

“The UK lecturers don’t teach me anything”: Chinese students’ expectations of their teachers and implications for UK HE providers.

Introduction

“The teachers here don’t teach me anything,” said Haipeng, sitting in my office one winter afternoon in 1998, in the second month of his Business Administration degree at the University of Wolverhampton. “You are lucky to teach in a British university,” announced a Chinese colleague during a visit to the UK in 1999. “You receive a much higher salary than lecturers in China, but you make the students do all the work. You don’t teach them anything.” Having a role in recruiting students from mainland China, I naturally became concerned that we might be mis-selling UK education. What were these students’ expectations of their teachers? Of themselves as learners? To what extent were these expectations being met, or disappointed? Did the students maintain this sense of dissatisfaction throughout their course, or did their feelings change as their studies progressed?

Working alongside Chinese colleagues in my University’s partner institutions in China over the past eight years has given me many opportunities to observe the interaction of students with their teachers both in and outside the H.E. classroom. In 2002/3 and 2004/5 I conducted small pilot studies among Chinese students in their first year at the University of Wolverhampton. In 2003/4 I interviewed a number of Chinese students and researchers who had been in the UK for more than a year, as the basis for an applicant counselling video. I discussed my findings with colleagues in

China, and with Chinese visiting scholars at the University of Wolverhampton, who also lent their insights and observations about the Chinese students taking part in classes the scholars had attended.

Most students coming to the University of Wolverhampton from mainland China enter directly into the second or final year of an undergraduate degree, or take up places on taught postgraduate programmes. A high proportion of them do not meet the University's English language entrance requirement, so first enrol on a one- or two-semester academic language and study skills programme. My main concern was with those who had already met the English language entrance requirement, and enrolled onto their degree course with a minimum of bridging/acclimatisation. For my pilot investigation I therefore targeted students on a short pre-session course, first by means of a survey questionnaire, followed up in the students' second semester by semi-structured interviews.

The Chinese students on the pre-session course were all proceeding to Language/Communication or Business degrees.¹ Of the sixteen undergraduate students surveyed in 2002/3, nine were from a polytechnic in Guangdong province, five were from a normal university in north-east China and two were from unspecified institutions. Two students from the polytechnic and two from the normal university consented to be interviewed for the pilot study. Of the thirteen students surveyed in 2004/5, ten were undergraduates from a polytechnic in Guangdong province, and three were graduates from universities in north-east and north-west China. Three students from the polytechnic consented to be interviewed. The sample is therefore

¹ Typically Chinese students from other disciplines need some language bridging before they can proceed to a degree course at my university.

too narrow to allow for generalisation to students from other parts of China and other academic disciplines, although the views expressed by interviewees on the pilot studies tallied with those of a wider range of students and researchers interviewed for the counselling video. More importantly, I found that while certain perceptions of Chinese/UK education were common to most respondents, the way the interviewees felt about or dealt with their experience differed widely between individuals. This supports the view that it is inappropriate to stereotype individuals according to their nationality (Stephens 1997; Garrott 1995).

In the sections that follow, I will discuss my findings as to students' expectations of the difference between teaching and learning in China and the UK, and their concept of a 'good' teacher. I will illustrate some of the difficulties that arise from mismatch of expectations and experience, and suggest some of the issues UK HEIs need to bear in mind when addressing these.

Expectations

In response to the question, "In what ways do you think studying in Britain will be different from studying in your home country?" 25 of the 29 Chinese respondents said they thought teaching and learning methods would be different in the UK from in China. 15 went into more detail, writing that they expected students in the UK to be more independent, creative and practical.

You should learn more by yourself.

I think British education attaches more importance to students' creativity and practice, but Chinese education is focused on book knowledge.

I think the education system in the UK is more free. Teachers seldom tell you what to do; you have to figure out everything by yourself.

Students have more freedom to express their own ideas.

When asked at interview how they had acquired these perceptions of UK study while in China, students gave a range of answers. Some had heard from friends who were studying in the UK, or from teachers who had studied here. Others had taken part in applicant counselling sessions led by the International Office in their former institution, or by visiting academics from Wolverhampton. Many had learned about 'western' approaches to study through the Chinese media: overseas study being a popular topic for newspaper articles, radio shows and TV documentaries.

If such a large proportion of students seemingly expected that they would have to study more independently in the UK, why did many complain that "The teachers here don't teach me anything"? What did they perceive the role of the teacher to be?

A good teacher

In response to the survey question, "What is your definition of a good teacher?" 22 of the 29 respondents mentioned personal attributes such as kindness, patience and caring for students. Professional attributes such as knowledge and teaching skill received less mention, and were actually ranked as less important by five respondents.

Nice and kind, always ready to help students to solve their problems. Also must be good at teaching.

Be patient and warm-hearted.

Understanding, know how to communicate with her/his students. Do care about their feelings.

A good teacher knows how to teach in a proper way. She/he appreciates my existence, not only teaches me knowledge but also attitude.

Pastoral issues

The emphasis on the teacher as caring, “patient and warm-hearted” may in part reflect the respondents’ sense of insecurity in their new surroundings and their hope that university staff would be understanding of their difficulties as international students.² Indeed, when asked “How do you think the University could help you overcome [anticipated] problems?” nine respondents wrote that they expected their teachers to help:

If there is a teacher to take care of my problems, it will be very helpful.

If some teachers are available for student matters, it will be good.

² Cf. Xiao and Dyson’s study (1999), which found that the five most important characteristics of a good teacher selected by Accounting students in their home country (specifically Beijing) were related to professional qualities.

However, the emphasis on kindness and caring as attributes of a good teacher also reflects the warmth and closeness of teacher-student relationships in mainland China. According to my observation, there is a far higher degree of social interaction between teachers and students in China than in the UK. Some of this interaction is institutionally managed (and compulsory), e.g. Sports Days, concerts, singing competitions and National Day celebrations, at which staff and students compete/perform alongside each other. More informal interaction is facilitated by the fact that, in most institutions, teachers live on campus (Biggs 1996). In some cases interaction is initiated by teachers through their involvement in extra-curricular student activities, such as preparing students for speech contests or coaching them for sports events. And in other cases it is initiated by students – I have observed that it is common for students to telephone or visit teachers at home during evenings, weekends and holidays.

I could phone or visit my teachers at home, just like friends.

I questioned visiting scholars from the two Chinese institutions represented by my survey participants as to the level of teacher-student interaction outside class, and was told that more than half their students deliberately sought out contact with some (but not all) of their teachers, and that most (but not all) of their colleagues were willing to spend time with their students outside working hours. One visiting scholar volunteered his opinion that some students cultivate relations (*guanxi*) with their teachers as a means to an end: they may see the teacher as a useful contact in securing a job offer or a place on a postgraduate course; or they may simply hope that by befriending the teacher they will improve their scores in the end-of-semester exams.

However the reason most frequently given for the comparative closeness of teacher-student relationships in China is the influence of the Confucian tradition, whereby the teacher “cares for students like a parent.” (Cortazzi and Jin, 1997: 85). Like a parent, the teacher is responsible not only for his/her charges’ intellectual development, but also for their moral, physical and behavioural training (Xiao and Dyson, 1999; Ting, 2000; Gao and Watkins, 2001). The teacher acts as a role model or *shibiao*, and may be sought out by students for counselling on a variety of non-academic issues ranging from careers advice to relationship problems.

This raises the question as to how Chinese students cope with pastoral support mechanisms in the UK. There are various aspects to this issue:

Office hours: at one of the University of Wolverhampton’s Chinese partner institutions, academic staff are expected to be in their office and available to students at all times during working hours except when teaching or in a staff meeting. This is not typical of other Chinese HEIs, but generally students in China can go to see academic staff outside class time without making an appointment (Pratt et al, 1999). Many Chinese students in the UK find it difficult to understand the concept of specified office hours or the need for an appointments system, especially if they can see that the lecturer they want to speak to is actually in the office but unavailable. According to one of my survey respondents,

[a good teacher] “must be very easygoing, kind and *like to help students solve problems at any time.*” (my italics)

Specialisation: generally speaking, student support in the UK is more diverse and specialist than in China. We have international officers, accommodation officers, finance officers, personal tutors, academic counsellors, study skills advisors, careers advisors, a student counselling service, academic misconduct and appeals officers... In China many of these roles would be subsumed under that of the *banzhuren*, a non-teaching member of academic staff (often a recent graduate) assigned to each class (*ban*) whose responsibilities include arranging and monitoring attendance at student activities; disciplining students for misconduct (e.g. being late for class or missing the bedtime curfew); acting as a troubleshooter and front-line counsellor for a host of issues. In the words of one interviewee:

The UK 'specialist' system is OK for you, but we don't know which special person we have to talk to.

Affective issues: as shown above, many students in China like to develop affective bonds with certain of their teachers that extend beyond the boundaries of the classroom and office. This desire may become even more pronounced in a foreign country, where the need to develop friendships with locals can be seen as a corollary of success.³ Sadly, many Chinese students live in self-imposed ghettos, finding it hard to build relationships with 'foreigners.' A sympathetic teacher may be seen in some cases as the only approachable native speaker on whom the student can practise his/her English. While some interviewees described UK lecturers as friendly, helpful and approachable, others felt we had less time for students than our Chinese counterparts:

³ Six of my 29 survey respondents cited making friends with people of other nationalities as one of their aims in choosing to study in Britain, and 17 said they hoped to improve their English through contact with local people.

The teachers here are always so busy: I feel I'm interrupting them if I drop in for a chat.

Teachers in the UK care more about their leisure time – they don't want to be disturbed after work.⁴

Staff workload: as a consequence, students will gravitate to the more approachable or physically available of their teachers, who often end up unofficially taking on the burden of their colleagues' tutees. Managers need to be aware of this issue and address it through staff development and/or reallocation of resources.

Teaching and learning issues

However the perennial grumble that “The teachers here don't teach me anything,” refers not so much to the comparative lack of emotional nurturing and moral guidance provided by UK lecturers, as to the lecture content and delivery methods used in UK HE institutions. To quote my interviewees:

In China, we have to follow the teacher...the teacher will tell us what to do, which book to read...In the UK, we have to follow our own mind, be independent.

In China, the teacher gives more knowledge, and writes important things on the blackboard...In Britain, the teacher gives you one word; then you have to go away and find a paragraph, a chart to explain it.

⁴ When I asked this student what she meant by “after work”, she answered, “after 5pm, at weekends and in the holidays.”

Most teachers in Britain won't tell you the answer, they'll just tell you how to find it...it's different from in China...British teachers force you to study yourself, to work on your own.⁵

The differences between teaching and learning approaches in South-East Asia and in 'western' countries are well documented (e.g. Cortazzi and Jin, 1997; Pratt et al, 1999). A few of the differences are summarised below. I have presented them as bipolar contrasts because that is often how they seem to Chinese and UK students and teachers grappling with cultural differences, but I concur with Ballard's caveat that to do so is simplistic, overly black-and-white, and may lead to stereotyping (Ballard, 1996).

The status of knowledge

In China (certainly at undergraduate level), knowledge is typically presented as a monolithic entity which must be mastered and understood before it can be applied or analysed. The learning focus is therefore on the assimilation of information and 'correct answers' which should be learned by heart, not questioned (Su et al, 1994; Xiao and Dyson, 1999). The most frequent concern expressed by lecturers teaching Chinese students at my university is that the students lack critical and analytical skills required for success on final-year undergraduate and postgraduate courses.⁶ At the same time students may feel baffled by their UK lecturers' insistence on this:

In this week, I learned something new for me that is about the Critical Analytical Thinking. I found it difficult to accept this kind of thinking system because we rarely did this before...I wonder why the Europeans always try to doubt what the others said

⁵ Cf Samuelowicz (1987: 123) and Zhang et al (1999:6)

⁶ Cf Samuelowicz (1987); Ballard (1996); Pearson and Beasley (1996)

by critical thinking. In my traditional culture, we prefer believing what we saw and heard in the books and media to thinking about it in a different way. I think that is one of the differences between the British and Chinese culture (Lv Kai: 2005 Learner Journal: quoted with permission).

Because knowledge is monolithic, it is common and shared, rather than the property of any particular individual. This occasions widely differing practices when it comes to referring to another's work. Typically, students writing an undergraduate dissertation in China are advised (but not required) to state their sources at the end of the dissertation; however they are not required (or taught) to use quotation marks, paraphrase and in-text referencing within the body of their work. For an undergraduate essay, no form of referencing is required at all. Students on taught postgraduate courses in China may or may not be introduced to 'western' academic writing conventions, but it is common to see university textbooks and scholarly articles published in China which carry little or no referencing, while quoting verbatim (and at length) from others' work (comments by participants on an academic writing workshop at Shenzhen Polytechnic, 14.05.2004).

This causes problems for Chinese students in the UK, especially when they are under pressure to meet assignment deadlines. The lack of a sufficiently wide vocabulary and grammar manipulation skills make paraphrasing a challenge, and students frequently wonder why they should have to use their own words when the author they are referring to puts things so much better. My impression is that the misapplication or transgression of 'western' academic writing conventions is the single greatest cause of failure by Chinese students at my university.

The source of knowledge

In China the main source of knowledge is the teacher. The teacher's role is to present and expound the textbook. The student's role is to listen to the teacher and memorise/internalise the textbook (Xiao and Dyson 1999; Pratt et al, 1999). On undergraduate courses, students usually have one (or at the most two) textbooks per course element. Although Chinese HEIs are investing heavily in learning resources, and the acquisition of e-libraries is opening up a wealth of hitherto inaccessible scholarship, students are not encouraged to make full use of these new resources, as the assessment system does not demand this (see below).

This can pose a challenge for Chinese students when, in the UK, they are required to seek information from a variety of sources, and present it in a seminar, or to debate which is the better of two or more opposing theories. Furthermore, while UK lecturers may see themselves as facilitators of learning and co-participants with students in the learning process, Chinese students may feel uncomfortable viewing their peers as teachers. I have frequently observed Chinese students chatting together in class while another student is giving a presentation or answering a question from the teacher; however they pay attention immediately the teacher begins to speak. One student (on a language course) actually told me: "Why should I listen to my classmates' mistakes? I want to hear what the teacher has to say."⁷

Assessment

⁷ This reflects a focus on the *product* of learning, i.e. correctness/knowledge as the main goal of education. In UK HE there is often more emphasis on the *process* of learning and on fostering the skills of enquiry necessary for independent research. Thus when in a UK seminar, the lecturer asks a question, her/his aim is to encourage students to verbalise their thought processes rather than to elicit a 'right answer.' But the Chinese student may be afraid to respond in case (s)he gets the answer 'wrong.'

Learning behaviour and outcomes are closely related to the assessment system, which is why this has been a focus for intense debate, experimentation and reform in China for millennia.

Although our Chinese partner institutions are introducing assessed coursework into parts of their curriculum, the main emphasis is still on the end-of-semester exam, which requires students to demonstrate their mastery of the knowledge gained from the teacher/textbook. The greater emphasis on coursework in the UK, and the range and nature of assignments, can cause anxiety for students from China.

In China, we seldom write long essays. In China, the final year project is 3,000 words long; here, it's 10,000 words.

In China, we don't need to hand in a lot of assignments. In the UK, we have to read many books and websites to do just one assignment.

Typically they require (but do not always get) more intensive and explicit support from teachers and supervisors than would be normal for a local student:

I need my dissertation supervisor to give me more specific help. Maybe general advice is enough for UK students, because they know what's going on. But writing a dissertation is very different in the UK from in China.

Classroom interaction

Much has been written on the differences between South-East Asian and 'Western' learners viz classroom interaction, with the former being typified as 'passive' and the latter as 'active' (e.g. Samuelowicz, 1987; Su et al, 1994). I frequently hear Chinese

students in the UK refer to themselves as passive compared with their local/European peers, and Chinese visiting scholars auditing classes in Wolverhampton also observe that Chinese students participate less actively than local/European students.

The Chinese students are lazier than other foreign students.

Though given more chances to participate due to the small class size, the students were generally still reluctant to join in class activities unless specifically prompted by the teacher (Zou, 2005).

However there is nothing in my experience to indicate that Chinese students are more or less actively involved in the learning process than their European counterparts, and I would like to suggest that the perceived difference is one of classroom etiquette in the respective cultures rather than a deeper issue of approaches to learning.⁸

Classes in China are typically teacher-led. The teacher orchestrates the entire proceedings and students rarely challenge the teacher, or ask questions in class. Several reasons can be suggested for this:

The teacher is the source of knowledge which must not be challenged or questioned (Su et al, 1994; Ballard, 1996).

To challenge or question the teacher may imply a lack of faith in/respect for his/her expertise, with corresponding loss of face for him/her (Cortazzi and Jin, 1997; Xiao and Dyson, 1999).

The teacher has to get through a certain amount of material in the class period, in order to prepare students for the exam. With classes of 40-60 students,

⁸ See Volet et al (1994: 314)

interruptions are discouraged – otherwise how could the teacher complete the syllabus in time? (Su et al, 1994; Gao and Watkins, 2001).

However none of the above implies that students are passive. I have observed lessons in China which were entirely teacher-led, but where the classroom fairly sizzled with the energy of intense concentration. Moreover the fact that students do not ask questions in class does not mean that they are not interested or engaged in the content of the lesson. It is common to see students clustering round the teacher with questions *after* the lesson has finished, or continuing the discussion as they help carry the teacher's belongings back to the staffroom.

Teachers in the UK like students to ask questions during the class. But in China, teachers like students to ask questions after the class.

When it comes to elicitation by the teacher in class, students in China typically do not volunteer answers, but wait for the teacher to address them by name. In many HE institutions they are required to stand up when addressing the teacher. It is considered the height of bad manners to shout out the answer to a question, unless the teacher is encouraging collective choral response.

Students coming from this and similar backgrounds commonly experience discomfort when, in the UK, they are expected to address their teacher by his/her first name, challenge the teacher and other students in class, have their views challenged in return, ask questions in front of other students, and volunteer answers without being personally invited to do so (Ballard 1996: 158; Zhang et al 1999: 7). Difficulties may therefore arise when 'active' (i.e. verbal) participation in class is linked to assessment.

This is not to say that students do not enjoy the change: in some cases it is accompanied by a sense of liberation:

In the UK, we can discuss with the teacher directly in class, but in China the teacher speaks more. In the UK, we feel free to learn things.

Outcomes

The potential discomfort caused by the mismatch of Chinese students' expectations and experience of UK HE raises two related questions:

1. To what extent should teachers in UK HE modify their delivery methods and style to account for the educational background, expectations and preferences of Chinese (or South-East Asian) students?
2. How can UK HEIs minimise Chinese/South-East Asian students' academic culture shock and help them to adjust to the new education milieu?

It is beyond the scope of this paper to address these issues in depth: however I will suggest a few points for discussion:

To what extent should teachers in UK HE modify their delivery methods and style to account for the educational background, expectations and preferences of Chinese (or South-East Asian) students?

Attitudes to this issue range from "If students want to be taught in the same way as they would be in China, why spend so much money on coming to the UK?" to 'valuing' (Zhang et al, 1999) the experience and culture of international students

through a process of ‘cultural synergy’ (Cortazzi and Jin, 1997). Somewhere in between lie the views of staff who recognise the need to adapt their teaching to the needs of international students (especially on courses where these form a large proportion of the student cohort) but are concerned that doing so will compromise academic standards (Ballard, 1996). Where extra academic support is required, for example extra tutorial support for assignments, to what extent are managers prepared to fund this? A further dimension, as the education market changes, is a shift towards delivery of UK courses overseas. While UK teaching styles and methods may be appropriate in the UK context, how applicable – and saleable – will they be to monolingual and relatively homogeneous classes in China?

My own feelings on this issue are equivocal. On the one hand, colleagues at the University of Wolverhampton who have modified their teaching methods, content or support systems to take account of the needs of their Chinese students tell me that the change has been beneficial to other overseas students and even to UK natives.⁹ On the other hand, the Chinese students and researchers I interviewed in their second semester or later were almost overwhelmingly positive about their experience of teaching and learning in the UK. Only one interlocutor (also a friend and a colleague) told me she felt she had “learned a lot, but it was in spite of my lecturers, not because of them.” Other students said

We have to deal with everything in the UK...In China, our parents and teachers help us a lot...It's a good thing; the ability of our life (sic) will become strong.

⁹ See also Samuelowicz 1987: 128; Pearson and Beasley 1996: 9.

In China, if I don't understand something, the teacher will tell me the answer. It's more convenient...but in Britain the teachers force you to study yourself, to work things out on your own. This way you can get more experience, learn how to do things for yourself.

After a year in Wolverhampton, I have learned how to think for myself.

It would appear that after an initial culture shock and acculturation period, Chinese students adjust successfully and begin to appreciate their increased independence, freedom and responsibility in study. If this is the case, *should* UK HEIs modify their delivery methods? Or should they expect Chinese students to adapt to them, and how?

How can UK HEIs minimise Chinese/South-East Asian students' academic culture shock and help them to adjust to the new education milieu?

My main purpose in conducting the two small pilot studies among Chinese students was to try to ascertain what stages they went through in their journey towards academic success in the UK. I thought if the students could tell me what strategies they had used for coping with the demands of UK HE, and which people/factors had been most helpful to them, we would be able to replicate these strategies and maximise the factors to ensure the smoothest possible transition to UK HE for all our international students from similar backgrounds. My aim was to be thwarted.

None of the students I interviewed could tell me what stages they went through in their adaptation or what strategies they used. None of them had any advice for the University in how to help international students to do this: they felt the University was

already doing enough. Basically, they said, it was up to the students themselves to make the effort.

The main problem is myself, not the University. It's up to me.

If you don't get used to it, you can understand nothing. The shortest way to solve a problem is to *do* it.

Reading in a foreign language is hard, but you *have to do* it. Bit by bit you will improve.

We know we have a lot of assignments...we *have to do* them step by step...we *have to* try our best.

I think the most important thing for us to do is adjust ourselves psychologically; secondly just to *do* the work. Most difficulties are caused by laziness.

When I had just arrived, I felt very cold, very hungry; I had no friends, I missed my family; I didn't want to spend one more day here: I wanted to go back to China. I told myself: You *have to* adjust. You are starting your new life. What you *have to do* is study. In class, don't think you are not an excellent student. You are learning. English students speak English very well. Don't be afraid. You are learning. I know it's not easy to do, but you *have to do* it. (my italics)

My interviewees' response indicates that we should be wary of promoting a problem-centred 'deficit model' of international students (Volet and Renshaw, 1996: 206; Pelletier, 2003). But by ending on this note, I am not suggesting that there is no place for intervention. The many, diverse and creative ways of easing the transition to UK HE for students from South-East Asia is the focus of other papers at this conference.

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