

Engaging Chinese  
Students in Teaching  
and Learning at  
Western Higher  
Education Institutions



# Engaging Chinese Students in Teaching and Learning at Western Higher Education Institutions

By

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With Contributions by Amy Pearson and Nick Wragg

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## PREFACE

Changing careers in my thirties was no easy task. Deciding to return to university and study for my degree was a daunting challenge; however, knowing how much I had achieved by the end of that study programme inspired me to want to help others learn and so I embarked on my journey into teaching. My first experiences with Chinese students were in my first year of teaching and to say this was difficult (in terms of teaching practice) is an understatement. However, I do believe that being a new teacher helped as I was still ‘fresh’ and inspired with new teaching methods, and worked tirelessly to overcome any challenges in the classroom I faced. Accepting that this wasn’t just about me and more about students’ learning was not easy to recognise, as the focus is on preparing the lessons, writing and marking assessment, and it becomes easy to forget that the whole purpose is the students’ learning and the impact of what you do on the student group. Knowing this made me a better teacher and I learnt the ability to engage any student group because of my experiences with the Chinese students, and it is for this reason that I wanted to produce something practical to help others with their teaching challenges.

This book therefore contains debates, case studies, primary research and discussions from a range of sources on a variety of topics relating to the teaching of Chinese students and their learning, with some practical advice and guidance on the best methods that can engage this particular student group. Chapters deal with separate issues of culture and language, breaking these down into smaller chunks that give a far more detailed discussion and analysis than has been found in other literature. Further chapters discuss attitudes to learning, staff support and some practical examples of appropriate methods that have been ‘tried and tested’.

The hope is that the reader will find this book useful in terms of providing some advice and guidance on the issues and challenges of teaching and learning in general as well as with the Chinese student, and that from this book, they might be able to adapt their own teaching practice to accommodate students’ different learning needs. The aim of the book is to provide clarity on what the challenges are and then to discuss practical solutions.

This book has been challenging but interesting to write. It has enabled me to develop even further as a teaching practitioner in Higher Education and has given me a greater knowledge into my own beliefs and culture and the impact this might have on my students in the classroom. It has allowed me to work with some wonderful people who have also challenged me to think deeper and to question the perceptions I might have, and it has then allowed me to question perceptions others might have. It has been incredibly rewarding and inspirational, and worth every late night.

One final thought goes to the publishers who believed that this book would be worth writing and that belief spurred me on to complete the research, and to put together this book in a meaningful and mindful way.

# INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this book is to examine and explore the challenges of engaging international learners in Higher Education (HE) within the United Kingdom (UK) through critical analysis and the evaluation of both primary and secondary data. The core emphasis in the book will be on Chinese learners and on considerations of the impact of teaching Chinese learners who have different languages, cultures and learning styles. The introductory chapter will provide background information about a research project that was undertaken, with a detailed rationale for the research together with the question, aims and objectives of the research. The introductory chapter will also provide a methodology of the project's research design and conclusions will be drawn throughout the book with appropriate recommendations made for future action following the analysis of the findings of both primary and secondary research. The book is divided into six chapters, and the literature embraces a variety of international sources, including articles, journalism, journals, the internet and textbooks, in order to gather a breadth of evidence for discussion purposes. The first chapter deals with the key question of what an international student is; discussing the Chinese student in depth, some observations on the challenges that this poses for western higher education institutions, and the perceptions that are often associated with large groups of Chinese students who travel specifically to gain a UK, US (or other) degree. The second chapter breaks this down further by discussing and analysing the cultural differences of the Chinese student in comparison to the western student, and the challenges that this presents. The third chapter concentrates on language in a similar way, breaking down the many different intricacies of the Chinese language and the impact this has when teaching higher education topics to a group of Chinese students. The fourth chapter discusses attitude to learning. It was felt that it was important to include such a chapter as it explores not only the expectations of the students when studying at a higher level, but also those of the teacher. The fifth chapter takes on the challenge of what support is available for teachers who may have suddenly found themselves in front of a large group of Chinese students and the potential stress and challenges this might cause. The final chapter offers some practical pedagogical examples of how it is best to engage this group and offers an insight into a

primary research study that ‘tested’ some practical methods. Finally, the book concludes by evaluating the six chapters and offering some recommendations to the sector on the best way forward with regard to teaching the Chinese student.

## **Background to the research**

The term globalisation, although difficult to define, relates to the existence of a strong interdependence between nations, especially in economic terms, and the sensitivity of nations to events in the outside world (Dicken, 1998). National economies are integrated into international economies through trade, foreign direct investment (FDI), technology and capital flows. This has led to an acceleration of new technology, communications and easier transportation with an increase in the ability of products, services, capital and people to cross national borders with some ease. Hickman and Olney (2011) refer to workers increasingly competing in an integrated global labour market. The increase in people moving from nation to nation has become commonplace and has forced businesses to change their working practices somewhat. In particular, this has impacted upon the education sector as work skills and training needs to be transferable in order to adapt to the ever changing jobs market. Since incorporation in 1993, colleges and universities have already changed rapidly in the manner in which they conduct their business. This has seen a move towards basing decision-making on business models. This, coupled with the concept of globalisation, has opened up the world of education to new challenges. Sloman (2008) suggests the greater competition, freer trade and FDI have encouraged businesses to think, plan and act globally. Hickman and Olney (2011) suggest, however, that relatively little is known about the extent to which globalisation affects investment in human capital. What is certain, according to the evidence, is that the number of international learners has increased globally. Apfelthaler et al (2006) support this by stating that the past decade has seen a dramatic rise in the international learner. The consequence of globalisation has certainly led to an increase within the US and UK in the number of international learners studying on degree programmes at both honours and post-graduate levels. Daguo (2007) confirms that in recent years, international students, and in particular Chinese learners, have increasingly wanted to study for a degree in the UK, amongst other Western countries, particularly English-speaking countries.

## **Aim of the book**

The overall aim of this book is to explore and analyse the challenges that may have arisen within colleges and universities to integrate these international learners through analysing and evaluating the literature and presenting a practical research project. In addition, the book aims to investigate the different cultures and learning styles of the international learner, with particular emphasis on the Chinese learner. Further areas deemed worthy of research are the engagement of these learners and the impact on the teaching practitioner and pedagogy, in order to adapt to the differing needs of these learners. As previously stated, the focus of this study is to primarily concentrate on Chinese learners as Daguo (2007) suggested that there has been a large influx in the past five years of Chinese nationals who want an English degree, with now as many as 1 in 10 students who are studying in the UK being of a different nationality. Of the students studying from countries outside the European Union (EU), the majority of these are Chinese with approximately 33% studying across the UK. Culturally, there is a vast difference in teaching and learning methods between English and Chinese educational establishments, and this has presented challenges within English colleges and universities. To simply assume that programmes can be delivered in a standard form without consideration for the formative background of the students is a flawed strategy. One of the research aims is to ascertain the extent to which the teaching practitioners of degree programmes have changed and adapted their teaching methods in order to meet these cultural challenges and whether it has been necessary to adapt in order to encourage social engagement of Chinese learners.

Education practices across the world may have similarities, but the managing of these teaching and learning practices is in some instances very different. With colleges and universities having to behave in a more business-like manner since incorporation, the need to attract the lucrative market of international students has increased. With the recent fee rises in the UK that universities and colleges are charging, initial studies suggest that the number of 'home' students has decreased and will continue to do so. Writing for the *Guardian*, Shepherd (2011) states that degree applications from 'home' students have *plummeted 12%* due to the fee rise. This has led to the escalation of competition within the education sector, and marketing strategies to encourage international learners have been developed and put into practice. With this change in strategy and the opening up of this sector of the market, the diverse nature of these groups of learners continues to be a challenge for educators and managers of

educational establishments. What is taught and how it is taught has to be more innovative in order to support the growing international market and adapted to meet their different cultural needs. *Intentional or unintentional ignoring or ignorance of factors such as societal background, history, cultural differences, attitudes and values, educational background and expectations may impact on the successful delivery of educational programmes to an international student group* (Bloy, 2010: 3).

## **Primary Research Aim**

The aim of the primary research within this book is to investigate and critically evaluate the pedagogy required within an educational environment to encourage the social engagement and enhanced learning success of Chinese students who are undertaking their first and post-graduate degrees at English Institutions of Further and Higher Education

To achieve this aim, the following points describe the key research objectives that shaped the research methodology and methods adopted for this study.

### **Research Objectives**

1. An in-depth exploration and analysis of the impact of language and culture on learning styles and teaching methods.
2. Identifying and evaluating the methods necessary for teaching and engaging Chinese learners from the perspective of the teacher and the student.
3. Critically analysing the appropriateness of teaching materials and methods for a cohort of Chinese learners.
4. A practical investigation into the appropriate methods that encourage social engagement in Chinese learners.
5. Providing a comparison of the use of 'games' within the teaching and learning of Chinese learners with home students.
6. Provide an analysis of data across Higher Educational Institutions.

## **Rationale**

As discussed above, the initial impetus for this study emanated from the researcher's experience of teaching international learners and being offered no formal training on how to do this, along with consequent conversations with new and other teachers who felt both disillusioned and disaffected by the difficulties of teaching international learners and the

lack of any training in this area. This compounded the desire to fully understand the drivers and complexities which appeared to be causing so many problems for a number of key stakeholders. These problems included the expectations of the Chinese learners and home students as well as the expectations of the management and quality departments.

Various meetings with colleagues from other similar institutions, and involvement in a special interest group (SIG) on this topic area through the Higher Education Academy (HEA) soon established that the problems were not in isolation, as they had encountered the same or similar issues. More recent discussions have provided evidence that this is still the case, and evidence from the SIG has suggested that in a university setting where first year classes had large numbers of students, all of different cultures and languages, it was even more difficult to engage the Chinese learners and ensure that the teaching and learning methods were adequate in order to meet their teaching and learning needs. Much work has been conducted by various theorists establishing the difficulties of teaching and engaging international learners, but research has suggested that despite the number of Chinese learners increasing over the past ten years, there is a limitation to the solutions to this and indeed the management of the change process with regard to teaching and learning methods, and the more recent observations and informal discussions clearly demonstrate that these solutions are still being sought. Through all of this, issues have emerged regarding pedagogy and andragogy.

## **Methodology**

As previously stated, this book contains a primary research project that was undertaken in line with a pilot study. The difficulties and challenges of engaging the Chinese student will become apparent over the course of the book; however, at this stage, it is important to make clear the reasons for the pilot study. The nature of the Chinese student is explained in the chapter on culture, along with the issue of 'saving' face; therefore, gathering a large amount of data was difficult and challenging in terms of the validity of the answers from the students. As will become clear in the book, questions arose as to whether the students were answering truthfully or whether they were answering in a way they thought was expected. Therefore, the complexity of the nature of the research topic requires the use of qualitative methods with an interpretivist philosophy considered as the first research method. This is due to the difficulties discussed above; if a positivist stance had been taken, gathering large enough amounts of data

proved to be very difficult, and as became clear during the ‘testing’, rich observations which were analysed produced far better results than potentially ‘false’ data if the student had completed questionnaires or tests in isolation. Saunders et al (2009:84) support this choice in stating that the social world of business is far too complex to consider a series of *law-like* generalisations. The philosophy of interpretivism allows for rich insights into this complex world and the investigation of the Chinese student is certainly a complex one. This view is in direct contrast with the positivistic philosophy, which lends itself more towards the quantitative methods of data collection and analysis. May (2011:40) supports Saunders’ views on interpretivism, suggesting that this philosophy allows research to focus on peoples’ subjective experiences and not on *treating them as ‘faulty’*; rather, it focuses on how *people make up the social world by sharing meanings and how they get on with each other*. The researcher is investigating the subjective experiences of Chinese students in Higher Education Institutions as well as the perhaps somewhat biased views of the educators who teach them. The design of interpretivism allows for these experiences to be investigated and evaluated, but also provides an overarching framework that will allow flexibility and sensitivity to the complexities of real life. By adopting this philosophy, the researcher is choosing research methods that emerge rather than the more rigid positivistic method. This is deemed necessary in order to gather as much reliable and relevant data as possible. Further, it is important to explore the subjective meanings motivating Chinese students and their teachers in order to be able to understand them.

The research will not start with a hypothesis for all the reasons stated previously. It is not about testing theory; the most appropriate method is to gather this data and develop theory as a result of the data analysis. Therefore, these results and potential theory from the pilot study would provide useful insight into how to gather the quantitative data that is considered more robust and that will allow for generalisations. However, what this study does provide is potential practical solutions to the challenges of teaching Chinese students. This approach is the inductive approach and the first theory is created following data collection and analysis in the initial stages of the study into the teaching and learning of the Chinese student. This approach is appropriate as it enables the researcher to allow for the Chinese student and the teacher’s biases when responding to any questions that they are asked. For example, the respondents will answer the questions based on their own perceptions of the teaching and learning methods used. This approach to the research design relates to the philosophy of interpretivism as it permits the aspects



of flexibility and sensitivity stated previously. This less structured approach may reveal several explanations and interpretations of the best teaching and learning method for the Chinese student. Easterby-Smith et al (2008) refer to how researchers using this tradition are more likely to work with qualitative data, further supporting the use of this method as the predominant method in the study of the Chinese student.

However, allowing for flexibility in the research strategies and data collection methods can create problems as it can be difficult to make a decision on where to go next. The research strategy that is chosen needs to be appropriate to the study and not be constrained to the approach and philosophy that has been adopted because this would not allow for the gathering of the most reliable data. Strategies considered for the study were, firstly, a case study. This method has elements that are appropriate due to the need to gather data that gives a rich understanding of the context of the research. The ability of this method to generate answers to the questions 'why' as well as 'what' and 'how', despite the 'what' and 'how', has generally related to the survey strategy (Saunders et al 2009) and makes this method extremely attractive. However, although this method may have elements that are appropriate, it lacks the ability to allow the researcher to be part of the research. A more appropriate strategy, therefore, and the second consideration, is that of ethnography, firmly rooted in the inductive approach (Saunders et al 2009). This method allows the interpretation of the social world, and this applies to the study of Chinese students and the way in which they interpret it. Benefits to this method do include the flexibility aspect, but this can be time consuming and there is a need for the researcher to constantly be responsive to change. This strategy relates to another method and a third consideration for the study that will be applied and is appropriate for the study in question, and that is the participant observer. The participant observer becomes involved with the subjects within the study and becomes a part of their community.

The participant observer method is chosen for the study because the researcher is a teacher who will need to gather some data through observations and by relating his or her own experiences alongside those of other respondents. However, it becomes far more complex to justify whether the researcher will be a complete participant or an observer as participant. This is because theory suggests that as a complete participant, the researcher is required to become a member of the group. This is all good so far; however, the theory then suggests that the complete participant does not reveal the true purpose of their role to the group. The

observer participant, however, allows the researcher to state their role clearly and be merely a spectator. The researcher will be stating their role clearly but will also become part of the group and this is slightly conflicting, but does support the earlier suggestion that the research is complex and the methods can be mixed to suit the research as long as the methods are appropriate.

The data collection methods which are typically used within the ethnography strategy are participant observer, according to Cresswell (1998); however, at this early stage in the study, it is not appropriate to be rigid in using this method alone. The dangers of using this method alone could mean that the data which is collected becomes contaminated if the researcher relies too heavily on his or her own observations. Therefore, a wider use of more mixed methods at this stage would be far more appropriate. Observations, in-depth interviews and questionnaires will be used in order to ensure the reliability of the data that is gathered and analysed. However, there are disadvantages in utilising observations. Although they can provide direct information about the behaviour of the Chinese student and the teacher, it can be time consuming and expensive to carry out. If the observer is the researcher alone, then as previously stated, the element of bias may contaminate the results; however, involving others in the observation process may lead to many different interpretations of what is happening and this can have both advantages and disadvantages. A fully structured observation process would not be appropriate, therefore, as it does not allow for the emerging data that needs to be observed and collected. Should the observation process be too formal, it might provide further bias and the students and teachers might behave differently, which is not in keeping with the inductive, interpretive approach and philosophy. However, the observations do allow the researcher to enter into and understand the situation and the context, and this is important to achieve the desired results for the study in question, but as previously stated, the observed group may behave differently if they know they are being observed and this may fail to deliver the desired data.

In-depth interviews will form part of the research design, allowing the researcher to yield rich data and new insights, whilst exploring topics in depth, but again can be time consuming, expensive and may produce a large volume of data that is difficult to transcribe and code. Questionnaires are the final method which is considered appropriate for the study and will be used in the early stages. These are to be used to gather large amounts of data that will be analysed in order to create theory, although it is important to appreciate that questionnaires can have a low return rate.

To conclude, it is not an easy task to decide on the best methods when designing the research, but the use of qualitative methods can indeed enhance the process and allow the researcher to gather valuable data that will inform the community. The qualitative and quantitative stances both have relevance within the research process; it is up to the researcher to explore the methods and make difficult decisions on which are the most appropriate. For the person researching the Chinese students, the requirement of gathering thoughts, beliefs, feelings and the need to make observations of human behaviour would suggest that the emphasis on the qualitative stance is going to be the one that reaps the best results.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT

### Introduction

This chapter aims to explore the concept of the international learner, with a clearly defined focus on the Chinese learner. In order to enable the reader to have a clear understanding of the issues that are related to the teaching and learning of Chinese students in Western institutions, it becomes necessary to explore this concept. The central aim of this chapter is to discuss the general perceptions of the Chinese learner and to make comparisons between them and their Western counterparts. Simonton (1988) refers to the problematic nature of generalisations as being precisely the kind of thing that is interesting. Cronbach (1986) goes further to state that these generalisations are (in this case) specific categories, and with vast cultural discrepancies, as with Chinese and Western students, it perhaps could be implausible to make assumptions. Therefore, this chapter aims to provide a deep exploration of these general perceptions of the Chinese and Western learning preference challenges to set the context of the book, which will then offer potential solutions in its latter half. It will examine the differing learning styles and pedagogical methods and tools used by both Chinese and Western educational establishments. Going further, it will examine the preferred methods of teaching and learning of Chinese students and will enable the reader to have a clearer understanding of what defines a Chinese learner and the challenges they face when studying for an undergraduate degree in Western institutions. According to Scott (2010), individualism is the most important aspect of any Western student in relation to particular learning styles. Controversially, she states that *rather than being a harmless fad, learning styles theory perpetuates the very stereotyping and harmful teaching practices it is said to combat* (2010: 5). Learning styles theory is widely endorsed across the Higher Educational sector and many institutions carry out specific learning styles *testing* prior to and during students' period of study with the *honourable* intention of creating the most appropriate pedagogical methods to meet each of the particular learning styles. However, it would appear to be more difficult to ascertain the particular

learning style of the Chinese student in the same way as the Western student due to the cultural differences, as Cronbach suggests above, and due to many other variables such as language issues. Scott (2010: 6) elegantly refers to this: *In such a context, even if empirical evidence for the effectiveness of basing pedagogy on one discrete model of learning styles could be found, this cannot be said to provide proof of the efficacy of 'learning styles' as they are currently conceived, or misconceived.* She goes further to suggest that many learning style models have little to offer in terms of pedagogical design and that they often offer little more than a waste of a teachers learning and teaching time. Therefore, this book does not propose to create a recommended model of teaching and learning for Chinese students; it merely suggests things that need to be considered when teaching this particular group, and this opening chapter aims to introduce the reader to the Chinese/international student.

This chapter focuses on several interesting case studies across a range of nations to give a broad perspective at this stage. Although there appears to be an abundance of information on learning styles, pedagogy and issues pertaining to international and home students, it lacks a detailed exploration and discussion of the key issues in teaching Chinese students with regard to the most appropriate and effective methods to encourage engagement, motivation and achievement. Taking this into consideration, it becomes necessary to explore, within the literature, the notion of an international student and that of a Chinese student. Furthermore, worthy of investigation are the issues that arise for a Chinese student when studying within a western HEI, as well as any literature that attempts to provide solutions to these issues, whilst clearly identifying whether these issues are unique to the Chinese student and whether the solutions offered are generic rather than specific to this particular student group. A final point of interest is to establish (touched upon in this section) what support is available for the teachers of this group and whether that support offers a practical solution which is easily transferable into the classroom. This will be discussed in more detail in the fifth chapter of the book.

### **What is an International Student?**

The concept of the international student, and indeed international education and training, is not a new one. As Ashton and Green stated in 1996 (3), there has been an *intensification* of international competition and the world's economies have integrated into *one global economy*. This, coupled with technological advances, has *rendered education and training*

*of paramount importance in the competitive process.* Therefore, before defining the concept of an international learner, it is initially important to understand the nature of education and the importance of theory within education, in order to consider its value in teaching and learning practice. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) for the United Kingdom (UK) refers to the implicit and explicit beliefs that educators operate from as well as educators' values about education, such as the purpose of education, the nature of relationships between teachers and pupils, and that theory influences our teaching and learning, whether or not this is subconscious. This theory informs our pedagogical approaches, curriculum design and assessment strategies (HEA, n.d. online). What this suggests is that it is necessary to have a deeper understanding of our learners before we can use theory and different pedagogy to aid us in finding appropriate methods for teaching. This is not only essential for home students, but *understanding how students learn helps teachers to identify how their teaching practices impact on the learning of students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds* (HEA, n.d. online). From a philosophical perspective, it was Nietzsche (1890) who stated that education is often corrupted by educators and that it was necessary to seek the source of great knowledge not from the corrupted interpretations of it from lesser minds. Einstein (1954) furthers this by stating that knowledge exists in two forms: lifeless stored in books and alive in the consciousness of men. Both Nietzsche and Einstein suggest, therefore, that the teacher's role is vital in shaping the student's learning, but it should not take away a similar consciousness of freedom for the student to evolve. This means that while theory informs practice, equally, there needs to be freedom for practice to inform theory. The teacher–student relationship needs to be one that allows this to advance as well as promoting inherent flexibility. As Scott (2010) suggests that theory continues to influence what teachers do, regardless of whether it is useful.

If these views are to be applied to the issue of the international student, then it could be argued that pedagogic models of teaching are constantly being challenged by the rise of the international learner and diverse student cohorts. Furthermore, and worthy of study, is the international learner moving from a particular style and model of teaching and learning in childhood to another style in Higher Education (HE) in western universities that could be classified as the complete opposite of what they have experienced previously. As Arenas (2009) states, *an individual's personal, social, cultural, economic and political experiences will shape their knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, behaviours, language, identity and even thinking.* This suggests that the way we are taught from an early age is

embedded and we will have difficulty changing the way we learn; this is certainly worthy of consideration as it alludes towards Bloy (2010) who stated that ignoring the cultural backgrounds and beliefs of the Chinese learner is a flawed approach. Arenas (2009) takes this further and boldly states that *this applies to both learners and teachers*, placing emphasis on the teachers' background beliefs and assumptions, and stating that this *influences their teaching practices, including sometimes in a negative way*. Marriott (2001) refers to the learning style of students and the way these learning styles can change according to the environment, suggesting that not only does the international learner have to contend with their learning styles changing from childhood to adulthood, they have to adapt to moving from their home country to a foreign one where the learning styles are different again. A study conducted by Marriott (2001), although now over a decade old, does suggest that differing learning styles exist and that learning preferences change over time. Therefore, the evidence would indeed suggest that the Chinese learner faces difficulties in transitioning to a Western HEI, and furthermore, the teacher faces difficulties in teaching them due to their ontotheological beliefs. That is the identity of 'being' of both the students and the teachers themselves (Heidegger 1969).

However, Caruana and Spurling (2007) refer to the research fields regarding the teaching and learning of international students as being limited and disparate. Huisman (2010) emulates this by arguing that there is a paucity of evidence-based and theoretically-informed work; however, research continues to be small-scale and somewhat theoretical. This provides evidence that the study of the practicalities of teaching international learners is limited and therefore further studies are necessary. It is necessary, however, to understand the studies if they have been done by researchers who are also the teachers of international learners, as often these studies are only from one particular viewpoint. Therefore, in the primary project contained within this book, it is important to gather as much evidence as possible in order to ensure that many viewpoints are given on the pedagogical methods of teaching international learners. A barrier, however, to the development of such studies and the necessity of such studies is eloquently expressed by DeWit (2002). *It is argued that at the 'symbolic' end of the institutional spectrum, universities are becoming 'active players in the global marketplace'* (DeWit, 2002, p. 227 in Qing (2009)) and that Higher Education establishments are interested primarily in the income generated from the international student. Gundarra (2000) does make an interesting point in that the increase in international students is primarily from wealthy, middle class backgrounds. Furthermore, students from backgrounds such as Chinese tend to study technical and



business subjects rather than topics in the arts or humanities. Gundarra (2000) recognises that institutions need to take measures that develop an understanding of different cultures at both informal and formal levels, going on to suggest that friendly relationships between staff and students may help to aid cultural understanding and bridge the distance for these students in Higher Education. Qing (2009: 38) goes further to suggest that HE establishments are *thin on understanding* with regard to international learners and have a *prescriptive approach to institutional change* that is *based on doing the least the market will bear*. This emphasises the necessity for such a study into the best techniques to engage and create the most appropriate methods of teaching and learning in order to construct a more integrated, and knowledge sharing approach. Supported by the OCED (2007b), Qing (2009: 39) suggests that although there is more literature on internationalisation, there is a distinct lack of *systematic, rigorous enquiries that provide empirically grounded evidence which informs our understandings of the nature, forms and key components of the 'international, intercultural and global dimension' in the delivery of quality higher education*. And furthermore, Qing (2009: 39) states that it is essential to *understand the purposes, practices and experiences of key stakeholders at all levels of the processes of internationalisation*, thus suggesting a study that provides empirical and robust data into the most appropriate teaching and learning methods of all international students is warranted.

Despite Qing deeply criticising HEIs dealings with international students, according to the United Nations, Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) at their 2009 world conference on Higher Education, there were more than 2.5 million students studying outside their own country. UNESCO further predicted that the number would rise to approximately 7 million by the year 2020. Qing (2009) predicts that the demand for an international education will rise to 7.2 million by 2025. It would appear that the main destination preferences are the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), Germany, France and Australia, with the number of international students more than doubling between 2000 and 2007. The US, UK and Australia have the highest number of international students. Prior to entry onto degree programmes, the students are required to sit a language test such as the International English Language Test (IELT). Interestingly, the US had the highest number of international learners until 9/11, when their visa requirements were made stricter. The UK saw this as an opportunity and 'cashed in', absorbing the international students. This market continued to be lucrative until the 2008 recession, which exposed bad practice, unmanageable high proportions of

international students compared to home students, and issues of quality raised by the use of aggressive recruitment practices, thereby supporting comments made previously by Qing in relation to the international student bringing in money for institutions, and therefore the teaching and learning needs of these students are something that teachers will just have to deal with. In 2009, international students represented 21.5% and 15.3% of HE enrolment in Australia and the UK respectively, compared to less than 4% in the US, according to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Of these international students, one of the largest growth areas has been from China.

Chinese students account for more than 18% of the total number of international students (although these figures continue to fluctuate and therefore obtaining an accurate figure is too difficult). Worryingly, though, is the element of fraud in tests and transcripts when applying for courses, but even Chinese students who test high on IELTSs can have difficulty reading, speaking or writing English well enough to stay ‘up to speed’ in classroom discussions and essay writing. The OECD (2007b) in Qing (2009: 37) refers to the poor existence of empirical *grounded knowledge* which fails to *offer a nuanced account* of new forms of *cross-border Higher Education*.

### **Teaching and learning of international learners**

The QAA (2012) refers to the need to ensure quality in teaching and learning at the HE level in the UK and the use of benchmark statements clearly demonstrates that all students on degree programmes in the UK must meet certain criteria in order to achieve their qualifications. These skills and competencies range from evaluation skills, extraction of data, criticality, analysis and the capacity for independent learning. Wilson and Hill (1994) in Marriott (2001) refer to the capacity to assume different learning styles according to the circumstances, leading to more effective learning. What Marriott (2001) also recognises is that students are diverse in terms of age, gender and nationality and that this diversity can lead to many differences in the way students learn and the ability or attitude to learning, and relates back to Heidegger’s (1969) philosophical works relating to identity.

Kosala et al (2011) conducted a study into the different learning styles in HE across different cultures. The study concentrated on three large areas: interestingly, two Asian countries – Sri Lanka and Indonesia – and the European country of the Netherlands. Using an inventory of learning

styles (ILS), the study by Kosala et al (2011) aimed to highlight the differences and similarities between the groups' learning strategies, conceptions and orientations. The results of the study showed more differences between the two Asian groups and the Western group, and fewer differences between the two Eastern countries. However, what is noteworthy is that Kosala et al make the bold statement that the controlled learning environment in the Asian countries is what could promote the differences from the Dutch learning style and it certainly supports Mariott's (2001) view on differing learning styles changing with differing environments. Kosala et al (2011: 313) make a final bold statement suggesting that,

*[I]n the view of some Sri Lankan communities, grades (end result) are more important than the learning process. Within the higher education context, it is a pity that only some teachers attempt to develop critical thinking skills and argument among their students. Teachers are mostly interested about the content of [the] subject matter, and much less in how students process the information, what strategies they use in comprehending subject matter, and how they may regulate their students' learning process and understanding.*

## **The Chinese Student**

This section examines the Chinese student and the impact of the cross border student on Western establishments in terms of adapting pedagogy and understanding the learning differences between Chinese and Western students. Furthermore, this section explores the challenges that this presents to the Chinese student studying for a degree in a Western institution.

A study by the International Association of Universities relates to institutions from 95 countries agreeing that internationalisation in HE brings benefits such as more internationally oriented staff and students, and improved academic quality. This is certainly a key factor in modern times, with organisations recognising the importance of the globally aware graduate and the effects of cross border trade. Foster and Stapleton (2012) refer to pedagogical tools such as discussions, student presentations, group work and case analyses as being fundamental, especially when teaching business students. They go further to suggest that pedagogy has been changed by the influx of Chinese students to US and other Western institutions as practitioners try to adapt their practice to satisfy the learning needs of the group presented to them. Tweed and Lehman (2002) in Foster

and Stapleton (2012) refer to how students and educators may under-appreciate the impact that learning styles and changes to environment have, and that fundamental activities (especially in learning business) such as participative activities and experiential learning are the most demanding for the Chinese student. Spence and Valentine (2002: 302) in Foster and Stapleton (2012) state clearly that *if in fact Chinese students have difficulty adapting to these pedagogies, it should be no surprise they are essentially Western constructs.*

Research from a variety of literature into the teaching and learning of Chinese students makes many generalisations about Chinese students. Primary research in the form of focus groups and questionnaires has added further validity to this list. The key factors as listed below:

- They are passive learners
- They are *surface* learners
- They do not enjoy participation
- They prefer memorisation and rote as a preferred style of learning
- They like repetition
- They only value the teacher's opinion
- They respect age and position
- They do not value peer observation or feedback
- They do not like being singled out and questioned
- They highly value group harmony

Therefore, if this perception is accurate, it presents many challenges to Western institutions where the pedagogical tools focus more on:

- Challenging learners
- Deep learning
- Active learners and participation as a preferred method
- Enquiry and experientiality as a pedagogy
- Welcoming both teacher and peer feedback and observation
- Group and team work
- Challenging and questioning of both peers and teachers (and the literature/theory)

Although it cannot be claimed that either style is more effective and produces better academic results, there are some similarities in these generalisations as rote and repetition are methods used in both Western and Chinese educational settings (remembering rote learning mathematical times tables and nursery rhymes for example). There could, however, be

an argument to support in class discussions, student presentations and group work as necessary for certain topic areas such as business (Foster and Stapleton 2012). In a study by Foster and Stapleton (2012: 305), they attempt to gather the students' perspective on the value of such methods of learning for business studies. The study took place in a Canadian university and used the method of focus groups. They gathered student opinions on four key areas: In class discussions, student presentations, case analysis and group work.

### **In class discussions**

Interesting comments relating to in class discussions suggested that the Chinese students did not value peer discussion (supporting the generalisation above) *because how can you get information if you just discuss between the students as we are new to the knowledge?* Of further interest, though, is the comment that they did value some opinions but only of those older students who had work experience that they could bring to the discussion. Another comment regarding in class discussion is one worthy of further exploration (more on this in chapter 4). This relates to the Chinese student not knowing why the discussion has taken place, what the purpose of the discussion was and what the conclusion to the discussion was, and would appear to be very confusing for the Chinese learning style. This comment suggests that these students prefer explicit delivery of content. The Chinese students prefer their teacher to provide the knowledge and the answer, and they have a preference for this and value it more (again supporting the generalisations above). An additional challenge for the Chinese learner is with regard to understanding their class mates: they speak too fast; they use words the Chinese do not understand and cannot translate (slang). And finally, they have a strange accent that is difficult to understand. Foster and Stapleton's study, however, did not suggest that the Chinese students were averse to participation but were perhaps hindered by differences in culture and language. Other comments regarding respect support this element, suggesting that the Chinese students are not expected to speak so freely in Chinese classrooms and that they are expected to answer the teacher's questions but not interrupt them as is often seen in Western institutions. This is disrespectful in Chinese culture. The study did yield that the Chinese appreciated the teachers in Western institutions, though, and that although they were nervous about interrupting and misunderstanding the discussion and questions (see saving face later in chapter 2), they did prefer the teacher–student relationship here as the teacher always seemed

to respect the student's opinion. But they did find it difficult to comprehend the *ad hoc* nature of the discussion, as in China, any topic is generally given to the students prior to the discussion to give them time to prepare.

Another challenge is the use of local references. Home students and teaching staff will often use local references such as places and tourist spots or discuss particular cultural hobbies, and this can make the Chinese student feel isolated which therefore reduces engagement and produces inertia with regard to engaging in the discussion. In opposition to this, the Chinese students want to perhaps use their own experiences and examples but find it difficult to explain the background context (Foster and Stapleton 2012). A final point from this element of the study suggests that the Chinese students recognise the usefulness of class discussions and participation and clearly distinguish the differences between engaging in a Western institution as opposed to a Chinese establishment.

### **Student presentations**

In this section of the study, students were asked for their opinions on giving student presentations and how these compare to in class discussions in terms of their feelings of comfort in taking part in these activities. Students stated that there were very few formal presentations in China and that these were mostly in classes that explored the English language. The response from the students on the importance of this skill was remarkable. They stated that presentation skills would enable the student to have far more of a competitive advantage when they returned to China to find work as it would help in interviews. However, this did not mean that the Chinese student found presentations easy, with comments including that they take a long time for the student to prepare, for them to then deliver such a short presentation, which was sometimes only ten minutes long, but they did understand the significance of the group work aspects of presentations as much as the individual ones and felt that the skills they learnt were of high value. In comparison to the in class discussions, all students in this study felt that presentations were better for Chinese students as they found in class discussion hard to engage with (Foster and Stapleton 2012).