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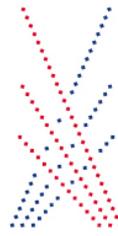
An investigation of acculturation journey of Chinese Mandarin-speaking students taking undergraduate studies in UK business schools

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BRITISH ACADEMY OF MANAGEMENT

BAM CONFERENCE

3RD-5TH SEPTEMBER
ASTON UNIVERSITY BIRMINGHAM UNITED KINGDOM

This paper is from the BAM2019 Conference Proceedings

An investigation of acculturation journey of Chinese Mandarin-speaking students
taking undergraduate studies in UK business schools

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Abstract

The research concentrates on Chinese Mandarin-speaking students' acculturation journey within their undergraduate studies in UK business schools, to identify issues that impact on their acculturation and academic adaptation, in an endeavour to provide the implications for teaching and learning, to the Chinese students, their lecturers, and the business schools for a more satisfying outcome of teaching and learning experience.

Supporting this research, a theoretical framework is constructed, which includes the cultural dimensions at national and organisational level, the acculturation strategy, the descriptions of Chinese and British pedagogy, and cultural synergy in the intercultural learning environment.

Surveys and case studies are introduced using the mixed method approaches to collect and analyse data separately. As a developmental paper, the initial findings are reported upon and comments offered with suggestions as to how to plan and further develop the research.

Key words: Acculturation, Chinese students, undergraduate studies, business, the UK

Introduction

According to Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2017) , in the UK, the number of international student enrolments from China was much larger than from any other overseas country. In 2015-16, the amount of student enrolments domiciled from China topped to 91,215. Almost one in five international students in the UK is Chinese.

Despite the big amount of Chinese students studying in the UK, Gu (2011) and Spurling (2007) highlighted their problems and difficulties of acculturation and adaptation into local life and their academic studies, which are always challenging to the Chinese students who are originally from a large power distance and collectivist oriented culture   (Hofstede, 1991).

Regarding the acculturation process, Searle and Ward (1990) argued that there are two outcomes to be considered: psychological and sociocultural adjustments. The former

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relates to 'feeling of well-being and satisfaction' in a new cultural context, whilst the latter refers to the 'ability to fit in and negotiate interactive aspects of the new culture' (ibid, p.450). Specifically for international students, whose goals are to achieve short term academic performance (Wu and Hammond, 2011), it is crucial that their academic adjustment, under the newly cultural settings should be covered into acculturation process, which arouses research interests and attracts researchers embark on studies in the field since the start of 21st century (Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010; Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson & Pisecco, 2002; Quan, He, & Sloan, 2016; Wang & Byram, 2011; Wu, 2008).

There are plenty of literatures in connection with the academic adjustment and adaptation of Chinese students learning at postgraduate level in the UK (Durkin, 2008; Wu, 2015; Zhao & Bourne, 2011; Zhou, Topping, & Jindal-Snape, 2011), however, literatures concerning the Chinese students' learning adaptation, specifically at undergraduate level, are scant. In addition, Gu (2011)'s finding indicates that due to the one-year postgraduate studies in the UK (PhD studies excluded), some Chinese students might think it is not necessary to change and but to hold their learning style inherited from their previous schooling. Another condition, some postgraduate students would abide by two sets of value, 'one for China and another for here' as they 'do not want to be treated as a foreigner in either context' (ibid, p.227). This research is trying to fill in the gap by studying the acculturation journey of Chinese students undertaking undergraduate programmes in British business schools, though the outcomes from the literature studying postgraduate students' acculturation can be carefully mirrored into this research.

HESA (2017) indicates that in 2015-16 entry, 46% of Chinese students in the UK were studying in business management subjects and related disciplines at different levels. The research concentrating on the Chinese students studying within business disciplines is not only due to the large amount of research subjects and easy sampling, but to the communicable characteristics of business students who can more precisely express their feeling and describe what they undergo during their academic journey.

Issue for the boundary of the research concerns the Chinese language that Chinese students speak. The official language in China is standard Mandarin, spoken by 70 percent of the population together with all sort of variations of Mandarin, whilst Cantonese is more popular in Hong Kong, Macao, Guangdong, and Guangxi province (British Council, 2016). As Cantonese-speaking students from Hong Kong and Macao are deeply influenced by British and Portuguese cultures due to historical reasons, they are excluded purposely in this research. Although Chinese students from Guangdong and Guangxi are speaking Cantonese in daily life, Mandarin is officially their school language and most of them can easily switch in oral from either one of the two languages to another.

Literature review

The literature review aiming at constructing a theoretical framework to support and guide this research is being carried out from the interpretation of cultural dimensions at national levels. Hofstede (1991) proposed four cultural dimensions: Power Distance, Individualism versus Collectivism, Masculinity versus Femininity, and Uncertainty Avoidance. When restructuring his research with the involvement of Chinese researchers to avoid deliberate western bias, Hofstede (2003) introduced the fifth cultural dimension, Long Term Orientation. Culture dimensions demonstrate the clarification of the culture difference between nations (countries) and 'culture shock' (Oberg, 1960) that Chinese Mandarin-speaking students might come across during their studies in another country, for instance, the UK.

The culture web advocated by Johnson, Whittington, Scholes, Pyle and Johnson (2011) analyses the elements of oragnisational culture at operational level. The practice of the organisations where Chinese students take their pre-UK studies in China, for instance, previous students' stories, routines and rituals like counseling session to their students from a cohort of British universities, outstanding alumni guest lectures, and pre departure training and so on, brings impacts and influences on their acculturation journey in the UK.

Hallén and Wiedersheim-Paul (1984, p. 17) suggested that, psychic distance which defined as the 'difference in perceptions between buyer and seller regarding either needs or offers', is composed of three elements, cultural affinity, trust, and experience. Applying the notion of psychic distance to the Chinese students acculturation under the British higher education, there is no culture similarity between the Chinese students and the university academics. However, during the interaction and communication, the willingness and personal experience from either side are important to set up a well-connected relationship. For instance, if Chinese students are from a Sino-British programme with the British university's involvement during their pre-UK studies, trusts from the university academics shall be imposed onto these students.

Berry (1990) identified four acculturation strategies for the immigrants who are being settled into the host community but with their heritage culture, which formed a bicultural environment: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. He concluded that integration strategy is most adaptive for sojourners who endorse the host culture whilst being committed to the original culture. Searle and Ward (1990) argued that psychological and sociocultural adjustments are two acculturation outcomes to be considered. In the course of pursuing their academic progress in the intercultural settings, acculturation strategy ought to be addressed and conducted either deliberately or unintentionally by the Chinese students to cope with their psychological, sociocultural, and most important of all, academic challenges.

Gu and Maley (2008) suggested that pedagogical factors are important in influencing the intercultural adaptation process and outcomes for international students. Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping and Todman (2008) focused their research on the match or mismatch of pedagogical expectations between the teachers and international students. Cheng and Xu (2011) acknowledged that Chinese contemporary pedagogies which are originally inhibited from Confucianism are actively entangled with Western discourse in the course of industrialization in contemporary China. Jin and Cortazzi (1998, 2002, 2016) advocated that the cultural synergy should be introduced to the intercultural teaching and learning settings. Under such circumstance, the academics have a positive learning attitude to learn from and with international and local students, and equally, different groups of students learn, understand, and appreciate each other's cultures from each other, with a view to formulate a status of cultural synergy and no threats to loss of their own culture identity (Jin & Cortazzi, 2002).

In order to bring reviewed literatures together and guide the research project in the next steps, attempts are made to develop a theoretical framework for synthesis of theories (Collis & Hussey, 2014) and further research on Chinese students' acculturation. Nine associated themes are identified as well. Figure 1 below indicates the theoretical framework and associated research themes for this research investigation.

Figure 1: Theoretical framework and research themes
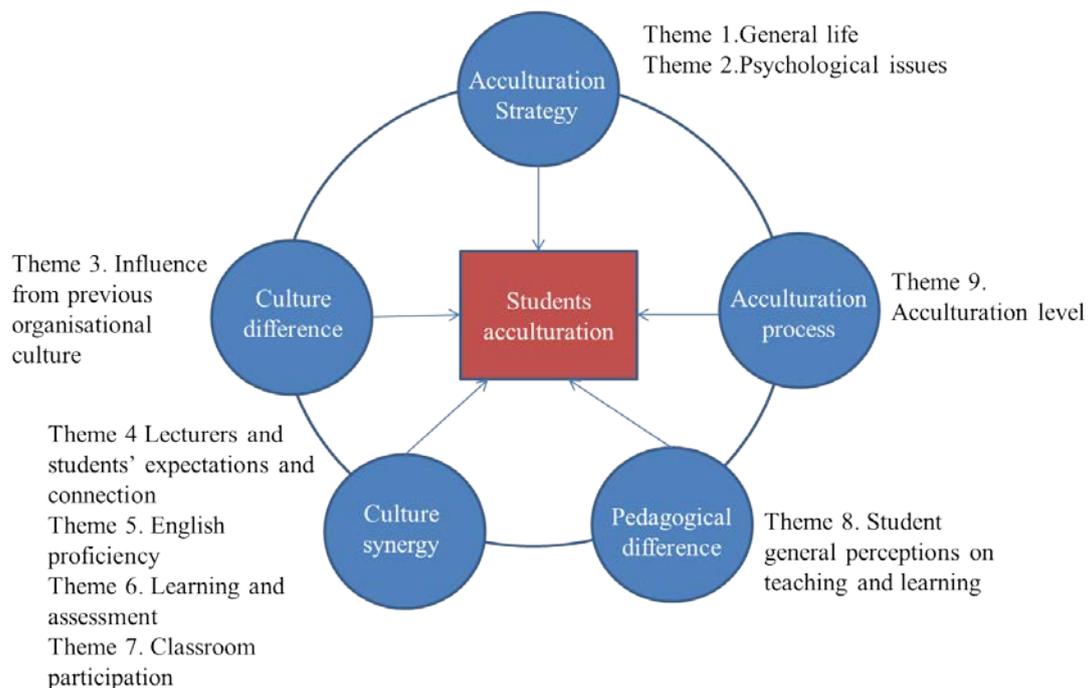
Source: this study

Collis and Hussey (2014) suggested that if a theory or theories exist, the testable hypotheses could be developed within research. In relation to this research, three

hypotheses were framed to test theories and themes,

1. Culture differences at national, organisational, and personal level bring over negative impacts on Chinese students' acculturation from their start in Britain.
2. The Chinese students' perceptions on learning strategy change as a result of being exposed to the different learning environment in the UK.
3. Culture synergy in academic studies correlates positively on Chinese students' acculturation during their undergraduate studies.

In response to the research aim and objectives, the following two research questions guide this study,

1. What kind of issues do the Chinese students may impacts their acculturation journey in their undergraduate studies in the UK?
2. How do the Chinese students and other stakeholders in Higher Education cope with these issues to improve and develop the acculturation journey in Britain?

Research methods

The convergent parallel mixed methods are applied to the research project, adopting quantitative and qualitative methods concurrently for data collection. Survey using questionnaire and case studies by interviews with Chinese students and academics in business schools in a multi cross-sectional way which details in Table 1, are adopted as the research methods for the study.

Table 1: Time horizon of data collection

Phase	Time	Description	Works	
Phase 1	May to July 2018	post-studies, within three months before their graduation	• Stage 1, on line survey to collection quantitative data from students • Stage 2, interviews with students to collect qualitative data	Interviews with academics in business schools
Phase 2	July to September 2018	pre-studies, before their departure for the UK	• Stage 1, on line survey to collection quantitative data from students • Stage 2, interviews with students to collect qualitative data	
Phase 3	October to December 2018	during studies, within three months after their enrolments into UK higher education	• Stage 1, on line survey to collection quantitative data from students • Stage 2, interviews with students to collect qualitative data	

Source: this study

Initial findings

345 invitations were sent to Chinese students at undergraduate level in business schools, asking them complete the on-line questionnaire. 178 effective responses were received, which indicates a response rate of 52%. 16 academic staffs and 19 students were interviewed. Since data analysis for the two strands are incomplete, initial research findings are presented only from the interviews with academics.

What impressed the researcher most from the interviews with the staff was concerning the relationship building between the academics and the students,

'We (the University) need to do a better job at acclimatising all international students to our system and expectations…... If their experience is good, we have a good experience too. That is what the University can do, but it is a 50 to 50 road. If you choose to be an international student, you have to get to be embedded yourself, be open-minded, be less resistant, and be ready to engage or participate. It is easier for the university then, to provide support mechanisms. Like what I said, we (the university) can only know the issue as a problem if you tell the university, so we (the

University and the students) can get to meet in the middle'. (STA5)

This point is coincided with the two strategies that Hofstede (1986, p.316) advocated under the international higher education contexts, 'teach the teachers how to teach' and 'teach students how to learn', and therefore, the expectations of students and their lecturers can 'meet in the middle'.

Another impressive viewpoint was from STA6 who emphasized the importance of the cultural awareness from either the academic staff or the supporting ones, when he suggested on how the university and business schools help Chinese students adapt into their daily life and academic studies,

'Training programmes to the university staff should be introduced...to make the staff have the cultural awareness so as to be able to appreciate the perspectives of the students, (and understand the reason) why they have a particular issue or problem that they might have'. (STA6)

Further works

Works on data collection have been accomplished. Data from both quantitative and qualitative strands are going to be compared, related, merged, and interpreted, consequently, conclusions can be drawn for this research investigation.

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