Chinese Masters Students' Experiences of UK HEI

A single Case Study using Constructivist Grounded Theory.

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Structure:

- Research
- Literature
- Findings
- Implications for action
- Questions

The specific aim of the study was:

- To elicit the experiences of the Chinese international students in order to identify specific factors that support or inhibit a positive experience and engagement in a Master's programme, the ways in which they manage and mitigate these factors and the consequences of those actions.
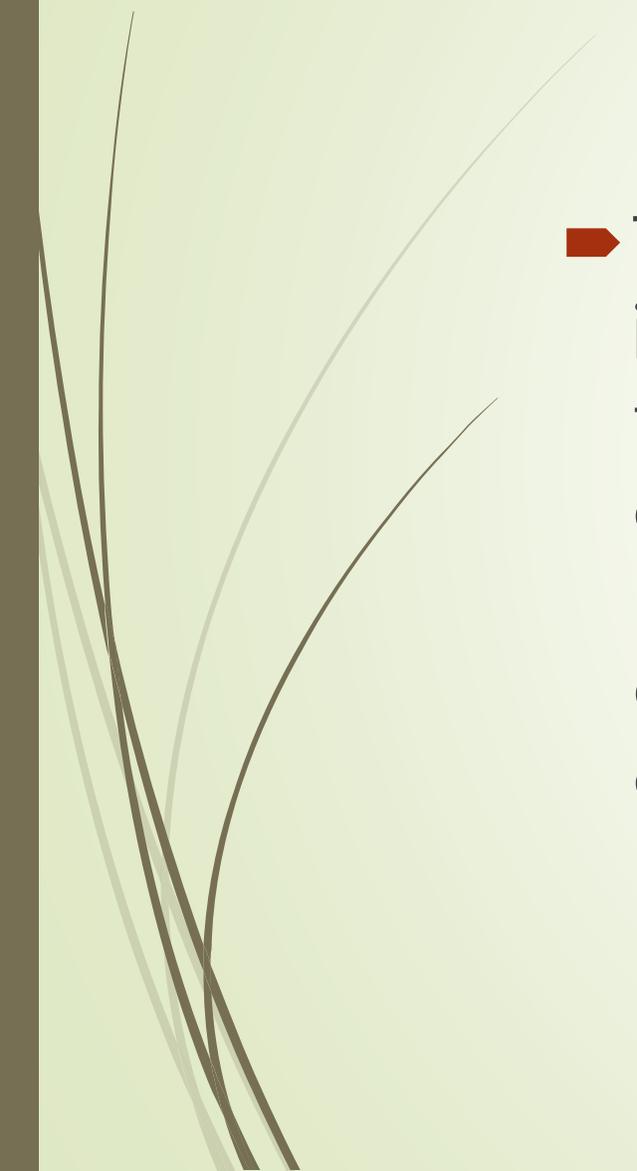
Research

- Case Study as single institution – access and ethical approval gained

- 3,764 PGT (32% International)

- 60 Level 7 students – all from regions in China

Male	27 - 45%
Female	33 – 55%
Male Mean Age	22
Female Mean Age	21

- Copy of the main research question – not pre defined questions

Research Method

- Essentially grounded theory is, 'the systematic generation of theory from data acquired by a rigorous research method' (Glaser, 1998:3) and is 'suitable for handling many problems that preconceiving methods do not handle' (Glaser 1998:11).

- Charmaz (1995) six characteristics:

- 1.   Synchronous data collection and analysis

- 2.   Coding themes arising from the data not preconceived hypotheses

- 3.   The development of middle range theories to explain behaviour

- 4.   Memo writing

- 5.   Theoretical sampling

- 6.   Literature review

- As such, an inductive approach enabled the students to tell their stories, out of which theory emerged which accounted for the patterns of their behavior.

Literature

- Framework rooted in the idea 'Figured Worlds' (Holland et al. (1998:40-41))

- A cultural phenomenon

- Function as contexts of meaning

- Are socially organized and reproduced

- Distribute people by relating them to landscapes of action

- The theory of 'figured worlds' is allied to the situated perspective of learning which appreciates it as a social experience and activity.

- Marshall and Case (2010:180) argue 'study in higher education involves taking on a 'new identity in the world'.

- As Giroux (2011:71) explains, this process of 'readjustment' to a new world takes time, and remains one of the key aspects many universities seem to miss.

Engagement

- The process of engagement has to start with figuring 'self' as an individual person before figuring self as a student. Wortham (2006:22) suggests this process can only start when the student has begun to recognise the image of themselves as a student in the figured world of universities.

- That presupposes a level of engagement, Trowler (2010) identifies three perspectives.

1. Behavioural engagement covers students who would typically comply with behavioural norms, such as attendance and involvement, and would demonstrate the absence of disruptive or negative behaviour.

2. Emotional engagement defines students who experience affective reactions such as interest, enjoyment, or a sense of belonging.

3. Cognitive engagement concerns students who are invested in their learning, would seek to go beyond the requirements, and would relish challenge.

Findings: Isolation

- The students from China expressed strong feelings of detachment from the home student body and the host society. They discussed their efforts to integrate with others both UK and other international students but frequently experienced rejection in particular by native English speakers.

- *'Teachers used many group discussions in class. My classmates usually did not invite me to join their group discussion. I am waiting for them to ask me.'*

- As a result they turned to co-nationals and sought to recreate their home and previous academic environment in order to help establish and preserve the sense of inclusion and identity they had experienced in their previous figured world. This action served only to further exacerbate the delicate situation of being seen to move further away from the native speakers and reinforced the image of difference and isolation

Findings: Isolation

- *'I live alone in a small box type room. I have no job because my family wish to study hard. I have no money from them so I cannot afford to go out with the others. I spend my time alone by myself.'*

- The sense of loneliness was also evident in the following statement:

- *'My main challenge comes in being lonely, in a strange place, with different foods and without my family to encourage or support me. There seems to be no jobs for me to work and earn extra pay and meet people. So other than my class mates, I am alone all the time. The weekends are the worst time.'*

Isolation: Actions

- Appointment AP's Student Experience
- Clear Focus on Student Mental Health and Well Being – Compulsory On Line Module for all staff
- Student Union Training
- International Welcome Week
- International Student Buddy Scheme
- Enhanced Personal Tutoring
- Cultural Awareness for Native students

Findings: Academic Dissonance

- It was commented on by the participants in the focus groups that when in China they were the 'top of their class' and here they are at the 'bottom' of their class.

- In an attempt to redress the position, many students spoke of having to '…prepare many materials for lectures' with an intensity not previously required. This took considerable time as their reading proficiency in English was poor and many words were unfamiliar to them and had to be translated from English to Chinese before comprehension could be achieved.

- *'I need to waste so much time reading books, which means my efficiency is lowered'.*

Academic Dissonance: Actions

- Extended 'Induction' (Week Zero)
- Increased activity by an extended Learning Hub
- Compulsory use of 'DMU Replay' (Staff)
- Removal of all assessed Group Work in Years 5 & 6
- The start of 'Problem Based Learning'
- Mandated 'Feedback and Guidance' Hours
- Extended Personal Tutoring

Findings: Communication

- *'Sometime tutor has lots of conversation with my classmates. There are useful points inside the conversation. But I can't understand what they are saying and this makes me learn nothing from it. I can't understand the questions my classmates' ask, so when tutor answer the questions I learn nothing from it. This is the biggest difficulty I have during class*.

- Extends to social communication:'*I find that English people like to make jokes; I can't understand what they said when others laugh together. They just said:' I'm just joking.' But I believe it is hard for me to get those jokes. I can usually understand the meaning of words but hardly catch the inside meaning'*.

Communication: Actions

- Greater acceptance of 'Translators' in class
- Appreciation of the value added by 'Communities of Practice'
- Academic Buddies in sessions
- International Society
- #Dare to.....Volunteer

Findings: Unity

- The Chinese international students relied on a network of fellow students with similar backgrounds for support and that this community of practice became a source of shared identity and unity.

- Analysis revealed it to be more than simply 'working' closely with others, there was a fundamental sense of identity and unity which bound them together.

- As two students observed:

- *'Staying with people who come from the same background as me, helps me to cope because they know what I am going through, they understand.'*

- And:

- *'We know we stay in our groups then we can look out for each other, share experiences, and help each other. It helps you start your new life easier, and also makes you feel less lonely.'*

Unity: Actions

- Accommodation Staff in Halls of residence
- Appreciation of the value added by 'Communities of Practice'
- Physically Open Spaces: Green Room, Library, The Hub
- DSU
- International Society
- #DMUGlobal/#DMULocal

Findings: Independence

➡ Data indicated the international students from China see themselves as undergoing a process of identity change during their education in the UK. This change explains how they respond to the challenges they face.

➡ *'When I got here I was young and did not know many things. University should let student know what they don't know and what they should do after they arrive in the UK. There were many things I did not know and have to find myself. Now I know them but it was hard to learn all those things on your own.'*

Independence: Actions

- #DMU4Life
- Student Voice
- Increased Placements
- PGT Progression – still a Struggle

Discussion

- These are not new issues – we have travelled this road in many journeys.
- What progress have we made?
- Why, in 2017 were we still hearing the same stories?
- What are we doing in 2018/19 to mitigate or promote the issues of:
- Communication
- Isolation
- Unity
- Independence