

Meeting the needs of Chinese students in British Higher Education

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Executive summary

Chinese students now form a large proportion of international students in the universities of the English-speaking world. Competition between the 'inner-circle' English-speaking countries (Australia, Canada, the UK and USA) is fierce with all the major players expressing concern about the effectiveness of their recruitment efforts. Based on the experiences of a wide range of university teachers and administrators in the UK, this report explores issues in providing effective higher education for students from the People's Republic of China.

The main findings are presented in two parts: pastoral issues and academic issues. The findings are contextualized with reference to discussion of related issues in the growing literature on international students, in general, and Chinese students, in particular.

Pastoral issues

Various pastoral concerns were identified, including the challenges of adjustment faced by students on arrival, the perceived isolation of Chinese students, and the anxieties of some students in relation to health care.

Adjustment problems

International students are often lonely, isolated and vulnerable; they are also confronted with different cultural conventions. In this situation, misunderstandings are common and the negotiation of relationships can be particularly challenging.

Attempts by universities to provide emotional support are often piecemeal and uncoordinated. Some institutions operate 'family networks' where second year students are 'parents' and third year students 'grandparents'. 'Buddy' schemes are also relatively common. Religious groups both within and outside the university tend to be particularly proactive, meeting and greeting new students at the airport, sharing meals and special occasions.

Friendship networks with students from a similar cultural background play an important role in adjustment to the new environment. Associations of Chinese students operate on most campuses, with more experienced students well placed to offer practical advice and support to newcomers. There is also an active UK China Students and Scholars Association.

Perceived isolation of Chinese students

In spite of a strong desire to take an active part in the university life, there is a natural tendency to seek out other Chinese students who have a better understanding both of students' previous experiences and of the challenges now facing them. In many cases, Chinese students seek to live alongside their compatriots. Cultural practices accentuate the differences; cooking and sharing meals, important leisure activities for Chinese, sometimes place them at odds with home students.

Health

Given that Chinese and Western medical traditions have developed in quite different ways, it is not surprising that there should be difficulties in meeting the expectations of Chinese students and misunderstandings between British health professionals and Chinese students. Focus group discussions indicated that health care is indeed a recurring problem for Chinese students. Various reasons for a reluctance to make use of the British health care system were identified,

including communication difficulties, mistrust of differences in approach, and limited understanding of how to access health care.

Academic issues

Some of the issues identified as affecting the academic performance of Chinese students were clearly related to cultural differences which can be explained in terms of the Confucian ideology; many were rooted in the limited understanding of British academics of the cultural expectations of Chinese students.

Student-teacher relationships

The fact that the Confucian view of the relationship between students and teachers is very different from the view of western university teachers gives rise to misunderstanding on both sides. Chinese members of the focus groups confirmed that the perception of lecturers as too busy and uncaring is widespread in the UK. For their part, university teachers tend to perceive attempts on the part of Chinese students to engage their attention outside the classroom and office hours as demanding.

Study skills

The match between the learning strategies encouraged in China and the study skills explicitly taught in British schools and universities is limited. Skills considered important in a British context include the ability to read critically, to form arguments and to structure essays and reports. While report and essay writing appear to cause fewer problems, critical analysis and problem solving are often identified as areas of weakness. Oral presentation was another area for concern.

Plagiarism

In the west, plagiarism is perceived by some as a violation of the author and is considered to be morally wrong. This worldview stands in contrast with the post-modern view that texts involve a recycling of words and ideas rather than the production of something wholly original. While there was uncertainty as to the best way of dealing with this issue, there was an awareness of the developmental nature of plagiarism in international students and the need for sympathetic understanding of the causes which gives rise to it.

Group work

There was awareness that group work is a new experience for Chinese students. There was also uneasiness about all Chinese and predominantly Chinese groups, particularly when this gave rise to the use of Chinese in discussion. The general consensus, however, was that the 'engineering' of groups was unproductive and that, in some situations at least, the use of Chinese can be helpful in developing students' understanding of basic concepts.

Competence in English

There was broad support for solutions which gave due recognition to the additional hurdles faced by Chinese and other non-native speakers of English. Yet, at the same time, there was deep-seated concern about the vexed question of 'maintaining standards'.

Students with limited proficiency are forced to rely on native speakers: tutors, supervisors, friends or those providing commercial services. In all these cases, however, it is unclear how much intervention is acceptable. Another issue concerns the familiarity of the 'editor' with the

subject matter. The fact someone is a native speaker does not mean they have access to the specialist vocabulary and discourses associated with a given subject. A third issue concerns resources: providing language support for essays and dissertations is both demanding and time-consuming.

There is a growing trend towards collaboration between university teachers and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) support staff to meet the subject specific needs of international students. Many teachers, however, have no knowledge of the support available within their institutions.

Implications

In order to ensure that British universities maintain their share of the China market, it is essential to address student needs holistically. Fundamental to this process is the need for both sides to develop a conscious awareness of cultural differences which may lead to misunderstandings on the level of both the pastoral and the academic. It is important to identify - and, if necessary, create - appropriate fora and structures where issues of this kind can be explored.

While there are objective differences between the preferred learning styles in Chinese and western universities, it is important not to lose sight of Chinese student's ability to adapt to the expectations of the new system. It is also important to avoid labeling students who use different learning styles as problems to be solved. If Chinese students are to achieve their full potential, they need to be viewed as an asset - and not a liability.

Suggestions for practical ways forward to achieve this end are set out in the recommendations which follow.

Recommendations

General

1. Chinese students share many concerns, such as the emotional challenges of adjusting to a new setting, with other international students but also have specific needs, often related to their Confucian heritage. Universities need to explore ways of addressing both the general and the specific.
2. There is an urgent need for both British and Chinese to develop a conscious awareness of differences which may lead to cross-cultural misunderstandings.
3. The International Office needs to take a co-ordinating role both in addressing issues of this kind through staff training, and in monitoring the delivery of such provision.
4. Chinese students need to be introduced to these issues as part of the induction process. Information can be shared with the wider student body through Students' Unions and Students' Services.
5. The bicultural and bilingual awareness of colleagues who have studied and worked in British universities allows them to serve as a very effective bridge between Chinese students and British teachers and students. Such colleagues should be involved in the planning and delivery of training and induction to ensure that all perspectives are fully represented.

Pastoral issues

1. Academic issues cannot be seen in isolation from other aspects of the student experience. Pastoral issues need careful attention if Chinese students are to fulfil their potential.
2. **Induction** should be considered as a process extending over several months rather than a single event or series of events at the start of courses.
 - 2.1. In the early stages, students are likely to be overloaded with information. It is unrealistic to rely solely on student handbooks and other documents.
3. International students are often lonely, isolated and vulnerable. Universities also need to approach the issue of providing emotional support in a coordinated way. Practical ideas for supporting new arrivals might include:
 - 3.1. 'family networks' where second year students are 'parents' and third year students 'grandparents'
 - 3.2. buddy schemes which encourage empathy for the situation of newcomers and create opportunities for longer and deeper relationships
 - 3.3. an email forum on the home page of the International Office to allow new students to make contact before they leave China for the UK.
4. No one set of *living arrangements* will suit all students. Some will want to live alongside other Chinese students; others will prefer to be integrated with home and other international students.
 - 4.1. Wherever possible a kitchen should be set aside to be booked by students wanting to prepare meals for larger groups.
 - 4.2. Student handbooks/hall regulations could include a discussion of the etiquette of using communal kitchens, with the recommendation that anyone intending to invite friends should consult with others sharing the kitchen.

Health

1. Chinese students are likely to encounter communication difficulties in medical encounters, to be suspicious of differences in approach, and have a limited understanding of how to access health care. Practical approaches to these problems may include:
 - 1.1. Encouraging those in a pastoral role to have a sympathetic understanding of the problems from the perspective of the student
 - 1.2. Providing information on access to health care and common problems as part of the induction process.
 - 1.3. Noting that the fact that information has been *given* does not mean that information has been *received*. Opportunities to revisit key points need to be offered at regular intervals during the course.

Academic issues

1. Misunderstandings about the nature of *teacher-student relationships* are common. In order to avoid frustration, confusion and even hostility, these issues should be addressed, both in staff training and in student induction.
2. *Learning styles* encouraged in China map poorly on to the study skills expected in the UK. In the Chinese education system imitation through repetition is considered the route to understanding and creativity. British universities stress the ability read critically, to form arguments and to structure essays and reports.
 - 2.1. Chinese students and British teachers need a clear understanding of differences in learning styles
 - 2.2. Modeling is an important teaching strategy for helping students make the transition from Chinese to Western learning strategies.
3. Plagiarism cannot simply be treated as a set of rules and associated penalties.
 - 3.1. Teachers need to understand that attitudes towards plagiarism vary between cultures and that most Chinese students involved in plagiarist practices are not intentionally trying to defraud the system.
 - 3.2. Students may need time to appreciate that practices which ensured success in China are viewed negatively in the UK. It may be useful to look on plagiarism a transitional phase or as a coping strategy in the very early stages of the course.
 - 3.3. There is a need for explicit instruction on referencing and support for paraphrasing
 - 3.4. Demonstrations of the ways in which technology can be used to detect plagiarist practices underline the seriousness with which this issue is treated in British universities.
4. Chinese students are unfamiliar with group work. In order to be persuaded of its usefulness, teachers need to explain very clearly, the aim of any task, what students are expected to accomplish and how their contribution will be assessed.
5. Teachers need to think carefully about the purpose of group work and the composition of the group.
6. There will be some occasions when it will be important for students to use English and other occasions when they should have the freedom to deepen their understanding of concepts through discussion in Chinese.

Competence in English

1. Teachers need to understand that IELTS scores are an imperfect measure of a student's ability to cope with the demands of university level courses.
2. Chinese students cannot be treated in the same way as native speakers. Universities have a responsibility to adapt to the differing needs of international students, rather than trying to make them fit into existing structures. However, there is also considerable uncertainty as to what kinds of adaptation are appropriate. Universities need to establish a forum where teachers can discuss issues such as:
 - 2.1. Modifications to existing assessment procedures
 - 2.2. How much intervention is appropriate in the editing of students' work.
3. Universities need to think strategically about the different kinds of language support for international students: in addition to pre-sessional courses, and in-sessional support in areas such as writing, collaboration should be encouraged between EAP tutors and subject specialists in areas such as
 - 3.1. the identification and teaching of specialist vocabulary
 - 3.2. the tasks students are expected to perform
 - 3.3. the form assessments take.

Introduction

Rong Hong, reputedly the first Chinese overseas student, graduated from Yale University in the 1850s (Yao, 2004). An estimated 130,000 further students found their way to universities abroad in the years that followed until Mao Ze Dong's policy of self-reliance stemmed the flow for thirty years (Wei 2002). Although some limited movement resumed following the economic reforms of 1978, it was not until 1993 that the Chinese government adopted a policy of active support for study abroad. Chinese students now represent a large section of the market for transnational education, with demand forecast to grow annually by 15 per cent (CEDA 2005).

It would be a serious mistake to treat Chinese-speaking students as a homogeneous group. Although bound by a common Confucian heritage, there are important differences, for instance, between the more economically developed Hong Kong, Taiwan and eastern coast cities of the People's Republic, and less developed areas such as the North Western provinces. However, by far the largest numbers of ethnic Chinese in British universities come from the more affluent regions of the People's Republic.

Chinese students decide to study in British and other western universities overseas in response to a complex mix of pull and push factors (Altbach 2004; Ingleson, 2004). Pull factors include lower communications costs, growing economic integration, and the recognition by British, Australian and New Zealand governments that revenue from international students can be used to reduce local expenditure on higher education. Growing numbers of institutions now see themselves as serving not just local and national, but also international communities. Universities in Australia, the UK, the US and Europe are actively exploring a range of possibilities, including campuses overseas, the linking of the home campus to one or more satellite campuses, and twinning arrangements where part or all of a course is completed overseas.

Push factors include the growing prosperity of China; the limited capacity of Chinese universities, particularly at postgraduate level; and the perception of universities in the north as powerful and prestigious. The competition for university places in China is fierce: fewer than 10 per cent of those taking the national university entry examination were successful before 1999 (Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, 2004). For this reason, overseas universities have been particularly attractive for wealthy families whose children might experience difficulty in obtaining a place in China. But by no means all Chinese students come from affluent backgrounds. Two thirds of students - most undergraduates and many postgraduates - report that their own and family funds pay for their study (Altbach 2004: 2). Particularly since the one-child policy, children have become a precious commodity and families are often prepared to make considerable personal sacrifices as they invest in a son or daughter's future. The case of Li Keji from Guagzhou, reported in the *South China Morning Post* (Anon, 2004) is typical. Li Keji's parents, a carpenter and a factory quality controller, spent their savings so that she could study for an MA in public administration at the University of York. Li Keji works 20 hours a week in a restaurant to help pay for her living expenses.

Estimates of the numbers of students outside their home countries in 2025 range from three million (Ingleson, 2004) to eight million (Altbach, 2004), with the main demand for English language education in the 'inner circle'ⁱ English-speaking countries of the US, the UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. Current estimates may well prove overly optimistic (Goh, 2004). Average starting salaries and increasing competition in China are leading many people to question the added value associated with an overseas qualification; rapidly increasing capacity in higher education in China is also likely to reduce the demand for courses overseas. For the foreseeable future, however, China will remain a very important source of international students.

Competition is fierce with all the major players expressing concern about the effectiveness of their recruitment efforts. The headline of the 6 August *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, for instance,

ⁱ A term coined by Kachru (1985)

reads: 'Are Chinese students losing interest in Canada?' (Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, 2004). In a similar vein, Abusalem (2005) recognizes the competitive edge offered by the low cost of education in Australia but draws attention to the need to address questions of quality. In contrast, in an analysis of British strengths and weaknesses, Goh (2004), acknowledges the fact that the cost of education in the UK is the highest of the inner circle English-speaking countries, but celebrates the successful marketing of the brand messages - *welcoming, accessible* and *new world class*.

The context for the present study

Researchers at the National Centre for Language and Literacy (NCLL) at the University of Reading where the current project is based first became aware of issues facing Chinese students in 1995 when An Ran, co-author of this report, arrived as a visiting scholar sponsored by the China Ministry of Education. She extended her stay to undertake a PhD on the experiences of Mainland Chinese families of British education (An Ran, 1999). Building on the issues explored in this thesis, a course on 'Meeting the needs of Chinese students' was first offered as part of a programme of post-professional development at NCLL in 2000, and repeated until An Ran returned to take up a position in China in 2004. Two recurrent features of these courses pointed to the need for further investigation: the first concerned unease among participants that they were failing to deliver the British brand messages; the second concerned the growing body of experience in British higher education of working Chinese students. Our aim was therefore to explore more systematically the issues in providing effective higher education for students from the People's Republic of China, and to disseminate information on good practice in institutions across the UK.

A one-day workshop funded by the Sino-British Trust was held at the University of Reading in April 2005. It drew on representatives from a wide range of British universities who had attended previous courses on 'Meeting the Needs of Chinese students' at NCLL; their experience encompassed both teaching and pastoral support. During the workshop, participants were divided into two focus groups, facilitated by the authors of this report and following standard procedures (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). In the first focus group, academic issues were considered by participants involved pre-sessional English courses, foundation courses, professional development for teachers of English, and undergraduate and postgraduate courses in subjects which tend to attract large numbers of Chinese students, such as Business and Management, Economics and Finance. In the second focus group, participants with experience of counselling, personal development planning with students, liaison with colleges in China, and the organization of induction and orientation, considered pastoral issues. Recognizing that, in some cases, the same individuals are involved in both academic support and pastoral care, members of both groups took part in a final plenary session where the main findings of the earlier discussion were reported and taken further. The workshop included both British and Chinese participants.

The analysis which follows was undertaken using HyperResearch, a cross-platform software package for the analysis of qualitative data, with issues allowed to emerge from, rather than being imposed on, transcripts of the focus group discussions. The main findings are presented in two parts: pastoral issues and academic issues. The findings are contextualized with reference to discussion of related issues in the growing literature on international students, in general, and Chinese students, in particular.

Pastoral concerns

For most Chinese studying abroad, the main motivation is instrumental - to acquire a prestigious qualification which will greatly increase their opportunities and status on return to China. It would be short sighted, however, to consider academic issues in isolation from other aspects of the student experience. Various pastoral concerns were identified in the focus group discussions, including the challenges of adjustment faced by students on arrival, the perceived isolation of Chinese student, and anxieties of some students in relation to health care.

Adjustment problems

The early days of a new course at a new university in a new country are exciting; they can also be extremely stressful and traumatic. Universities routinely address a range of practical matters through student induction and orientation. Procedures seem to be in place on issues such as letters of introduction for students wanting to open a bank account, and information on services is clearly set out in a range of documents. Some concern, however, was expressed about the dangers of over-reliance on student handbooks and induction. In the early stages, students are likely to be overloaded with information. It is also important that induction be considered as a process extending over several months rather than a single event or series of events at the start of courses.

International students are often lonely, isolated and vulnerable; they are also confronted with different cultural conventions. In this situation, misunderstandings are common and the negotiation of relationships can be particularly challenging. Some participants reported, for instance, that help offered routinely as part of their jobs was interpreted as friendship:

My job is international marketing and recruitment. I find that as part of follow-up with students I have met overseas, I get regular emails. Just chitchat: "What did you do at the weekend? What are your hobbies? Where do you like to go shopping? That would be on a regular basis. Then when they get to the university they come to see me every day for the first couple of weeks because I am the one person they know and they latch on to me.

Occasionally, differences in perceptions between Chinese and British students affected relationships between sexes. A student counsellor reported two separate instances of young women who found themselves in difficulties:

The men were trying to push them sexually where they didn't want to go. And it was only at that point that they realized what was going on and it was very difficult for them to handle.

Attempts on the part of universities to provide emotional support are often piecemeal and uncoordinated. Some universities operate 'family networks' where second year students are 'parents' and third year students 'grandparents'; although set up initially for home students, they have enormous potential for supporting overseas students. 'Buddy' schemes are also relatively common, with some universities offering home students payment for spending time initially with new arrivals. The long-term success of these schemes depends of course, on factors such as the level of investment on the part of the university and the commitment of the home students. Religious groups both within and outside the university tend to be particularly proactive, meeting and greeting new students at the airport, sharing meals and special occasions. Although some concern was expressed about the potential proselytising of vulnerable groups of students, there was no evidence that this was a problem.

Friendship networks with students from a similar cultural background play an important role in adjustment to the new environment (see, for instance, O'Donoghue, 1996; Furnham, 1997). When students arrive in a new country, feelings of isolation are often aggravated by communication difficulties. Depression is a common reaction when faced with life changing situations of this magnitude. Very few Chinese students take advantage of counselling services, since this is very much a western concept. There is a natural tendency, rather, to seek support from other Chinese students who have a better understanding both of students' previous experiences and of the challenges now facing them:

Initially you want to spend more time mixing with different nationalities. But gradually you feel deep inside that you want to speak with people from your own country... To satisfy the deeper feeling, you want to talk in more depth and to exchange information as well.

Associations of Chinese students operate on most campuses, with more experienced students well placed to offer practical advice and support to newcomers. There is also an active UK China Student and Scholars Association which operates on a national level. *Guan xi* ('networks') is a useful concept in helping to explain the level of mutual support offered by Chinese students. The number and quality of *guan xi* connections determines a person's social status. Each party has the right to make demands on the other and, in order to avoid losing face, also has an obligation to respond to these demands. As ESI (1998-2001) explains:

The two concepts, "face" and *guan-xi*, refer to two aspects of a single social pattern. An individual is evaluated in terms of his social position, i.e. in terms of his personal power. This power is referred to as "face" or the amount of face. Face is measured in terms of *guan xi* - the number and the quality of the connections.

While the network relations of students arriving in the UK are necessarily far more diffuse than they would have been in China, the concept of *guan xi* is nonetheless useful in understanding the survival strategies of Chinese students. Focus group participants also identified ways in which universities could facilitate such networking: an email forum on the home page of the International Office, for instance, would allow new students to make contact with others at the same university before departure.

Perceived isolation of Chinese students

While other Chinese students are clearly an important source of emotional support, the tendency of Chinese students to seek out the company of their compatriots is sometimes perceived as a contributory factor in British students' reluctance to invest in cross-cultural friendship. In the words of one participant: 'Students of one nationality who remain in a group make it intimidating and difficult for even one British student breaking those ranks'. Segregation in the teaching situation will be discussed below. For present purposes, the focus will be on the situation outside the classroom.

There is, of course, a great deal of variation between students and, while some find a sense of security in an all-Chinese group, others want to venture further afield. As one Chinese participant with recent experience as a postgraduate student commented:

I have stayed here over three years. I could never want to be with Chinese all the time because I came here to study English. I don't want to stay with Chinese, speaking Chinese all day. A lot of students come here and want a different life style.

It is also important to bear in mind the enormous pressures on Chinese students to succeed: enrolment on a UK course has often involved the family in enormous financial sacrifices. Participants reported comments from Chinese students such as: "I came here to study. I would love to have the time to do other things but I have got so much work to do, so much reading". Yet, in spite of a strong desire to take an active part in the university life, many students find other Chinese the most accessible source of support.

In many cases, for instance, Chinese students seek to live alongside their countrymen, a tendency which provoked a great deal of comment from focus group participants. Universities seem undecided as to whether it is in the best interests of Chinese students to be placed together or separated. Chinese students are also sometimes ambivalent:

All the Chinese students wanted to live together or live next door to each other. On the one hand, they say they want to improve their English: 'We want to live with British students'; but, on the other hand, they say: 'We want to know that other Chinese students are in the block'.

Cultural practices accentuate the differences. Although cooking and sharing meals are important leisure activities for Chinese - and indeed many other groups of students - these

activities sometimes place them at odds with home students. This applies even when Chinese students have deliberately decided to seek accommodation with mixed groups of students:

Two or three of them will come in and cook one meal together. The English students will come in one at a time and go to the freezer and get their frozen chips and things one at a time. *And they don't do the washing up after them!*

Let's say you have a situation where eight to 12 people share a kitchen. Say half are Chinese and half British or mixed nationalities. One of the problems is that Chinese students want to cook together and quite often the cooking and socializing seem to happen from 11.30 to 2 o'clock in the morning. We have more complaints about that than anything else.

One of the practical suggestions to emerge from focus group discussions was the possibility of setting aside kitchen space to be booked by students wanting to prepare meals for larger groups. It was also suggested that student handbooks could include a discussion of the etiquette of using communal kitchens, with the recommendation that anyone intending to invite friends should consult with others sharing the kitchen. In this way, 'If they invite their friends to cook a meal they are likely to talk to and get permission, or even invite their flat mate. So there will be less tension'.

Another, albeit less frequent, cultural difference that attracted comment concerns the relationship between parents and children. Confucianism continues to inform Chinese social life (Chan 1999). It provides a hierarchical structure which stresses mutual respect and harmony at all levels of society, including the family. Participants reported some cases where parents had spent extended stays with their children in university accommodation. Several reasons were proposed to explain Chinese expectations. The first was financial: parents simply could not afford their own accommodation. Second, the respect which children are expected to show for parents helped to 'normalise' this arrangement. Finally, multiple occupation is common in Chinese university halls of residence. The eminently practical solution adopted by these Chinese students and their parents, however, fundamentally challenges the expectations of home students relishing their newly found independence. One participant explained the resulting dilemma in the following terms:

One mother was living in university accommodation with her daughter, much to the disgust of the other students who shared that flat... We actually had to terminate the student's study in order to force the mother out of the building and reinstating the student once her mother had left.

In attempting to explore British perceptions of the isolation of Chinese students, it may be instructive to examine Chinese response to overseas students. China is also starting to attract international students, housing them in dormitories separate from the rest of the student body, and sometimes enrolling them in separate classes. Schlemm (2005: 13) describes the situation in the following way:

Chinese students keep to strict study routines, while international students have more free time, gathering often for parties... Both the Chinese and the international students... expressed a desire to interact more with one another and a curiosity about other cultures, but each seemed equally contented with their own living and working situations and habits. Their relationship speaks to the interaction between Chinese and foreigners in China as a whole.

It is ironic that British educators and students, whose culture attaches importance to the individual, experience discomfort when they observe Chinese students operating as a group independent of the mainstream; such independence is perceived as an affront. Chinese students attach greater importance to collectivity but define that collectivity in terms of the smaller rather than the larger group.

Health

Several participants identified health care as a recurring problem for Chinese students. Various reasons for a reluctance to make use of the British health care system were identified, including communication difficulties, mistrust of differences in approach, and limited understanding of how to access health care.

Communication difficulties in medical consultation are very real. Even when student competence in English is adequate for academic work, they are likely to experience difficulties in describing symptoms to a doctor. These difficulties are exacerbated by different expectations about appropriate treatment. Students, for instance, who are told to keep warm and go to bed when they are expecting prescription medicine, may feel let down and uncared for. There was certainly evidence of a mistrust of British health care. In one instance, a student needing urgent hospital treatment opted to fly back to China. Concerns were not always limited to medical considerations. On another occasion, British tutors had great difficulty persuading a Chinese undergraduate to seek treatment for a broken leg, apparently because she would have missed an exam and was fearful of her parents' reaction. There was also evidence of different attitudes towards mental health. It was felt likely that the stigma attached to psychiatric illness in China was such that prospective students would be reluctant to disclose information on an existing condition because of fears that this might jeopardise their chances of a place.

Limited understanding of access to health care in the UK was also an issue. Government funded students or scholars are routinely given the relevant information before their departure from China; undergraduates and privately funded students tend to be less well informed. Many universities provide information in a student handbook on the need to register with a GP, the fact that students qualify for free treatment when enrolled on courses longer than six months, and the need to pay for prescriptions. However, in a crisis situation, students are unlikely to refer to the handbook.

Making sure students are informed by giving them information simply doesn't work. *Giving* information does not mean information has been received. Handing out bits of paper with information is a waste of time, particularly at a time of year when they are overloaded.

Academic issues

A range of issues affecting the academic life of Chinese students emerged from the academic focus group discussion. Some were clearly related to cultural differences which can be explained in terms of the Confucian ideology; many were rooted in the limited understanding of British academics of the cultural expectations of Chinese students.

Student-teacher relationships

A growing body of literature explores differences in relationships between teachers and students in China and the west. Aspland (1999), for instance, suggests that western university teachers tend to see their role in terms of 'a type of personal collegiality, but professional independence and initiative'. Chinese students, in contrast, expect 'a hierarchic distance but a professional closeness' with their teachers. The influence of Confucianism is particularly evident in the hierarchical relationships between students and teachers (Biggs 1994; Chan, 1999). Students owe respect to those who provide knowledge; the authority of teachers is such that only they - and not the students - should initiate interactions in class.

The discussion in the academic focus group demonstrated an awareness of cultural patterns of interaction in teaching. As one participant commented: 'Basically you perceive there is a harmony and balance and you don't rock it'. There was also awareness of the role of communication problems - 'The majority of our Chinese students want to participate but they feel too shy; they feel that other people answer the questions faster than they can' - and of

practical constraints on teaching in China - 'There are so many [students] in the classrooms. No body ever focuses their attention on one particular student, [saying] give me your opinion, and give me your views on the matter'. While the accuracy of these observations is open to question, there was clearly an awareness on key issues.

Misunderstandings extend well beyond the classroom. Chinese students, for their part, have difficulty understanding the behaviour of Western teachers: attempts to foster autonomous learning are often perceived as unfriendly and uncaring. The western tendency to limit student contact outside lectures to set office hours is, for instance, in marked contrast to what happens in China, where teachers typically offer help whenever needed and, by solving students' problems, consolidate their high status (Hui 2005). In an Australian context, Malcolm (1995: ii) recounts the tearful complaint of a Chinese student:

My lecturer doesn't care if I pass or fail. I came from China at my own expense because I want to learn. But he treats me as a nuisance when I try to ask questions in class. He avoids me. I try to catch him after the class and he is always in a hurry... and he won't help me!

Chinese members of the focus groups confirmed that the perception of western lecturers as too busy and uncaring is also widespread in the UK. One recalled a complaint very similar to the student in Australia: "If I want to see my teacher on a certain day... you have to make an appointment. In China you say: 'I have a problem. Can I see you?'" Chinese students overseas, then, have to resolve the tension between the 'freedom' accorded to western students, on the one hand, and their expectation that lecturers should offer help, on the other.

For their part, western teachers tend to perceive attempts on the part of Chinese students to engage their attention outside the classroom and office hours as demanding. Lecturers often express frustration that issues which could usefully have been aired in the context of the whole group have to be dealt with on a one-to-one basis: "You work really hard to get the response in the whole group situation and then you've got a whole string of people waiting outside your door".

Suggestions for ways of increasing participation included increasing opportunities for teaching in small groups. While this course of action may reduce the anxieties associated with communication problems, it is important to remember that reluctance to interact is also influenced by different cultural understandings of the role of the teacher.

Study skills

The match between the learning strategies encouraged in China and the study skills explicitly taught in British schools and universities is limited. Learning strategies prized in Chinese education have received a good deal of attention from both western and Chinese scholars; levels of awareness of these issues among British university teachers, however, are variable.

The influence of Confucianism is evident not only in student-teacher relationships but also in preferred learning styles. Chan (1999), for instance, suggests that methods of teaching and learning, such as the memorization of texts, preserve social harmony and avoid loss of face. Deference for the written word, as illustrated by the proverb: *du shi po wan juan, xia bi ru you shen* (after reading ten thousand books, your writing will be guided with inspiration) is central to an understanding of Chinese attitudes towards learning. Memorization of texts thus allows students to show respect for authors (Chan, 1999). Chinese students, then, are expected not only to pay respect to teachers in class, but also to the material that teachers have directed them to read them (Hui, 2005). British academics, in contrast, tend to dismiss memorization as a legitimate study strategy on the grounds that it leads to surface learning rather than deep understanding. Writers such as Biggs & Watkins (1996) and An Ran (2000), however, argue that it is important to distinguish between rote learning (defined as 'memorizing without understanding') and repetition learning which leads to a deepening of understanding over time.

Memorization of texts requires diligence and persistence, key personal qualities for students in

China. As Hui (2005: 28) explains:

Most Chinese students believe in diligence, that is, zhi yao gong fu shen, tie chu mo cheng zhen (if you work at it hard enough, you can grind an iron rod into a needle), and they know the stories of tou xuan liang, zhui ci gu (hanging one's hair up to the ceiling and piercing one's leg [to prevent oneself from falling into sleep when studying]).

Success in western education, however, depends on study skills which map poorly on to the learning strategies characteristic of good Chinese students (Cottrell, 2003; Sinfield and Burns, 2003). Skills considered important in a British context include the ability to read critically, to form arguments and to structure essays and reports. Report and essay writing appear to cause fewer problems. Chinese students at the University of Central Lancashire, for instance, consider themselves reasonably proficient in these areas (Introna et al, 2003). Chinese students are also well versed in writing examinations (Davey & Higgins, 2005). Writers such as Hui (2003) report that most Chinese students see failure as their own responsibility; their natural inclination is to therefore to avoid any suggestion that the teacher has not performed their role effectively. Some members of the academic focus group, however, had been asked by Chinese students to revisit their marks, behaviour which was, indeed, perceived as face threatening by the teachers in question.

Critical analysis and problem solving, in contrast, are often identified as areas of weakness. Reading in the context of western university education creates fundamental problems for Chinese students, both in terms of their reliance on the teacher for guidance as to what they should be reading and in terms of the sheer volume of reading recommended by lecturers. In China, it is the lecturer who tells you what to do. In the west, the student is faced with the reality that, while reading everything is impossible, making selections is also difficult (Gao, 1998). Focus group participants suggested that Chinese students' experiences of independent research is sometimes painful:

In group research projects, where [students are] directed towards quite a wide range of literature, it wouldn't be: 'Read that particular book and that particular chapter'. And so it would require students to work more independently, and that has been more of a difficulty and a surprise.

Oral presentation was another area for concern. Poor performance in oral presentation was attributed by British lecturers to fear, lack of confidence and concerns about criticism by others. Their experience coincides with the self-reports of Chinese students in the University of Central Lancashire (Davey and Higgins, 2005). Various reasons have been proposed to account for this phenomenon. Discomfort can be explained, in part at least, by the authority invested in the teacher in Chinese classrooms (Hui, 2005): Chinese students are not used to taking such a prominent role. Traditionally the Chinese tendency towards collectivism - rather than individualism - may also play a role. Although the current trend in China is to acknowledge the importance of individualism, students often have little opportunity to put this philosophy into practice. It would be prudent, however, to take a broader view of these anxieties: British students also express anxiety about presenting information to an audience (Higgins 2004).

Participants identified modeling as an important strategy for helping students make the transition from Chinese to Western learning strategies. This recommendation is consistent with the British perception that Chinese students are very good at learning and applying principles, but only after they have been made explicit:

For example, referencing... If you can take them through step by step and show them exactly how it is done and then keep getting them to practice, that works... rather than expecting them to be able to do it or find out for themselves.

Suggestions for modeling included the notion of sample answers - good, average and poor - to examination questions along the lines of GCSE and A-level study guides. This approach is likely to be of greatest use for students on foundation courses and undergraduate degrees. It is problematic, of course, for students required to produce more extended pieces of writing. As a member of the academic focus group explained: 'If I could have said this dissertation got 59,

then they would have had some thing they could relate to, but of course we can't do that. All I can say is this one is better than that one.'

Plagiarism

A very clear example of differences in attitude between China and the west concerns plagiarism. Various developments attest to growing worries about detecting and preventing plagiarism in British higher education. A Plagiarism Advisory Serviceⁱⁱ, based at Northumbria University, offers 'generic advice and guidance' to 'institutions, academics and students'. The University of Sussex Centre for Continuing Education (CCE) run workshops on study strategies 'that help students avoid plagiarism'. The Oxford Brookes Centre for Staff and Learning Developmentⁱⁱⁱ offers online courses on the subject. This preoccupation is by no means confined to British academics. Definitions of plagiarism appear on the websites of many American, Canadian, Irish, Australian and New Zealand universities. The message is loud and clear: taking someone else's words and passing them off as your own is dishonest and should be avoided at all costs.

While plagiarism is by no means a recent phenomenon, the rapid growth in international students may well have served as a catalyst for current discussions. In the west, the author is considered to be the sole creator of the text; plagiarism is perceived by some as a violation of the author and is considered to be morally wrong (Kolich, 1983). This worldview stands in marked contrast to views of authorship in both the pre-modern and post-modern periods (Pennycook, 1997). Before the Enlightenment, a divine God was believed to be the source of all creativity. In the post-modern era, meaning is held to derive from interaction with the text, a recycling of words and ideas rather than the production of something wholly original (Foucault, 1977). Most participants subscribed to the modernist position of ownership of texts by individuals, but were unsure as to the best way of making sure that students understood their concerns:

It's very difficult to get across. We spend a lot of time during induction and orientation saying it's not just a case of regurgitation of what you read - you have actually got to show us you understand what it means or that it can be challenged.

I tried taking two books off the shelf and showing them what two different authors have to say on the same topic. This author says 'a' and this author says 'b' - so what do you do? They both looked at me as if I was asking an impossible question.

This approach, however, seems to meet with limited success. As one participant commented: 'When you tackle it in terms of: "You must not do it", most students still don't understand why they mustn't do it'.

Plagiarism has attracted the attention of a growing number of writers who point to the cultural underpinnings of the western moralistic approach (see, for instance, Scollon, 1995; Pennycook, 1996). Studies of international students' attitudes also lend support to this interpretation. Introna et al (2003) conclude, for instance, that many if not most students involved in plagiarist practices at the University of Lancaster are not intentionally trying to defraud the system. Only when western academics are prepared to move from the moral high ground, will it be possible to understand the many complex reasons for plagiarism.

There was certainly evidence in the focus groups of an awareness of the issues shaping Chinese attitudes to text. Typical comments included:

Some Chinese students have the need to show respect for an author by using his work in some way, and they take that a stage further and they are reluctant to disagree with what they see in print, so they just lift it.

ⁱⁱ www.jiscpas.ac.uk

ⁱⁱⁱ www.brookes.ac.uk:80/services/ocs

They think that if they copy out chunks they are actually complementing the author.

In an assignment for Economics in Accounting and the student had just copied chunks from one of the lecturer's textbook. When asked she said: 'But you write it so much better than I can!'

There was similarly awareness of language issues, which will be discussed in greater detail below:

Some say that they simply do not have sufficient command of English to explain what an author says in their own words. They are limited by their vocabulary and probably by their grammar as well.

Other pressures, too, result in plagiarism: financial worries, for instance, may accentuate the pressure for students to achieve in order to justify the sacrifices their family is making (Introna et al., 2003; Harris 1995).

Interestingly, some participants drew attention to what they perceived to be the developmental nature of plagiarism in international students. A member of the academic focus group suggested that plagiarism was a transitional phase in the learning process: 'It's something you see much more of at a foundation or first year and it tends to diminish during years 2 and 3 as students gain in confidence and in knowledge'. Another commented: 'You could reclassify plagiarism as a coping strategy that can be indulged in for a time until you are ready to reject it'. It would seem that, even when British expectations are carefully explained, students may need time to take on board the fact that the practices which ensured success in the home country are viewed negatively in the new setting.

Various strategies are commonly used for helping international students adapt to western expectations. The need for explicit instructions on referencing and support for paraphrasing, for instance, was widely recognized. Issues of deterrence were also discussed. It was agreed that some approaches are more effective than others. While threats of penalties for plagiarism in student handbooks seem to have minimal impact, there was consensus that demonstrations of the ways in which technology can be used to detect plagiarist practices are more likely to affect behaviour. The use of outside speakers brought in to underline the seriousness attached to plagiarism was also felt to have some merit.

The emphasis was not, however, exclusively on deterrence: there was considerable support for a sympathetic understanding of the causes of plagiarism rather than pathologizing the perpetrators. Introna et al (2003: 43) is also a powerful advocate for this position:

If we show that we understand why they might find themselves plagiarizing according to our definition and practices; if we show that we understand why they might often turn to 'plagiarism' as a coping strategy; if we show that we do not treat plagiarism merely as a set of rules and associated penalties; and finally, if we show a willingness to support them to develop appropriate writing practices, then we will be more confident that those that continue to plagiarise are indeed trying to cheat us all. Then we will be more confident in the justice of our disciplinary procedures.

Group work

Two main themes emerged in relation to group work. The first concerned the belief that working collaboratively in groups is a culturally challenging concept for Chinese students. The fact that something is new does not, of course, imply that it is unwelcome. However, it would seem that students need to be persuaded as to its value. Chinese participants reported that students often complain about group discussion: they feel it lacks structure and expect lecturers to provide a cogent summary of the main points emerging from any teaching situation.

The second theme concerned the composition of the groups. There was clearly some indecision among focus group participants as to the best course of action. There was evidence, for instance, of uneasiness about all-Chinese and predominantly Chinese groups. Comments such as: 'We try and force them to mix' and 'It's very important not to have too many Chinese students in a group' were typical. The reactions of other international students in the group were also mentioned. Examples of hostile remarks included: 'This bunch of people are nothing to do with us; they are too foreign and we're not interested'. By no means everyone, however, subscribed to the idea that there should be careful controls on group membership. There was awareness, for instance, of the practical and ethical issues in engineering 'balance':

Is it possible to dictate membership of groups, and physically move students from one group to another in order to then ensure that they make contact with others who speak a different language? People [in our group] didn't necessarily think it was a good idea, particularly if you are a vulnerable, shy person. If you keep being moved it would give you more stress, wouldn't it? In my view this is too prescriptive.

Much of the concern about predominantly Chinese groups focused on language: the tendency of Chinese students to use Chinese rather than English was perceived by some as unhelpful: 'They are told all the time that the essential thing is to work with non-Chinese - even if it's with Japanese - because you have got to work in English'. The priority for advocates of an English-only approach is to maximize student opportunities to hear and use the target language: 'When they discuss in Chinese all the time, they aren't learning the technical terms they need for writing their essays or exam questions'.

There was, however, little unanimity on this question. One participant pointed out that the only time a class 'took off' was when students were able to take ownership of their learning through discussion in Chinese. Another pointed to the unnecessary polarization which characterizes much of the debate on this subject:

The common perception is that it is not a good thing for people to use Chinese in group discussions because it doesn't allow people to practice their skills in English. But this is not necessarily an either/or situation. There are considerable pedagogical benefits in being able to rehearse in your own language what you've just been discussing or listening to. Where students need to learn specific vocabulary, there are other ways of doing this.

The complex mix of instrumental and integrative motivation for learning English also needs to be considered (Li, 2001). As one participant pointed out: 'There are some areas where [Chinese students] need to use English and to develop proficiency, and other areas where it is really not relevant. It should be up to them'. Another pointed to the 'overtones of assimilation and cultural imperialism' associated with the mantra that only English should be used in the classroom.

Competence in English

One of the reasons for using Chinese in group work is, of course, students' limited competence in English. IELTS (International English Language Testing System) is the most commonly used test of competence in English in the UK. The minimum requirement of most universities is an average IELTS score on speaking, listening, reading and writing of 7.0 for courses in the arts and social sciences and 6.5 in other courses. Students who achieve these scores, however, are not necessarily equipped to deal with the academic demands of courses, and one of the issues which engaged participants was the usefulness - or otherwise - of standardized tests. The following comments were typical:

7 doesn't mean you can do a PhD, it just means that you have a command of the language. You probably understand what you are reading, but can you get that then across in your own words?

I have a major problem with one of my postgraduates. We found a book we thought was ideal - short, makes all the points we want to make. But it is written in such an

academic style that Chinese students can only cope with a couple of pages at a time, and that includes students with IELTS scores of 6.5 or even 7.0.

Participants suspected that students 'learn how to get high marks at the test', a strategy which backfires when they are faced with the demands of academic life in the overseas setting. Suggestions for remedying this situation included a move from a single standardized test to a range of assessments developed by individual universities. An example of such an assessment is TEEP (Test of English for Educational Purposes), used by the University of Reading. This course of action would, of course, be more labour intensive than reliance on a single standardized test; there might also be issues of external recognition when students move on.

Various researchers have raised concern at the competence in English of many international students. Valimaa (1998), for instance, reports the case of a PhD supervisor who claimed to have read fifteen drafts of a student paper before it was 'anywhere near satisfactory'. Those supervising theses in the academic focus group reported similar experiences. Comments included: 'The writing was so weak that by the time you finished reading a page you couldn't hold the content of what had gone before'; 'I just didn't know what he was trying to say';

There was also awareness that competence in English is not simply a matter of vocabulary and rules of grammar: there is also an important cultural dimension. If students lack the relevant cultural schemata or frames of reference (Kirkpatrick, 1992; Smith, 1997), their understanding will be impaired. A member of the academic focus group illustrated the kinds of challenge he had observed with Chinese students enrolled on business courses:

Even an extremely lazy British student can pass their marketing exam, not so much from what they learnt on the course but from their 18 years of living in England and knowing you produce something because it is going to be sold, not because we told you this is what you produce. The Chinese don't understand you produce to demand.

At the postgraduate level, there is also evidence that Chinese students experience difficulty in understanding key concepts taken for granted by their supervisors, including 'substantial contribution to the field', and 'independent research' (Chen et al., 2003), though it may be the case that many students, irrespective of their background, encounter similar problems. There was also a lack of clarity on the part of students concerning expectations about ethical issues.

So given that a student has been accepted for a course but is failing to cope, what are the options? Writing was identified as an area of particular concern. Although most universities provide in-session support for international students, the needs of students are sometimes too serious to be addressed in this way. Participants recognized that many Chinese students coped well or extremely well in the British system; they also expressed enormous sympathy for the predicament of students with low levels of competence in English. As one participant commented: 'You can't treat people who don't speak English as a first language in the same way you treat native speakers - it's not a level playing ground and you just cannot have the same expectations'. This view accords with the argument put forward by writers such as Ryan (2000) that universities have a responsibility to adapt to the differing needs of international students, rather than trying to make them fit into existing structures. In this view, assessment needs to accommodate different ways of learning. There was certainly broad support within the group for solutions which gave due recognition to the additional hurdles faced by Chinese and other non-native speakers of English. In the same way that universities make allowances for students with physical disabilities and specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia, a more flexible approach to assessment is necessary for non-native speakers. There is in fact evidence of growing international support for this position. The focus here is on the importance of a flexible response to student needs; there is, of course, no suggestion that limited competence in English should be categorized as a disability.

Yet at the same time, there was deep-seated concern about the vexed question of maintaining standards, a recurring theme in more general educational discourse. Many participants expressed concern about the dumbing down of British degrees. When teachers make allowances for Chinese students' level of proficiency in English, either by paying less attention to 'surface features' such as grammar, or by providing editorial support, are they compromising the value

of British qualifications? One participant summed up the dilemma thus:

When we mark essays, to get a First, one of the criteria is the use of language... Certainly if I was marking a piece of work and it wasn't linguistically clear, I wouldn't want to give it a First.

Particular concern was expressed in relation to the external validation of courses and qualifications:

Some of our courses, particularly Accounting, are accredited by external professional bodies. You are therefore going to be expected to be able to produce reports in perfect English... if something was so badly written and so full of errors, should you be giving them the same mark as somebody who is writing it in good English?

Undergraduates in computing have to do quite a big project. On a number of occasions our external examiner has demanded a re-write of a project, even though the content is excellent because he says: 'Do you really wish something with that sort of grammar to sit on your shelf as a public statement of your University?'

Ethical issues also took centre stage in the discussion on PhD students. One participant recalled her experience as internal examiner for a Chinese student with extremely weak writing skills:

The external examiner said she didn't see the point in asking questions the student was not going to be able to answer. I agree that it's perfectly reasonable to take extra time in formulating your question for non-native speakers, to put it in the clearest possible way so that they at least know what it is that you are asking. However, I felt extremely uncomfortable at the end of the process when we were looking at the revisions we wanted her to do. Again the external examiner said: 'It's no good asking the student to do things that she would not be able to.'

Students with limited proficiency are forced to rely on native speakers: tutors, supervisors, friends or those providing commercial services. In all these cases, it is unclear how much intervention is acceptable. As one of the focus group participants commented: 'There is a very fine line between who is writing the thesis, them or me'. There is, of course, a continuum of editorial intervention from proof reading to substantial rewriting of material. While proofing is straightforward, there is less clarity about how much rewriting is acceptable. In the words of another participant:

You have to make sure that [the editor] has no input into the dissertation itself. And that is less straightforward than you might think. Let me give you an example. I'm registered with the police as an interpreter. My job is quite simply to translate what it said from one language into the other. I can't get involved in any other way, even though perhaps the person in trouble expects me immediately to be on their side. All I can do is say: "The officer has asked you this question. What is your answer"?

Another issue concerns the familiarity of the 'editor' with the subject matter. The fact someone is a native speaker does not mean they have access to the specialist vocabulary and discourses associated with a given subject. Another contribution focused on the revisions required of a Chinese PhD candidate:

We came to the conclusion she had to work with a native speaker. But the subject matter was so specialized that only somebody who had done a PhD in the subject would have been able to help.

A third issue concerns resources: providing language support for essays and dissertations is both demanding and time-consuming, so reliance on friends is realistic only when a student's needs are limited. And, while it is reasonable for tutors and supervisors to provide some editorial input, low levels of English proficiency require disproportionate amounts of teachers' time. In many universities, advertisements for editorial services to non-English speakers on student notice boards suggests that there is a market among students unable to find support from

friends and teachers. This situation is unsatisfactory from two points of view. First, the 'editor' may not have the necessary subject knowledge; second, there is the ethical consideration that students already paying high tuition fees need to bear additional costs. There is clearly a case for universities to investigate ways of offering language support. One possibility might be for a pool of tutors with experience of English for academic purposes to be available for help in writing dissertations and other major assignments.

There is, in fact, a considerable body of experience in responding to the language needs of EFL students. The teaching of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) as a specialism has a long history. The British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes (BALEAP), a national organisation of centres where EAP is taught within British Universities and providers of higher education, was founded in 1972. It supports professional development for EAP teachers, offers an accreditation scheme for EAP courses and helps disseminate EAP associated research. Traditionally, however, it has focused on intensive pre-sessional courses, and ongoing support in the form, for instance, of once or twice weekly writing classes for weaker students during term time. More recently, however, provision has become more targeted, with increasing emphasis on collaboration between lecturers and EAP support staff.

University teachers and EAP specialists in the academic focus group identified an important distinction between subject specific and more general academic vocabulary and structures. Sometimes, identifying key vocabulary and providing support materials is a relatively simple matter. An EAP specialist, for instance, described how he had worked in collaboration with a statistics lecturer:

He's in the lecture and he's talking about 2 times 4 and then 2 multiplied by 4 and 4 divided by 2 and they haven't got the foggiest. So he called us in and the first thing we did was synonyms - how many ways can you say 3 divided by 2?

In other subject areas, the teaching of specialist vocabulary was deemed to be more problematic. In a discussion of the language of economics, for instance, one member of the group commented:

I don't understand how you can teach economic jargon like 'the multiplier' out of context without going through the whole concept of what it was. These are terms which native speakers struggle with, too.

Many lecturers, however, have no knowledge of the support which is often available within their institutions and, in the case of at least one of the universities represented in the focus groups, active attempts were being made to raise awareness:

Little by little, departments are coming to us and asking us to go in on either on an away day to talk to them, or to work with them on a longer-term basis. We're working with Business at the moment, trying to find out how we can help them - what their assessments are, what tasks they have to do, what type of essays they have to write.

Discussion

This report is restricted to the needs of Chinese students. We recognize, however, that this group shares many concerns with other international students. Yet, while certain issues, such as the practical and emotional challenges of adjusting to the new setting, affect students irrespective of their country of origin, others, such as the influence of Confucianism on attitudes towards teachers and the printed word, are specific to the Chinese and other far eastern students. In painting as full a picture of the needs of Chinese students, we have, of course, needed to deal with both common and specific concerns.

In order to ensure that British universities maintain their share of the China market, it is essential to address student needs holistically. The emotional and physical well being of students has far reaching consequences for their academic performance. Fundamental to this

process is the need for both sides need to develop a conscious awareness of cultural differences which may lead to misunderstandings. The British need to recognize that Chinese students offer each other enormous social, emotional and practical support at a time when they are vulnerable, homesick and struggling to make sense of a new environment. Buddy schemes which encourage empathy for the situation of newcomers and create opportunities for longer and deeper relationships offer a constructive alternative to the fortress mentality which sees close-knit Chinese friendship networks as a threat to the integrity of their own group. Chinese students, for their part, need to appreciate which aspects of their behaviour are likely to be perceived negatively in a British situation. It is clearly not a question of prescribing such behaviour but of identifying strategies, such as seeking the permission of flatmates before inviting friends for dinner, which will help in the negotiation of more positive relationships.

It is important for universities and other institutions of higher education to identify - and, if necessary, create - appropriate fora and structures where issues of this kind can be explored. The work of International Offices can usefully extend beyond recruitment to information sharing with the wider student body through Students' Unions and Students' Services and with university teachers, administrators and support staff through ongoing staff training. Chinese personnel have a vital role to play in this process. The bicultural and bilingual awareness of colleagues who have studied and worked in British universities allows them to serve as a very effective bridge between Chinese students and British teachers and students.

The need for greater understanding is not, of course, limited to pastoral issues. Misunderstanding about the relationships between teachers and students are widespread on both sides: unless they are addressed, frustration, confusion and even hostility may well ensue. To achieve their full potential, it is essential for Chinese students to understand the expectations of their teachers. British teachers, for their part, first need to identify potential difficulties for their students and then to clearly model the skills required for success. While there are objective differences between the preferred learning styles in Chinese and western universities, it is important not to lose sight of Chinese student's ability to adapt to the expectations of the new system. In the Australian context, O'Donoghue (1996) reports that Chinese students fully understood the need to change their approach to learning, including the need to undertake independent reading before lectures and tutorials and to seek clarification by asking questions. Similarly, Bamford et al (2002) report positive attitudes among Chinese postgraduate students in the UK in relation to more independent learning styles. It is also important to avoid labeling students who use different learning styles as problems to be solved. Writers such as Ryan (2000) and Biggs (1999) argue that international students are an asset, not a liability, but that until the academic community is sensitized to issues such as differences in learning styles, students are unlikely to achieve their potential.

Student levels of competence in English come high on the agenda of academics. There is a tension between, on the one hand, the desire to uphold standards by ensuring that student work demonstrates near native-speaker proficiency, and on the other hand, the sympathetic understanding that Chinese students are dealing with an uneven playing field. Interestingly, little attention has been paid to the views of students on this question. Valimaa? (1998), a notable exception, reports that students tend to view limited competence in English as a transitory issue: most feel that they will improve in time and that, in the meanwhile, they should be able to rely on the supervisor's support. Chen et al. (2003: 6) have considerable sympathy for this view, and draws attention to the wider context in which debates about language are currently taking place:

We may ultimately have to come to terms with the fact that language modes are changing more quickly than ever before, and that we may need to broaden our areas of tolerance for language variation. Given the influences of multiculturalism and computerisation, the process of compromise in this area may well place more pressure on native speakers to change than on second language learners to conform.

There are, of course, no obvious and clear-cut solutions, either on the issue of proficiency in English or indeed on many of the other questions identified both in the focus group discussions and in the wider literature. We leave the final word to one of the participants:

It seem to me what we are talking about is the tension. Two different forces pull. Sometimes that is quite creative and interesting and sometimes it is quite difficult and painful. There isn't a solution to that. It's a matter of recognising it and grappling with it.

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