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Review

Chinese nursing students' culture-related learning styles and behaviours: A discussion paper



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ABSTRACT

Globalisation requires that nursing education focuses on culturally competent care. International students studying in Australia present a valuable resource for cultural learning, yet internationalisation presents opportunities and challenges for both lecturers and students. This paper explores Chinese nursing students, the single largest group of international students in Australia, their communication behaviour, patterns and learning styles at Australian universities from cultural and psychosocial perspectives. Our aim is to provide insight for educators in Western countries to better understand this particular ethnic group and help Chinese nursing students overcome learning difficulties and develop their potential learning capabilities. We further recommend coping strategies to help international Chinese nursing students' learning.

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1. Introduction

The numbers of international students attending Australian universities make international education a significant industry and an important international exchange program. The growth in the number of international students is considered economically beneficial, but also beneficial for building alliances, sharing knowledge, enhancing Australian influence, increasing cultural awareness, and for preparing a workforce for the global environment [1–7]. This discussion paper will examine the literature to assist Australian university educators in understanding the perspective of Chinese nursing students studying in Australia. This discussion is

partially in response to the importance of international students' teaching and learning experiences, which has received considerable attention in educational research [8]. We focus on the students' culture-related learning styles and behaviours, particularly in the area of nursing and nursing education.

As a culturally diverse country, 26% of Australia's population was born overseas [9]. There is a significant number of international Chinese students who choose to study at Australian universities [6] and China is the country of origin for the single largest group of international students at many educational institutions [10,11]. According to the Australian Department of Education, Chinese students were the largest

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single international student group overall, and similarly, comprised the largest number of international nursing students in 2011 and 2012 [9]. To support culturally competent care, the Australian government has encouraged the employment of health care professionals with multicultural experiences and backgrounds [12], and the significant number of international students enrolling at Australian universities in health-related programs is a potential source of employees [4,7]. Therefore, providing a positive learning experience for international students is also an important recruitment strategy in achieving the nation's future healthcare needs.

Unfortunately, the majority of literature has identified a range of challenges for international students in assimilating and learning within their host countries, including Australia. These issues include English language proficiency, cultural barriers, social conflict, different learning styles, unexpected academic demands, perceived racism, homesickness, and financial hardship [6,13–18]. However, most of the literature has attributed these obstacles to a deficit approach, emphasising the hindrances in international students' learning and experiences, yet potentially overlooking the value of their education to both the students themselves and their host nations [19,20].

The learning experiences of different international student cohorts can vary greatly [21]. Therefore, both cultural and study discipline-based research into specific groups is highly relevant. While this paper will address issues of broad relevance to international students, we specifically focus on nursing students from mainland China. This cohort of students contributes to the highest proportion of international students studying in Australia as a whole and also within nursing programmes [9].

Lecturers accustomed to Western-based student behaviours may perceive the behaviour and personality of Chinese nursing students at Australian universities differently. Little research has been performed to better understand Chinese students' communication behaviour, patterns and learning styles from both cultural and psychosocial perspectives, or how they may impact their study abroad [11,22]. As we discuss, the learning styles of Chinese students have been profoundly shaped by Confucian philosophy and Chinese cultural values. Understanding how Chinese students' minds operate, their cultural values and why certain learning styles are preferred by these students will potentially improve their teaching and learning experiences. To gain a better understanding, the remainder of the paper will address the major frameworks that inform Chinese students' thinking, perceptions and learning approaches. Our aim is to provide insight for educators in Western countries to better understand this subject and help Chinese nursing students overcome learning difficulties and develop their potential learning capabilities.

2. When the west meets the east

Among the many frameworks of cultural variability, collectivism versus individualism [23] and high-context versus low-context communication [24] are two main Western cultural explanatory dimensions that apply to Chinese culture [25–27]. In addition, Chinese culture has been profoundly shaped by

the influential power of Confucian philosophy, and hence, these aspects will be included within our discussion.

2.1. Collectivism versus individualism

Individuals in collective cultures are “primarily motivated by the duties and goals of the members of these collectives over their own personal goals” [23]. Chinese culture is predominantly collectivistic. Reid stated that “within the Confucian tradition, students learn through co-operation, by working for the common good, by supporting each other and by not elevating themselves above others” [28]. This co-operative value requires Chinese students to help each other, with each member having a strong sense of duty towards other group members. First year or junior students will often refer to more senior students as ‘big brother’ or ‘big sister’, both as a mark of respect and acknowledgement of their commitment to the group.

In contrast, individualism is defined as “a social pattern that consists of loosely linked individuals who view themselves as independent of collectives: are primarily motivated by their own preferences, needs, rights, and the contracts they have established with others; give priority to their personal goals over the goals of others; and emphasize rational analyses of the advantages and disadvantages to associating with others” [23]. Australia is an example of an individualistic culture whereby students are expected to largely work independently and take responsibility for their learning.

Triandis' [23] framework of collectivism versus individualism causes conflict for Chinese students studying in a Western-based individualistic culture. For example, their culture-based behaviours, such as respect for authority figures and preserving harmony, can present a challenge when these ideals conflict with the host educational institution's expectations. Thus, Chinese students are often perceived by Western lecturers and peers as passive, quiet in class, non-confrontational, do not asking questions, lack of critical thinking, lack of independent learning, and lack of assertiveness.

2.2. High-context versus low-context cultures

According to Hall, “culture is communication and communication is culture” [24]. In high-context cultures such as China, communication is indirect and implicit. Communication is internalised and is dependent on physical and psychosocial contexts. However, in low-context cultures such as Australia, communication is explicit, direct, open and straightforward. Hall believed that “culture determines what an individual takes in and leaves out in terms of information processing” [26], and further suggested that collectivism (China) is a high-context culture whereas individualism (Australia) tends to be a low-context culture.

Hall's ideas concerning high-context and low-context cultures provide an explanatory framework for understanding Chinese nursing students' communication behaviour patterns and styles. For example, Chinese students will not engage in discourse before they are certain of the related implications. Even though they have the desire to enter into discourse, they may undergo a complex thought process while remaining

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