



Briefing Note

KNOWING ABOUT YOUR CHINESE STUDENTS: A QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE FOR AUSTRALIAN ACADEMICS

Academics in Australia are often familiar with the issues and difficulties associated with Chinese postgraduate students acclimatising to the Australian university environment. Academics, however, don't necessarily understand what lies beneath these problems nor do they always know how to deal with them. To help academics this **Quick Reference Guide** has been developed, not to provide a 'quick fix' but rather to supply useful and succinct information to help both academics and also their Chinese postgraduate students.

This **Quick Reference Guide** is just one of a number of tools that have been developed in response to research conducted with Chinese students, Chinese academics and also with Australian academics. The Guide is designed to aid in the transition of Chinese postgraduate students to study in Australia. The additional tools that have been developed provide more detailed information about specific areas addressed in the Guide. Links to these additional tools are provided in this Quick Reference Guide.

When considering the information provided here, and when thinking about Chinese students, we need to be able to acknowledge difference. There are fundamental differences between universities and notions of scholarship when comparing China and Australia. Acknowledging difference, however, does not mean the attribution of deficiency. It simply means that there are many differences that need to be negotiated by students and academics as they learn to work with each other.

Why do Chinese students select Australia as a destination for postgraduate study?

- To gain a higher degree in a relatively short period of time
- To experience 'Western' culture
- Family prestige
- Develop professional skills

Note

Chinese students may not have a strong appreciation of the differences between Western cultures. It may be that students have very little knowledge about Australia or Australians. After all, Australia is a very long way from China physically and also with respect to being in the Chinese consciousness. In some instances, students may have very little interest in Australia. Someone else may have made the decision for them to study here in Australia. (See also the Briefing Note on **Intercultural communication**)

Note

Although enrolled to study in areas such as Media and Communication, it may be that students have very little background in the selected discipline area. And even if their undergraduate degree was in the same area, they will have little knowledge of the discipline within Australia. It is important, however, to honour and appreciate the knowledge and experience that Chinese students bring with them, to draw on this, and allow them to express and share this knowledge within Australian course contexts.

What are Chinese students expecting on arrival in Australia?

- Interviews suggest that many students don't know what to expect as they have little exposure to or experience of life beyond China.
- As their reference point is their own undergraduate experience in China, it is important to have some sense of what Chinese universities are like:
 - Chinese students are used to a more holistic university experience - a bit like boarding school (or very traditional Australian university college life) with everything happening on campus. Students live on campus, have meals prepared for them, socialise on campus and tend to be involved in clubs and societies, many of which allow them to foster links to support future employment.
 - Because all students live on campus there is usually a designated pastoral lecturer ('fudaoyuan') whom students can contact for support, although many do not avail themselves of this opportunity. The pastoral lecturer may have responsibility for 200 or more students. It is uncommon for there to be a learning support centre or counselling service on campus. This is not the way students in China access help and support.
 - The university library is a quiet place. This is where students can study in peace away from the activity of dormitories and living quarters. Being a place where students can source information from a wide variety of media and texts can seem a subsidiary function for the library. Students (and lecturers also) often don't have the same access to information and databases that Australian university libraries are able to provide.

Note

Because of the differences identified above, Chinese students are often either unaware of, don't know how to, or are reluctant to access the different university services available in Australia. Many will also be unwilling to ask for help, believing that they should be able to cope with any problems encountered by being more persistent and working harder. Seeking help involves 'face' and this can be a concern for students. (See the Briefing Note on **Understanding the concept of face and how this impacts the interactions of Chinese students within the Australian university context**).

- Chinese students are not necessarily expecting that they will socialise with Australian students and even if they want to, they very often do not have the language and cultural skills to enable them to do so. They are also unaware of how relationships work in the Australian context (particularly given the importance of face and hierarchy in China) and are therefore often reluctant to establish friendships outside their cultural group.

Note

The formal establishment of a peer or buddy system is one way to try to help Chinese students 'get into' the many facets of university life. In addition, consideration could be given to the establishment of a formal advisor / mentor position to support the transition of Chinese students. Such a person could also be a broker for other university services such as counselling and health.

The following link may be useful. This provides ideas for encouraging interactions between international and local students:

http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/research/experience/enhancing_interact.html

- Chinese students are not necessarily expecting that their postgraduate experience in Australia will be demanding. The university experience in China is often less stressful than the experience of school. 'Hard to enter, hard to fail' is how some Chinese students have described university in China. Chinese lecturers have described it as 'relaxing' for students. Because of this, the expectations associated with study here can be a real shock.

What are the expectations Chinese students have with respect to learning and teaching?

- Chinese students expect that they will be taught the required content and that a capacity to reproduce that content will be the measure of success.
- The complexities associated with learning and teaching in Australia will be unfamiliar to them. They will be particularly unfamiliar with the following:
 - the degree of independence required for successful study
 - the volume of reading required
 - the expectation that many different sources will be accessed
 - the amount of writing required
 - the number of assignments required

- the requirement to reflect knowledge and understanding through different text types / genre that are specific to the discipline area of study
- the requirement to use a critical perspective and demonstrate higher order thinking
- the requirement to engage in spontaneous oral interaction and debate

Note

Scholarship in China has historically been constructed very differently from Western scholarship. Lecturers have traditionally been revered as the custodians / holders of knowledge who have a responsibility to transmit knowledge to their students. This process is impacted by factors associated with hierarchy, relationships and face, as well as beliefs about the nature of knowledge and how it is best represented. Scholarship in China is also built on a strong work ethic – the belief that hard work will result in success.

Chinese scholarship is changing but is still impacted significantly by tradition. The following Briefing Notes will help build a better understanding of how these traditions and beliefs impact the work of Chinese students when they commence study in Australia:

- **Why Chinese postgraduate students struggle with listening, reading, writing and speaking in English**
- **Understanding the concept of face and how this impacts the interactions of Chinese students within the Australian university context**
- **Rehearsal and performance in Chinese scholarship**

What are the expectations Chinese students have with respect to assessment?

- Chinese students expect that an examination will be the principle form of assessment in each of their units or courses as this has been their experience in China.

- There may be an expectation that lecturers will provide extensive 'hints' about what will be in examinations, and perhaps provide even more detailed information such as specific pages to learn.
- It is likely that Chinese students will be unfamiliar with formative assessment and its importance in Australian universities. Qualitative feedback in China is often limited to praise or encouragement rather than genuine critique of work against clearly described criteria. Because of this Chinese students often have difficulty interpreting task rubrics / requirements and the rating scales that are used for assessment. They also have difficulty interpreting feedback and they don't necessarily know how to use feedback to improve future assignments.
- Students may not initially understand the importance of essays and other assignments for overall assessment and achievement in a unit or course and they may well feel overwhelmed by the number of assignments they have to complete (all having to be prepared in a language that is not their native tongue).
- Students may be confused or unnerved if they do not receive praise from their lecturers.

Note

End of semester exams are the core element of the testing regime in China and teaching tends to be exam driven. Because this is not the case (for the most part) in Australia, this whole area of assessment – requirements and criteria – can be very perplexing for Chinese students. Students need explicit instruction with respect to assessment requirements and they need to be provided with illustrative samples so that they can appreciate the different conventions and styles that are used in the English language text types that constitute different forms of assessment. (See Briefing Note on **Common problems in English language usage for Chinese speakers**)

What are the expectations Chinese students have of you, their lecturer?

- They will expect that you will provide explicit and factual information and that you will also present any interpretation of information that they will be required to reproduce.

Note

In their undergraduate study Chinese students will most likely have been reliant on a textbook or notes or resources provided by their lecturers. They will not necessarily be used to having to find resources themselves, or evaluating different sources of information. It is also important to understand that there is authority within the resources provided by the lecturer. Speaking and discussion is considered much less authoritative. This has an impact on how Chinese students view and construct their engagement with university learning.

- There will be a sense of dependence on you that is born out of the traditional belief that the lecturer is the source of knowledge and that knowledge forms a bridge between lecturer and student (Li, 2012, p.109)
- Chinese students will also believe that you will be sensitive to their vulnerability and at least have an appreciation of the importance of face and relationships in Chinese society even if you don't know much specifically about these areas.
- They will also expect you to be tolerant of a high level of ambiguity in their work.

Note

Once again this is all tied up with relationships and with face – concepts that continue to be highly significant within Chinese society and that are often a complete mystery to outsiders. The acceptance of ambiguity is described by Hwang (2011) as being an enactment of face within relationships. This is significant in formal contexts such as university classes. Students are less vulnerable and more open and forthright in private spaces such as online discussion groups. What this means is that it may be easier to build the 'knowledge bridge' in online spaces. (See Briefing Note on Understanding **the concept of face and how this impacts the interactions of Chinese students within the Australian university context**).

- Importantly, they will expect that you will be prepared to have them come to your office after class, or talk to them outside the classroom, so that clarification and support can be provided in a private, less face-threatening context.

Reference list

- Hwang, Kwang-Kuo. (2011). *Foundations of Chinese Psychology: Confucian Social Relations*. New York: Springer.
- Li, M. (2012). English Curriculum in Higher Education in China for Non-English Majors. In J. Ruan and C. Leung (Eds). *Perspectives on Teaching and Learning English Literacy in China*, 105-114. Dordrecht: Springer.

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Additional materials and resources are available from
<http://chinapostgraduates.murdoch.edu.au>

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