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The experience of Chinese students in Irish third level libraries: an investigation of current challenges and an analysis of possible solutions

David Mannion and Clare Thornley

Introduction

Third level institutions in Ireland are finding themselves under increasing financial pressure. A common way to increase income is to recruit more non-EU students, as they pay substantially higher fees than EU students. For example, at UCD a student taking an undergraduate law degree pays £5,780 if they are an EU student, but pays £14,850 if they are from a non-EU country. Fees are often more than double what an EU student will expect to pay.¹

US students accounted for incomes of £32.3m and Chinese students £28m in 2009 (Education Ireland, 2010).² International students are a major source of income to Irish Third level institutions. Most institutions have strategies in place to increase non-EU student recruitment, through staff visits to similar organisations overseas. This is set to continue for the foreseeable future, with commitments being made by the new government to encourage international students to study in Ireland (Irish Council for International Students, 2011).

Clearly the quality of learning experience which international students receive is very important if recruitment levels are to be maintained. The academic library is central to student learning. What role does it play in serving the specific learning needs of

international students? Are academic libraries adequately prepared to meet these needs so that students can be assured of a quality library experience?

This article focuses on the experience of Chinese students in one Irish Third Level Institution. Other than those attending from the USA, students of Chinese origin are the largest non-EU group attending Irish Third Level Institutions (Education Ireland, 2010); thus they make up a significant number of students whose first language is not English. This article examines some of the difficulties they encounter in making full use of the library, the nature of these challenges and some possible ways, based on this study and related research, to make those in the academic library service better aware and more responsive to their needs. Some of these challenges may be unique to Chinese students but many of the issues uncovered could also be relevant to other international students and also suggest approaches which may discover more about the particular needs of different groups.

Past research has shown that international students often experience difficulty in the library due to cultural differences and difficulties with language and communication. This can cause a gap between the quality of library service experienced by international students and indigenous students in any country.

Previous studies have tended to investigate international students as one entire group rather than a multitude of different nationalities with different needs. In the Irish context little has been done to investigate the library experiences of international students despite the constant efforts being made to attract international students to study here and the huge revenues they generate into the economy.

Based on a Master’s thesis in Library and Information Studies (2010), this case study provides an insight into the academic library experiences of Chinese students (both under-graduate and post-graduate) attending an Irish third level institution. The research reported here found that factors such as limited communication skills, diverse cultural traits, and a lack of understanding of library services contributed to a less than effective use of the library. Confirming previous research conducted elsewhere, it found that they do not always enjoy the same quality of library service as indigenous students or those whose first language is English.

Recommendations from the study include an acknowledgement of the cultural traits of international students when planning and developing library induction and training courses, specific staff training and co-operation with the International Office and student societies to find ways to establish a library service that is useful to all patrons.

Keywords: International Students, Academic Libraries, Ireland

Literature Review

An insight into the issues, methodologies and key findings of past research in the area was gained through a literature review. Much of the existing literature deals with academic libraries in English-speaking countries such as Canada, the USA and New Zealand. The majority of these offer recommendations and many of these are applicable to the Irish context. Past studies, such as that conducted by Jackson (2005), have usually considered ‘international students’ as a homogenous group without differentiating their nationalities and cultures.

Though somewhat dated, Wayman’s article ‘The international student in the academic library’ (1984) provides a good overview of the issues facing international students using libraries and would be a good starting point. Bilal’s ‘International students’ acquisition of library research skills: relationship with their English language proficiency’ (1989) gives insight into how a limited proficiency in language can affect effective library use.

Research by others (Allen, 1993; Jackson, 2005; Hughes, 2005) confirms that international students often experience difficulty in the library due to a lack of language proficiency, communication difficulties and cultural differences. There is often a gap between the quality of library service experienced by interna-
tional students and indigenous students in the country in which they are studying. Allen’s research also gives a good insight into how international students engage with libraries in the American context and focuses particularly on how they use library resources such as online databases and catalogues (1993). A study by Jiao & Onwueghuzie (1999) focussed on anxiety in the library among international students. It found that those whose native language is not English faced multiple difficulties in academic libraries, particularly with regard to the use of library equipment (computers, printers, photocopiers etc.). More recent work by Jackson (2005) examines the level of awareness of library services among international students.

Studies specific to Asian students have been conducted by Liu and Winn ‘Chinese Graduate Students and the Academic Library: a user study at the University of Windsor’ (2009). This article provides a good summary of past research and gives a concise description of challenges faced by Chinese library users. Zhang’s ‘Communication in Academic Libraries: an East Asian Perspective’ (2006) investigated how linguistic barriers affect the students’ information seeking behaviour, whilst Lewis’ work from 1969 ‘Library orientation for Asian College Students’ offered some early views on the challenges facing libraries in effectively inducting international users to the library.

A consensus was evident in the research that student difficulties in the library are largely due to communication problems, language problems, adjusting to a new educational or library system and general cultural differences (Baron, Strout-Dapaz, 2001); (Badke, 2002); (Liao, Finn and Lu, 2005). It was also noted in earlier research that librarians are often not adequately trained to deal with students of varying cultures and thus encounter difficulties orienting students to use the library effectively (Wayman, 1984, Liestman & Wu, 1990).

The Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL) publication Library Services for International Students (2008) provides a comprehensive overview of issues facing international patrons of academic libraries in the UK and offers good recommendations to meeting the challenges involved. It also provides a lengthy reading list.

A study conducted by Hurley, Hegarty & Bolger (2006) focused on the challenges involved in developing and delivering a pilot library skills course to a group of international bridging studies students from China and Pakistan in Waterford Institute of Technology. It found that their main barrier related to communication difficulties. There has been no significant investigation into international students in the context of the Irish academic library. In Ireland it would appear that the public library system is better focused towards facilitating a diverse user base than in academic libraries. This is illustrated in reports recently published by An Chomhairle Leabharlanna (The Library Council) which investigate service provision to culturally diverse patrons, such as Branching Out: Future Directions (2008) and Meeting the challenges of Cultural Diversity (2007).

Whilst these reports acknowledge the sometimes inconsistent response to meeting the needs of an international user base in public libraries, the fact that they were conducted in the first place indicates that, at least, an effort is being made to address these issues.

Methodology

Academic Libraries should be information and learning resource centres for all students. Cultural differences, language barriers and communication difficulties, whilst they may be challenging, should not hinder the quality of service a user receives. Non-EU students, particularly given the increased fees they pay, should have a reasonable expectation that the library, as part of the overall learning experience, is making an effort to provide a service suitable to a culturally diverse student population. Using Chinese students as a case study, this research investigates the extent to which this expectation may or may not be valid by examining if they enjoy the same quality of service as indigenous students. Whilst it is not a conclusive investigation, it is a contribution to exploring whether academic libraries are meeting the needs of their culturally diverse user base.

The literature review helped to develop some broad research questions on the Chinese student library experience in Ireland:

- What are Chinese students’ habits as users of the library?
- What are the challenges they encounter while using the library?
- How satisfied are they with service and instruction provided to them?

These broad questions were investigated by means of a qualitative questionnaire survey conducted during a focus group session with twenty Chinese students (out of a total of 150) at a large third level institution. (Appendix 1) Ethnic origin was the determining factor in how students were chosen. They were not divided by subject discipline, stage of progression, type of course, age or gender. The focus group included both undergraduate and post-graduate students. (See diagram on following page.) In answering the survey, they were also asked to provide suggestions on how they think the service could be improved.

The perspective of the librarians providing the service is also central to a proper understanding of the issues. Therefore, two reader service librarians, each with more than five years experience at the same institution, were invited to participate in an interview investigating the way the library approaches service provision to international students. This was to elicit their views on how to best serve Chinese students as well as gaining an insight into their general experience of working with international students.

Gathered survey data was coded and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) whilst the interview data was transcribed and hand coded, thus allowing for themes and patterns within the data to be organised.

Results

A summary of the results is available in Appendix 2. It was found that cultural, linguistic and communication barriers, along with inadequate training, hinder Chinese students'
optimal use of the library. Efforts of the academic library to overcome these issues and meet the needs of a culturally diverse user base are limited by a range of different challenges. These include those that are likely to remain, such as low levels of staffing and resources, as well as those that could be more readily overcome, such as library policies which fail to provide specific guidelines on dealing with a diverse user base and an incomplete understanding of user’s behaviour among library staff.

An academic library’s main purpose is to serve the teaching and research needs of students and staff (Hoare, 1997). This research has found that a gap exists between the library’s basic purpose and what Chinese students actually experience. The survey among Chinese students suggested that, in this particular institute, they tend not to seek assistance when they encounter problems in the library and it highlighted a preference in many cases to work independently. It also found that some experience difficulty expressing their needs effectively in English and often avoid doing so. The majority of students reported difficulty returning satisfactory results when searching for information on the library catalogue and in online databases. Like many undergraduates, the students relied heavily on online search engines such as Google to find information. This might suggest that some lack skills in information retrieval techniques and information literacy.

The majority of those surveyed also reported dissatisfaction with the standard of induction and library training they received. Whilst the helpfulness and approachability of staff was a point of satisfaction, their overall view of the library service itself could be regarded as poor, particularly with regard to resources specific to Chinese needs, for example material in their native language. Given that they are expected to have a reasonable standard of English prior to commencing their studies and that their courses are given through English, perhaps provision of text books in their own language is an unreasonable expectation. However, provision of multilingual library material such as basic user guides and information on services is surely not unreasonable, especially considering the fees paid by them.

There is no correlation between fees paid and what library services are provided. But given that the library is an integral part of any student’s college experience, it is arguable that a dedicated percentage of fees that international students pay should go towards ensuring a library service that meets their needs.

The interview with librarians highlighted particularly the lack of a general library policy, and therefore, the lack of specific guidelines for service provision to international students. Instead this library was guided by the policies of the academic institution overall whilst, perhaps, a specific library strategy should also be in place. Another key finding was that the library, despite a strong desire to meet the needs of all students, is very much bound by limited resources especially in terms of staffing levels. Thus the ability to provide a service ‘tailored’ towards Chinese students is not possible. This is evident particularly in inducting international students to the library. Whilst they are taken separately to English speaking students, in practice all international students are grouped together for induction. When available, a Chinese translator participates in induction, but this is not always the case. The induction course, whilst covering the basic operations of the library, fails to address information literacy and how to conduct effective information seeking. Further library instruction is arranged by their lecturers as is deemed necessary.

The interview also highlighted the tension between giving an in-depth focussed approach to international users whilst also maintaining general service. Whilst accepting that Chinese students have specific needs, the library treats all users ‘equally’; they do not discriminate by giving special treatment to one group over another. An opinion prevailed that in addressing the issues specific to Chinese students, this would lead to having to
provide special services to all students from culturally diverse backgrounds. One of the librarians interviewed noted:

‘Can I also say that there might be a problem if you translate it into Chinese and then other student groups would say ‘well why haven’t you translated it into my language’, because we can’t discriminate. If you are discriminating against ... I mean we’ve got Saudi Arabian, Eastern European students, other European students, (Spanish, French). We can’t just single out ... So, if we wanted to translate booklets, we have to do it for every group. You are giving special treatment to one group over another and that might be unfair’.

It was felt that the resources are not available to do so, thus all are given the same service regardless of nationality. It is somewhat paradoxical that in ‘being fair’ to all students, those who may need a little extra help might not get it.

Engaging with both students and librarians highlighted that, to a certain degree, neither group fully understands the other. For example, the interview with librarians suggested the opinion that as part of their culture, Chinese students have a tendency not to approach the desk and ask for help when required. At the same time, the survey with students suggested that some did not completely understand the role of the library in their learning, nor realise that it is the librarian’s job to answer the queries of patrons. One of the librarians interviewed commented:

‘I’ve noticed that they are much shyer when they come up to the desk. When they do ask questions, some of the other nationalities are more assertive. For instance I notice that Eastern European students are more likely to come up and ask questions. It may be down to their language skills as well. Some may find it harder to articulate the question or what they want.

It’s probably a cultural thing as well because, I suppose there’s a respect thing there as well with Chinese students. They’re not so likely to approach somebody and I know that the lecturers would say that as well; that they don’t ask questions in class as much as the other students’.

Conclusions and recommendations

The findings of this research suggest that many Chinese students are not using the Irish academic library to its full potential. Thus it is arguable that many may not get the full learning experience that they pay for in fees. Academic libraries have taken some steps to meet their needs but a concern exists about the tension between providing a comprehensive service to all students and the increased resources needed to deliver a tailored service to the full range of international students. A significant body of past research exists on library use among international students in English speaking countries (See further reading). Taking this work into account, along with the findings of this particular project, it is possible to offer some recommendations for library policy and practice in the future.

If the academic library experience for Chinese students is to be improved, then change must happen in the way that service is provided to them. While institutional policies exist, it is felt that libraries must establish formal, written, library-specific policies and guidelines to improve the student experience, based on current research and ‘best practice’. They also need to work towards adopting strategic plans which guide the path to meeting these responsibilities within the constraints of tight budgets.

Academic libraries need to acknowledge the cultural traits of Chinese students, and indeed, all international student groups, and how these affect their use of the library. Without undermining diversity of culture, students should be made aware that in Irish society it is perfectly acceptable to ask questions and that it is part of the librarian’s job to answer them. Students should also be made aware that questions do not necessarily have to be asked face to face and that reference services may be conducted via phone or email also. In addressing difficulties that students may have communicating, arguably it is beyond the direct responsibility of the library. However, the library may be able to help the situation through the provision of guidebooks which explain the terminology and phraseology of the library in the students’ own language if necessary. Co-operation with the International office of the institution and lecturers would also allow the library to be better informed of issues that Chinese students may have in their library use.

Library staff should be educated and trained to best serve international users. While many organisations offer multicultural training, very little of it would be library specific. Perhaps, both LAI and Academic and National Libraries Training Cooperative (ANLTC) have a role in offering CPD courses in this area. Courses are offered by CILIP. The Library Council has also offered similar courses for public library staff.

Library training for students needs to be implemented with more sensitivity to the cultural traits, communicative abilities and learning methods of Chinese students, and indeed other nationalities. Within training, more emphasis needs to be paid to information literacy and information retrieval techniques, bearing in mind that these may be more challenging in many cases for international students. Students should be educated on how to conduct advanced searches on library databases and electronic resources but also encouraged to ask for staff help at any point in their searching. Within information literacy training, students should be shown how to use search engines effectively but also they should be encouraged to look beyond them and towards resources offered by the library and the help that librarians can provide. Training and guidance should ideally take place over an extended period of time rather than in one session at the start of the year. Ideally, student groups should be taken separately according to nationality in order to tailor training for their needs. While academic departments need to work closely with the library to inform on the resources applicable to their courses and to organise further library training for them, the library should be more proactive in the planning process. They also need to inform their Chinese students about the services available through the library and encourage them to take advantage of them.

Implementing improvements for Chinese students in the library could potentially be perceived as unfair by other students.
nationalities enrolled at the college. Thus, any efforts to improve their experience should be done in the context of improving service provision to all nationalities enrolled at the college. Cooperation with the International office and student societies are essential to find ways to establish a service that is useful to all and these resources could be better used by libraries. A final recommendation would be that some of the higher fees paid by international students would be earmarked for libraries so that appropriate user education can be provided.

Limitations of this study

This study is by no means a fully comprehensive account of the Chinese student experience in Irish academic libraries. The study was limited to the library of one academic institution, and focussed on the experiences of twenty Chinese students studying there. Thus, it does not represent the situation pertaining to all academic libraries in Ireland. Certain questions in the interviews and survey questionnaires relied on the participants’ opinions. The situation and experiences for Chinese students attending another Irish Third level institution may be different and there may be important differences between different disciplines and/or levels of study. Therefore, further research, across multiple academic libraries, is required to gain a full insight into Chinese students’ experiences of using them.

The conclusions and recommendations of Meeting the Challenges of Cultural Diversity should also be considered. One of its key recommendations (5.2.1) explains that ‘library authorities should develop policies to meet the needs of their foreign national users and wider non-user communities. The longer term policy and planning should be incorporated into library development plans.’ Although this report deals largely with the public library system, this and many of its other recommendations may be applied to the academic library context.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire conducted among Chinese Students

1. What course are you undertaking here at the college?

2. What stage of study are you at?
   Year 1  Year 2  Year 3  Year 4  Other

3. Are you a full time or a part time student?

4. What age bracket do you fall into? Please choose
   18-21  22-25  26-30  Over 30

5. How often do you use the college library? Please Choose:
   Never  A couple of times per month  Once per week  2-3 times per week  More than 3 times per week

6. Do you use any other library other than the college library when seeking information – for example, public libraries – if so, what do you use this library for?

7. Which statement best describes how you communicate your information needs to library staff? Please choose what statement suits you most:
   • I never feel challenged and I understand all of the time
   • I feel challenged sometimes, but mostly I understand
   • I feel challenged often and find it difficult to understand
   • I always feel challenged and rarely understand
   • Other: Please give details

8. Does the library provide any of the following in your native language? Please tick all that apply
   Books  Newspapers/Magazines  DVDs/Videos  CDs/Cassettes  Exhibitions/Talks
   A library policy provided in your own language
   Library guides in your own language
   None of the above

9. When you search for information using the library databases, have you felt that the quality of information suffers because of challenges with language?
   Never  Less Often  Often  Always

10. On average, how often are you satisfied with the results of your search for information? – How often do you find what you are looking for?
    Never  Less Often  Often  Always

11. How often do you ask library staff for help when you are looking for information in the library? Please choose what is relevant to you:
    • I never ask for help, I usually find what I need by myself
    • I ask for help sometimes, but only when I really need it.
    • I ask for help a lot of the time

12. Have you ever decided not to ask a question of library staff for any of the following reasons?
    • I do not like asking for help
    • I find it difficult to communicate with library staff
    • They are not very helpful
    • Other reasons, please give details

13. Have you ever experienced difficulty with any of the following?
    • Use of search tools (Library Catalogue, Databases, Electronic Resources)
    • Understanding the rules of the library
    • Understanding the advice of a library staff member
    • Finding material on the shelves

14. Did you ever receive any training from the library about how to use it properly – e.g. a library tour? Please give details of what aspects it provided training in.

15. How would you evaluate any training you received, if any?
    • I did not find it helpful at all
    • I found it a little helpful
    • I learned a lot from it

16. When you use the internet to find information about your course, do you conduct your search in English or do you usually search in Chinese? Please explain why.

17. How would you evaluate the service provided by the library for Chinese students?

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<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Very good</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Adequate</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Very poor</th>
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<td>Range of books</td>
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<td>Hours of opening</td>
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<tr>
<td>Computer facilities</td>
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<td>Guidance/Training</td>
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<td>Staff helpfulness</td>
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<td>Staff Knowledge</td>
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<td>Staff Friendliness</td>
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<td>Online resources</td>
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<td>How they deal with</td>
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<td>Information queries</td>
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<td>from Chinese students</td>
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</table>
18. Do you feel that a student from China receives the same quality of information from the library as a student from Ireland? Please tick the statement that is relevant to your views
- Always receives the same standard of information
- Receives the same standard of information sometimes
- Rarely receives the same standard of information
- Never receives the same standard of information

19. Can you describe in your own words how service might be improved for Chinese students – particularly in relation to finding information

Appendix 2

Findings derived from the questionnaire survey conducted among students

Evaluation of library service

The questionnaire surveyed twenty out of the total one hundred and fifty Chinese students who attend the institute and use the library. The table shows the number of students who responded according to the headings.

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<th>Adequate</th>
<th>Poor</th>
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<td>Computer Facilities</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance/Training</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff Helpfulness</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff Knowledge</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>Staff Friendliness/Approachability</td>
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<td>Online Resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall service to Chinese students</td>
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<td>7</td>
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