

Creating a supportive learning environment for direct entry Chinese students to reduce the attainment gap

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The expansion of Chinese articulations, which offer Chinese students the opportunity to study in the United Kingdom (UK) by permitting direct entry into the second or final year of an undergraduate study programme, has created a financially attractive market. However, it has also raised concerns that we do not always provide the academic experience which these students expect and need in order to attain a good degree classification (Crawford and Wang, 2015). The culture shock, in terms of day-to-day life contrasts between the UK and China, and the different pedagogical approaches of the two nations, creates additional barriers to success which are unique to these students (Wilson, 2009).

The aim here is to outline our experiences from two departments within a post-1992 Business School that has been recruiting Chinese students via articulations for thirteen years. We present highlights of the journey so far and explain how we have adopted new approaches to teaching these students thereby closing the attainment gap. We offer insight into which initiatives have proved beneficial and share our experience of creating conditions that support student success.

The Business School first received Chinese final year entry (FYE) students onto the Accounting and Finance programme within the Accounting and Finance (AF) Department. However, the majority of Chinese students coming into the Business School as FYE students now join one of our 'Business with ...' programmes, delivered by the Systems Management and Strategy (SMS) Department. To facilitate students' transition to studying with us, some of our lecturers go to China to teach so students can develop their English language skills while still on their home programmes and start to become familiar with the different pedagogical approach in the UK. On arrival at the Business School, both departments offer enhanced induction weeks to the Chinese students which provides the opportunity to meet each other and their lecturers.

We also include some subject-specific content during induction. Sessions are conducted in English but important information on how to be successful at a UK university is also translated into Chinese for those first couple of weeks by graduate student ambassadors. During the programme we use technology to support students. This includes putting materials on the virtual learning environment early, so that FYE students can review the required technical vocabulary before a lecture, and providing lecture recordings, so that students can go back over a lecture to reinforce learning. We also use an online questioning system so that students can ask and answer questions without feeling embarrassed about a lack of understanding. This benefits the FYE students who may be nervous about speaking in front of the class, particularly at the beginning of the term, despite achieving the required English levels to join the programmes. It should be noted that all students benefit from these practices.

To provide an inclusive curriculum, we consider how we can make our case studies and assignments relevant to the Chinese students. For example, a reference to 'Black Friday' in a case study was changed to 'Double 11 Day', the busiest day for online shopping in China. We also consider how best to communicate with the Chinese students, especially during university holidays and the resit preparation period. We have found that 'WeChat' is an effective way to get information to students promptly. These are approaches which both AF and SMS have in common. However, there also bespoke interventions used by each department reflecting the individual programmes and modules.

The AF programme is a technically focussed programme with a high proportion of exams within its assessment structure. Individual module leaders decide how best to support the students on their modules. For example, where we have a Term One module with a January exam, which is less than four months after the FYE students join the department, we have put the Chinese students in their own classes so that they are taught by a colleague who is professionally qualified and also an experienced teacher of English as a Second Language. This means that the tutor can pace her classes as required. We also provide support classes for students so that they can become familiar with exam terminology. This is particularly important for the Chinese students who will be sitting their first exams in the English language. However, support classes are open to all and provide an example of how the support we have put in place to help our FYE students has spilled over to benefit everyone. Another example is where two modules use individual and small group formative feed-forward interviews to support students with their assignments. Where we use a team-based pedagogical approach, we ensure teams are mixed in order to facilitate integration with the other students.

Two key differences between the departments are that AF has professional accreditation and therefore the assessment structure includes a number of exams which we need to prepare the FYE students for. However, SMS has a much higher number of Chinese students to deal with. To make sure that the FYE students can access pastoral support and receive all the information they need in relation to the university's systems, SMS provide an information desk which is staffed by a Chinese-speaking lecturer or student ambassador during advertised hours. It is important to note that all teaching is in English.

All students at the university have their own personal tutor and, in addition, the SMS student community mentor the FYE students and organise social events, for example at Chinese New Year and Christmas. We have changed a FYE programme structure, developing a new bespoke module for an SMS programme which recruits FYE students only. We did this to replace an existing module in the Business School which the students found very difficult because their previous programmes in China had not prepared them for that module, with the pedagogical approaches being significantly different (Tran, 2013). The new module was therefore designed to include the required content whilst acknowledging the students' prior learning.

Over recent years the attainment gaps for the FYE students in both departments have been shrinking and in 2018-19, both gaps were eliminated. Our work over the past thirteen years has not always resulted in success. We have tried and tested many different approaches to create an inclusive approach to our students, in

particular, the large group of Chinese students whom we have accepted onto our programmes. By trying new approaches through engaging in scholarly teaching and learning, we have now closed the gap in the two departments. It is also important to note that our interventions have not only improved the experience of this group of students but all of our students.

References

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