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# Engaging Diversity At An Australian University: Chinese International Students' Perceptions Of Their Social Experience While Studying In Australia

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**Cross, J.M., Edith Cowan University, Australia. Engaging Diversity At An Australian University: Chinese International Students' Perceptions Of Their Social Experience While Studying In Australia**

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ABSTRACT
Increasing diversity of student populations at Australian universities has raised research attention on how international students are coping with their academic and social life. A research project conducted with Chinese students studying at Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Western Australia in 2005 revealed various cultural and equity issues which impact on the Chinese international students' academic and social experiences in Australia. This paper focuses on the social aspects of the findings from this study. It was found that most Chinese students reported poor social life and interaction with local and other international students on and off campus. Developing friendship with local students seems difficult. Home-stay experience has also been found problematic. The study shows that language and cultural differences are major barriers which impact on their social experience in Australia. The role of universities and local communities to develop strategies to improve Chinese international students' social outcomes while studying in Australia is addressed.

Key words: Asian students, social experience, cultural issues, equity issues, language barriers.

This research paper identifies and discusses issues related to Chinese students' perceptions of their social experiences while studying in Perth, Western Australia. The paper reports on a research project undertaken in 2005 by Cross & Wang which analyses quantitative and qualitative questionnaire data obtained from 50 Chinese students currently studying at Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Perth, Western Australia. An overview of this study, which focuses on cultural and equity issues, is outlined by Wang & Cross (2006). This paper focuses specifically on the social experiences of these students and their ability to adapt to a new culture and integrate within the local community. Additional findings and insights not provided within the previous publication are provided. Of course the students' social experiences and ability to adapt to their new culture will also have an impact on their satisfaction and academic performance within the classroom (Thompson & Thompson, 1996). Conclusions are drawn and recommendations made to assist Australian universities and the local community to develop strategies to better facilitate Chinese students' participation and integration in Australia in order to improve their educational and social outcomes as well as to provide internationalisation benefits to non Chinese students and the local community.

In recent years, international student populations have been growing significantly and form an important group within the university and wider community in Australia. In particular, China has become a major international student source for Australian universities. According to AEI (2006), by the end of 2006, onshore Chinese student number had increased by 100% from 2002 to 81 369 which accounts for 23.7% of the total international students studying in Australia.(AEI, 2006).

The growth of Chinese student populations produces new demands and challenges for Australian universities and the local community. Strategies for improving these students' educational and social outcomes have become increasingly important and even crucial to future growth and well being for the student population as a whole.

**Literature Review**

It has been reported that Chinese students are still largely incapable of participating and integrating themselves within the campus and local communities in Australia (Wang & Webster, 2004, Wang & Cross, 2006). In the literature, a number of issues have been identified including language abilities,

communications and learning skills, culture differences, intercultural relations, integration with local students, and previous experiences and expectations with Australian universities (Jones et al., 1999; Sam, 2001, Ward, 2001; Leder & Forgasz, 2004; Sanchez, 2004; Wang & Webster, 2004; Varga-Atkins, 2004, Wang & Cross, 2006).

Lewthwaite, (1997) identified that the greatest block to adaptation was lack of intercultural communicative competence. Luzio-Lockett (1998) indicated that the restrictions of international students' language abilities combined with emotional and situational difficulties limit their academic performance and consequently affect the overall educational and social experience. She suggests that guidance and counselling, and academic and personal supports for international students generally prove useful in addressing these issues. McClure (2001) agrees, suggesting that universities should help international students develop their language skills and learner autonomy through courses that provide suitable pedagogical strategies. Ninnes (1999) asserts that university and lecturer awareness of international students' special needs facilitates their adaptation to the local environment enhancing both their academic and social experience.

A number of studies have focussed on cultural issues of international students. Varga-Atkins (2004) points out that cultural differences reflects on the way people use the language and non-verbal signs and consequently impact on communication. Varga-Atkins goes on to say that learning styles from different cultural settings will differ. When coming to Australia to study, international students bring the experience that they have built up within their own educational context (Luzio-Lockett, 1998). They not only have to adjust themselves to the new country but also to the specific university where they are studying (Richards 1998). To improve this new experience, the importance of understanding the new country's culture (Kotby 1998) and knowing the culture of the language used there (Richards 1998) are stressed.

Concerns for the lack of interaction between international students and domestic students have been highlighted in a number of research reports (Smart et al., 2000, cited in Varga-Atkins, 2004). Through interviews with international students, Romm et al. (1991; Cited in Varga-Atkins, 2004) concludes that missing integrated social contacts with domestic students causes dissatisfaction of international students with their social experience. Research shows that international students have reported great difficulties in communicating and establishing meaningful relations with domestic students (Varga-Atkins, 2004; Wang & Webster, 2004). However, Varga-Atkins (2004) also points out that researchers are still unclear on how seriously this situation is viewed by international students themselves. Smart, Volet, and Ang (2000) conclude that, although awareness is still quite low, there is growing academic and administrative awareness that a lack of on-campus social interaction causes problems for overseas students.

Interestingly, Ward (2001) points out a fact that most research has been focusing on the perspective from international students, but not from the domestic students. He also says that limited investigations have found that domestic students are mostly not very interested in initiating any contact with international students on their campuses. He concludes that intercultural exchange and activities need to be created through interventionist approaches because it is unlikely they will occur in the normal course of events at Australian universities. Spencer and Rogers(2001) indicate that domestic students perceive international students such as Chinese students as a homogenous group which may discourage the formation of links between the two groups. Clearly greater understanding is required to facilitate interaction at the individual level.

Similarly, Ward (2001) reports that very little is understood about how to integrate international students into Australian communities. Ryan & Oqilvie, (2001) stress the need for universities to focus on the home environment of the international students from Asia as it has a major impact on the overall social experience of the student. Some studies suggest that international students boarding in family homes (home-stays) do not necessarily solve problems and can even prove a source of stress for students. Campbell and Hong (2004) studied the home-stay experiences of Chinese students in New Zealand and found considerable disappointment and concern amongst students with their home-stay experience particularly at the beginning. Other research reports in an

ad hoc manner about outreach programmes by community groups but evaluations are sketchy and inconclusive.

Wang and Webster (2004) make the obvious but crucial point that university communities are an essential part of international students' educational experiences. Lacina (2002) points out that it is important for the university to consider not only the academic experience of international students but also the wider social experience. Allen and Allen (2003) suggest that universities should employ a variety of strategies designed to integrate international students into academic and wider communities beginning with the classes themselves. Deep and enjoyable exposure to local culture should be understood as a vital component of a successful academic experience for international students. Such exposure will also provide avenues for host academic communities to benefit from the internal students in return. Briffle and Thompson (2004) emphasise this point when commenting that communities, being dynamic, can either enhance or degrade human experience. They stress that there are educational implications for teaching and learning in many areas of a community such as economic activity, range of choice, implied purpose, and the quality of social responsibility.

**Methodology and Student Profile Data**

This paper is based on results obtained from a larger research project undertaken in 2005 by Wang and Cross which examined both academic and social experiences for Chinese students studying at Edith Cowan University in Perth, Western Australia. The first stage of this research involved the use of a comprehensive questionnaire consisting of multiple choice questions as well as open-ended questions. Questions focused on the background of students and their expectations and experiences in relation to academic and community involvement and integration. The questionnaire was sent to all ECU Chinese students from P.R. China including Hong Kong. There were 50 students who responded to the questionnaire. The results were presented using exploratory data analysis. Using statistical testing significant differences in responses for various cohort groups were obtained in order to identify key factors influencing responses. Open ended questions helped the researchers gain further insight on key issues and related factors identified by the multiple choice questions. The second stage consisted of 15-25 minute face-to-face individual interviews with 15 selected ECU Chinese students based on a stratified random sample from the Chinese students who undertook the questionnaire. The student sample for interviews was selected according to their gender, age range, original city/province, educational qualification from China, Course being untaken at ECU, and the number of semesters studied.. Participants were given freedom to explore issues raised in addition to the initial questions asked by the interviewer. The interview provided an opportunity to gain insight on issues related to the Chinese students' social experience of studying in Australia and to further probe areas identified in the questionnaire.

For the 50 questionnaire participants', 76.9% were female students and 23.1% were male students as compared to the population percentages of 52% and 48% respectively. The age of these respondents ranged between 18-35, with an average of 24.3. They were from a variety of cities of China including: Northern cities/provinces such as Beijing, Liaoning, Inner Mongolia, Shandong, and Hebei; Eastern cities/provinces such as Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, Anhui; Western provinces/areas such as Sichuan and Shanxi; and Southern cities/provinces such as Yunnan, Guangdong, and Hong Kong.

Regarding educational background, 57.7% of the participants were high school graduates before coming to Australia and the rest were diploma and bachelor holders. Thirty four students were undertaking undergraduate studies and 18 postgraduate studies. The students' language abilities before commencing study in Australia varied significantly between IELTS 5.0 to 7.0. Fifteen of them scored IELTS 5.5 or less, 23 scored above 5.5, and 14 students (mainly from Hong Kong) did not have an IELTS score before coming to Australia. Twenty one students did not take any language courses after coming to Australia, while the rest of the participants took English courses of 1-10 months. The average length of English courses taken by students since arriving in Australia is 4.1 months. The respondents have studied at ECU between 0.5 - 4 years, including language courses, with 13 students having studied for less than 1 year, 21 for 1-1.9 years, 15 for 2-2.9 years, and 3 for 3-4 years.

## SOCIAL EXPERIENCE FINDINGS

In this section we provide a summary of the responses provided by the Chinese students involved in the study in relation to their social experiences on arrival and during their study. Common themes from the questionnaire and interview responses were identified covering arrival, social and cultural experiences. Where appropriate differences in responses for different cohorts are noted and student quotes to open ended questions provided. The final section outlines some of the significant differences identified between different cohorts.

### Experience on Arrival

The survey shows that students vary in their difficulty settling in when first arriving in Australia. Less than one third of postgraduate students reported that they found it difficult to settle when arriving in Australia, whereas half the undergraduate students had difficulties. This indicates that undergraduate students may need more help on their arrival to adapt to cultural changes.

At the same time, it appears that it is more difficult for female students to settle in than for male students. Five female students “strongly agreed” that it was difficult for them to settle in, while no male students chose “strongly agree” in the questionnaire. This was also confirmed with an analysis of the difference in the mean Likert scale score and associated standard deviations. The statistics also reflect that students with higher IELTS scores find it relatively easier to settle down.

Most participants find that their Chinese friends, schoolmates and university staff were most helpful during their process of settling in. However, the survey shows that feeling lonely is common when Chinese students first arrive in Australia. That is when they most need assistance and helpful friends. Often their Chinese fellow students helped them to settle in and they can become good friends as indicated by the following sample of comments:

- Question: Please provide more information on your arrival experience
- Answer: [Felt] lonely. (Comments of an undergraduate male student)
- Answer: Only Chinese friends know how to and can help me a lot. I felt excited but often very lonely, so needed friends. Needed to feel being in a group, such as belonging to a class or a group of people with same interests, etc. (Comments of a postgraduate female student)

The study reveals that some students found that home-stay arrangements were unpleasant on their arrival. This is similar to the findings by Campbell and Hong (2004) in their New Zealand study. Difficulties and culture shock were reported in relationships with home-stay families. If the home-stay family is not able to offer a lot of attention to these Chinese students (who have usually just left their home and come to a new country alone), they would prefer to share a flat with friends of a similar age.

The following quote reveal unhappiness and dissatisfaction with a home stay arrangement.
I lived with an Australian family for two months… The family did not help me much about my English, and they were too busy to spend time with me. I was lonely, and spent lots of time with my Chinese friends. (Comments of an undergraduate female student)

### Living and Working Experience

It was found that Chinese students tend to get together with their Chinese friends. However there does not seem to be much interaction between Chinese and local/other international students. Getting along with local or other international students does not seem very difficult for Chinese students. But making friends with them or becoming close friends is reported as difficult. Some have other Asian and international student friends. Very few have local friends.

It seems especially difficult for undergraduate students to interact with local or other international students. Almost 75% of undergraduate students’ friends and 58.8% of postgraduate students’ friends are “mainly Chinese”. Only 3.2% of undergraduate and 5.9% of postgraduate students’ friends are local.

The statistics also show that female students have slightly more difficulty in making friends with students from other countries than male students.

The following quote frankly states a general position.
It seems like where you come from [is] where the people that you [get along with] are from. That is really sad!!! (Comments in questionnaire)

It was noted that about two thirds of the Chinese students have part-time work. More postgraduate students undertake part time work while studying. Students find it not very difficult to cope with their work and study at the same time. However, participants listed a number of advantages of having part-time jobs during their study in Australia. They find that having part-time jobs provides them financial support and helps reduce financial burden on their parents. It is a good opportunity to practice and improve their English, especially speaking and listening. Some mentioned that through their part-time work, they were able to get to know more about Australian people, make more friends, and learn Australian culture.

Since most Chinese students do not have much time and money for social activities, they find their social life becomes more interesting and fun because of their experience at workplaces. Also, through work, they are able to gain work experience and learn practical and communication skills. Some feel that they can study more efficiently while working. However, at the same time, part-time jobs bring a number of issues to students studying in Australia including the Chinese students surveyed.

Most of the students found that paid employment takes a lot of their time away from study and relaxation. They feel especially stressful during assignment and exam periods. Many students mentioned that they often got too tired to study after work. There is also a problem that many jobs are only labouring work, therefore they can not learn English language and professional skills from their part-time jobs. Finally it was noted that being busy with work limits their participation in their campus life.

The survey shows that sharing a flat/house/unit is the most popular form of accommodation for Chinese students, while living alone and on campus are the least favoured. Almost 80% of the Chinese students were living in shared flats/houses/units. Only 4.1% chose to live by themselves and 2% live on campus.

It was noticed that home-stay was not popular among most students. From interviews, it was noticeable that more students had home-stays at the beginning, but moved out to share a flat with their friends after 1-2 months. They found that they could have more freedom when sharing a flat. Also, they can choose their own preferred style of food.

From both the questionnaires and interviews, it was clear that home-stay has not been a very good experience for most Chinese students. Reasons expressed included difficulties and conflicts in culture, food, and language. At the same time, it should be mentioned that a minority of students thought that their home-stay parents really helped them a lot in their English and studies and became good friends with them. These are normally well-educated local families, especially with occupations such as teacher, which indicates that families who have a professional occupation may serve as better home-stay families for international students.

The pattern of share-mates also illustrates that Chinese students often get together with their own Chinese friends rather than Australian and other international students. The number of students who share with Chinese is 70.8%, whereas only about 20% share accommodation with other international and local students. It is also noticeable that postgraduate students who are older with better English than undergraduate students tend to live with students of other nationalities.

The survey also found that the local community can be a good source for Chinese students to mix with non-Chinese people and become friends with them. It provides a good platform for them to integrate in the local community and learn Western culture and language. More than half of

Chinese students (59.1%) have made friends within their local communities and these students are much more able to mix with various nationalities.

The students who have not had any friends from the local communities are mostly younger undergraduate students. This indicates that students who are more mature may find it easier to integrate into the local community. It seems that younger students might need more help in this area.

In the questionnaire, when the students were asked whether they have attended any campus/social/local activities or joined any campus/social/local associations/clubs, 64.5% of the participants said that they did not attend any. Reasons mentioned are mainly that they did not have time besides study and work or that they did not know where and how to join these activities.

Many students who have joined some kind of campus/social/local activities or associations/clubs are members of the Chinese Student Association of the university, have been volunteers for orientation, attended "Multi-culture Day", and so on.

Interestingly, 90.1% of these students (who have more active campus/social/local life) are female. Also, the percentage of female students who participated in the questionnaire is 76.9%. However there are about half and half female and male Chinese students currently studying at ECU. Therefore, it seems that female Chinese students have a more active social life on and off campus.

**Cultural Experiences**

Most students find that differences in culture have more influence on their social life in Australia than that on their study. Mainly, they mentioned cultural impacts on making friends with local people. They find the differences make it hard for them to communicate with Australians and make it difficult to come to understand each other well. Reasons include different styles of joking and different form of direct or indirect communication. The following quotes reveal these concerns.

- Question: Have you experienced difficulties in culture related issues? Give some explanations please.
- Answer: When I speak to local [people], sometimes they cannot understand or catch my meaning. Because we [tend] to use an indirect way to describe thing[s], but local people like to use direct way[s]. (Comments of a postgraduate male student in questionnaire)
- Answer: As a Chinese, I sometimes feel difficult to express my feelings. I prefer not to say things too straight forward or direct, but my Western friends sometimes are a bit too direct for us. We feel difficult even feel hurt. (Comments of a postgraduate female student in questionnaire)
- Question: Do you think difference in culture has any influence in your study and social life in Australia? Please comment.
- Answer 1: Yes. I try to make friends with local people. However, I found there's some problem in our communication with different culture[s]. Sometimes I don't think it's fun[ny] when my Australian friend[s] tell joke[s]. (Comments of an undergraduate female student in questionnaire)

**Comparison of Cohorts**

Among the Chinese students who participated in the research, the postgraduate students' average age is about 4 years older than that of the undergraduate students, namely 26.8 and 22.9 respectively. Not only were the postgraduate students more mature than the undergraduates, they also had better English language skills when they came to Australia and fewer of them did English courses after arrival in Australia.

The survey shows that undergraduate students had more difficulty in settling in on arrival and making friends with local and other international students in Australia. Their language difficulty is obviously one of the major obstacles. However, personality might also be another important issue. They were generally born after the 1980s in China, which was after China implemented its One-child Policy (may be helpful to elabourate on the significance of this – implied but not sufficiently

clear). Consequently, they may find it difficult to cope with some social aspects during their study in Australia. Therefore, undergraduate Chinese students will need more help and support in improving their English language competencies and social life.

What is not observed in the comparison of postgraduate and undergraduate students is that non-high-school-entry students find it much easier to find part-time jobs than high-school-entry students. It would be expected that these older students often have more work experience than the younger high-school-entry students which may makes it easier for the non-high-school-entry students to get jobs than high-school-entry students. Besides, the non-high-school-entry students consider it a lot harder to deal with their study while working.

The comparison between male and female Chinese students who participated in the survey illustrates that (the social adjustments issues of ) studying in Australia is generally more difficult (for whom?) and overall satisfaction is relatively lower for the male students than for the female students.

The female Chinese students tend to have better English skills than the male students. The female students' average IELTS score at entry was about 6.0, while the number was 5.6 for male students. It is also noticed that, because of lower level of English language ability, the male students have studied English for 1.5 months more than the female students on average. Statistics show that, in general, male students find it more difficult to complete group assignments and obtain help for their study at university.

It is also noticeable that the male students have not enjoyed their study at ECU as much as the female students. This is a reflection of the more active female student social participation on campus and within the Australian Community. At the same time, the females are more motivated to recommend their Chinese friends to come to study in Australia and at ECU than the males reflecting their experience here.

## DISCUSSION

Perth is a fast growing city made up of people from many cultures from throughout the world. A large proportion of the population are first or second generation Australians. The results of this research suggest that Chinese students have in general been able to adapt well to the change in environment within the Perth community .However it is also clear that while there is a desire by many of the students to integrate within the community they find this very difficult to achieve.

As seen there are many reasons for some Chinese students having social experiences which do not meet their expectations but clearly the students English language ability, age and gender appear to be significant factors impacting on their success. While it is clear that personality traits will be key to a students ability to adapt to the new culture this study indicates that female postgraduate students with higher levels of English skills appear to have a greater chance of successful cultural integration. This study identifies that undergraduate male students are at risk. They find it much easier to socialize with their fellow Chinese students' than to fully engage with the multicultural environment in which they live.

Overall there appears to be a desire by Chinese students to have a rich social experience while studying in Australia but for this to be achieved the University and the local community in which they live has to identify strategies to facilitate this. The University can assist the students on their arrival not only to prepare them for academic study but also for a stimulating social and cultural experience. This can be done through provision of student support in identifying suitable home-stays, provision of peer mentoring and opportunities on campus and in class for social interaction with students from other cultures. This can include opportunities for students to participate in sporting and recreational activities and for group work within the classroom.

The local community in which the student lives and works on a part time basis can also support the social interaction through providing opportunities for the Chinese students. This can include

opportunities for Chinese students to join sporting clubs, churches and to participate in cultural events where students can share their cultural heritage with other cultural groups within the community. This is confirmed by McGrath and Butler (2004) who found that international students in New Zealand who became linked to community groups such as sporting clubs and churches benefit and are assisted in forming friendships which enrich their social experience and sense of belonging.

## CONCLUSION

From this research it is clear that the Chinese students do appreciate the opportunity for study in Australia and have been able to adapt well to a change in environment both on the campus and in the community. However it is also clear that while there is a desire by many of the students to integrate with the community they find this very difficult to achieve.

Limited English language skills and difficulty with communication is one major obstacle for social interaction. Even with good English skills, many students still find difficulty in engaging with local or other international students for other reasons, such as different cultural and life experience factors. At the same time, it is easier for them to get help from fellow Chinese students, especially if they are new arrivals. Another important reason is that Australian universities often do not meet their expectations in terms of the campus atmosphere and recreational facilities. Unfortunately the experience in the home-stay environment has not been a positive one for many of the students resulting in the majority of students moving to apartments with their Chinese friends. While there is clearly a desire on the part of a large proportion of Chinese students to embrace the new culture they find in reality this is very difficult to achieve. Some students rely on their part time work to provide the opportunity for interaction with the locals. For some this is successful but for many this does not provide the interaction they were seeking. The students who have had the opportunity to join local sporting clubs or church groups have had the opportunity of establishing friendships with locals which have enabled the students to adjust to their new cultural setting and to enhance both their social experience and academic outcomes.

A range of recommendations, detailed in Wang & Cross (2006), are suggested as a basis for Australian institutions to explore ways of establishing strong links and connections between a campus and its various communities for the benefit of all students. These include information transfer and support at international student and home-stay orientations, programs to provide greater understanding and respect of different cultures including music, food, religion, greater opportunities for student on campus involvement in recreational and social activities, opportunities to improve general English competency and provision of opportunities for the Chinese students to voice their needs and requirements. The local community can also assist by providing access for students to participate in sporting clubs, church groups and cultural events.

This study has highlighted the need for further research related to Chinese students which focuses on the expectations and experiences of other stakeholders including local and international students, academic staff, home-stay providers and the wider community. It is only by understanding the position of all stakeholders that effective progress can be made to better match expectations with experiences.

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