

Expectations and perceptions of a particular group of Chinese MBA students and graduates

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Introduction

The student population of higher education institutions in the UK has diversified in terms of nationality over the last two decades. This is especially the case for the management postgraduate programmes with the vast majority of students coming from rapidly developing countries, e.g. India and China, who are eager to gain “advanced” and “traditional” western qualifications (Ivy and Naude, 2004).

Students are not always completely aware of the longer term benefits of the postgraduate experience when they enrol on courses; it is therefore important to understand how students value qualifications not only when they study for them but how they perceive the value of the study after graduation. The philosophy of TQM (Oakland, 1999) emphasises that products should be “fit for purpose” and therefore, course designers and deliverers should take into account the needs of the students. It is also important that providers design courses on the basis of the value that they give to those who take those courses in the short and the long term. Research in consumer services suggests that there is a gap between perceptions of quality of service between service managers, service providers, and service consumers (Zeithaml et alia). So we also argue that there is the possibility that there is a gap between students’ perceptions, teachers’ perceptions and University managers’ perceptions of the benefits of educational programmes, especially when the consumer and the delivery system occupy different cultural environments (Malhotra et al., 2005). It is therefore useful and important for course designers and deliverers to gain deeper insights into the strengths and weaknesses of educational products as perceived by purchasers of those products.

This paper uses the concept of human capital as its theoretical basis. From the work of Useem and Karabel (1986), Baruch et al. (2005) have developed a model for evaluating the capital that graduates receive from pursuing management postgraduate and undergraduate degrees. They suggest that obtaining a management degree can add value to graduates by endowing them with five kinds of human capital: 1) scholastic capital which is mainly the theoretical knowledge obtained from one’s studies, 2) social capital gained by developing key links/networks with relevant people, 3) cultural capital “developed through the value people within society place on symbols of status” (p.54), 4) inner-value capital developed by self-awareness, and 5) market-value capital as evidenced by enhanced earning potential.

The research seeks to develop an understanding of the pre-arrival expectations that students have of their postgraduate management programmes, what knowledge and skills the students have actually acquired during their study and to what extent the graduates can apply the knowledge and skills in their own social contexts after graduation. This paper presents the findings of the pilot study conducted during September 2006, May 2007 and July 2007.

Methods

The subjects of the pilot study are three cohorts of MBA students (academic years of 04/05, 05/06 and 06/07) sponsored by a Chinese provincial government. It involves interviews with a sample of 41 students out of 70 in total from the three cohorts (14 out of 32 from cohort 1, 12 out

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of 18 from cohort 2 and 15 out of 20 from cohort 3). The respondents worked for the provincial government, state owned enterprises or educational institutions.

The investigations were conducted with the 1st cohort of students 18 months after their graduation, with the 2nd cohort of students days before they returned to their own country after the completion of their study and with the 3rd cohort of students one week prior to the start of their MBA study and one month before they returned to their own country.

The investigative techniques used were a mixture of one-to-one interviews and focus group discussions. The interviews were semi-structured in nature, lasting between 30 minutes to 2 hours each. An interview guide was developed based on the 5-capital framework, aiming to find out the expectations and actual outcomes of the one-year study. The interview data was analysed using the qualitative computerised data analysis tool NVIVO 7.

Findings

What was expected of UK MBA?

1. Cultural capital

Cultural capital is demonstrated by the enhancement of one's social status. According to the respondents, improving English seemed to be the single most important element. Students realised that English has become the business language in the global economy and a good command of the language has been perceived to be a big potential enhancement of one's career as demonstrated in the quotations from two respondents.

The government wanted us to become bilingual managers. I really wanted to improve my English when I first came. I planned to make great efforts in English study especially in listening and speaking.
Respondent A

I think this qualification is not that important for me. I prefer to improve my English because I was working in the company and English is very useful.
Respondent B

From one of the authors' understanding of the Chinese environment, the command of a foreign language, particularly English, has been seen by a majority of Chinese as an indication of being international, hence greatly admired in the society.

In parallel with the command of English is the international experience. This aspect is closely related to the difficulties of the Chinese nationals travelling abroad. Although China has opened its doors to the western world for nearly three decades, it is still very difficult for Chinese nationals to go abroad. This is particularly the case for government officials. One of the respondents saw himself "growing up in a closed environment" and wanted to "go out of the country". Traditionally, studying abroad has been described as "galvanised with gold" by Chinese.

2. Inner-value capital

Broadening horizons and developing new thinking styles are the two elements expressed by the respondents. As put forward by one of the respondents, "going out of the country, developing a global perspective, understanding the western cultures and changing the way of thinking is more important than the knowledge of management". Such an expectation was expressed by most respondents when they were asked why they chose to study MBA in the UK rather than in China.

3. Scholastic capital

The third aspect of their expectations is the acquisition of knowledge of western management which was described by many as "advanced".

I really want to know the differences between Chinese and western management. Why are they so advanced?
Respondent C

For a majority of the respondents, their previous studies were not management related, but in areas such as engineering, biology, journalism and Chinese. These people were then promoted to management positions and hence felt a need to learn about management as demonstrated by the following respondent:

I majored in Chinese. I worked as a civil servant. Later, I took charge of foreign trade and tourism. There are several reasons why I came to the UK. One of them is that I wanted to get some knowledge about management.
Respondent D

However, when asked what they meant exactly by advanced western management, none of the respondents could tell.

4. Market value capital

Over the last 15 years or so, the Chinese authorities have realised the importance of management knowledge and skills in a market economy (Branine 2005) and have since approved the rapid expansion of MBA delivery throughout the country. However, due to a lack of rigid quality control systems, the value of an MBA obtained from a Chinese institution has gone down dramatically. When asked why they chose to come to the UK to study MBA, most respondents seemed to suggest that a Chinese MBA is not valuable any more while UK has a worldwide reputation for high quality education. A UK qualification was described by one of the respondents as a "REAL" qualification.

The second thing is acquiring the qualification, a real western qualification.
Respondent A

As the provincial government concerned has also been sending officials to the USA for MBA studies, the respondents were therefore also asked why they did not choose to go to the States. The reputation of the high standard of British HEIs was highlighted as shown below:

America is a super country. You can go there to taste a kind of lifestyle. As for study, the British education is well-known. I would like to study MBA in UK.
Respondent E

5. Social capital

This aspect was not explicitly expected by every respondent, but certain respondents did have this in mind right from the beginning either in their own planning or at the request of their bosses. A respondent who worked for the Office of International Affairs of her city mentioned that her director asked her to develop a few links while she was in the UK. Another respondent who was an academic said he would like to develop some education collaboration during his stay in the UK.

What was acquired?

All respondents had high expectations in one way or another. Have those expectations been met? If yes, to what extent? If not, why not? Those were the questions put to the respondents from cohort 2 and 3 just before their returning to China and to cohort 1 after they had returned to China.

1. Cultural capital

The cultural capital enhancement expected by the respondents at the beginning of the study would be founded upon their English fluency and their international experience. – they would be “bilingual managers”.

Answers obtained regarding the improvement of English fluency in general were those of disappointment. The following responses illustrate that very clearly:

I am satisfied with this one-year study in UK except the language.
Respondent E

I'm not satisfied with the improvement of my English, especially with my speaking. It hasn't improved as much as I thought. I thought I could improve more as I am in Britain which is real English environment, we could speak English everywhere at any time. My speaking should have been improved greatly through this one-year's study. But actually, it's not true.
Respondent K1

However, when looking at the four skills separately, all respondents were positive about their improvement of English reading and writing skills. The main disappointment was in speaking and listening which was partly caused by the fact that 1) they all lived together in the same block(s) and tended to speak Chinese all the time and 2) there were not enough organised events to encourage more integration, hence providing a social environment for students to talk to each other in English.

*Yeah. I think for us, I think because our Group students live together in***, in our university, we have built a good relationship there, but on the other hand I think we should live with the foreign students, I think that would be better.*
Yes. We talked in Chinese every day.
Respondent K1

In terms of the enhanced social status via the fact of studying in the UK, there is the feeling that all the graduates interviewed after their return to China felt that their status had been enhanced by their experiences in the UK.

Whether this was because of the MBA itself, the fact that they had been chosen by the Province to go to England or whether it was the fact that they had studied abroad is not really clear. A useful research project could investigate how graduates and employers recognise the tangible benefits of MBAs with respect to scholastic capital and intangible benefits as defined by cultural capital (using this paper's definitions) (Jenkins, 2004).

2. Inner value capital

Inner value capital based on linguistic skill and cross cultural awareness

Broadening horizons and developing new thinking styles were expected by the respondents at the start of their studying in the UK. At the end of their study, when asked whether their expectations in those aspects were achieved, most respondents from cohorts 2 and 3 seemed to have changed the topic slightly. They mainly mentioned their confidence gained in intercultural communication. Respondent E compared how she felt before and after the one year's study in the UK.

We usually have a lot of contact with some foreign enterprises and I often felt there was a big gap between me and them. I thought they were very mysterious, and the foreign enterprises were even more mysterious. But after this one year, I know much more about the foreign things. The biggest gain, I

think, through this one year's study is that we are not afraid of chatting with foreigners anymore. We won't be shy anymore.
Respondent E

Further explorations suggested that such confidence in intercultural communication was partly obtained by classroom discussions, but more by participation in extracurricular activities such as visiting host families, working as volunteers or part-time, company visits and work shadowing organised by the university and extensive travelling in the UK.

When graduates from cohort 1 were interviewed in China in English the concept of inner value was only detected in four interviews; this is possibly due to a flaw in the interviewing /interpretation process.

Errm, but not, I didn't get promotion, but I think I can make some decisions by myself, more than I could before, before I go abroad.
I think the foreign learning experience is more, kind of helped me to make easier to communicate with the other country people
Yes, than I did before, I think I'm better than before
Respondent K1

It opens your eyes, opens your ears, give you different points of view
Respondent O1

Inner value is a complex concept to detect and since the interviewer and the interviewed had different first languages and the interviews were conducted in the language of the interviewer (cohort 1 study) it is likely that a complete range of perspectives was not obtained. It is worthy of note that the four respondents who, in the interpretation of the interviewer, had good command of English were also the ones whose responses suggested that they had gained some inner value though their UK studies. It poses the question whether this is just a methodological problem for this research or the surfacing of a different mechanism, since the lower the level of English a student has the less likely they are to explore other features of University life, and may become "trapped" within their own community. This is an area for further exploration. However, there is the suggestion that possession of the MBA through a British experience is beneficial for at least some of our graduates on this dimension.

3. Scholastic capital

There is evidence of the development of managerial skills amongst the respondents. Some students also reported that useful and applicable knowledge was gained. When asked at the end of their study in the UK, respondents were able to give more explicit and specific examples of the skills they had learned. Skills particularly emphasised were problem solving skills, research skills, IT skills, presentation skills, teamwork and time management.

However, the knowledge of management was thought by the respondents to be more relevant for those working within firms or interfacing with firms.

4. Social capital

This is largely achieved among themselves. However, there the mechanism is not the one generally envisioned by Western thinkers:

The cohort of a specific class, the full alumni of the university, and the overall population of graduates serve as foundation stone for networking. Being part of the 'old boys' network is a great asset for individual members, and organizational networks can increase human capital contribution to organizational success
(Baruch et al, 2005 page 53)

In this group the students come with the social capital inherited from their previous and still current employment, the Provun Provincial Government and its related state controlled institutions. This case may be an example of how capital is reproduced amongst elite groups, but this elite group did not form itself at the University but was initially brought about by the Provincial Government's actions in getting the group together, and putting it in a structure that acted upon rather than within the University structure. There is some sense here of a deliberately emergent strategy (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). The social capital of being a member of these groups was a very powerful driver for individual academic success. The first group for example had a very cohesive semi formal structure which meant that group learning and helping each other was strongly emphasised.

I think a group means that some people working together, so as a group, as a team, I think that most of the students helped each other during the study in the UK, and we know the hard time, we experience a hard time, and we surely had this, and especially during the dissertation stage, all of us almost found it studying very difficult conditions, you know

Respondent E1

Thus the deficiencies in the English language skills of some members are more than compensated for by the support they get from the group and possibly the feelings of responsibility that individuals have to the overall success of the group. This is an area where the literature on capital could be further explored to discuss the mechanisms that occurred in this group and are continuing post graduation (Bourdieu's (1977, 1984, Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Again this project can also be usefully informed by the literature of Guanxi (Xin and Pearce, 1996; Wong and Chan, 1996; Chen and Chen, 2004). The literature on learning communities could inform and be informed by the study of these groups in the context of the English higher education sector (Colley, 2003).

Those who expected to develop links with UK organisations/institutions were not able to do so to the degree that they had hoped and such contacts that were made were limited to work placements. The main barrier for the development was said to be the lack of opportunity but English language skills could also be a limiting factor. Studies with the first group indicated that relationships were developed between the Provun group and other students, University staff and people from outside the University however, these were relatively few in number and all but two seemed to be social rather than business or professional links. However, one local businessman had visited Provun because of a link gained by meeting students in the first cohort. When compared to the relationships within the group, relationships outside the group appear to have less force.

5. Market value capital

Of the respondents from the first cohort who returned to China after their study, all apart from one believed that having the MBA would get them promoted, four had already been promoted and one had changed industry on the basis of his MBA. However, it may be that the MBA is as much a cause as an effect within this cohort. It is possible that having been chosen to go on the MBA programme the graduates were predestined for relatively successful returns if they achieved the degree.

Conclusion and Further Research

The expectations of the students have largely been met. These students after graduation understand the theories of Western management but some felt frustrated that they could not further explore their knowledge outside the formal constraints of the written word. It should be remembered that learning a foreign language is not the stated purpose of a MBA programme but students need to be able to overcome language limitations in order to get the widest benefits from a Western education. Also learning English was seen as important to students. The sponsoring government wanted bilingual managers. Therefore a disappointing aspect has been the insufficient improvement of English of some students, particularly in speaking and listening. This

has raised the issue of what type of English courses should be offered to international students as most English courses for degree students have been English for academic purposes. Consider the following extract from an interview with a member of the first cohort:

If I have enough time I think, I have the time passed very fast, if I had six more months I would have got better language, and learning

Another closely related issue mentioned by the respondents was the long-standing issue of integration which needs to be looked into from various aspects including accommodation arrangements.

On the other hand the very strong links within the group ensured that weaknesses in language were not a barrier to learning in the formal academic context. In this respect the group's strength was also its weakness in that students could survive in England in a largely Chinese speaking learning environment.

While so much emphasis has been placed on the global perspective and broadening horizons by the respondents, it is noteworthy that the acquisitions which have been made come mainly from extracurricular activities. It is recommended that course designers take this into consideration in terms of how such outcomes can be achieved within the curriculum as well. For example, course designers could consider if/how students' involvement with the local business and governmental community could be formally linked into a module concerned with comparative studies and cross cultural understanding.

This report is based on the pilot study. This study would be enhanced if research could be done to further explore the students' behavioural change as their careers develop and whether they consider their MBA experience has informed their continuing behaviour. It would also be useful for course designers if data could be collected on employers' perspectives as to whether the effectiveness of our graduates employed by them had been influenced by their MBA studies. It would also be useful to carry out work on other students/graduates to investigate how they perceive their experiences in the UK and whether they have similar or different experiences from the group studied in this research. The extent to which the findings from this study can be generalised to wider student bodies needs to be further explored.

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