for the institution concerned*'. He talked about the importance of bringing '*an international dimension*' to campus life and how '*the ensuring multi-cultural experience help to broaden the educational social horizon of Irish students*' (Department of Education & Science, 2001)

In a recent report by The Higher Education Authority (HEA) entitled *The Provision of Undergraduate and Taught Postgraduate Education to Overseas Students in Ireland*, they stated that Ireland should continue to be involved in overseas higher education, based on the evidence of economic opportunity. They go on to point out that Ireland is also entering a period when the existing higher education system may experience a fall off in domestic demand for courses and degrees, creating space within which to address this rapidly growing overseas opportunity (Higher Education Authority, 2003)

In a publication by The Enterprise Strategy Group entitled *Ahead of the Curve* in 2004 they site Irelands strengths in attracting overseas students as the following

- Native English speaking
- A strong academic reputation
- A desirable place to live and learn
- Technology expertise

They see '*significant potential in targeting new and growing markets such as Russia, China, and Northern and Eastern European countries*' (Enterprise Strategy Group, 2004)

While these developments may be viewed as financially advantageous to Ireland, careful planning, substantial investment, research and multicultural awareness are all required if Chinese students participating in Irish education are to get the best out of their learning experience.

Chinese context

It was tradition in Pre-Revolutionary China to send young people abroad in order to get an international Education. Common destinations were USA, Japan, France and the UK.

With the closing of China in the 1960s the only academic exchanges were reserved for the elite who could travel to the Soviet Union and other Eastern block countries where they received technical or political education. (Hayhoe, 1996). It wasn't until the 80's and 90s that numbers of students seeking degrees in Europe and the US increased. Today huge value is put on an International qualification in China. And with the one child policy, an aging population, the dramatic economic expansion and increasing competition for Chinese College places, a western education is now seen as a family's investment in the future.

Chinese Students in Western Education

When two Chinese students were enrolled in my first year VisualCommunication class, I thought the language issues would be our biggest difficulty. However the cultural differences and contrasting perception of higher education became far more challenging.

In a Paper by Yvonne Turner entitled *When an unstoppable force meets an immovable object: Chinese students in the UK University System*, the author explores these differences very well. She maps the sequence of development in Higher education in China and contrasts it with the UK system in terms of policy approach and definition. The contrast in the role of education in society is very clear and I found this information very helpful in trying to understand the difficulties these students were having in class. Recently when I started incorporating a more student focused learning strategies into my teaching I was worried they might disengage completely.

Problems encountered

1. Their role as a student.

They see my role as the speaker and themselves as the listener. Even in one on one tutorials, they are reluctant to engage in discussion or voice an opinion.

'Confucianist tendency to emphasize the master as expert leads to an expectation that students performance ultimately mirrors the direct competence of the educator'

(Chen 1994 cited in Turner 2001, p.38). Turner explains that in China *'asking questions in class is actively discouraged...should a student provide an incorrect answer, they receive some kind of rebuke or punishment'* (Turner 2001, p.45)

Class participation is therefore extremely difficult for them and this makes me question my teaching approach. While interactivity seems to be fostering deeper learning in the

Irish students, it may be causing unnecessary anxiety to the Chinese students. It is important that we respect their deep-rooted concerns about losing face.

2. Either or thinking.

They seem to be predominantly concerned with the objective knowledge and find it difficult to engage with the subjective level. They regularly asks me if their design is 'correct' which is a question I find difficult to relate to design. If I say yes, it is correct, they then finds it hard to understand why he hasn't received a 1.1 grade.

3. Attendance

This has become a big issue for one of the students in particular. Ireland is marketed as an attractive student location with a good quality of life. However the cost of living especially that of rented accommodation on top of the high tuition fees is of great concern. With a work/study visa, students can legally work up to 20 hours a week. (Business Week, 2004) This student was working these long hours as well attending college full time (20 contact hours). Family pressures to succeed and again issues concerned with face and deep-rooted fears about failure have resulted in a very overworked and anxious student.

Conclusion

Chinese Students in Ireland is an extensive subject but I have attempted to reflect on some of the issues I have witness in my teaching. I feel it is important for me, as a teacher to be aware of multicultural educational needs and be prepared to facilitate were possible. Integration is a too way process. It is advantageous to all concerned to understand other cultures and not assume total assimilation.

Intercultural knowledge about ethics, religion, social norms, learning styles, etc should be freely available to integrate the international student as well as ensure equality of treatment for them. There should be training for lectures on how to incorporate cultural differences into their class plan.

Turner(2001, p. 53) presents a very thought provoking argument.

'...a common assumption about Chinese students in the UK system is that they are competent at rote learning but learning but do not possess critical thinking skills (Chant and Drover 1996) Certainly, this may reflect the previous opportunities to develop skills that the students have received in China. It also implies a value assumption

prevalent in the UK that critical thinking is somehow more useful or important as an indicator of higher or deeper learning than the ability to process large quantities of data. This assumption may be somewhat limited in its perspective and represent a cultural notion of learning and knowledge however. Since the ability to manipulate large volumes of data may be in itself an important capability in the information age in which we live, and also may have some implications for the development of the lifelong learning society, it is worth considering this further'

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