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Expectations, emerging issues and change for Chinese international students in a New Zealand university

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Abstract

This study uses a sociocultural framework to trace the experiences of 24 Chinese international undergraduate students studying business and information sciences in a New Zealand university, using community of practice perspectives recognising the university as a site of complex discourses requiring negotiation of new identities and practices. The students' expectations, the issues that emerged and the processes of change they went through to meet their goals were investigated from retrospective and longitudinal viewpoints, using semi-structured interviews supported by schematic representations developed by the researcher and photographic representations compiled by participants were.

The findings suggest that preparation before departure focused largely on expected English demands, rather than wider matters of academic culture, and this was only partially rectified during prior study in New Zealand. Students thus entered the university unfamiliar with its specific discourses and found conditions for resolving difficulties more limited than previously experienced. The anonymity and extreme time pressure pertaining in large first-year classes led to bewilderment about requirements, threats to the sense of identity as competent students which they had arrived with, and often, failure of courses. Nevertheless, the investment, personal and monetary, which this journey represented provided the incentive to persevere. Most students were resourceful in negotiating a fit between their learning preferences and the affordances of the university, resulting in very different journeys for each of them. Measures adopted included those sanctioned by the university, such as developing skills to meet the demands of academic literacies, and others less valued, such as extreme dependence on teacher consultation. Success was gained through personal agency which proved more important than the university goal of student autonomy. Beyond the academic arena, other activities such as part-time jobs were significant in contributing to a sense of identity as competent and educated adults, and to new viewpoints which contrasted with original cultural norms. They continued to identify as Chinese, but in a "third space" owing something to New Zealand influences. The study concludes that entry criteria should include a component of university preparation. It also recommends measures by which the university might enhance the experiences of such students.

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This thesis describes a complex learning journey undertaken by novices to whom many unforeseen complexities were revealed in the course of their years of study. In many ways it has formed a parallel to my own PhD journey, and as with my participants, I have been helped on my way by a range of people, whether their roles be official or otherwise.

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