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University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Cross Cultural Experiences of Chinese Students Studying Food Science in Ireland

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Introduction

Food science is the comprehensive study of food and beverages or more specifically the application of the scientific disciplines of the physical, biological, and chemical as well as engineering, microbiology and nutrition to the study of food and beverages to improve the sensory properties, safety, nutrition, functionality, sustainability and availability. UCC attracts diverse cross-cultural groups of students to degree programmes in Ireland annually including 3000 international students from over 100 countries (UCC, 2018). However, anecdotally, students were underperforming for some of their formative assessments due to a lack of familiarity with the Irish teaching system. For this reason, it was decided to investigate, from first principals, the experiences of these Chinese students both from their Chinese and Irish experiential perspectives in order to determine areas that could be optimised to improve their integration and promote their holistic learning experiences. The action research findings of this present study will thus be used to optimise a new bespoke degree programme, specifically catered for Chinese students, that commenced in UCC in September 2017.

Methods

Interviews Using a Structured or Semi-Structured Approach

The semi-structured interview technique where the interviewer's task is to obtain information while listening and encouraging the interviewee to speak (Di Cicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) . The semi-structured interview gives full freedom to the interviewees to express themselves and to deepen the conversation about some different or all the covered topics. This is important for a good relationship between interviewer and interviewee .

Interview Questions

1) Tell me about your University in China?
2) How do lecturers interact (teach) with students?
3) How do you feel about this? What is your opinion?
4) What do you like and dislike?
5) What would your ideal experience be of learning in English (learning in China and Ireland).
6) How does your classroom experience (so far) in Ireland differ from that of your homeland?

7) How does your laboratory practical experience (so far) in Ireland differ from that of your homeland?
8) What do you think of UCC approach to teaching? Tell me about your experience of UCC teaching approaches
9) What do you like and dislike. Or what do you find positive and negative about these approaches.
10) How could teaching approaches be improved.
11) What does holistic mean to you? Can you connect the different modules to see the bigger picture.
12) How do you interact with the Irish students. What would you like this interaction to be.
13) Tell me about your exam experience in China and Ireland.

Thematic Analysis

The interviews for this study were transcribed by the first author in order to create immersion in the data. Hard copies of the interview transcripts were coded by highlighting thematic phrases with a highlighter pen. The interviews were coded and analysed, and the following themes identified as per the results presented below.

Findings

Students reported that they sometimes have to translate unfamiliar words in class and do this using Google Translate or electronic dictionaries, while simultaneously trying to listen to the lecture. WIFI connectivity is thus very important to enable learning for these students however the interviewees reported that not all classrooms have good WIFI. Also, teaching in UCC definitely promoted more holistic understanding and unlike some situations in China was never rote learning. Students suggested that lecturers who only give out hand-outs during class leaves them at a disadvantage as they have not had time to preview and translate the documents.

Holistic Learning

In Irish exams they find the essay type question a very difficult concept to understand especially on first seeing them. Students suggested this has become easier over time, but they prefer the former format of MCQ's and short Questions. They also suggested they would benefit from tutorials where example essay questions are answered by the lecturer as case studies or sample questions format. Interviewees also understood the concept of holistic learning, when also described as "joining the dots" of the module content to the syllabus. The interviwees clearly understood the concept of applying what she learnt from one module to another and examined using the essay question. The interviewees presented examples of "cross-pollination" of the way different food science areas are connected, for example, one students explained that she understands how microbial spoilage and chemical deterioration of food effect shelf life, and how this manifests as sensory issues and possibly also as food safety issues. She was also able to identify how preservatives help to retard these processes. She was enthusiastic about telling me about these holistic connections in the food science discipline. Additional comments made by the students included; "Some lecturers say this in class, that we must try and understand holistically. We must connect things, as you say join the dots."

Conclusions

Overall the Chinese students interviewed showed consensus with regard to certain issues with respect to their classes taught in Ireland. They require good WIFI and it is essential for them that they receive lecture notes with an adequate lead time prior to the lecture which facilitates translation. In China exams are usually presented with

short questions. It is recommended that students are introduced to the essay question format, possibly also through tutorials, to speed and ease their transition in the Irish system. The above findings were used to optimise the current interaction with our Chinese students Food Science and Technology International Degree.

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