**The impact of an Australian study tour on the innovative practice of Chinese lecturers.**

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* Vocational teaching and learning systems are usually circumscribed by national boundaries. While driving concepts may be borrowed from other nations, national systems develop to reflect unique cultural and political patterns, with the training and development of teachers almost exclusively under strong national control. However, as nations increasingly prepare students for global employment experiences, the development of vocational teachers is also reflecting a similar pattern. This paper reports on a recent international training scheme for a diverse group of 66 Chinese lecturers over a 12-week period in Western Australia. The paper explores the impact of the experience on the participants and their reflections on their pedagogic and academic learning through multiple participative data collection processes. This paper focuses on the contrasts between the focus of learning, interactivity and flexible delivery emerging from the interim analysis, and explores these themes through Hofstede’s cultural dimensions. The study illuminates what was learned from Australian practice and what will mediate subsequent pedagogic translation.
* **Introduction**
* This paper focuses on the experiences, reflections and impact of an Australian study tour on 66 Chinese lecturers and how this collaborative engagement is impacting on innovation in their teaching practice. Vocational learning systems are generated by the unique cultural, social, economic and political interactional pattern within each nation and often mediated by responses to rapid change. Increasingly, national systems have been developed through benchmarking against more progressive systems. The globalisation of education has accelerated this process, with students more flexible in their study horizons due to higher social expectations, government investment, and parental wealth (Bathmaker, 2003). While teacher development has largely been regulated by each nation-state, educational study tours have become more prolific, moving from political fact-finding missions (Schofer and Mayer, 2005)), to focus on the development teaching staff to permeate institutions with innovative practice.
* This paper focuses on the development of Chinese lecturers. China has undergone a massive economic and social development and now has more than 50 cities with over 5 million people. The demand for education has increased as social aspirations have changed with vocational and higher educational (H.Ed.) institutions proliferating. The China Scholarship Council (CSC) plays a significant role in this process, providing financial assistance for teachers to study abroad to develop their practice. In 2015 the CSC sponsored 66 lecturers from diverse H.Ed. institutes for a 12week residential study tour at Edith Cowan University. The objective of the study tour was to experience of H.Ed. in Australia and subsequently enhance their practice. There was a specific focus on generating more effective learning interaction and English language skills.
* This study tour provided a unique opportunity to engage with and research the reflections of a diverse group of lecturers reflecting on their own practice, the pedagogic interactions they experienced, and their plans for innovation. We devised a research study to explore the ‘Contextual Differences of the Chinese and Australian Higher Education Systems: focusing on changes in pedagogy’, gaining University funding and ethical clearances. The research team was motivated to develop an understanding of; the pedagogic differences, the underpinning cultural imperatives, and the key mediators for subsequent innovative practice. The research team had an exceptional opportunity to teach and research, simultaneously learning about the participants and increasing pedagogic knowledge.
* The lecturers were a select group motivated to re-examine and develop their pedagogic practice. Higher Education has undergone rapid expansion in most developed and developing countries in the last three decades. Once an option for the privileged, it becomes an essential path for up to forty percent of the population. This expansion dramatically changes the nature and goals of H.Ed. systems, from developing learning capability, to acquiring vocational capability. As a result, H.Ed. is migrating to become a social commodity in a highly competitive market (Harmon, 2015). This leads to a challenging environment for university staff, confronted with greater numbers of students, demanding quality flexible delivery, and employment certainty. Simultaneously, traditions of knowledge consumption are problematised by rapid changes in knowledge bases, complicating preparation for workplace roles (Wong, 2004). As a consequence, modes of student-centred learning have emerged as dominant discourse for universities in Australia. How would Chinese lecturers perceive the relevance of this system for their institutions and their culture? What pedagogic innovations would they wish to incorporate and translate? Our study took the opportunity to explore these issues. *The significance of this study* is that it explores how pedagogic practice may be mediated at a time of rapid internationalisation and growth of Higher Education, Australia’s third largest export industry.
* **Literature review**
* Developing this study involved exploring what was known about contrasting educational systems; developing frameworks for gathering the lecturers’ perceptions; and developing understanding of the cultural imperatives shaping the systems. These three areas will be summarised in this section.

Much of the existing research in the area of *higher education development* is explorative and based on comparative analyses of large existing databases (Taskforce E.C., 2011). There is a significant stream of study into the comparative ratings of universities globally and the validity of such rankings (Coates, 2009). There is a broad stream of economic studies exploring the expansion value and impact of the system, and the differing political imperatives driving systems (Coaldrake, 2014; Mazzarol and Soutar 2002). A further body of knowledge analyses the export market of Higher Education, tracking student flows and market relationships (Guruz, 2001; Li and Bray, 2007: Marginson, 2006). There are also a group of studies that focus on systems of governance and emerging trends in Higher Education (Harmon, 2015; Deem et al, 2008). However, educational studies that explore pedagogic relationships are mainly focused on schools rather than post compulsory education, and lack a comparative intent. The opportunity to complete a comparative H.Ed. study focusing on individual perceptions appeared to be relatively unique. This study was therefore designed to gather participants’ perceptions about the contrast between both H.Ed. systems, and the innovations they intended to incorporate in their pedagogic practice. We explored literature that would provide a framework for collecting and analysing these forms of data.

* In terms of the first issue, and building a framework to *explore teaching and learning practices and barriers to change* we used three specific sources. Our primary source for mapping the dimensions of Higher Education pedagogy were based on the work of Briggs (2011) and the concept of constructive alignment, as it underpins the shift from distributing disciplinary knowledge to building student workplace capability through the judicious application of knowledge. Knowledge once only available from libraries and lecturers is downloadable from every smartphone. This approach incorporates previous educational approaches of facilitation, student centred learning, authentic assignments, negotiated learning paths, individual and collaborative learning, flexible delivery, and self reflection evidence, all of which were incorporated in our framework, displacing discourses of testing accumulated knowledge in a decontextualised situation. We also used the work of Cooke (2005)**,** to explore how the participants were building their research. We also recognised that observing and experiencing new techniques is stimulating, but translating them to another culture is often problematic. Here we drew on the work of Giddens (1984) to shape a framework that might help explore *the barriers to change*. Structuration theory provides a framework for understanding social change, but can equally be applied to organisations, by focusing on the cyclical relationship between rules and guidelines and the mechanisms by which they are changed.

In terms of theoretical frameworks to explore the *broad cultural differences* that had shaped the pedagogic system and may mediate changed practice, we were drawn to use Hofstede’s (2010) framework as a basis for our work. The existing literature did not provide a relevant model for contrasting teaching between HE systems and focused more on economic comparisons. In contrast, Hofstede’s model provided a well-tested framework for comparing cultural differences. While this framework is critiqued in regard to recency, broad generalisation, and a focus on business and not education, it is a well trialed framework for comparison. The framework has been developed across three decades, across more than seventy countries, and through multiple challenging and confirming studies. At the heart of the work is the concept that culture only exists by comparison. There are six dimensions in the model that are a basis for comparing national cultures and indicating broad preferred cultural patterns rather than individual preferences. **The *Power-Distance*** dimension explores the extent to which the less powerful members of organisations and institutions will accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. Societies that exhibit significant Power-Distance position individuals in a hierarchical order where people ‘know their place’ and accept inequity, while individuals in societies with low Power-Distance demand justification for what they perceive as power inequality or injustice, and seek democratic solutions to mediate inequities. **The *Individualism vs. Collectivism*** dimension attempts to assess the degree to which individuals are integrated within groups in their society and the contrasting emphasis upon I or we in terms of personal identity. More individualistic cultures place a greater importance on attaining personal goal and self-care, while in more collectivist societies value the group more than individuals, who subordinate their expectations for loyalty and support. **The *Masculinity vs. Femininity*** dimension explores the relative value a culture places on stereotypical gender roles. Does the culture revere assertiveness, heroism and ambition, or is there more emphasis on relational capabilities and care for the disadvantaged? Cultures high on this scale have more prominent gender differences and encourage ambitious and competitive behaviour. Cultures with low scores have more gender equality and emphasise consensus relational capability. ***Uncertainty-Avoidance*** explores if the society has a definite focus or if their room for fluid debate? This dimension measures how a society negotiates unexpected situations. Cultures high on this dimension utilise rules and regulation and resist change. In contrast, societies low on this index have less guidelines, are more open to change, and tolerate ambiguity. ***Long-term vs. Short-term Orientation*** explores the social time horizon. A long-term orientation reflects a pragmatic future focused attitude to time (flexhumility), while short-term oriented cultures value traditions, and views social changes with suspicion (monumentalism). ***Indulgence vs. Restraint*** is a more recent dimension assessing the ability of a culture to satisfy immediate individual desires in contrast with societies with strict social norms and rules discouraging personal gratification. The current contrast between Australian and Chinese cultures are displayed in Hofstede’s dimensions in the figure below. It is evident that there are significant differences in four underlined dimensions.

1 - Power-Distance

2 – Individualism

3- - Masculinity

4 – Uncertainty avoidance

5 – Long term orientation

6 - Indulgence

Blue = China

Red = Australia

* Figure 1 Contrasting Chinese and Australian Culture
* **Research Method**

This research study focused on the experiences and reflections of a diverse group of 66 Chinese lecturers during a 13-week period training scheme to develop their pedagogic practice. *The purpose of the study* was to explore contextual differences between Chinese and Australian H.Ed. systems and how the participants intended to change their pedagogic practice. The study used the participant cohort as informed co-researchers as they provided a purposeful and revelatory sample from a wide range of H.Ed. institutions. The participants came from 66 different faculties at 49 different Universities across China and represented nearly all of the 50 large cities with populations over 5m. There was a predominance of females with only 22 male lecturers. The majority of the lecturers were Professors and Associate Professors with more then ten years experience.

* The *key research questions* driving the study were: what do you perceive as the critical differences between the Chinese and Australian H.Ed. systems; what changes in teaching and learning design, delivery, and management do you intend to implement?
* While research studies sometimes emerge from issues raised by practice or a lack of knowledge, this study was motivated by an opportunity to explore an emerging issue and sought to capitalise on a unique opportunity to map the experiences, perceptions and reflections of a relevant sample group. The design of this study was based on a constructivist-interpretive approach using a clustered case-study. Whilst the participants shared an experience, their diverse cultural backgrounds inevitably produced diverse reflections and agendas for action, mediated by their unique institutional structures, networks, and prior learning relations. The study sought to capture these narratives of their experiences pursuing an interpretive, critical realist perspective (Sayer, 1992; Dubin, 1982).This was a mixed-mode study using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), to enable the key concepts to emerge from the data (McConnell, 2002; Clarke, 1997). This paper focuses on emerging themes from the interim analysis of the data. The study used focus groups, semi structured interviews and questionnaires. The researchers were acculturalised through interactions with the participants during interactive seminars, and previous experiences in China. The *focus groups and* semi-structured interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2008) were designed to explore similar areas, but in tandem provided the opportunity for individuals to respond, and also to interact with colleagues during reflections. In the *questionnaires* we collected demographic data for the study and responses to 87 Lickert scaled questions about their pedagogic practice and beliefs, with open-ended questions focused on what they intended to adapt and change.
* One of the critical fieldwork issues with this study was the restrictive use of English by the participants, particularly on their arrival. There was a high probability that limited English expression and erroneous translation might impact on the validity of the study. This was ameliorated by the research and delivery team including two native language speakers, and by employing a research assistant who was bilingual and detached from the programme delivery. This ensured participants relaxed into their own language, and conversed outside the training session with a native speaker. Interviews and focus groups were held at multiple locations for the convenience of the participants and often away from University premises to enable reflective space. The interactions were audio recorded with the permission of participants, fully transcribed and then checked for errors and paralinguistic information. Follow-up discussions were conducted where necessary for clarification purposes. The data was analysed using a template approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994), analysing the text through the use of a “guide” consisting of a number of relevant themes (Gurbich, 2007, Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2003). The analysis benefited from etic and emic perspectives of the researchers, using dual independent theme construction and resolution, with participants subsequently involved in validating the emerging outcomes. Etic perceptions are those made by observers from outside the culture, with less empathy for the culture and less understanding of the culture, but with more objectivity. In contrast, emic perceptions are those from within the culture, where local knowledge aids explanation but may lack the detachment of a more objective stance. Both perceptions are valid, but come from using different lenses, the combination of both is valuable.Participation was voluntary as agreed in the ethics application. Participants had multiple options for contributing through questionnaires, focus groups and interviews. We gained above 80% participation and illness and language skills may have curtailed some engagement. Fluency to describe issues might have been a barrier in some cases but the use of a Chinese-speaking interviewer and the option to talk in their first language assisted in gaining participation. It is possible some participants were culturally resistant to both western learning and culture. In contrast, several lecturers had lived and worked abroad in foreign universities.
* **Findings**
* This section provides an overview of the key themes emerging from the interim analysis of the data. Subsequent papers will examine the questionnaire responses and integrate the full data analysis. The focus here is on the participants’ perceptions of the contrast between the two H.Ed. systems and the changes in practice they intend to translate and integrate on their return. China has invested heavily in education in general, and in higher education in particular, to meet the needs and aspirations of a rapidly growing middle-class. However, educational pedagogy is a deeply contested area where opposing views of knowledge transmission, student-centred construction, and cultural biases and stereotypes abound. Initial discussions with the visiting lecturers confirmed that declarative knowledge transmission, larger classes and residential full time students dominate the current Chinese H.Ed system. The three key themes of the findings were therefore unsurprising as the contrasts of practice reflected these contrasts in ideology and purpose. The first theme in the findings is the contrast between a *teacher-centred and a student-centred* learning environment. The second key finding strongly represented in the evidence, relates to the greater *diversity of classroom interaction* in the Australian system they experienced. Finally, the third key finding was the significant difference between the direct instructional mode of the current Chinese Higher Education system and the move toward *blended and on line delivery* within Australia. The three findings are inextricably linked with each other and are explored in the following sections.

In terms of the contrast between a *teacher-centred and a student-centred* learning environment, the Chinese knowledge-centred approaches privilege face-to-face didactic delivery with a focus on attendance, knowledge replication and exams. In contrast, Australian educators are more constructivist based, designing delivery for diverse learners with flexible interactive delivery patterns, aimed at applying knowledge in workplaces for subsequent jobs.

*The historical study environment is different between the eastern and western. Chinese have been using the feeding teaching method for thousands of years. Almost all-Chinese teaching are influenced by Confucius. Although Chinese universities have been influenced by the western pedagogy approaches, Confucius methods are still influencing stronger. Ling*

*While Chinese teachers aim at teaching the knowledge points (from the text book), Western teachers aim at improving students' ability (to use or apply the knowledge points from text book)…. (Our)Textbooks are designed for exams, and the content is boring and not interesting for students. Fan*

* *Students need to be able to learn by themselves in the future - They should be able to get the learning ability, so as to be able to apply what they learnt under the right situations. This also allows them to be able to adapt to fast changes. Jiang*
* *(The) content of units teachers need to teach is much more than Australia. So Students here can learn something in-depth, but not in China….. They are afraid of making mistakes. Wei*

In terms of greater *diversity of classroom interaction* the Australian system was configured around smaller cohorts and greater participation. The participants perceived greater engagement and freedom within the learning spaces.

* *There is a saying in China "the gun will always shoot the bird different from others". None would like to show their different IQ compared to others. The (re is a) modest(y in the) culture and this explains why Chinese students do not talk too much. Hang*
* *Here (Australia) teachers guide students to study, in other words, teachers give tasks to students in advance…. conduct group discussions on classes, and then students will present their responses…. But in China, indeed, mostly with teacher-centered teaching. Meihui*
* *More group works and discussion at Australia….Australia teachers have more interactions with students on the classes…..Australia focus more on critical thinking training, but China focus more on teaching the content in the textbooks. Chen*
* *The class environment is more enjoyable in Australia…. teachers use games on classes. But it is not the case the China….Classroom arrangement is different, Australia is more interactive compared to China…..* *students got lots of chance to practice, but it is hard in China because too many students in a class. Hifan*
* *Chinese students just listen to the teachers, and sit down on their seat without condition. They are not confident (to talk), because they are afraid of (envy) authorities (teachers or good students)….Australian students do well in group discussion and positively/actively share opinions. Hang*

In terms of the Australian move toward *blended and on line delivery* the participants were confronted with new technologies and options for managing and conducting learning.In China the emphasis is on full time and mainly residential study programmes. Flexible delivery programmes with online materials and facilitation were a alien but stimulating delivery mode for the participants.

*(what was different was) powerpoint , blackboard, and class discussion. LI*

 *(the greatest difference was) for example, to use the online teaching system. Chen*

*(Students) are framed to certain way of learning in China, but Australian students have more flexibility in learning. Huan*

*Lots of teachers explained that half or more than half of students here have their own work and life. Study is an important part of the students but not all of their life…. Most students in China are full-time students, who stay on campus. Therefore, the requirement of attendance in China is very high…. So this is a very huge difference.**(I)**think Australia do it better on this issue, student-centered. For example, one of my typical experiences is that the attendance here is actually not that important. Meirong*

**Discussion**

This study set out to illuminate what the Chinese teachers were learning from Australian practices and how they intended to translate this learning within their own practice. The interim findings have indicated three areas where the learning experience has impacted on these Chinese educationalists. The first area is the contrast between a teacher-centred and a student-centred learning environment. There is little doubt that the responses from the data collection present strong evidence that Australian teachers and institutions are orientated around student expectation and goals. In contrast, Chinese practice places the teachers as class controllers (Carroll and Ryan, 2007; Lee and Fouts, 2011). The second key finding was also strongly represented in the evidence of the findings and relates to the greater diversity of classroom interaction in the Australian system. Most lecturers were continuing a tradition of monologue delivery to students. They experienced a wide range of group activity in their Australian programme that evidently gave them options for changing delivery patterns on their return, although these concepts would need translation to match different class sizes, institutional spaces, and student expectations (Ramburuth and McCormick, 2001; Mok, 2000). The third key finding was the significant difference between the direct instructional mode of the current Chinese Higher Education system and the move toward blended and on-line delivery within Australia. This evidence from the study indicates that the lecturers worked in China with local and residential students in face-to-face mode. Flexible online delivery was very limited. This meant that there was a significant difference in the learning materials and resources they experienced. The delivery platform for online learning presented the lecturers and their institutions with a new challenge and opportunity. They indicated that this experience exposed them to a far broader range of learning materials that were used in China at present (Yang, 2012).

* However, while the contrast and key learning issues are clear, it is the translation of that personal learning to another culture and different institutional constraints that will be the most interesting part of the programme evaluation. The contrast between the cultures provides clues to patterns that must be negotiated. To what extent will the new learning be encouraged, distributed and legitimised to effect cultural and institutional change (Shin, 2009: Healy, 2008)? While it is evident that the Higher Educational systems in question operate with differing principles and technologies for different markets, they reflect wider cultural patterns that remain distinctive despite increasing institutional globalisation and student internationalisation. While the differences between the systems are clear from the perceptions of these lecturers, the more important issue concerned their intentions to make pedagogic changes and the issues that they had to deal with for effective translation of practices. Here, Hofstede’s framework provides a cultural contrast that identifies the areas of greatest cultural dissonance and therefore the issues that would impact the most on translating practice from one environment to another. To what extent are current practices the product of culture or pedagogic limitations?
* It is therefore relevant to set the findings of this study within the wider social and cultural differences. The contrast between Chinese and Australian social dimensions indicated four key areas of difference. The areas of power-difference, individualism, long termism and indulgence showed significant cultural dissimilarity. Australia reflected a society that placed a far higher value on individualism and indulgence. On the other hand, Chinese culture reflected a greater power distance differential and a far longer-term orientation. While Higher Education is a special and selective component of society, if these strong contrasts are enduring in this educational area, what will be the key challenges for the Chinese lecturers as they attempt to integrate their new learning within established pedagogic practices? Student centered pedagogy aligns well with a more individualistic social climate. It may well be that moves towards pedagogic practices that centre on their students cannot be accelerated beyond the changes that are currently occurring in the surrounding society and their expectations. It may be strongly to the lecturers’ advantage that the long-term perspectives of their institutions may be amenable to generating pedagogic change for the future. Given the significant difference in power-distance and indulgence, changes in practice will need to be carefully negotiated for longer-term change that is in step with changes in the cultural environment. In terms of future research participants should be more directly engaged with their pedagogic intentions and with the barriers they perceive that may impact on their attempts to change practice. This was a pilot programme and one area of learning is the limited emphasis allocated to preparing the lecturers for subsequent pedagogic translation and change*.*
* **Conclusion**
* This paper has focused on current ‘Teaching and Learning’ in VET across international boundaries. The Chinese lecturers exploring the delivery of learning in another context with the intention of putting that learning to work in their own practice. This initiative displayed an innovative approach by the CSC to accelerate teacher learning. The relationship provided a unique opportunity to explore through a critical incident approach the pedagogic experience of a diverse group of teachers. The evidence indicates that the lecturers returned with changed perceptions of pedagogic practice and an intention to enrich their pattern of practice, their institution and profession. This paper has indicated how cultural differences may mediate those intentions. The immediacy experienced in Australia may have to be subordinated to a longer-term change strategy reflecting both student needs and institutional systems. What remains to be seen is how this learning translates in a very different social, cultural and economic climate.
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