

Do Chinese Students in Public and Private Higher Education Institutes Perform at Different Level in One of the Leadership Skills: Critical Thinking? An Exploratory Comparison

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INTRODUCTION

With the accelerated development of the economy and businesses, there is an increased need for the higher education institutes (HEIs) to equip their students with more comprehensive competences besides academic knowledge. Strategic leadership is one critical element of these competences.

The current globalised economy signals the need of more professionals with strategic leadership to lead the businesses to succeed in the intensified market competition. Research has evidenced and emphasised the positive link between critical thinking (CT) and strategic leadership competence; a leader without sufficient critical thinking in decision making can cause negative consequences (Pykhtina, 2011; Ricketts, 2005; Semerci, 2010).

Thus, it is well perceived that CT is one of the most important transferrable skills higher education graduates should possess and is regarded as crucial for success in their current academic study and future career development (Floyd, 2011; Tapper, 2004; Davies, 2013; Harrell, 2011; Hammer & Green, 2011; Tapper, 2004; Davies, 2013; Harrell, 2011; Ladyshewsky, 2006; Hammer & Green, 2011). CT has been embedded as an important content of education by HEIs in both western countries (e.g., UK) and eastern countries (e.g., China) and has been receiving increased emphasis in recent decades (Wu, 2004; Gu, 2013; Zhang & Yin, 2012; Yu, et al., 2013). However, that the Chinese students lack of critical thinking capability has been contended by both Chinese and western academics (Zhang & Yin, 2012; Gu, 2013; Yu, et al., 2013). This phenomenon has further highlighted to the Chinese academia on the importance of CT and the development/improvement of students' CT competence in HEIs (Yu, et al., 2013; Wu, 2004; Gu, 2013; Zhang & Yin, 2012). Nevertheless, compared with western HEIs, the Chinese HEIs have not yet done sufficiently on their students' CT competence cultivation (Gu, 2013; Zhang & Yin, 2012). This situation has been reflected by Chinese students' relatively poor performance

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of critical thinking in their assignment writing, class discussion and group work after aboard the host HEIs' education programmes, compared to their local peers in western countries (Xiao & Dyson 1999; Pratt et al., 1999; Clark & Gieve, 2006; Jones, 2005; Shi, 2006; Davies, 2013; Atkinson, 1997; Biggs, 1996; Carson, 1992; Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Gu, 2013; Zhang & Yin, 2012).

Currently, under the trend of globalisation of higher education provision, Chinese students are holding the largest portion of international student cohort in western HEIs; and among them those studying management and business related programmes are the biggest group (EOL, 2013; DOE, 2012; HESA, 2013). The Chinese students contribute to the diversity of student groups, the income generation of the host institutes and the economic growth of the host countries. Thus it is very important to ensure that they have a fruitful learning experience while in the higher education process as a student, and embark on a successful future career path as a competent professional or a leader who needs to make decisions at both strategic and operational levels. The ability of educating future strategic leadership competence also demonstrates that the host institutes' high capability of effective education, and consequentially attracts more students to join their education programmes; a situation as such can form a positive and virtuous education circle, which will be beneficial to both host institutes and the students.

Since CT is one of those skills needed to be enhanced for Chinese students, in order to ensure their effective learning outcome and future career success, many western HEIs have been endeavouring in providing facilitation to Chinese students' CT skill development/ improvement. However, the Chinese students come from two different types of institutes – public institutes and private ones. Corresponding to the mixed perception on western private HEIs' students' performance/competence compared to their public peers (Guo, 1990; Wang, 2010; Woodfield, 2014), there is a relatively consensual contention that in the two type Chinese institutes in general the students' academic performance and characteristics have obvious differences (Yu, 2011; Chen, 2011; Ye, 2008; Jin & Yin, 2009; Mao, 2008) and consequentially the argument of that the public institute students tend to have higher level of CT competence/performance; nonetheless there is also the opposite claim of that private HEI students possess substantial CT capability (Xi'an Eurasia University, 2015) and can largely satisfy their employers with regard to their competence (Wang, 2009), namely they are not less competent than their public institute peers.

If students from the two type institutes are allocated together as one single group, which is a general phenomenon in western HEIs hosting Chinese international students, a salient disparity of academic competence between them can reduce the effectiveness and efficiency of the host institutes' facilitation in cultivating their CT competence; under such a situation, an alternative strategy to provide the facilitation separately corresponding to their profiles would be a better option. Thus it is important to fully understand the Chinese students' CT competence level and whether there is substantial CT competence difference between students from public and private HEIs in China.

In this research, the authors developed research questions focusing on the Chinese students from public and private HEIs, with regard to their CT competence perceived from the dimensions of instructors and the students themselves, to explore whether there is difference on the two type students' CT capability/skills. "Instructors" herein is a general term used in this research, refer to the academic staff who deliver the teaching to students in HEIs, in some countries they are also loosely called as "tutor" while in China are usually called as "teacher" by students.

Different from other research applying a standardized CT test measure (see, e.g., Gu, 2013), within this research the students' performance level in applying the CT cultivation methods are used as an indicator of their CT competence. Meanwhile, the approaches used by instructors and students themselves on cultivating students' CT skills in the application of these methods have also been compared between

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