

Honourable Chair, _____

Distinguished Speakers and Guests,

Good afternoon and 新年快乐. My name is Rebecca Bogiri and I spent 5 years in Beijing, China from 2009 to 2014. During that time, I studied towards a Masters and PhD in Economics at the University of International Business and Economics (对外经济贸易大学). The China Scholarship Council (CSC) sponsored my scholarship.

During my first year in China, there were 20 ni-Vanuatu students, over 50 Papua New Guinean students, over 20 Fijian students, over 20 Tongan students, and over 30 Samoan students. The number of Pacific island students in China has increased greatly over time, and there are an increasing number of students who are privately sponsored in China as well.

I will talk about my experience and the experience of my Pacific island colleagues of studying in China.

1. First impressions

Upon arrival in China, I did not speak a word of Chinese. I immediately felt out of place. Notices and signs were written in Chinese. All taxi drivers spoke only Chinese. It was difficult to go shopping, sightseeing or travel without having someone who spoke Chinese to accompany me. Knowledge of basic Chinese prior to arriving in China would have been very helpful in settling down and adjusting to life at the University.

2. Medicare & Establishment Allowance

Medical insurance was provided, but it differed in different universities. For example, in my University only basic medical insurance covering basic health issues was covered. In other Universities, comprehensive medical insurance coverage was provided, including for all kinds treatment and surgery needed.

My establishment allowance was given by the University two weeks after I arrived. For some of my colleagues studying at other Universities, it was given even later. Others were luckier and received theirs immediately upon arrival. Furthermore, the amounts of establishment allowance received differed by University.

3. Monthly Allowance

Allowances were given at different amounts depending on the level of study. Degree students received 1,400 RMB per month, which is equivalent to 223 USD. Masters students received 1,700 RMB per month, which is equivalent to 271 USD. PhD students received 2,000 RMB per month, which is equivalent to 319 USD.

Given the fact that the RMB has continued to appreciate since 2008, these amounts of money are no longer sufficient to sustain students at the current standard of living.

4. The grading system

Chinese universities have very stringent grading systems. Any mark below 60% is considered a fail mark. To get an A, you had to have between 92% to 100%.

I studied before at USP where any mark below 50% was considered a fail mark, and you could easily get an A grade if you gained a mark between 85% to 100%. So you can imagine my surprise when I learnt about this during orientation week. This forces international students, especially those from the Pacific region to work harder to be able to pass comfortably.

It is also a requirement to attend all classes. If a student misses three classes in a semester without a medical report or sick leave, the student is immediately failed. Students are also marked for general behaviour during class, such as respect for the teacher and students, punctuality in attending classes, and attempting all assignments.

5. The level of academic competitiveness

Chinese students are generally very competitive, academically. They usually aim for a grade of 90% or over. They spend long hours in the library studying and perfecting their assignments, and complete all work long before the set deadline.

Living, studying and hanging out with Chinese students means that their competitiveness and study habits rubs off on their classmates who are international students.

6. The teacher-student relationship

Teachers in China also serve as mentors and role models, and they are always concerned for their student's education, health and life during their time at the University. It is common to find a class of students and their teacher enjoying dinner together at a restaurant at the beginning or end of a semester.

A teacher will also go out of their way to visit a student who is hospitalised, or bring lessons to a child who cannot attend classes due to illness. I myself was hospitalised once, and it was a comfort to have my teacher visit me, and my department administrator call up to check on me at the hospital.

In return, a student displays a very respectful attitude towards a teacher.

7. The general culture

Chinese are very hardworking and respectful people. They live frugally. They are also efficient in their work.

8. How these features can benefit Pacific Islanders

Pacific islanders who study in China are exposed to competitiveness and efficiency during their studies. They learn to be efficient in their work and not to waste time. They learn to work hard, and be respectful. This is useful for Pacific islanders who often have a generally laid back attitude.

They learn to build networks and maintain relationships to grow their networks. They also learn to live frugally on a small monthly allowance. They learn to budget and save up to meet medical expenses that will not be covered otherwise by medical insurance.

Most importantly, they learn the Chinese language and how to deal with Chinese people. This is especially beneficial as we see an increasing Chinese presence in the Pacific region. Pacific island students who return to their home countries have additional career options such as translators, business consultants, immigration consultants, tourist operators, policy analysts/planner and other careers that cater for the needs of incoming Chinese investors, tourists etc.

9. Handling of students by Chinese authorities/Universities

Based on my experiences and the experiences of other CSC awardees from the Pacific, the following are recommendations to improve the way students are handled by Chinese authorities or universities.

- a. Students should be given classes in basic Chinese prior to their departure to China to assist them in settling down. Classes can be organised with various Chinese Confucius Institutes set up in Pacific Island countries.
- b. Students should be given establishment allowance upon arrival at the University or prior to their departure.
- c. The monthly stipend should be increased to take into account the appreciating Renminbi which is causing a general increase in the price levels.
- d. Universities hosting CSC students should harmonise their medical insurance policies and establishment allowances policies.

To conclude, I would like to thank the Chinese government for providing opportunities to Pacific Island students to study in China. The number of scholarships have continued to be increased over time, and they complement traditional donors in the Pacific to educate students in priority fields.

In my opinion, the increase in the number of Chinese scholarships awarded is timely as it not only assists Pacific island countries in developing their human resources, but it also prepares us indirectly to better understand and play an active role in the increasing Chinese presence in the Pacific.