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### Re-engineering the course design and delivery of Australian tertiary education programmes: perspectives from Chinese students

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## **Re-engineering the course design and delivery of Australian tertiary education programmes: perspectives from Chinese students**

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This article reports on interview-based research on Chinese students' perceptions of aspects of university study and their reasons for undertaking Australian programmes. In this cross-cultural setting, perceptions of 'good' and 'bad' subjects were elicited, and the need to standardise or adapt programmes to meet Chinese students' needs is considered. The study indicates that a culturally inclusive learning environment needs to be established by teachers. Teachers should modify their delivery approach to make it more compatible with Chinese learners' learning and thinking styles. Students studying in both Australia and China were interviewed.

**Keywords:** Chinese learners; cross-cultural course design and delivery; internationalisation

### **Introduction**

Australian universities have attracted many Chinese students to their programmes and a number of Australian universities have partnership arrangements in China. Issues have arisen as to the design and delivery of courses and programmes in an international and associated cross-cultural environment. Over recent decades, the practice of producing course material in one country or culture for delivery in another has become more common. Difficulties arising from this now common practice have been discussed by many researchers (Andrade, 2006; Handa & Fallon, 2006; Manning, & Mayor 1999; Smith, 1997; Trice, 2003). Research into the pedagogical aspects of international student cohorts in Australia has drawn the attention of a growing number of Australian researchers (Asmar, Inge, Singh, & Ginns, 2003; Handa & Fallon, 2006; University of Melbourne, 2004). Further, there has been significant research into the design and delivery of courses within the Chinese diaspora from a foreign university perspective (Ho, 2010; Willis, 2010; Zhang, 2006) but there has been limited research into the actual views and attitudes of Chinese students regarding the design and delivery of courses. What makes a good subject and what contributes to a bad subject in Australia and China? The need to examine them more closely is important because of the implications for further expansion in China, one of the most important markets, and the value of Australia education as perceived and experienced by Chinese students both onshore and offshore. The aim of this study is to identify Chinese students' perceptions, views and attitudes regarding the design and delivery of courses in Australia and China. Specifically:

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- What do Chinese students feel and think about the various aspects of foreign course design and delivery, within the Chinese and Australian contexts and environments? What are the attractions and benefits of an Australian degree?
- In a course/unit (that is, a component of a programme), in general terms what makes a 'good' course, and what makes a 'poor' course?
- How much should programmes be adapted or standardised to suit the different national or cultural contexts?
- What makes a successful cross-cultural teaching situation, context and experience?

### **Literature review**

The literature on Asian students' learning styles has identified the change from rote and superficial learning (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Biggs, 1994) to recognising the use of repetition as a way to gain deep learning (Biggs 1996; Entwistle & Ramsey, 1983; Kember, 1998). Recent studies provide more insights into the different learning styles of the Chinese learners (Chan, 1999, Watkins & Biggs, 2001, Xiao, 2006) in the Western context. There is also research indicating that efforts to impose Western pedagogy on students from the Confucian Heritage Culture have met with failure (Boekaerts, 1998).

Much research has suggested that a teacher's teaching style and a student's learning style interact to affect student learning (Grasha, 2002; Ho, 2010; Xiao, 2006; Zhang, 2006). Felder and Brent (2005) reported that teachers can achieve their teaching objectives by understanding the students' backgrounds, levels of motivation, various teaching and learning attitudes, and responses to specific instructional practices. Zhang (2006) found that Chinese students prefer deep thinking, which implies that if the appropriate teaching method matches a student's learning style, Chinese students can improve their critical thinking ability to match what is expected in Western programmes.

In the literature, studies on the conceptions of effective teachers are abundant (Beckman, 1994; Crawford & Bradshaw, 1968; Funderburk, 1994; Weinerman, 1998; Witcher, Onwuegbuzie, & Minor, 2001). A thorough examination of the literature by Zhang (2004) revealed that there are six essential dimensions to a student's conception of an effective teacher:

- (1) academic qualification and scholarship;
- (2) preparedness and subject knowledge;
- (3) personality traits and personal style;
- (4) connectedness with students;
- (5) motivation and enthusiasm; and
- (6) classroom operation.

However, little research has been done on how Chinese learners perceive what makes a good teacher and what makes a good subject in cross-cultural settings.

Xiao (2006) suggests that many factors affect students' perceptions in class. The factors can be teaching methodology, the demeanour of lecturers, the topics of discussion, and students' own willingness to participate in class. Given the differences identified in the literature between Western and Chinese teaching styles, which approach or factors that are perceived by the Chinese learners as effective delivery? One of the issues is whether the courses presented to Chinese students should be identical to the courses presented to Australian students, or whether they should be adapted specifically for Chinese students. Willis (2010) observed that students in China prefer standardised foreign courses with

limited adaptation. However the nature of the adaptation and what drives the adaptation is not very clear. Further research is necessary to identify the types of course design and course delivery that can most benefit Chinese students.

With the rapidly increasing frequency of cross-cultural delivery of Australian programmes, this need for a better understanding of Chinese students' perceptions and their views of the course design and course delivery marks this as a rich area for research.

The research reported in the current paper is important. Even though there has been some research into the design and delivery of courses within the Chinese diaspora from a foreign university perspective (Willis, 2010; Willis & Rushdi, 2001), this study will add value by reporting the actual views of the students.

### **Research method**

A qualitative approach was adopted in this research, to capture the richness of individual cultural and learning experiences of Chinese students in a variety of situations and contexts regarding the various aspects of foreign business course design, delivery within an Australian university.

### **Data source and participants**

Bilingual interviews and group discussions based on semi-structured open ended questions were utilised to seek the views of the Chinese participants on course design, delivery, and actual classroom issues and aspects. The population interviewed included 19 onshore Chinese students from five campuses (six postgraduate students, 13 undergraduate students) and 27 offshore students (12 postgraduate and 15 undergraduate students) from four locations in China.

The participants were recruited from among the researchers' former business students, both onshore and offshore, as well as from research networks in China in three universities which are running on-campus Australian business programmes. The semi-structured open ended questions were presented in both Mandarin and English. The majority of students chose Mandarin to articulate and respond to the questions and participate in the discussions. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and wherever the interviews were conducted in Mandarin, they were translated into English by the first author.

The interpretative analysis involves formatting and importing the interview transcripts into Nvivo software (QSR International, Australia) and coding them according to the research questions. Nvivo is qualitative research software designed primarily as a search and retrieval system for large amounts of various qualitative data. Themes and categories were identified and defined along the lines suggested by Richards (2009, p. 105). From this, cross examination of the results from different study levels and country of study were compared and contrasted. Pseudonyms and code numbers were used to preserve the interviewees' confidentiality. The abbreviations 'UG' and 'PG' were used to represent undergraduate and postgraduate students, respectively.

### **Data analysis and discussion**

In this section, we describe the perceptions of Chinese students regarding the aforementioned research questions, which include the purpose of undertaking an Australian degree; attractions and benefits of a foreign degree; the key features of good course and effective delivery; course standardisation vs. adaptation and students suggestions and advice. While

we do use direct quotations, we mostly summarise the main points made by those Chinese students in the interviews because of the space limitation.

### **The purpose of undertaking an Australian degree for students in China**

The in-depth interviews indicated different priorities or reasons for pursuing a foreign degree between postgraduate and undergraduate interviewees. Career advancement and updating knowledge and management skills to become more competitive were the main reasons cited by postgraduate interviewees in China.

Nowadays the learning has changed from the traditional short-term school learning into life-long learning. The reason for me choosing an MBA for further study after years of working is to update my knowledge level in order to combine textbook knowledge with practices to be more competent in my job and more competitive in the working environment. (026 PG China)

The reasons expressed by undergraduate interviewees in China were more broad and general. The most mentioned reasons included improving their English, to experience a different culture and teaching methods, to have better future working opportunities, to improve immigration potential, because of previous overseas experience, and parental pressures. Many undergraduate interviewees emphasised that their parents were the driving force behind them undertaking a foreign programme. Similar comments were made by undergraduate interviewees in Australia.

I chose to study overseas simply because I did not perform well in the [Chinese] National University Entrance Exam. My parents do not want me to repeat the exam so they decided to send me overseas. (008UG Australia)

There is some evidence from the literature as well as from this study that supports the general view that Chinese parents exercise decisive power in choosing what their children should study (Chan, 1999). However, some of the undergraduate interviewees explained that their reason for undertaking a foreign programme was simply out of interest and their future employment opportunities.

I always admire people who can speak and read novels in English so I decided to take a foreign degree to improve my English. (014 UG China)

I got a diploma in English but there is no competitive edge in it. So to study a foreign business programme is natural for me. It might give me more work options later. (043 UG China)

While both onshore and offshore undergraduates reported similar purposes, postgraduate interviewees in Australia emphasised a few different study reasons.

The main reason is to improve my English and to experience a different culture. Studying and living in foreign environment forces me to open my mouth [speaking English]. (002 PG Australia)

The postgraduate respondents in Australia commented that with many foreign programmes run in China it is not necessary to converse in English all the time, therefore they want to have a legitimate foreign degree from overseas. This finding is consistent with the

observation that students from mainland China want a course that is primarily unadapted (Willis, 2010).

### **Attractions and benefits of a foreign degree**

This study found that the major attractions of an Australian degree included: cost factors; to experience a different culture and life style; flexible pathways and relatively relaxed requirements for admission; a superior degree; self management of learning; flexible delivery; and an interactive and dynamic classroom atmosphere.

Most postgraduate students in China considered cost factors, flexible pathways, and flexible delivery approach were the most attractive features of Australian programmes. They acknowledged that giving up their current jobs to study overseas was financially impractical.

Yes, if there is a chance to study on a foreign campus that would be ideal; however we have to balance the cost against the opportunities. China is not like it was 10 years ago. Nowadays the foreign enterprises are more localised and a master degree is a necessity to promote my career but not necessarily from an overseas campus. (026 PG China)

These postgraduates also commented on the more relaxed requirements for admission compared with admission to Chinese programmes. It provides an additional attraction to those students with long work experience but with only a diploma-level qualification. Some undergraduate interviewees in China also reported that the admission requirements of Australian programmes in China opened another door for their higher education aspirations. Despite the fact that new student enrolments in Chinese universities have increased tremendously over recent years (Hu, 2008), there are still many students who are prepared for college study but are excluded from the National University Entrance Exam. Interviewee 015 is one of them.

The foreign [Australian] programme provides me with a better chance for college study. There are too many rules and barriers to study in a preferred Chinese university and I do not want to go to a Chinese university to get a diploma based on my entrance score. Studying a foreign [Australian] programme will not only improve my English, but is also a superior degree to a Chinese diploma. (015 UG Australia)

Other attractions emphasised by the undergraduate students in China include increased opportunities to work in joint-ventures in China, to gain new knowledge, and to learn English faster than in a Chinese programme. In contrast with their peers in China, undergraduate interviewees in Australia were more attracted by the external learning environment including the study facilities and the self-regulated learning approach and relaxed atmosphere experienced in the classroom. They indicated the flexibility in choosing courses and tutorials, and the informal learning atmosphere as being an enjoyable bi-product of studying in Australia.

In contrast with Australian course delivery, the courses running in the Chinese higher education system are typically based on classes, lectures, and seminars. Small-class tutorials are not included as part of the delivery. In addition, the required courses are normally scheduled sequentially according to the year when the student first enrolled. That applies to all students in the same major and usually not much flexibility is imbedded into course selection until the latter part of their study.

In response to the attraction and benefits of an Australian programme, postgraduate interviewees in Australia are more interested in the quality of the Australian programmes.

Western education [Australian] emphasised communication and problem solving ability; this is so different to the Chinese education system. I've been here for one year already and I have to say I am still in the process of adaptation but in theory I think they are good. (004PG Australia)

This comment reveals that Chinese learners appreciate Australian pedagogical practices after they've been exposed to the Western culture. However, this transition process takes time and effort (Andrade, 2006; Wang & Shan, 2007) given their cultural and pedagogical differences. The transition can only be done gradually, over a period of time.

Other attractions reported by those postgraduate interviewees include the competitive price of Australian education. However, other interviewees argue that the appreciation in the value of the Australian dollar in the past few years has diminished this advantage.

### **Good vs. bad courses**

Various factors were identified by the Chinese participants regarding what makes a good course. These included the lecturers' perceived expertise, skills, and publishing output in the same discipline area as the lectures, their personal traits and demeanour, their friendly and fair attitudes, well structured and organised programme content, practical and interesting assessment tasks, etc. However, the main themes for what constitutes a good course emerging from those results included being a good teacher, and students identified the following characteristics.

#### ***Course knowledge and expertise***

Course knowledge and expertise were considered critical for a good teacher and a good course. Most postgraduate students in both locations described the importance of the expertise of the lecturers and business experience as a prerequisite for a good course.

The lecturer's expertise and experience in the business world is critical for a good course. You will not only learn up to date knowledge but also advice and experience that you couldn't learn from a textbook. (019 PG China)

Students will have a negative perception of a course if they perceive that a lecturer's course knowledge is weak.

#### ***Personality and willingness to help students***

The majority of interviewees, particular the undergraduates, reported that rich expertise and strong business experience sometimes is not all a teacher requires to be a 'good teacher'. It also depends on a lecturer's professionalism and attitude towards students. Many students mentioned teachers' fairness, care, and non-discriminatory responses as part of what makes a good course.

A good course should be fair. The evaluation of students by teachers should be fair, without any discrimination. (006 UG Australia)

A teacher's value/attitude towards the course and students is the deciding factor for a good subject. Discrimination is the worst thing that international students have to bear. (008 UG Australia)

Some lecturers do not understand Chinese culture; do not respect students. (013 UG Australia)

Some [lecturers] think students should be responsible for their own learning. (018 UG Australia)

These comments reflected some of the earlier research on the difficulties confronting international students (Chan, 1999; Durkin, 2004; Song-Turner, 2008; Wang & Shan, 2007;) that language deficiency leaves many international students in a vulnerable position and how cross-cultural understanding and adequate support might aid them in adapting to the academic transition in Western higher education. The last comment highlights the differences in the perceived learning responsibility between teachers and students. In the Chinese system, teachers assume a primary responsibility for ensuring that student achieve the learning objectives, while within Australia students are expected to be more independent learners.

### ***Motivation and enthusiasm***

Another important characteristic of a good teacher as identified by the interviewees is the motivation and enthusiasm that the lecturers exhibited towards their teaching.

One of the lecturers who I like the most was my English literacy teacher. Taking her class is such a pleasure. You just cannot help to be impressed by her passion and her enjoyment of what she is teaching. (031UG China)

### ***Good textbooks and using handouts***

Many interviewees brought up the topic of textbooks in relation to a good course. It seemed to them a well selected textbook is an important source of their learning. They perceived that the major purpose of the attending lectures was to help them come to grips with the textbook content. If a lecturer's presentation and assessment tasks were not closely related to the prescribed textbook or handouts, students often felt frustrated and disappointed. This view was widely reported by the interviewees.

Using handouts in the classroom was considered to be a good aspect of effective delivery. Chinese students believed that if handouts were provided, it helped them to overcome the difficulty of note taking in a language other than their mother tongue. Note taking is a habitual practice in the Chinese education system. It helps students to review their lessons and serves as a reminder of the important contents for revision. An old saying often cited by Chinese lecturers was 'good memory is no better than a rotten pen' implying the importance of note taking for future revision purposes. A propensity for note taking is an obvious learning habit which Chinese students have carried over from their past learning background.

. . . if the lecture content doesn't follow the handouts or has little to do with the handouts, the lecturing and thinking are hard to follow. (024 UG Australia)

The concept of applicable knowledge and real world business practices were mentioned by many of the undergraduate and postgraduate interviewees.

A good course should be based on practical knowledge that can be applied in future work or study. (035 UG China)

A good subject consists of a good textbook; good interaction between lecturers and students and among students themselves; good case studies; proper duration for the subject [i.e. classes should run on time] and whether it is practical for use in real life. (016 PG China)

### ***Well designed assessment***

Most interviewees in this study reported well designed assessment with moderate study load are important for creating a good course. Students in this study indicated that group study and presentations were new to them. Some students had been scared by previous bad group project experiences.

The reason that I do not like group assignment is from my past experience of working with a poor group. It is time consuming. Too many factors involved in a group assignment. Working with a lazy member will push the group into hell. (007 UG Australia)

There is evidence from the literature that studying in English increases the study workload significantly for the Chinese learners (Ho, 2010; Song-Turner, 2008; Xiao, 2006).

### ***Good vs. bad delivery***

Respondents in this study identified the practices that led to good delivery.

#### ***Having a variety of teaching and learning activities***

Balanced classroom activity was considered to be an important feature of effective delivery. Many students commented that Australian lectures should not just conduct in the classroom. Varying activities such as field studies or industry tours could increase the interaction between lecturer and students and stimulate students' interests.

#### ***Using plenty of examples***

Using plenty of examples, particularly local (Chinese) examples. The purpose of using examples is to help students to understand how the theory can be applied in practice. The use of local (Chinese) examples was perceived as an important indicator of an effective delivery by the Chinese students. Examples allow lecturers to go beyond the textbook and relate theoretical concepts to real life.

#### ***Adjusting language***

Adjusting language, such as using simpler and shorter sentences and delivering them at a slower pace to take account of students' knowledge of English is highly valued by Chinese learners, was perceived by students as an important approach to engaging students and increasing classroom interaction. Some students also commented on the importance of body language for effective delivery.

### ***Successful vs. unsuccessful situations***

When the students were asked to describe a situation in a foreign programme which they felt was a real success or not a success and why, they offered a number of reasons which are either related to the characteristics of a good teacher or good course or effective delivery.

According to students, a successful situation can be made possible if the lecturer has practical and up to date material, has a good knowledge of the most up to date research available, knows the students' learning background and characteristics, connects with the students, is well prepared and organised, is willing and prepared to help, and adopts a caring

attitude towards students. On the other hand, an unsuccessful situation could be caused by the absence of these elements.

A successful situation comes out when the course is designed fit with students' needs. The course on corporate strategy is usually a success. The Chinese students, in my experience, are generally middle-level managers that are more involved with daily management but desire to participate in strategy planning. The course on strategy fulfils their needs. (028 PG China)

In the international economics subject, I felt the teacher was good. The lectures were well organised and explained; and the example was easy for me to understand and he was very happy to help students. (001 PG Australia)

I think that presenting in class is the most difficult and nerve-wracking task for international students. What makes us feel more encouraged was no matter how poor our presentation was, the lecturers always listened with smile and gave encouragement and affirmation to us. This is what I felt was the most successful part of course. (009 UG Australia)

### **Standardised or customised courses**

Opinions differed regarding the question of standardisation vs. adaptation of a foreign course by students onshore vs. offshore. Most onshore respondents (Australia) prefer to study exactly the same course as studied by the Australian students. This is consistent with their reason for studying outside China.

If a student chooses to study in Australia, that means they want be educated in ways that are different from Chinese education. (010 UG Australia)

Some offshore students (China) expressed the preference for courses being adapted to the local situation. A number of interviewees indicated that the extent of adaptation depends on the lecturer's ability to convey the theory and concepts related to the Chinese context. Foreign lecturers with experience living and working in China seem to have an advantage over their expatriate colleagues.

Obviously the foreign programmes are designed for the foreign industry or a specific field overseas. Some lecturers may use the same material and delivery to us using the same delivery mode, but it often doesn't work in China. (014 UG China)

Foreign teachers with experience living and working in China are preferred. If they know both their home country and China, the content will be more understandable and advantageous. (043 UG China)

Yes, I think [courses] should be localised [to the Chinese context] but they should retain an international perspective. I do not want to study exactly what Australian students would study. After all they will work in Australia and I will work in China. The things I learn need to apply to the Chinese environment and I would rather study something related to our future working environment. (043 UG China)

### **Suggestions/advice**

Students offered suggestions and advice for foreign universities on how they should develop and deliver courses in China, and how to teach Chinese students. It is suggested that several attributes should be incorporated into classroom teaching.

- Make your style of teaching clear to the students. Explain explicitly how your lectures are organised and what your expectation of them is for each lecture.
- Refer to the handouts constantly and ensure that the key areas and questions are checked during the lecture so that students will understand the main areas.
- Do not assume that students have had experience in non-verbal or non-textual forms of communication. Use body language to stimulate class atmosphere and elevate students' interests. Equally, do not assume students have an innate ability to work in a group. Indeed, for those Chinese students who are schooled in an education system which emphasises examinations and rote learning, skills like negotiation, team work, time management in a meeting, task delegation, as well as team motivation, needs to be taught and learned. Therefore, some activities to develop these skills should be integrated into lectures and tutorials.
- Use as many local cases, events, and examples as possible and contrast and compare the application differences between China and Western worlds where possible. This eases Chinese students' understanding of the Western theory and will also stimulate their interest for further study.
- Learn some Chinese even if only the basic greeting words and phrases. Chinese learners appreciate a lecturer's effort to learn their language. Those efforts will help to improve and enhance a good teaching and learning relationship.
- Balance teaching and learning activities and finish classes on time. Chinese learners perceive a late dismissed class as inefficient organisation and view it as a negative sign about the teacher.

In addition, students believed that universities should be willing to provide additional help to international students, including increasing social activities both on and off campus. They thought that partnership programme students should be integrated into the main campus. On the staff front, they thought that partnership programmes should be staffed with more qualified lecturers, that staff should be provided with cross-cultural knowledge training, and that they should have at their disposal only the latest learning material. Interestingly, many students thought that the required English language admission level should be increased.

A further cross-examination of the suggestions from onshore and offshore Chinese students shows that the needs and expectation of students varies with the learning and studying environment. This finding reveals that Chinese learners in different places have different approaches to and expectations about learning. University academic designers and policy makers should monitor closely the effectiveness of teaching and programmes for Chinese learners.

## **Implications**

If the barriers to cross-cultural course design and course delivery are to be overcome, then several strategies need to be put into place. There are implications for course design and delivery practices, marketing strategies, and policies within the university.

### **Implications for course design and delivery practice**

Both onshore and offshore undergraduates in this study preferred lectures and handouts with practical information and examples, which would help them to relate to their limited business experience and reduce the disadvantage caused by their relative language

ability. In particular, undergraduate students reported that the lecturer's attitude towards them had an important influence on their performance. Lecturers should be sensitive to the cross-cultural students' perception and maintain a learning environment that is equal for all students by providing necessary support. Many of the undergraduate interviewees indicated that extra assistance was needed; however the existing support mechanism does not seem to be adequate for them. For Chinese students, positive motivation, communication (including after class contact), encouragement, as well as constructive feedback are very important. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Ho, 2010; Mangina & Mowlids, 2007), the results of which showed that Chinese learners are active learners who appreciate motivation and encouragement from lecturers.

Zhang's study (2004) reported that students prefer their teachers to teach in styles that match their own learning styles. At the same time, he also suggested that lecturers should not be overly concerned that their teaching styles are diversified to match every single student learning style, as he illustrated that students are open to teaching styles that are similar to, complementary to, or even completely different from, their own learning style (p. 248). Previous studies and evidence in this study have also suggested that Chinese learners appreciate Australian pedagogical practices after they've been exposed to the Western culture even though they prefer the teacher-centred teaching methodology (Ho, 2010; Leung & Lu, 2008; Nield, 2004). However, this transition process takes time and effort (Andrade, 2006; Wang & Shan, 2007) given their cultural and pedagogical differences. That teaching is not a one-way street must be taken into consideration and students must be able to learn from the teachers if the teaching is to be effective (Ho, 2010, p. 172).

Early studies (Hofstede, 1986; Newble & Entwistle, 1986) pointed out that to improve students' learning experience, the burden of adaptation in cross-cultural learning situations should be primarily on the teachers. Efforts to impose Western education methods on Chinese students have met with failure (Boekaerts, 1998). In recognition of those issues, Australian academics should consider diversifying their teaching styles so that students with different learning styles can benefit from their instructions. The awareness of Chinese students preferred learning styles and behaviours as well as their perceived effective teaching practices can aid teachers in selecting appropriate teaching strategies and structuring the learning environment to better serve Chinese students' needs in learning

In a more direct vein, those who provide instruction and design materials in such cross-cultural situations should increase their own knowledge of Chinese learners. In particular, they might ensure their prescribed textbooks and other lecture material with international views also contain cases and examples that students can relate to in their own culture and background. The common practice for Chinese learners is to review the lessons after class. Students in this study, particularly undergraduate students, repeatedly reported that the prescribed textbook and the lecture notes were their major source for revision. Some commented they did not like their prescribed textbook either because it was too theoretical or too hard to read. Others mentioned that it was difficult to find content related to the required assessment tasks.

Related to this is the consideration that course design of cross-cultural programmes may need to be modified to make them more compatible with learners' reading behaviour. In the case of the entry level of Chinese learners using English as their second language for their study, it might be necessary to provide shorter, more simplified, or otherwise modified textual units or distribute the necessary reading material ahead of class.

The fact that students from China were not prone to asking questions during class and that they did not easily or spontaneously question or formulate a question in proper English must be considered. Lecture designers need to be aware that the patterns of cognitive

processing in other-culture learners are frequently different from those common within the Australian culture. Recent research in cognitive differences between Westerners and Asians by Nisbett and his colleagues (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001) makes an extremely strong case for this.

As can be seen from the data analysis, there was a fair amount of overlap in the students' perceptions of good courses, effective delivery and standardisation vs. adaptation of Australian programmes. However, there were also some striking differences. Postgraduate students in mainland China are more critical about the practical aspects and challenge of the course content. They are very sensitive to the delivering lecturer's expertise and academic ability. Contrary to the widely held view that Chinese students prefer passive teaching, the respondents in this study showed that their preferred learning style in the classroom was quite similar to the Western postgraduate students. Seminars, group discussion, and debate of current events were identified as the favoured delivery format.

In terms of course design for postgraduate students, participants in this study, particularly those in China who are generally mature age students, were more interested in enrolling in programmes that include high demand knowledge and skill areas which can increase their competitive advantage for career advancement. They like lecturers with strong business backgrounds who can mentor them in the global environment.

Practical and interesting assessment tasks were an important part of being a good course. The focus on case study and team work is a feature for foreign programmes in China, although more and more Chinese programmes began to pay attention to this. Nevertheless, the case studies in foreign programmes are more prone to be foreign or international cases while cases used in the Chinese programme are more related to China. Ho (2010) reported that Chinese students prefer local to foreign lecturers' teaching styles. One important factor contributed was the practicality of those cases that the local (Chinese) lecturers use. Although many researchers commend the effectiveness of team work (Biggs, 1994; Watkins & Biggs, 2000), Melton (1990) found that the Chinese individual learns from experience, and prefers the visual and auditory learning style to group work. Ho's study (2010) also did not support teamwork as an effective tool among the Chinese learners. Other researchers (Andrade, 2006; Leung & Lu, 2008; Zhang, 2006) suggest that changing to student-centred learning can be slow. Designers of assessment tasks need to be aware of this characteristic when using group assessment for the Chinese students.

Xiao (2006) suggests that there are many factors which affect students' perceptions of effective delivery in class. The factors can be teaching methodology, the demeanour of lecturers, the topics of discussion, and the students' own willingness to participate in class. Students in this study prefer lecturers to keep their Western student-centred way of teaching, but that they should modify and design some activities to suit the Chinese learning style to promote creative learning. This finding confirms some of the earlier research (Leung & Lu, 2008; Xiao 2006; Zhang, 2006) that Chinese students are adapting to student-centred teaching, which promotes critical thinking.

### **Implications for academic development**

This study found that Chinese students prefer foreign instructors to deliver lectures but perceive that local (Chinese-speaking) lecturers can provide them with deeper learning because of the language advantage. Local lecturers are also able to use local examples and cases to help students to relate to theories and principles. In addition, they repeatedly reported that it is easier to build rapport with lecturers with Chinese knowledge and work experience. This is of great benefit for the effective teaching of Chinese learners. This finding suggests attention be given to lecturer training and development when despatching

academic staff to teach in China and staffing in Australia as well. The professionalism exhibited by those staff members who teach Chinese students has a direct impact on the image of the Australian programmes. There was a strong demand from the respondents for universities to send better qualified lecturers who understand Chinese students' needs and know how to explain to them. Possible academic exchange programmes and research collaboration opportunities could be considered to enrich staff members' Chinese knowledge and experience on this issue.

### **Implications for marketing strategies**

The different purpose and perceived attractions as identified in this study imply that varied marketing strategies and tactics should be used for recruiting undergraduate and post-graduate Chinese students. Given the main reasons for study by postgraduate students in China are career-orientated, the marketing campaign should emphasise the high demand of knowledge and skills of the course and qualification of the staffing faculties. Flexibility of delivery and cost saving can also be part of the marketing theme considered from those students' reality and requirements. For universities that hope to attract more Chinese students to come to Australia, the marketing strategy should also pay greater attention to parents' influence in China. Furthermore, this study has revealed that the external environment, such as the natural environment, study facilities, community life, and classroom activities etc., provide insightful information for marketing planning and strategy design.

### **Implications for policy in universities**

Extra language training help was one of the main requests from Chinese learners, particularly the onshore students and undergraduate students in China. Lack of language proficiency is the major reason for those students' learning difficulty, even though most of them have met the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) admission requirement. Many studies have suggested that a higher IELTS score does not necessarily predict the academic success for international students (Cotton & Conrow, 1998; Dooey & Oliver, 2002; Dunworth, 2010; Hill, Storch, & Lynch, 1999; Picard, 2007). Making lecturers/tutors more culturally aware and also aware of the unique academic needs of articulation of Chinese students, indeed all international students seem critical. Continuing language support is required for both onshore and offshore students. Related to this issue is the negative perception regarding the relaxed admission requirements of Australian programmes. Despite some students commenting that relaxed admission requirements provided an opportunity for their further education, others believed it compromised the quality image of Australian education.

The most critical role that higher education plays in the response to changes in the global market is to equip students with the skills they need to be productive in their existing and future work place. Students' advice in this study suggests that there should be thorough market research on the demands of the Chinese markets and study about the Chinese students' demands and expectations are therefore the prerequisite for appropriate course and programme design. Students in China need the right knowledge and skills to compete in job markets. Australian universities that have partnership programmes in China need to monitor the effectiveness of these in order to compete successfully with local universities as well as other Western universities' programmes.

### **Conclusion**

Determining what needs to change in course and delivery design is not a one-off activity, but rather it is a process of continuous analysis, reflection, and adjustment, especially

in light of the increasing globalisation and cooperation in higher education across all countries. This study examined Chinese learners' perceptions and views about Australian onshore and offshore programmes and identified the attractions, benefits, tensions, and opportunities for further improvement. Despite the limitation of the scope and samples of the study, the findings that flow from it have several implications for Australian universities that have cohorts of Chinese students and/or partnership programmes in China. The study pointed out some areas and gaps that could improve the effectiveness of teaching by academic staff and learning by Chinese students. The study also illustrates the necessity for university management to monitor the effectiveness of their programmes, and points out directions and strategies for effective marketing planning. Finally, this study provides opportunities for policy makers in planning academic staff professional development, particularly regarding effective teaching in cross-cultural contexts.

While this study aims to lead to a better understanding of the structural, effective, cognitive aspects of global educational design and delivery within a specific cohort environment – Chinese diaspora – from the perspective of students, further study could be done from the perspectives of lecturers who are involved in course design and delivery, and programmes management within the Australian and Chinese contexts and environments to have a balanced view on the best practices in the development, implementation, and measurement of course design and delivery in light of the increasing frequency of cross-cultural delivery of Australian programmes and associated learning needs.

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