



Developing Chinese Managers – Reasons for Enrolling on a Postgraduate Management Programme in the UK

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Abstract

This paper examines the reasons why Chinese Managers come to the UK to study a postgraduate management qualification. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 27 managers from the Guangxi province in China, who were studying a Master of Arts award in Management Studies at the University of Worcester. The research indicates that managers were motivated by increased knowledge of Western management practices, improved business English skills and personal reasons such as travel opportunities and culture experiences. Nonetheless, without financial support from employers, it is doubtful whether these individuals would have committed to study in the UK. The paper concludes by suggesting actions that universities could make in order to maximize the learning experience of Chinese students in the UK.

Keywords: Management Development, Chinese Managers, Culture, English language skills

1. Introduction

The 1999 Blair Initiative on International Education gave impetus to universities' international recruitment programmes, and consequently resulted in a dramatic rise in overseas students at UK universities (MacLeod, 2006). With the enlargement of the EU, the number of learners from ascension states is expected to increase the number of students from outside the UK studying at British institutions

(Andalo, 2006). Nonetheless, Chinese students comprise the largest group of international learners studying at UK universities, making up nearly 17% of the 318,000 international students studying in the UK in 2004/05 (UKCOSA, 2007). Yet little is known of the reasons why Chinese students would choose to study in the UK. With fears of increased global competition for international learners (MacLeod, 2006), the reasons influencing the decision of learners to study in the UK are of paramount importance, especially as income from international business is deemed vital for the survival of universities. The underlying reasons for managers from China studying in the UK are perhaps even more important to determine, since they already have status, and authority to influence further learners from that country.

However, research to date has focused on learning and teaching differences between the two countries (Chan, 1999, Nield, 2004), rather than reasons for studying in the UK. Similarly, the development of Chinese managers has focused on the need for adoption of more creative and experiential learning approaches in China, rather than persist with traditional Chinese learning systems (Ituma et al, 2007; Liu, 2006; Martinsons and Martinsons, 1996,). Consequently, little is known on the factors influencing individuals, especially managers from China, to study in the UK.

Economic reforms in 1979 triggered economic growth in China, with official statistics indicating a current average annual growth of approximately 10% (Xinhua, 2006). Nonetheless, the change from a planned, to a more market driven economy brought with it increased performance pressures on public administration and increased the need for more informed managers (Ituma, 2007). As a result, China established civil service training systems in 1993. Concurrently, the Chinese government established offices to design specific training courses for managers of government

organizations and state owned enterprises. As a result, the number of Chinese academic institutions offering MBA programmes has now increased to over 80 (China Business Review, 2007), serving an increasing demand for management development in the country.

Nonetheless, in October 2006, a cohort of 27 managers from the Guangxi province commenced the MA in Management Studies at the University of Worcester, England. Yet, the underlying reasons as to what motivated those individuals to come to the UK to study a postgraduate management, rather than study in China are largely unknown. Consequently, the aim of this paper is to explore the reasons why Chinese managers come to the UK to study a postgraduate management qualification. Whilst the findings are specific to this cohort and institution, they will be enlightening to other UK institutions who are recruiting management students from China.

2. Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the delegation of 27 managers studying the MA in Management Studies programme at University of Worcester. This group comprised 18 male and 9 female managers, working in a range of government bodies, academic institutions or state-owned-enterprises (Table 1). The interviews were conducted by the leader of the delegation in Chinese, to overcome language barriers, and recorded to support the noting of quotations. The semi-structured interviews were based around five key questions related to: reasons for studying in the UK, support from employer, social reasons, difficulties experienced during the time of study, and advice to international students. However, the flexible nature of semi-structured interviews, allowed for further elaboration of responses during the interview, if required. The findings of the interviews were analysed thematically and drawn together into the factors that influenced the decision to study in the UK, and problems relating to the study. These were then tabulated to facilitate quantitative analysis.

3. Findings

Individuals confessed to a pressure to develop as managers and thereby improve their professional status, with all of the delegation members citing professional development as a key factor in influencing their decision to study in the UK (Table 2). There was a feeling among delegates that their managerial skills were currently underdeveloped, leaving them particularly vulnerable to “poor organizational performance, underutilization of resources and the cost impact of unresolved conflict”. One male manager said, “I really want to learn more theories and practical management here. The training programmes at the university offer a range of skills development to equip managers with the basics of the management toolkit, and to enhance, polish and fine-tune the skillsets of the more experienced, otherwise, I wouldn’t be here”.

Moreover, there was a perceived knowledge gap possessed by Chinese managers compared to Western managers. This had become more obvious to delegation members as trading between China and the West had increased. Consequently, all delegation members quoted a need to widen their international business awareness (Table 2). Moreover, several members mentioned the growth in joint venture companies or subsidiaries of large corporations being established in China, and emphasized the need for awareness of their type of operations and business practices.

Additionally, it emerged in the interviews, that several known individuals from previous delegations who had studied at Masters level in the UK, had subsequently been promoted to Board level in their respective organizations. It was this prospect of rapid promotion that had provided motivation for these individuals to enroll on the programme. One of the younger delegation members said, “I come because my employer promises to give a promotion and pay increase after I came back to China”. The lure of promotion must therefore have been a key factor, since all members will have relinquished their existing post for the 12 months course duration, which always poses the risk of someone else moving into their role during the absence, and the delegation member subsequently sidelined on their return.

However, dreams of promotion would seemingly remain just that if it was not for financial support from the employer. One female manager commented, “230,000RMB (approximately £15,000) a year for studying in the UK is a large amount of money for me; I would not come if the personnel didn’t pay for me, and it would be stupid if you do not come when you have the time and money paid for you”. Given the level of financial support (i.e. tuition fees, accommodation and living expenses) required to study in the UK, none of the delegation members would have enrolled on the programme without employer funding.

Nonetheless, 15 of the delegates saw their English language skills as one of the crucial factors in their overseas study. One manager felt this especially important, “I just want to come to the place where the English language originates and improve my English language skills, especially speaking and listening skills”. Similarly, another manager commented, “I have attended management courses in a university in China, and have a better understanding of the theories and its practice. So I came for language improvement because I find it hard for me to communicate with the staff working in foreign companies”. Other delegates commented that international business is usually conducted in English, and so to be able to read international business newspapers and magazines, and attend international conferences require English language skills. The importance of English language training was reiterated by 12 of the delegation, who admitted to

paying the University Language Unit for further lessons. Cross cultural aspects also appealed to the delegates, with several commenting that mixing with local students at Worcester University helped to enrich their experience in the UK and helped them to develop different perspectives and new ways of thinking. Several commented on their appreciation of the difference in learning styles between the UK and China, with a desire to engage in a different educational approach compelling 5 delegates to quote academic reasons as an influencing factor (Table 2).

The immersion in a different culture was seen as a positive influence to study in the UK, with one manager stating, "It is good to have 12 months in the UK, to travel and experience life". This was endorsed by 12 of the delegation, who saw travel to the UK as a positive experience (Table 2). There was a sense among the delegation of wanting to experience a "culture shock" now, so any future encounters with Western businesses would not be such a daunting experience. Furthermore, the study at Masters level in the UK by Chinese citizens, is highly valued in China, and successful individuals who return, are held in high esteem by colleagues, family and friends and affectionately known by the term "Hai Gui". This designation confers almost celebrity status on those individuals, which again supports career aspirations.

While language and cultural aspects were viewed as positive reasons to register on the programme, most difficulties experienced by delegation members during their studies in the UK centred on these issues, which ultimately created pressure on deadlines for assignments (Table 3). Despite passing English language tests in China, the delegation members felt that language difficulties hindered their learning experience, with most complaining that it took them longer than expected to read texts, write assignments and comprehend lecture notes. As one delegate commented, "I want to spend more time on learning English language, knowledge of British culture, especially business culture. That is why I choose to take overseas training". There was also a difficulty in understanding how practices could be transferred transnationally, with one manager stating, "We are not only interested in learning the theory, but also interested in how the theory can be applied in China".

4. Conclusion

The increase in global activity has encouraged international investment in China, and this in turn has resulted in a perceived need by Chinese Managers to enhance their managerial capabilities and embrace international business practices. A feeling of wanting to be a part of the international business community and to possess equivalent business acumen as Western management counterparts has provided the motivation for managers to enroll onto a postgraduate management qualification at a UK university. Hence the desire to immerse themselves in English language and culture, to learn what is perceived to be a universal business language, and to study Western management practices with a view to adopting them into their Chinese businesses. Yet the support for overseas study from government agencies in China is not be underestimated, since without financial backing, none of the students would have enrolled on the programme. In a way, this makes the delegation a unique grouping, especially different to the number of Chinese students who come to the UK to study who are self funded. Consequently, the research on the reasons why Chinese managers enroll on a postgraduate award at a UK university now needs to be expanded to incorporate those individuals not supported by employers, or sponsoring agencies.

There is clearly a demanded product, given the numbers of Chinese students enrolling on UK postgraduate programmes. However, Rammell (2006) warns UK universities that improvements in the experience of international students are required in order to remain competitive in the world's education market. In some way this is confirmed by this delegation, who seemed to be looking for one-step further from their development activity - the prescription of how to integrate English language, culture and management practices into their own organizations. The merging of these aspects into the MA award would have resulted in maximum utility for the delegation, and so points the way for universities to enhance their international offering.

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Table 1. The background of the 27 Chinese Managers from Guangxi 2006-2007

No.	M/F	Employing Organisation
1	F	Chinese Youth League of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region
2	M	Publicity Department of Guangxi Province, the CCPC
3	M	Investment-promotion Bureau, Gui Lin city, Guangxi Province
4	M	General office of Guangxi Municipal Government
5	M	Investment-recruitment Bureau, Guangxi province
6	M	Commerce & Trade Bureau, Guangxi Province
7	M	Audit Bureau, Guangxi Province
8	F	Technology Bureau, Guangxi Province
9	F	Judicatory Bureau, Guangxi Province
10	F	Institute of Product Quality Inspection, Guangxi Province
11	F	Developing & Research Center of Guilin City, Guangxi Province
12	F	Commerce Bank of Guilin City, Guangxi Province
13	F	Quality & Technology Inspection Bureau, Guangxi province
14	M	Personnel Bureau, Guangxi Province
15	M	Animal-Medicine Inspection Station, Guangxi Province
16	M	Xi Jiang Shipping Co. Guangxi Province
17	M	Xi Jiang Shipping Co. Guangxi Province
18	M	Security Bureau, Qin Zhou city, Guangxi Province
19	M	Policy research office of CCPC, Guangxi Province
20	M	Guangxi School
21	M	Ying Tong Auto Sales & Service Co. Ltd, Liu Zhou city, Guangxi Province
22	M	Transport-Management Bureau, Guangxi Province
23	F	Shipping-checking Department, Nanning city of Guangxi Province
24	F	Guangxi University
25	M	Import & export Company, Guangxi Province
26	M	Hospital, Guangxi Province
27	M	Environment-protection Bureau, Guilin city, Guangxi Province

Table 2. Factors influencing Chinese Managers from Guangxi to study a postgraduate management course in the UK

List of Factors	Number of people referring to the factor
Professional development	27
Widen business awareness	27
Encouraged or supported by employer	27
English language development	15
Reputation of UK universities	12
Travel and cultural experience	12
Academic reasons	5
Establish international network	3
Other	2

Table 3. Difficulties experienced by the Delegation during studies at the University of Worcester

Difficulties	Number of people (out of 27 members)	Percentage (%)
Language problems	22	81.5%
Pressure of assignments	16	59.3%
Culture shock	11	40.7%
Other	4	14.8%