



Chinese international students' experience of studying online in New Zealand

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Abstract

Reasons distance students seek online study options include pursuing subjects of interest, taking subjects not available to them locally, or gaining a qualification from an institution of specialisation or reputation. However, when students travel to another country for study, what prompts these students to elect to study online? International students in New Zealand have the opportunity to study online through most tertiary institutions. This paper reports on a research project investigating Chinese graduate students' experience of learning online while in New Zealand, and the impact of culture on their learning. This study highlights the benefits of particular aspects of instructional design and makes recommendations to help eEducation educators maximise the benefits of online learning for international students.

Keywords

eEducation, international students, Chinese students, online learning, Chinese culture

Introduction

In the western world, which includes England, Ireland, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, international students in general and ethnic Chinese students in particular have become an increasingly significant presence in tertiary education campuses. In 2003, it was estimated that more than 80% of the international students studying in New Zealand came from China (45%), South Korea (20%) and Japan (17%) (Education New Zealand, 2003). Butcher (2004) found that increased numbers of Chinese students studying in New Zealand had underwritten growth in numbers at both secondary schools and public tertiary institutions over the previous five years. According to recent statistics from the New Zealand Ministry of Education, 95,537 international students studied in New Zealand in 2008/2009, while Chinese



student enrolments represented the largest group (22,917, 24%), despite an overall decrease in Chinese student enrolments since 2004 (Ministry of Education, 2009).

Previous studies have also looked at the experience of Chinese students in New Zealand. For example, Bowen (2008) investigated English language learning; Chu (1997) examined experiences in secondary schools, and Yang (2008) examined learning and social experiences at Massey University. Other examples are Skyrme (2008) and Yao (2005), who separately investigated Chinese students' motivations, expectations and challenges in the unfamiliar academic culture of a New Zealand university (undergraduate and postgraduate respectively). Hardie's study (2009), also in a university context, focused on aspects of independent or self-regulated learning for Chinese students, finding that although such factors were applicable, students' cultural beliefs had the most influence on their academic outcomes.

International students travel to significantly different countries to study in other languages. Distance students, on the other hand, seek online study options for subjects of interest not available to them locally. However, when students travel to another country for study, what prompts these students to elect to study online? With significant numbers of Chinese students studying in New Zealand, and the growing number of online course options available particularly at tertiary levels, can we assume that increasing numbers of Chinese students will choose to study online or undertake online courses?

This study, while having commonalities with these other studies through similarities in context and the nature of participants, specifically focuses on the context of Chinese students learning online within a tertiary institution and asks Chinese graduate students about their experience of studying online while living in New Zealand as university students. Such students are essentially seen as "local" rather than distance students. Their reasons for choosing to learn online focused on obtaining new learning experiences that they perceived would be advantageous for their future careers. These students identified beneficial aspects of the online courses they were enrolled in and recommended providing more information prior to enrolment, opportunities for blended learning, and feedback on discussion to further meet their needs.

The study background

The research took place in 2007 and involved eight (six women and two men) international Chinese university students studying in New Zealand as participants. All had online learning experience but differed in gender, age, personal study and employment experiences. Seven out of eight were aged 25–30 and one was over 30. All the participants were past graduates of the fully online Postgraduate Certificate in eEducation, and all had experience in, and an interest in, eTeaching, both as students and teachers. The researcher (Yan Cong) also had undertaken one of these postgraduate certificate courses. Having been a student in this online course helped her reflect on differences in culture, teaching and learning styles between two countries (New Zealand and China) as well as understand how other Chinese students perceived this online learning programme.

Method

This study used a qualitative research framework examining participants' words and perceptions of learning online as Chinese international students. The data collection method consisted of an email questionnaire and a face-to-face interview with three participants who had remained in New Zealand. The email questionnaire was chosen for speed, convenience, and economy. It consisted of 23 questions divided into six sections: demographic information and experience; learning online (expectations, benefits, barriers, skills, helpful features); being an effective eTeacher and a successful student; participation in online discussion; cultural impact and recommendations. There were a mix of question formats including multiple choice, rating scales and open-ended questions.

Although participants were enrolled in online courses as on-campus students, many had returned to China at the time data was gathered. Using email surveys enabled the researcher to overcome practical constraints such as cost, time, and travel distance. Email was a fast way to deliver and receive information, and it was also very convenient and flexible for the researcher, allowing follow-up questions to clarify interesting points participants made. Additionally, it allowed participants to consider the questions and frame appropriate responses. Because most participants had a heavy work or study load, responding to the survey through email gave them more time to reflect on their answers. An email message introducing the use of email surveys was sent to each participant with the questionnaire as an attachment, with participants completing their questionnaires and emailing them back as attachments.

Interviews were used to provide further exploration into the motivations of participants and their reasons for responding as they did in the email surveys. Most of the interview questions were designed as open-ended questions, which allowed for unexpected or unanticipated answers. The interviews were conducted in Chinese and tape-recorded, and transcribed by the researcher. Transcripts were sent to participants for confirmation.

Findings

Student motivation for choosing online learning

Participants were asked about their decision to choose to study online. Their reasons focused on obtaining new learning experiences and that this online learning would be beneficial for their future career development. Some of these students had followed other people's advice on what courses to take and one thought it would be easy to achieve high marks in online courses. These considerations showed that participants believed that the success in studies would reward them with knowledge, new learning experiences, achievement, and career enhancement.

Most ($\frac{5}{8}$) participants saw trying a new learning experience as a key reason for choosing to study online:

I was quite interested in online learning because I had never touched it before I came to New Zealand. So I wanted to get to know more about this new learning environment. (P5)

Two explained that a reason for them to select this course to study was following others' advice: one participant was following a professional academic's advice; the other was adopting a friend's suggestion. This participant (P4) also mentioned learning online being helpful for their future teaching:

I have learned from my classmates who have chosen this course, and they told me that this course is very helpful for my future teaching. (P4)

Good grades were also seen as important for future careers in these students' home country context of China.

In fact, it is inevitable that we influence by the Chinese social environment. Since we were a little, we were expected to go to the best kindergarten for the early child education. And we started to learn some other skills such as playing piano or painting just for getting extra marks when I took the national exams when we completed high school. We have been arranged to be sent to the best primary and secondary schools by parents, and we have been told that we need to get the best marks in the class. In order to get a good job, we have been told that we need to get into good university. Because of the huge population in China, we need to be the best then we can compete with others. Another reason is about culture. Exams have existed for a long time since the old time in China. The dynasty selected government officials by exams, like people who got the first, second, third or fourth place were selected to be government officials. Lots of ordinary people could change their lives by exams. (P3)

One participant (P3) expected to get high grades in an online course, although gave no reason as the basis for this expectation:

My expectation is to get high scores in online course. Students should achieve high marks. It is common that Chinese students have significant concerns about high marks. It is cultural impact or family influence I suppose. ... in Chinese society, every student has concern about achieving high marks. For example, we won't be able to get into a very good school unless we achieve high score in our exams in China. This is what have we been told since we were a little. We have not changed this kind of thinking even though we studied abroad. So when we study overseas, we still want to get better marks than others. (P3)

Some participants were secondary and high school teachers and others were university tutors. A participant from Hebei Radio and Television University also commented that this experience would be good for their career development:

I come from Hebei Radio and TV University, the distance education is one of the most important components of my university in China, so I think it is necessary for me to have some learning experience and also to learn how to run an online course. (P2)

According to the Chinese International Distance Education Conference organising committee (2007), online education in China is developing rapidly due to its promotion by the government. There has been a rapid growth in Internet use and telecommunications in China, powered in part by China's economic boom. Reports

from the Chinese Ministry of Industry and Information show that the Internet population in China had reached 221 million by the end of February, 2008 (Backgrounder, 2010; China's Internet Users, 2008). China Mobile had become the world's first mobile operator to pass the half a billion-subscriber milestone. For example, in August 2009 it added 5.3 million customers (net additions) (Middleton, 2009). From these statistical reports, it can be expected that China could probably become a huge online learning market, and also has great potential in online learning and teaching development. The Chinese government's needs to develop e-learning and eTeaching may be the main reason why these participants chose to undertake this programme in New Zealand.

Along with these noted reasons for online study, these participants highlighted a disincentive in making this choice: a lack of information about online learning prior to enrolment. General guidance on how to participate within the learning management system was provided for all students but specific information (e.g., expectations for discussion participation) was only available once students had enrolled—and only in English. The observation by this student is also likely to apply to others:

Providing relevant materials in Chinese to help Chinese students to understand what is online learning and what is required in online learning environment such as some useful webpage and some instructions, some particular information about how to interact with lecturers and peers and how to participate in the online discussion. Providing possible instructions in Chinese about how to use specific online learning platform would be a great support. (P5)

Having chosen to study online primarily based on perceived benefits for their futures, these participants' views on what aspects supported their study during their online course are examined in the next section.

Student motivation during online learning

Participants identified specific instructional design aspects of their online course as beneficial to their learning online—in particular as international students, including: the supportive organisation of the course, asynchronous discussions and the marking of discussions.

Design and Organisation of the course

It was common for the students enrolled in these online courses to be from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The design of the course structure and attention to student support was intended to help this diverse group be successful. The modular design containing several smaller assignments rather than two to three major ones was intended to meet the needs of these diverse online students.

Each course was split into four modules of three weeks, 12 weeks in total. For each module there were two asynchronous discussion forums of 1½ weeks' duration. The class was divided into groups of 12–14 participants (with participant access), and each group was also able to read the contributions in other groups' discussions (read-only access). Participation was rewarded with 5% of marks per module, meaning 20% of the total marks per course were awarded for discussion contributions. The other 20% per

module was made up of one or two small assignments requiring a variety of presentation formats (e.g. a poem, PowerPoint, brochure, abstract, job description).

One key aspect of the design of these online courses was the use of asynchronous discussion. This feature was specifically identified by the students in this study as being helpful to them.

The value of asynchronous discussion

Asynchronous discussion allows greater flexibility for both teachers and students to fit participation around other commitments and make time when it suits them and from a place that suits them. The asynchronous discussion format in these courses meant the students had time to consider, read and reread others' posts, reflect and draft, edit and proofread their own post, and have a greater voice in this setting. For each student, there is therefore less dependence on ability with and/or confidence with the English language, a factor that was very important for the students' varied backgrounds.

One of the main reasons given for these students (⁶/₈) preferring the online discussion environment over face-to-face learning was its flexibility and having more time to reflect on other's comments:

There is no limitation of learning time and place. ... I can check other's comments at any time as it is permanent. I have enough time for thinking and writing. I also can read peer's opinion. (P3)

One student commented on the difference asynchronous discussion made to participation over the duration of the course:

I spent less than one hour (a day) and seldom participated in online discussions (in the beginning). After I was attracted by it, I visit class forum every day and read about it. No other courses attracted me so much. (P1)

Participants acknowledged that this reasoning could be attributed to their language barrier as a Chinese student.

To me, I would prefer face-to-face discussion if I talked to Chinese students, but if the person who I communicated with is a Kiwi, I would prefer online discussion. (P3)

Firstly, some Chinese students can't really understand the face-to-face discussion due to the language barrier. They may miss some points of discussion when they take notes because of the time limit of a lecture. However, in online discussion, Chinese students have plenty of time to review the discussion in order to fully understand it, and sometimes students may be stimulated and get more ideas and understanding when they review online discussion In addition, Chinese student will have more time to reflect the question. In face-to-face class, due to language barrier, students may not be able to express precisely, but student will get more time to think about their expression. (P5)

The other two participants who did not indicate any preference for face-to-face or online discussion explained

Both can be interesting or boring—all depends on how the teacher organises it and with whom you discuss about it. (P1)

If the topics are not difficult and do not need a lot of time to prepare, the F2F pattern will be better, otherwise the online one is favourable. (P2)

However, all participants agreed that participation in discussion should be rewarded with marks.

Approval for awarding marks for discussion

Researchers have emphasised the importance of prompt and positive feedback online (e.g., Bender, 2003; Bischoff, 2000; Young, 2006). Prompt feedback is needed because students expect their contributions to be acknowledged, and they need to know what they have done well and what needs to be improved. In this study student discussion participation was assessed to reward students for their participation. Participation was rewarded with 5% of marks per module, and 20% of the total marks in each course were awarded for discussion contributions. Specific guidance on participating in discussions was provided for students in the course information area and often referred to by teachers.

These Chinese students commented that being marked on participation in online discussion was a kind of encouragement, and receiving a mark for participating in online discussion was a form of feedback that reflected whether students met the course and lecturer's requirements as well as being part of the learning process.

... I got low grades due to less participation. I knew I must change this situation because I did think I knew better than others and deserved the highest grade. So I think at first stage, grades on participation forced me to participate more. And later, when I was attracted by it, grade became a reward and useful information for me to see whether I was doing the right way according to the teachers' requirements. (P1)

Online discussion is an important part of online learning. Students can enhance their understanding on topics by regularly and consistently discussing them with peers and lecturers. From the marks given to online discussion, students can see if their participation in online discussion meets the course requirement or not. If not, they can benefit from the comments from lecturers to improve their participation for next topic. ... Theoretically, students could learn better when they have no pressure. However, in the reality, students are lazy without any pressure. (P5)

These students understood that grades are a kind of evaluation and reflect student achievements.

Grades mean whether you achieve the requirement of online course. It does not mean itself is really important, but the process of getting good marks is a kind of learning process. Students know how much they have achieved and developed from the grades. So grades are kind of evaluation in order to stimulate students to study. From this perspective, grades are important. Otherwise students will not pay that much attention to their studies without giving grades. (P5)

Grades play an important role in valuing the course. (P7)

However, one participant explained the learning process was far more important than the grade itself.

According to my experience, no education can reveal the true ability of a student by grades Compared with the improvement in your way of thinking, fantastic learning experience you get, grade is nothing. (P1)

I think the learning process is far more important than the grades no matter what marks students got. (P8)

The impact of the students' cultural background

Students' cultural values, particularly those of effort and hard work, appear to have an impact on online learning.

The majority of participants ($\frac{6}{8}$) believed that Chinese students generally study hard. One participant directly pointed out the reason was cultural and influenced by the Chinese examination system.

Another reason is about our culture. The evaluation by using exams has existed for a long time since the old time. The Qing dynasty started to select government officers by exams. Ordinary people could change their lives by exams. Chinese culture actually tells us that if we cannot achieve good marks in exams, we cannot be successful in our future and lives. (P3)

They believed that hard work can determine good marks in studies, and obtaining good marks in exams can reward them with material wealth, career and a good life through increasing their potential to succeed in the competitive Chinese society. Literature suggests that under the influence of Confucian culture, Chinese people believe hard work leads to the success in learning, and students have significant concerns about achieving good marks in exams (Lee, 1996). Lack of English proficiency is also given as a reason why Chinese students study hard. Participants commented that they spend more time on reading and reflecting so that they can overcome language difficulties and get better marks.

Chinese students will have to put extra effort to overcome language barriers and to fully understand the course instructions as well as comments from lecturers and peers. (P5)

We spend more time on reading and reflecting. (P4)

The financial burden, including a huge amount spent on tuition fees and living expenses, also motivates Chinese students.

We pay great amount of tuition fee here, so we have lots of pressure. That is why lots of Chinese students generally study hard. (P8)

The majority of these students ($\frac{7}{8}$) saw individual effort as essential to a successful learning outcome, and emphasised the importance of each student's role in the learning process.

Nothing can take the place of self-effort. (P7)

Students are the most important part of study. (P4)

One participant's explanation reflects the understanding of online learning.

Unlike regular learning, online learning is less supervised and more flexible. It requires students to be self-disciplined and work independently and actively. Therefore, students actually need to put more effort to make sure [of] their success in online learning environment. (P5)

Participants also acknowledged the flexibility and independence of the online learning environment, and stressed that effort is needed because there is limited supervision in this learning environment. However, two participants disagreed and explained that this cultural impact cannot be generalised. This perception may be in line with work by Samovar and Porter (2004) suggesting that such students are simply less aware of the influence of their own culture. In particular, this study's participants argued that concepts of hard work differ between individuals no matter which culture we come from, and what it means to be a hard worker can also be interpreted differently. They argued that some Chinese students were more willing to adapt to a new culture and learning environment than others.

Some participants explained how they needed to be willing to learn from New Zealand culture and try to accept western ways of learning in order to be successful. Lu Xun (1881–1936), one of modern China's best-known authors and social critics, identified this ideological attitude towards foreign culture which has strongly influenced Chinese people's ideas and attitude towards any new culture (Chen -Jianfeng, 2001). Lu Xun's ideology tells Chinese people to take the essence of a new culture, and learn from it so that they can adapt to the new culture. The students in this study also believed that New Zealand culture and a western teaching and learning style had more impact on Chinese students who had better English proficiency, and that those with greater English proficiency were more willing to adapt to New Zealand culture.

As well as recognising the positive aspects impacting on their motivation during their online study, participants also made recommendations that could further support student success. These further recommendations were to strengthen the reflection of the host culture in the course, and provide opportunities for face-to-face experiences.

Aspects of the host culture reflected in the course content

These students came to New Zealand for their studies not only to obtain knowledge and qualifications in New Zealand, but also expecting to gain more understanding of New Zealand culture, so more generalised course content was seen as a limitation. To some extent, this suggests that changing course content to increase cultural content from the host country might increase the appeal to Chinese students and encourage more to choose online courses in the future.

Findings indicated that these students were keen to learn about the ways things work in New Zealand, including teaching and learning. They had quickly recognised the differences and implications for themselves between teaching and learning in New Zealand and teaching and learning in China. In the interview, participants explained that the relationship between students and teachers in China is different to that in New Zealand due to cultural backgrounds.

In Chinese tradition, teacher is the authority. We have to listen to the teacher. If we disagree with what the teacher said, we are meant not respect teachers. But in New Zealand, lecturers and students are equal. I think the relationship between students and lecturers in online course is closer than it's in face-to-face class even if online lecturer never see some students face to face. (P5)

In New Zealand, teachers are more like friends to students, and they can talk studies even life experience with students ... respecting teachers and having significant concerns about education is Chinese culture When I was in China, no matter whether my marks were good or not, I was still scared of talking to teachers. But in New Zealand teachers ... do not have bias on whether you have high marks or not. So I feel free and relaxed to communicate with teachers. That is why I always talk to teachers when I have questions. But I would not do this in China if I was still in China. (P3)

Lecturers here are fair to everyone no matter whether you got good marks or not. I appreciate this way. (P8)

These participants showed their appreciation of a western learning style such as speaking their own thoughts rather than relying on teachers' instructions, and being willing to share ideas as well as being critical in their thinking. As they explained, the relationship between students and teachers in China generally is not equal, and students respect teachers as authority figures so they normally agree with what is said. Participants acknowledged this kind of unequal relationship between students and teachers is influenced by Chinese culture. In comparison, participants appreciated the more equal teacher-student relationship in New Zealand they had experienced in both face-to-face and online courses. They also emphasised the importance of being willing to communicate, ask questions, share opinion and experiences and seek clarification with their teachers and with other students. This willingness was supported by a perception that teachers in New Zealand are friendly and treat students fairly.

Consider a blended approach

Although happy with the improvement in their written English, participants found they had less improvement in their spoken English when studying online. They also felt less in contact with New Zealand culture. One way to achieve this cultural contact for international students, no matter what the topic content of the online course, would be using a blended approach, either formally or informally.

Two participants in this study suggested activities beside course work such as group meetings in order to develop a closer relationship between students and to discuss general study problems.

Organising regular or group meeting to discuss general problems. Chinese students meet in online learning environment and find suitable way to solve the problems. (P5)

It would be better if there would be more activities besides course work. Sometimes one to two get together can be arranged to make a more close

relationship. It is good for students when they communicate in the virtual reality if they know each other in the real world. (P1)

Apart from the online student-student interaction, these Chinese students suggested lecturers make an effort to organise face-to-face student group meetings. It is interesting that these Chinese students, who recognised greater equality between teachers and students in New Zealand and who highlighted the role of the student in their learning success, saw the organisation of informal support meetings for students as the role of the teacher. Any formal offline work within the full online courses that were the focus of this study would be unlikely so as not to be seen as disadvantaging those students who, because of distance, would be unable to attend. However, a recommendation arising from this study would be that online teachers can explicitly and strongly encourage students to make informal contacts and meet face-to-face for mutual support, an opportunity for international students to improve their spoken English, and to stimulate further learning about the host country culture.

Advice for other students

Along with identifying aspects important to their own learning, participants were asked to give advice to other students about studying online including the specific benefits.

Most ($\frac{7}{8}$) participants indicated a key benefit was that their written English had improved from learning online, and $\frac{6}{8}$ participants indicated that they had improved time management skills, technical skills and independence skills. Participants also made some clear points about the qualities of a successful online learning student. Their advice can be categorised in three main aspects: study attitude, behaviour and strategies.

Study attitude

Most ($\frac{5}{8}$) participants indicated a successful online learning student should be positive and active in online learning: P3 agrees with P6 that a successful online learning student should “pursue knowledge” and P8 advised online learning students to “never give up”.

Study behaviour

Two participants (P3, P5) indicated that “self-control” and “self-discipline”, and “having the ability to work independently without supervision helps in succeeding in online learning”.

Study strategies

Some qualities identified by participants in this study could be applied to any kind of learning, but participants identified these points specifically for online learning: “read and think more” (P2), “make preparation for online discussion” (P6), “be willing to share ideas, take notes about useful comments” (P3), “ensure frequent participation” (P4), “make use of computer techniques which can give you an effective way of learning” (P7), and “practice time management skills, and ask for lecturer’s and classmates’ help” (P8).

Some strategies these students identified may help Chinese students (and other international students) overcome difficulties caused by limited English competency.

Conclusion

Participants chose to undertake online courses based on an appreciation of new learning experiences. They viewed having online learning experiences as beneficial for their future careers in China. They readily recognised the differences between teaching and learning in New Zealand and China and showed their appreciation of the relationship between teachers and students in New Zealand, and were willing to adjust to a new learning environment and culture. The modular design of the course content and the variety of smaller assignment tasks were seen as supporting these students' study online. They also considered asynchronous discussion of considerable benefit to them and advocated the marking of these discussions.

Findings also suggest there is a tension between teachers catering for the diversity of participants and the desire of international students to gain knowledge and experience of another culture. Teachers, through generalising and perhaps the "de-culturalisation" of a course in the design and content, may inadvertently impact on the motivation, beyond gaining English language proficiency and qualifications, for international students to study in another country (western): to gain experience for future careers. Providing some blended learning opportunities through arranging group meetings alongside course study was suggested as a good way for Chinese students to enhance cultural exchange, develop and practice English language skills and gain further support in learning.

With rapidly increasing access to digital technologies and the promotion of online education by the Chinese government, China can be seen as a large potential online teaching and learning market. Opportunities to provide professional development in eEducation for teachers through enhancing existing study options may meet particularly Chinese, international students' needs and strengthen advantages for these students in studying in New Zealand.

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