



Chinese Curriculum Design and Motivation of Chinese Background Students in Australian Tertiary Education

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Abstract

This study explores the need for a change in the current Chinese curriculum for Chinese-background students at the University of Newcastle (UoN). It examines the motivation behind the learning behaviour of Chinese-background students enrolling in the discipline of Chinese at the UoN as well as Chinese curriculum design at other Australian universities. The data from two sources were collected and analysed, Chinese-background students in the Chinese discipline at the UoN and lecturers in the Chinese discipline at six Australian universities. The findings of this study can be used to assist in the curriculum development for the Chinese program at the UoN.

Keywords: Chinese background students, Chinese curriculum design, Motivation, Mainland China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia

1. Introduction

There is a rapidly growing demand for Chinese language and culture units in Australia, especially since 2002 when China became the largest source of international students in Australian education. In recent years, with China becoming the largest trading partner of Australia, and more Australian students being engaged in Chinese learning, some Chinese-background students venturing into Australian education are also tending to take Chinese units as a means to better understand their own language and culture.

In this paper, Chinese background students are defined as those who are of Chinese ethnicity and grew up in a Chinese language environment. In general, these students can be classified into two groups. One group is comprised of students from mainland China, the other group of students comes from Chinese ethnic groups in Asian countries or regions, mainly Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong. The common feature of the two groups of students is that they all speak fluent Chinese. There are three aspects of differentiation between the two groups: written Chinese, spoken accent, and the degree of fragmentation of Chinese culture. These students are significantly different from Chinese descendants who were born in western countries such as Australia. For these Australian-born Chinese students (ABC students), English is their first language at home, indeed, some of them might not be able to speak Chinese, or if they do, they are not able to read Chinese fluently. This study does not focus on these students.

Australian Education International (AEI) reports for 2007 indicate that Chinese-background students made up one third of all international students in higher education in Australia (AEI 2008; McGowan and Potter 2008; AEI 2009). It was reported, regarding the five main sources of Chinese-background students in higher education pursuing coursework, that 24.9% were from mainland China (32424 visas granted), 5.5% from Malaysia (7098 visas), 2.7% from Hong Kong (3517 visas), 2.6% from Singapore (3441 visas), and 1.5% from Taiwan (1921 visas). So, 37.2%, or over one third, of all Australian higher education coursework visas is held by students of Chinese background.

Another snapshot from AEI makes a more manifest and striking presentation about the contribution Chinese background students make to the Australia economy through export income from education services. The latest Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) International Trade in Services data (AEI 2009) shows international education activity contributed \$14.2 billion in export income to the Australian economy in 2007. Onshore students from China

made the largest contribution to export income with \$3.1 billion, accounting for 21.9%, followed by Malaysia at \$723 million or 5.1%, Hong Kong at \$574 million or 4%, Singapore at \$278 million or 2% and finally Taiwan at \$239 million or 1.7%. The total value of export income from the five countries of origin for Chinese-background students was \$4.9 billion, accounting for over one third (34.7%) of the total education export income.

A curriculum is the set of units offered at a school or university. A major focus of the practice of internationalisation at Australian universities over the last decade has been an increasing emphasis on internationalizing the curriculum, reflecting public recognition that tertiary students require international skills and competencies in the new global order (Hayward and Siaya 2001). Internationalization of the curriculum is also defined as the process of designing a curriculum that meets the needs of international students (Haigh 2002).

Inter-institutional competition has been identified as a major influence on the curriculum (Colbeck 2002). Increased numbers of Chinese-background students, especially mainland Chinese students in Australia, has brought with it a substantial evolution in the curriculum design at many leading Australian universities. The University of Sydney (USYD 2009), University of Melbourne (UNIMELB 2009), University of Queensland (UQ 2009) and some other Group 8 universities are now providing a specific Chinese stream of electives catering for the needs of Chinese-background students. Even some non-Group 8 universities, such as Deakin University (Deakin 2009) and Macquarie University (MQ 2009), have a Chinese stream for Chinese-background speakers. A rapid increase in the number of students from mainland China at the UoN commenced in 2007. Within one year (June, 2008) the number of students soared from 255 to 756 due to the implementation of new joint programs between the UoN and China (Services 2008). Given the global economic downturn, the pace of competition inter-institutionally is likely to accelerate; “[t]he presence of Chinese background students fuels the impetus to internationalize the existing curriculum” (McGowan and Potter 2008, p.188). In June 2008 the Chinese program at the UoN had, out of 78 enrolments, only 11 from Chinese background students. This ratio of one in seven enrolments being of Chinese background students was quite low compared with the one in three ratio at the six universities in which telephone interviews were conducted with lecturers in Chinese. It is evident that the enrolments of Chinese background students in the Chinese discipline at the UoN fall behind this trend.

Therefore, a new curriculum needs to be created that takes into account characteristics of these Chinese background students, paying particular attention to their language limitations and cultural backgrounds. Revitalising and updating curricula accords with good academic practice in general but there are also very real and practical economic gains to be had from such a step. Financially, an increase of Chinese-background student enrolments will boost the School of Humanities and Social Science which offers fewer industry-related units.

Motivation on education perspective is defined as having two dimensions: interest in reading, and instrumental motivation which refers to external rewards such as praise for good performance or improved job prospects (OECD 2003). Such motivations are reflected in comments such as “I study to get a job”. Internally generated motives, such as interest in subject areas, are called interest in reading (Deci and Ryan 1985; Schiefele, Krapp et al. 1992), and are reflected in comments such as “when I read, I sometimes get totally absorbed”. According to research findings regarding approaches to learning, there are some differences in motivation among these groups of Chinese background students:

With regards to motivation, although there were no manifest differences identified in instrumental motivation and interest in reading through the quantitative data analysis, the qualitative data analysis indicated that mainland Chinese students showed a very stronger preference for instrumental motivation such as migration rather than interest in reading. Conversely Hong Kong students showed stronger interest in reading than instrumental motivation, while Malaysian Chinese student’s preferences fell in between. (Li 2007)

Identifying motivation as the driving force behind learning, this paper seeks to discover the motivation of Chinese-background students in taking Chinese units at Australian universities with the view to redesign the Chinese curriculum at the UoN. To achieve this aim, this research also looks at the currently-operating curricula of Chinese programs at other Australian universities to draw some ideas shedding light on the UoN.

2. Chinese curricula at Australian universities

The enrolment of Chinese-background students at Australian universities makes a major contribution to the education export of Australia. Competition for Chinese-background students, especially from China, has been intense among Australian universities and takes various forms, including, for example, joint programs with China university partners. This is reflected in rapidly increasing numbers of Chinese-background students as well as the number of Chinese language and cultural units (Note 1) offered by most Australian universities, especially those in capital cities.

2.1 Universities offering Chinese units for Chinese background students

Information obtained from the official websites of all 39 Australian universities in April 2009, shows that 29 are offering Chinese units (Note 2) for Chinese-background students, and 4 universities are offering Chinese units through blended

models with other universities at both undergraduate level and postgraduate level. Within the 29 universities, 10 universities offer more than 10 units (see Table 1).

All the universities of this group are located in capital cities, which suggest that this cohort of students is more attracted to study in metropolitan universities, resulting in a large number of Chinese-background students in the larger Australian cities.

8 universities offer 6 to 9 units (see Table 2). Two universities from regional areas—the University of New England and Bond University—have edged into the group of the capital universities. The University of New England presents its offerings as the only comprehensive Chinese program by distance education in Australia, while Bond University, in part, takes advantage of its location on the Gold Coast, a popular holiday resort.

11 universities offer 1 to 5 units independently (see Table 3). Most universities in this final category are situated in ‘regional Australia/low population growth metropolitan areas’ (Immigration 2009). This is the reflection of their shortage of attraction to Chinese background students and also the less development of Chinese programs at some of these universities to some extent. However, one point that needs to be made is that Newcastle is classified as a ‘metropolitan area’ by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, which, along with the sharp increase in the number of Chinese background students in 2008, indicates some potential for further development of its Chinese program.

Currently, the Chinese program of the UoN has four Chinese literacy units available for Chinese-background students, these being *Intermediate Spoken Chinese*, *Intermediate Written Chinese*, *Advanced Spoken Chinese*, and *Advanced Written Chinese* (shifted to be *Advanced Chinese Via Translation* in the second semester), together with a translation unit at postgraduate level. There are no units on Chinese literature, Chinese culture or Chinese arts in the program.

There are also 4 universities offering units for Chinese background students through their partner universities in either an internal mode in the same city or an external mode, see Table 4.

2.2 Chinese units on offer for Chinese background students at these universities

The Chinese units for Chinese-background students offered by Australian universities can be classified into five categories: Chinese literacy, Chinese literature, Chinese arts, Chinese culture and society and translation/interpretation. Each category is commonly divided into different subcategories, for example, under ‘Chinese literature’ at Macquarie University, units include *Chinese Literature from Hong Kong and Taiwan*, *Modern Chinese Literature*, *Contemporary Chinese Literature*, *the Chinese Martial Arts Novel*, and *The Traditional Chinese Novels*. A unit about Chinese films at the University of New South Wales is called *Chinese Cinema*, while a similar unit at Macquarie University is called *Chinese Film and Literary Texts*. Units are sorted into these categories thus:

Chinese literacy: *Intermediate Chinese*, *Advanced Chinese*

Chinese literature: *Classical Chinese*, *Modern/Contemporary Chinese*, *Chinese Novels*

Chinese arts: *Chinese Calligraphy*, *Chinese Cinema*

Chinese culture and society: *Chinese Culture*, *Chinese Society and Culture*, *Business Chinese*

Translation/Interpretation: *Chinese/English Translation/Interpretation*

3. Methodology

3.1 Research questions

Three general research questions were formulated to guide the collection of data from students:

What motivation affects your decision-making in the selection of Chinese units?

What Chinese language unit in the current curriculum interests you most?

Regardless of the availability, what Chinese units would best meet the needs of your study in Australia?

Another three research questions were formulated to guide the collection of data from lecturers in Chinese:

What units are operating most successfully in the Chinese program for Chinese background students?

Briefly explain the rationale behind the curriculum design?

What aspects of the program could be improved?

3.2 Data collection

Quantitative data in the form of information on Chinese units offered to Chinese-background students at the selected universities was obtained by perusing the universities’ official websites. These data were then analysed to provide an overall picture of the Chinese curriculum design in Australian tertiary education, and shedding light on the design of the Chinese curriculum of the UoN. Units were counted across the identified categories of typical units at Australian universities to find out how many of them are offered to Chinese-background students with a consideration for their

marketing value for the UoN. Each unit, despite various similar names, was counted only once for each university. For example, three units at Macquarie University—*Chinese Literature from Hong Kong and Taiwan*, *Modern Chinese Literature*, and *Contemporary Chinese Literature*—could only be counted as one typical unit in *Modern/Contemporary Chinese Literature* to avoid obscuring the pattern of offerings because of fragmentation.

It is claimed that subjective data gained through interactive modes, such as in-depth interviews, will yield rich and productive insights into the understandings of curriculum design (Mackay, Burgoyne et al. 2006). In this study, subjective data on curriculum design was sourced from two stakeholders, Chinese-background students and lecturers in Chinese at Australian universities. Eleven Chinese-background students in the Chinese discipline from the UoN were selected and separately involved in a semi-structured face-to-face interview for the research.

Face-to-face and semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted to obtain qualitative information expanding on the key issues emerging from the findings of the quantitative analysis in the Chinese programs of the thirty-nine Australian universities. The questions were designed to prompt individual reflection on these issues. Thematic analysis was chosen for analysis of the qualitative data as it is particularly effective in dialogic or interactive methodologies such as interviews (Sarantakos 1998).

All the 11 student participants interviewed were from one university, the UoN. In Semester 1, 2008, eleven Chinese-background students were enrolled in Chinese units. Among the eleven participants, five were from mainland China (all majoring in Accounting), two from Hong Kong (both in Accounting), two from Malaysia (in Accounting and International Business), and two from Singapore (in Psychology and Finance). The individuals were asked to reflect on the Chinese curriculum design and articulate their needs in order to strengthen their Chinese language and cultural knowledge and skills. The subjective responses gained from interview provide useful information for triangulation with the data collection instruments used in this study.

Telephone interviews of 20 minutes each were held with lecturers in Chinese in the Chinese programs of six Australian universities. Among those participants, three were from the Group 8 universities—University of Sydney, Monash University and University of Western Australia—and three from non-Group 8 universities—Deakin University, La Trobe University and University of New England. The rationale of this arrangement lies in that, on the one hand, some examples of good practice from the Group 8 universities could prove useful in informing the experience of the UoN, and on the other hand, universities at similar rankings to the UoN would have more comparative significance to the UoN. To gain representative samples across universities would require a much larger sample of data than possible within the scope of this research project, but, even with a larger sample, such an undertaking would remain fraught (McGuirk 2001).

4. Findings and discussion

It was found that the most popular subjects were *Intermediate Chinese* and *Advanced Chinese* under the category of Chinese literacy. Such units were offered by 23 universities, indicating that Chinese language teaching has been made central by most Australian universities. The third most popular unit was *Chinese Culture and Society*, being offered at 21 universities with some universities expanding this into two, or even three units, such as *Introduction to Chinese Society and Culture*, and *Issues in Chinese Culture for Chinese Speakers* at the University of Adelaide. These categories were followed by Modern Chinese Literature (14) and Translation/Interpretation (14), Classical Chinese (9), Chinese Cinema (6), Chinese Novels (3), and Chinese Calligraphy (3).

It is clearly seen from this data that, apart from traditional Chinese subjects under the category of ‘Chinese literacy’ for Chinese background students, the category of ‘Chinese culture and society’ is the most prominent out of the other three categories of ‘Chinese literature’, ‘Chinese/English translation/interpretation’ and ‘Chinese arts’, with the category of Chinese arts being the least popular in this sequence.

Principles of good practice may function as components of good curriculum development models (Mackay, Burgoyne et al. 2006). The collection of good practice models in the literature review is important, as it is a strategy in itself that can be used to inform the Chinese program of the UoN. The units of good practice identified in the literature review are *Chinese Culture and Society*, *Modern/Contemporary Chinese Literature*, *Translation/Interpretation*, and *Classical Chinese*. The four units were also verified by the results of the data analysis of the interviews with lecturer participants and the student participants who had a variety of motivations.

The interviews with students concerning their motivation for learning Chinese verified some of the foregoing findings to some extent. It was found that there was a strong interest in attending Chinese language and culture units seen as relevant to Chinese identity, especially for university students with Chinese-language background enrolled in undergraduate level units following their completion of high school study in Australia. However, when Chinese-background students from mainland China and Malaysia were asked whether this was the only purpose of their choosing Chinese units, they all smiled and then admitted a hidden reason; that taking Chinese units could considerably alleviate the stress and pressure imposed on them by the coursework delivered through English instruction. As a result,

it is seen that to obtain high marks with greater ease will considerably help these students achieve their very practical goal of the completion of course in due time with creditable grades.

Given this motive, it was natural to find that students in *Intermediate Chinese* and *Advanced Chinese* were all happy with their choice, as the unit did not require much effort from them. When asked what unit they would love to take regardless of its availability at their university, all the five students from mainland China and Malaysia and one from Hong Kong expressed strong interest in learning *Contemporary Chinese literature*. As one of the interviewees from mainland China said: "I am fond of contemporary Chinese literature, if I have a chance to learn them, I will." Four of the five mainland Chinese, Malaysian Chinese students showed strong interests in learning *Classical Chinese*; one mainland Chinese student said that "classical Chinese is the essence of Chinese language; it is more profound and beautiful." All the mainland Chinese students majoring in accounting made manifest a strong interest in doing Chinese culture related to business:

If there is Chinese Business Culture in our school, I will definitely take it. As I am planning to work in a Sino-Australian company after graduation, I do need that part of knowledge and skills. And I am pretty sure if you have this course (unit) soon, there would be a lot of Chinese background students coming to enrol.

The interviews with student participants also revealed that students from Hong Kong showed strong interest in learning standard Chinese, Mandarin. The Chinese literacy units of intermediate Chinese and advanced Chinese are also quite popular with this group of students because Hong Kong Chinese students are Cantonese speakers, a dialect of Chinese. Cantonese adopts traditional Chinese characters, while Mandarin, namely standard Chinese, uses simplified characters. Cantonese differs little from Mandarin as a written language, but is completely different as a spoken language. Given that Hong Kong has become part of China and China has maintained a strong growth in its economy, being only able to speak Cantonese appears to be a severe limitation in the Hong Kong students' new situation.

Telephone interviews with lecturers at six Australian universities further confirmed the findings of the literature review and the student interviews. Chinese culture and society and Chinese literature units, such as *the Analects of Confucius*, *Chinese Business Culture*, *Chinese Language and Culture*, and *Chinese Literature from Hong Kong and Taiwan*, have large numbers of enrolments. While Chinese arts units (for example *Chinese Cinema*, *Chinese Film and Literary Texts*, and *Chinese Calligraphy*) also draw a considerable number of Chinese background students, it is also evident that units such as *Chinese Culture and Society* have also attracted many non-Chinese background students and are often a first step in arousing their interest to learn Chinese language.

These findings indicate which Chinese units need to be established in order to cater for the needs of Chinese-background students and suggest possible changes in the curriculum design at the UoN.

5. Conclusions

In designing a curriculum, it is a foremost requirement to identify target markets, namely, student groups in the context of higher education. A 'target market' is a term meaning the market segment to which a particular good or service is marketed. As one of the most famous regional Australian universities, it is important to identify the student groups who will potentially be interested in learning Chinese units at the UoN.

Given a large increase in the number of Chinese-background students at the UoN, and the universities location only 200 km north of Sydney, the research findings suggest that the Chinese discipline at the UoN should establish three Chinese streams in which two new units on Chinese culture and society, Chinese literature, and Chinese arts need to be established. The three streams are proposed as follows:

Non-background stream for people learning Chinese as a second language;

General background speakers' stream for dialect Chinese speakers unable to speak the standard Chinese, Mandarin and Australian born Chinese able to speak but unable to read Mandarin;

Advanced Background speakers' stream for Chinese native speakers able to speak standard Chinese but having an additional interest in Chinese literature, etc.

Chinese-background students wishing to undertake Chinese can start at the two higher levels of the three stream entry points and will have the chance to be placed at the appropriate entry point according to their language ability and their interest. Apart from the current units of Chinese literacy (such as the beginner, intermediate and advanced Chinese), units in the first stream are for non-background students majoring in Chinese in a Bachelor of Arts program. In the second stream for general background students with a minor in Chinese, it is suggested that some new units be established for Chinese-background students. Based on the findings from this study, for this cohort of students units on Chinese culture and society, Chinese literature, and Chinese arts need to be considered. In line with the sequence of popularity of these three fields, the researcher suggests that one unit out of each of the three fields be put into the agenda in the first stage. (Note 3)

This study is a preliminary study that aims to provide information to the policy makers at the UoN in the hope of expanding the enrolments of Chinese-background students in the university's Chinese program. Some limitations of this study are obvious; for example, the researcher did not have access to the numbers of Chinese-background students in the Chinese program at each Australian university and in the university as a whole, which would have enabled identification of the proportion of Chinese-background students in the Chinese program out of the total number of university enrolments. Such data could contribute to establishing targets for the UoN. Some other issues, such as differences in the content of some units under a category, are worth further exploration. In addition, statistically the data collected may not represent the needs and the views of all the Chinese teachers and Chinese-background students in Australian tertiary education. The researcher does not claim that these findings reflect the experience of all Chinese-background students, and remains mindful of making claims owing to the small sample captured in the study. However, the findings can be used to assist in curriculum design. The validity of these findings is strengthened by the very good overall internal consistency between the clear themes emerging from the literature and the findings from the analysis of the data collected from the interviews with students and lecturers. The findings support the suggestion that the Chinese curriculum in the Chinese discipline at the UoN needs to be redesigned.

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Notes

Note 1. at the UoN, 'course' is used to refer to 'unit'. This is to say, 'course' used by the UoN does not refer to a program of study leading to a degree or certificate, but a unit in educational program, used at most of other Australian universities, one of several distinct units that together form a program of study leading to a qualification such as a degree. To avoid confusion, this paper only uses the term 'unit' to refer to a subject.

Note 2. regarding Chinese literacy unit, two units at one level are counted as one in this paper, for example *Intermediate Chinese 1* and *Intermediate Chinese 2* are counted as one unit. It is common that one language literacy unit of a level always spans one year long and splits into 2 units for two semesters.

Note 3. regarding Chinese arts, the establishment of a unit, *An Appreciation of Chinese Films*, is strongly recommended due to the feedback of a survey in May 2008 conducted by the researcher. The unit, *An Appreciation of Chinese Films*, was designed by the researcher and sent to all the Chinese background students at the UoN by bulk email for expressions of interest, as a result, 35 students in reply expressed their intention to enrol in this unit if it could be put in place in the following semester.

Table 1. 10 universities offer more than 10 units

State	University	Number of Units
NSW	University of New South Wales	12
	Macquarie University	19
	University of Sydney	17
South Australia	University of Adelaide	14
Tasmania	University of Tasmania	15
Victoria	La Trobe University	11
	Monash University	15
	University of Melbourne	11
Western Australia	University of Western Australia	11
	Murdoch University (BCom)	12

Sourced from these universities' websites

Table 2. 8 universities offer 6-9 units

State	University	Number of Units
NSW	University of New England	7
	University of Western Sydney	9
Victoria	Victoria University	9
	Deakin University	8
Queensland	Griffith University	8
	University of Queensland	7
	Bond University	6
Western Australia	Curtin University	9

Sourced from these universities' websites

Table 3. 11 universities offer 1 to 5 units

State	University	Number of Units
NSW	University of Newcastle	5
	University of Technology Sydney	5
	University of Wollongong	1
ACT	Australia National University	5
	University of Canberra	1
Northern Territory	Charles Darwin University	4
Victoria	RMIT University	4
	Swinburne University of Technology	1
	University of Ballarat	1
Queensland	University of South Queensland	4
	Queensland University Technology	3

Sourced from these universities' websites

Table 4. 4 universities offering units for Chinese background students through their partner universities

State	University	Partner University
South Australia	The Flinders University	University of Adelaide
	University of South Australia	University of Adelaide
Queensland	James Cook University	University of New England
At all the states	Open University	Griffith Universs of thisity

Sourced from these universities' websites