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Irish and Chinese Students' College Experience On a Joint Engineering Programme

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The Institute of Technology Tallaght Dublin (ITTD) and the Nanjing University of Technology (NJUT) deliver a joint BEng (Hons) Mechanical Engineering Degree programme to Chinese students. Students spend the first three years in NJUT (Jiangsu, China) being jointly taught by ITTD and NJUT lecturers and complete their 4th year in Ireland in the same class as ITTD students.

The increasing number of international students worldwide demonstrates a relatively rapid change in the integration of global education. China adopted its open door policy approximately 25 years ago and sends more students to study abroad than any other country [1]. Chinese students have been shown to have different learning styles than western students [2]. Impressions, opinions and myths about how Chinese students respond to western teaching styles are plentiful, and these are often based on outdated facts. Lecturers delivering modules in NJUT evaluated the student experience in light of the reported cultural differences between Chinese and European students and the potential impact of this on the students' learning and lecturers' teaching styles.

NJUT students in 1st, 3rd and final year of the joint programme completed a survey exploring their college experiences. The survey was adapted from the College Student Experience Questionnaire (CSEQ) which is available for use in documenting, understanding and improving the student experience [3]. The survey focused on study practices of the students, development of their ability to learn, integration into college life and satisfaction with course of study. The same survey was completed by 1st, 3rd and final year Irish students.

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In many ways the findings were the same for the Irish and Chinese students; however there are some significant differences which might be attributed to their family situation and living arrangements, language ability and cultural factors. The findings are compared and contrasted with those of Zhang [4] who conducted a study on students in the three cultures using the Briggs 3P model (Presage, Process, Product). Zhang focuses on the relationships between student characteristics, teaching context, learning approach and achievement. The implications of the findings are compared with those of Cortazzi et al [5] who discusses how Chinese students in the UK change their practices in response to British academic cultures. The difference in the students' assessment of how their learning has progressed is explored in relation to their cultural backgrounds as described by Hofstede's Dimensions of Culture [6].

The paper concludes with a discussion on the ramifications of these findings on course design, delivery and assessment. Many similar traits were found between the Chinese and Irish students. Some differences may be explained by the fact that the Chinese come from very small families who support them financially as they live on campus. The Irish students generally live at home with two thirds being supported by state grants. This impacted on study practices and integration into college life. A high percentage of students said they would choose the same course again. The students' perception of the development of their ability to learn differed for Chinese and Irish students which may be explained by their cultural backgrounds. The findings of this study will be used to further inform the design and delivery of the programme both in NJUT and when the Chinese students arrive in Ireland. ■

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