BCES Conference Books, 2019, Volume 17. Sofia: Bulgarian Comparative Education Society
ISSN 1314-4693 (print), ISSN 2534-8426 (online), ISBN 978-619-7326-07-9 (print), ISBN 978-619-7326-08-6 (online)

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The Experiences of East Asian Students Studying at English Medium Universities: A South African Case Study

Abstract

The involvement of East Asia, and in particular China, in the global markets has rapidly increased over the last few decades, and universities in English-speaking countries, including South Africa are increasingly accepting students from that region into their programmes. This requires the students to not only move to a locality where foreign languages are spoken, but also to function within a completely different cultural environment. In this case study, we consider the experiences of a group of East Asian students at one university in South Africa. In view of the interconnected world that we live in, we argue that it is important for lecturers and administrators at higher education institutions to take note of these experiences, to advance intercultural understanding and support these students towards positive international experiences.

Keywords: internationalisation of higher education, student experience, East Asian students

Introduction

We live in an interconnected world where international mobility, also in the context of higher education is increasingly popular. Burçer and Kangro (2016, p. 201) point out that a number of issues underpin the internationalisation of higher education, some of which are rooted in neo-liberalism. Economic issues, such as expanding global markets also motivate many East Asian parents to send their children to study at English medium universities, inter alia to learn English and to get exposure to other cultures, thus increasing their competiveness in the job market (Wang & Shan, 2006; Xie, 2019). Indeed, Wang and Shan (2006, p. 16) concur with this expectation and caution universities to "foster students' global understanding and development of skills for living and working more effectively in a diverse world".

Rationale and statement of the problem

International students from East Asia, however do not only have to move to localities away from family, where a foreign language is spoken, but they also need to function within completely different academic and social environments. This may pose challenges to the students in their quest for higher education, particularly if there are few peers that they can relate to. Wang and Shan (2006) point out that in Australia, there is a substantial number of Chinese international students. On the other hand, in South African universities, while it is common to find international students from Sub-Saharan Africa, the number of students from East Asia is relatively small. For instance, at the University of the Free State, during 2018, only 12 of the 39832 students (0.03%) enrolled were from East Asia (University of the

Free State, n.d.). While literature on international student experience in the United States of America, Australia and Europe are reasonably available (e.g. Marmon et al., 2018; Bertram et al., 2014), we could not find studies specifically focusing on East Asian students' experience in the Southern African context.

The first author, originally from China, experienced many problems when he embarked on his postgraduate studies in South Africa. Not only did he experience language barriers, but he often felt socially excluded (Xie, 2019). His own experience, together with the dearth in literature available specifically on East Asian students in the Southern African context, served as impetus for this study, and we pose the following research question*: What are the experiences of East Asian students during their tenure at an English medium university in South Africa*.

Methodology

We embarked on a qualitative study. The first author generated data by interviewing 6 East Asian students enrolled at a single university in South Africa, as a case study. Four were from China, one from South Korea and the other one from Japan. Four were males and two females, and four were enrolled in graduate programmes, while two were busy with their Master's degrees. We also used the first authors' own reflections to supplement the data, citing him as author.

Guided by principles of integrity, we obtained ethical clearance from the relevant ethics board, prior to the start of data generation, and used different strategies, inter alia member checking and an audit trail, to promote trustworthiness. We gave each participant a pseudonym, in the form of a random acronym (cf. Merriam, 2009).

Findings

A number of issues crystallised during the interviews. Direct quotes are provided to substantiate the claims that are made. In the section that follows, these themes are juxtaposed with findings from other studies.

Reasons for studying in South Africa

Two major reasons for studying in South Africa emerged from the data. Firstly, some students saw it as a viable option to get international experience. QQ, for instance saw South Africa as a western country with a different educational structure ("I was interested in studying educational systems of western countries"), while PP would have preferred to study elsewhere, but instead an opportunity arose to study here:

> *I strongly hoped that I had a chance to study one of overseas countries such as America, Canada and some European countries. However, they were difficult to accept some foreigners to study in these fields of high-tech technology. Consequently, I made a decision to come to South Africa in terms of it was welcoming to allow foreigners to study from different countries.*

Some participants indicated that they came to South Africa due to some family connection ("I came to South Africa with my parents, for my father's study in Theology" (JJ); "My relative travelled to South Africa five years ago. He told me that I should come to South Africa to study." (TT); "My relative works in a South

African company. He told me that I must come to South Africa to study" (MM). Yet, the overarching reason all the participants provided was to improve their English because a "high standard of English would help you to find a good job" (MM).

Mankowska (2018) in her study found that indeed job market prospects are a huge motivating factor for Chinese students to study abroad, not only to gain skills to improve their chances back home, but also to open up opportunities for themselves and their families to migrate to other countries.

Language barriers

Although all the participants indicated that they had English as a subject at school level and had access to dictionaries and electronic language convertors, the biggest problem for most of the participants was to communicate and study in English. QQ shared that it was a struggle "to understand some main points" in class. Not only was it difficult to keep up with the speed of lectures and discussions in class, and they struggled because of the different accents used by the people in South Africa ("A few of lecturers spoke heavily accented English or spoke English very fast thus I could not understand what they were talking about" (PP); "Different lecturers had different accents, therefore I had to spend more time on my study" (MM)). PP furthermore relates:

> *It was difficult for me to understand in the class because my mother tongue was not English. In China, I used to attend classes in Mandarin. In South Africa, I would face a new challenge – I had to study all my subjects in English. If I wanted to get involved in the class, I had to preview all my subjects before the classes and revised them after the classes.*

A study in Australia found that East Asian students often lack confidence to engage in class discussions due to their limited language proficiency (Wang & Shan, 2006). Yet, as time went by, the participants seemed to cope better, as JJ shared:

> *In the beginning, I experienced language barriers, because I was not exposed to English as much in South Korea. Once I learned how to speak English I have realized that South Africa is an interesting place to live.*

Teaching and learning approaches

A number of issues related to teaching and learning transpired. It seems that most of the East Asian students were more used to lecturer-centred environments, where students are passive, and where high levels of rote-learning was expected ("Chinese education focused on exams" (TT); "[In China] if you passed your final exams, you would pass your subjects" (PP)). Mankowska (2018, p. 154) indeed calls the Chinese schools "test-oriented" and "encyclopaedic". In South Africa, on the other hand, the approach is more student-centred and outcomes-based and this determines the types of assessments ("In South Africa, it focused on different ways to assess your study such as group assignments, presentation on-line test etc." (TT); "In South African universities, they had many ways to assess your subjects such as group assignment, presentation, class test and so on" (PP)). This seems to be a challenge for the participants. Wang and Shan (2006) argue that such assessment practices, also used in the Australian higher education environment, require students to change their way of learning.

Some of the participants found it difficult to engage with other students in class. For them, it seemed like all the South African students knew each other before entering higher education, as they could immediately mingle and form groups in class.

> *It was still another challenge for me to participate in the group discussion because most of my classmates knew each other from their high school. Thus they were easy to build up different groups in the class.* (PP)

To add, Bertram et al. (2014) warns that robust and noisy classroom discussions may cause students who grew up in the collectivistic culture of East Asia, to become anxious. Still, students shared that certain practices, such as using visual presentations helped.

> *Some lecturers preferred to use PowerPoint to explain their knowledge thus I could easily to get the main points in the class, but some of them never use PowerPoint to explain them, I was struggled to understand the knowledge.* (PP)

Perseverance of the students

What came out strongly was the dedication and perseverance of the participants in spite of the challenges above. They had high expectations of themselves, and they worked hard towards it.

> *For me, I could not find any ways to overcome language barriers thus I had to spend more time on my study. Besides, attitude was very important for every student. I did not fail any of subjects because my attendance rate was high. I finished all of my workload on time.* (PP)

JJ also shared: "I survive by having lots of 'library sessions' – meaning I spend most of my time in the library studying". Mankowska's study in Poland confirmed how Chinese students worked up to 18 hours per day, spending time in the library from early in the morning to late in the evening (Mankowska, 2018).

Social life

Some participants indicated that they managed to make friends with local people. For instance, PP shared: "Firstly, I made a lot of local friends in the class, lab and library. It was not difficult for me to make local friends. They did not force me to understand their cultures; proficiently use their language etc. because I was a foreigner". Still, others experience difficulties in this regard. TT explained: "It is difficult for me to make local friends to be close friends because we have different languages, cultures etc." and similarly YY lamented as follows: "I felt loneliness. My family is the only Japanese in Bloemfontein. I do not belong to any community. The loneliness is one of difficulty for me to stay in South Africa".

It emerged that East Asian students are sometimes uneasy with certain aspects of the South African social life including constantly hugging and touching each other. Xie (2019, p. 27) shared that on the first day in class "some ladies asked [him] to give them hugs". He indicated that he felt "very awkward and refused their request". Wang and Shan (2006, p. 10) similarly found that in Australia, Chinese students were not comfortable with "parties in pubs" where a lot of alcohol consumption occurs. Participants also admitted being intimidated by the student protests that occurred from time to time in South Africa ("Last year, I could not

attend to the classes because it broke out a serious protests in South African universities" (PP)).

Although literature suggest that foreigners often experience racism and xenophobia, and this results in verbal attacks and physical assaults (e.g. Brown & Jones, 2013), such incidents were only mentioned by two of the participants. Xie (2019, p. 25) explained that prior to entering his postgraduate qualification, he was sometimes asked "Can you open your eyes please?" or "Do you like to eat dogs or cats?". JJ shared that "There are some racial stereotypes in the beginning of the relationship, but I tell them what is right and wrong". On the other hand PP did not experience any bias:

> *I lived off campus with a Chinese classmate. Most of my neighbours or classmates were university students, so I did not experience any racial discrimination in the school [sic] or in my accommodation.*

Still, he was wise enough to navigate his way in discussions to prevent conflict: "I never talked about some sensitive topics with [local students], thus it was easy to make some local friends" (PP).

Clearly, to find their way in the social landscape of South Africa was not easy.

Improving the experience for East Asian students

It is not unexpected that foreign students experience language and cultural barriers when they move to a locality that is vastly different to their own, such as East Asian students migrating to South Africa. Findings in the study correspond with studies from the USA, Australia and Europe. Still, the small numbers of East Asian students on the campuses deepen these international students' feelings of isolation compared to countries more accessible and popular for East Asian people. Higher education institutions need to understand how to best support the students.

Studies shows that universities that offer successful international programmes, often offer language and communication training upfront, to better prepare international students for their studies. One such an example is the Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin where prior to embarking on their medical studies, international students learn to communicate in the healthcare setting. Such training not only includes learning language, but also to socialise and to communicate in the professional and academic environment in a culturally appropriate manner (Marmon et al., 2018).

International students well-being should be monitored, thus Bertram et al. (2014) recommend that information regarding stressors should regularly be disseminated to the institutional community, and that lecturers should engage with these students to raise their concerns. Briggs and Ammigan (2017) recommends a collaborative programming and outreach model that includes international coffee hours, international student essay contests, and career support which can vastly improve the student experience.

Care should be taken to inform students continuously of services, as although most higher education institutions in South Africa and elsewhere, including the one in the case study, have special units to support international and other students, what emerged from the larger study by Xie (2019) was that students were largely unaware of the availability of such service.

Conclusion

International students at higher education, have the potential to contribute to the glocal common good. Not only do they receive opportunities to gain insight and develop proficiencies necessary to function in a diverse world, international students' interaction with local students can increase the exposure of the latter to global influences.

However, Mankowska (2018) warns that this might not always be a comfortable experience for the locals. In view of the interconnected world that we live in, we argue that it is important for lecturers and administrators at higher education institutions to take note of the experiences of the East Asian students who took part in this study, to advance intercultural understanding and to support foreign students towards positive international experiences.

Acknowledgements

This paper is based on the first author's Master dissertation. The second and third authors were his supervisors.

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