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Accomodating international students successfully

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A quality label for international student mobility

Accommodating international students successfully



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Research study carried out by Inès Jourde, Alison McCheyne and Pascale Schmidt-Dubois

Travelling abroad today has become a mass phenomenon, whether it be for leisure, work or studies. And with increased mobility, universities all over the world are recruiting more international students as well as sending more of their own abroad, attaining more than 4,600,000 students in 2017. But are universities really prepared to accommodate these students? Are the students equally equipped to integrate and adapt?

If “France is back” as *Campus France* reported in April 2018, referring to President Macron’s slogan and more specifically to the 12.2% increase of foreign students in France, the country is about to face stronger international competition from other countries in Africa, the Middle East and China, where student enrolments are growing at a spectacular rate. Although France still maintains 4th position world-wide as host country for foreign students and first among non-anglophone countries, it will need to change policies if it wants to be a leader in the game.

With increased privatization, pressure to fend for themselves, along with national (even world) rankings, universities now find that they are being forced to act more like companies and treat students like clients. It leaves them with no other option than to stand out from the crowd and attract as many students as possible, resulting in a situation where higher education is functioning like a mass industry.

On the other side of the fence, there are grumbings from university lecturers, students and administrative staff about the “low language level” of international students, many of them not understanding the rules and regulations or participating in class or social activities.

It was in this context that we set out to do a research study on this intercultural issue, focusing on Chinese students in French higher education. With around 30,000 students in 2017, China represents the second largest nationality after Morocco, demonstrating that in order to keep attracting foreign students, France needs to address the issue of accommodating these students by offering the best conditions for success.

France - China : Historical partnership and cooperation

To establish the attractiveness of France for Chinese students, we first took a look back at the historical partnership and cooperation between France and China. France was one of the first countries to “visit” China in the 16th century with the arrival of the first Jesuit missionaries. Strong ties were woven and were later extended under the reign of Louis XIV with emperor Kangxi and then again with de Gaulle who was the first western President to recognize Mao’s China in 1964. In January of this year, President Macron addressed Xi Jinping, renewing the wish for France to reinforce bonds, in particular through language and academic exchanges.

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Chinese students are frequently confused by western teachers' writing when reading numbers, such as 4 and 7.



Results of study carried out in 3 universities in France

Our research took place in three *grandes écoles* and we established three main factors which are essential elements for academic success of international students. Without surprise, the first factor was the language level (either French or English), not only of the foreign students, but also of the teachers and members of administration, the ability to adapt to different teaching/learning styles and finally the social integration of students.

The language gap

It has been said that the main difficulty of learning another language can be estimated by the size of the difference that lies between one's mother tongue and the target language. Below is a sentence in both languages:

“L'énorme distance interlinguistique entre la langue de départ et la langue cible...”

只是观察中法文字书写的不同或者比较两者语音语调的差异，就能了解两种语言之间巨大的差别

Not only the fact that they look different, the actual process of reading Chinese is also diametrically opposed to that of reading French. As Michel Sauquet in his book *L'intelligence de l'autre* writes, “Reading a Chinese character is like recognizing someone's face and putting a name to it, whereas when you read a name written in alphabetic script it is like pronouncing the name in the hope of evoking a face”.

This particular language gap goes much further than vo-

cabulary and understanding; it involves a completely different thought process. In *Learner English* Jung Chang explains how French or English words appear extremely long for a Chinese student who is used to reading just one character at a time.

“The way the information is spread out in each word seems cumbersome for a reader used to the compact ideograms of the Chinese. Individual words may take a relatively long time to identify and (since words take up more space than in Chinese) the eye cannot take in so much at a time. Chinese learners therefore tend to have relatively slow reading speeds”.

Another problem that came out of our interviews was the difficulty in reading the handwriting of the teachers. When Chinese learn English or French vocabulary, they learn mostly from books where the print is very clear and often in small letters. They know the capital letters but are not used to reading whole words in them. As one Chinese student pointed out: “Sometimes the teacher only writes in capital letters. ABCD. This is very difficult”.

The interviewees also mentioned how complicated it was to read numbers. “Our teachers here have strange ways of writing the numbers 4 and 7.” For a native speaker, it is hard for us to imagine how misleading a single stroke can be. But if we take a look at two simple words in Chinese on the next page, we can understand why.

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Chinese students come from an education system based on the teachings of Confucius.



The ideogram 人= people. If we add a horizontal stroke to it 大= big

Host universities and their teachers should be aware of these differences so that they can adapt accordingly. Simple changes, such as teachers providing lesson hand-outs of slides, giving students extra reading time or paying particular attention to writing clearly on the board, can make a great difference for these students.

The adaptation to different teaching styles

Another main issue we identified was the difference in learning styles, making it hard for international students to understand what the teacher expects from them. Both students and teachers alike might experience feelings of confusion which can lead to misunderstandings at best, or prejudice and negative judgment of the other culture, perceived as illogical and senseless.

The Chinese education system today is based on the Confucius vision of learning: first, the transmission of traditional values is mostly through memorizing knowledge. Second, the relation between teacher and students is highly hierarchical: teachers expect great respect due to their status, and students are expected to listen, read and learn by heart. They usually come to class prepared, i.e. having read extensively on the subject, often written by the teacher. Contesting what the teachers says or interacting with teachers and classmates is not common in the classroom.

Almost the opposite is expected in western society where a “good teacher” is respected not only on knowledge, but also for their skills and their ability to transmit knowledge. A “good student” is participative, eloquent and is capable of critical thinking. They like to learn in a non-judgmental environment where they can express themselves freely and appreciate a personal connection with the teacher. Both teachers and students aspire to a more equal teacher-student relationship.

Another major misunderstanding is copying/plagiarism. In China, learning equals copying, whereas in western culture copying equals plagiarism, a serious offence, which could exclude a student from exams and potentially jeopardize their whole professional career.

The social integration

The third factor that we esteem to count as essential in the success of international students is their social integration. Adapting to university life in a foreign country in another language and coping with a new culture is a hugely challenging experience. All these things need to be considered and students should be prepared as well as possible in order to have a successful stay.

During our interviews, some students told us how their lack of language fluency affected their confidence and consequently their identity. “Sometimes when I speak French,

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Accommodating... — continued

A successful accommodating program for international students is a win-win situation for everyone.



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they just look at me. They don't understand me and so I don't speak. I feel stupid. I can't say what I really want to say" (Wu). "People always ask me to repeat what I say. I don't feel comfortable because I don't feel good enough. In China, this never did happen" (Yi).

These same emotions can be read in François Cheng's book *Le dialogue*. "Possessing only a rudimentary knowledge of the adopted country's language, he was reduced to feeling like a young pupil in the eyes of everyone else. Stumbling over words and approximate sentences, unable to narrate clearly and coherently, he gives the impression of lacking thought or even feelings".

It is not, however, only the students who are ill-prepared to integrate and adapt but it is also the universities who are not ready or equipped to face this new diverse student body. If a university wishes to operate effectively in a global context, then they too must prepare their teachers, administrative staff and native students to welcome international students by meeting their needs in order to study in the best conditions.

Introducing a quality label

We believe that by introducing a recognized label, international students will be reassured, knowing that they are going to an establishment that is recognized world-wide as being apt to accommodate and help them with their integration and adap-

tation. We have named this quality label PIA and structured it around three main components:

PREPARE: Before arrival, the school prepares its staff, teachers, providing intercultural training and access to all necessary information corresponding to the needs of the students in order to avoid social, academic or cultural shock.

INTEGRATE: On arrival, the school welcomes students in the best possible conditions so that they feel comfortable and supported throughout their stay. At the same time, the school announces a dedicated support plan.

ADAPT: Study programs - all issues concerning comprehension cultural differences and learning styles are addressed in class by the teaching staff.

A positive experience abroad is linked to having a policy which accommodates students academically, linguistically and inter-culturally. Measuring this accommodation of students is the first step to a better international cooperation in the future.

PIA aims to give establishments the tools and certification to become better prepared to welcome international students as well as increasing their attractiveness. Moreover, the PIA quality label will make it easier for students to assess a school's ability to accommodate them in order to assure an environment with the best conditions for success in their studies.

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