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Exploring undergraduates' experiences of teaching and learning in a Chinese-Australian programme: An intercultural dialogue perspective

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Abstract. This study aims to explore and understand undergraduates' experiences of teaching and learning in a Chinese-Australian collaborative programme. Data are collected mainly through in-depth interviews with 23 Chinese students and supplemented by classroom observation and document analysis. The findings reveal that teaching and assessment differs between the Chinese and Western lecturers. While many students preferred the Australian system of teaching and assessment, many still favoured the Chinese methods of instruction and evaluation. Furthermore, the design of the curriculum proved problematic due to parts of it being irrelevant and failing to meet the students' needs and expectations; some students also found fault with the intensity of the course schedule. The findings are further explored in the light of the intercultural dialogue (ICD) framework.

Keywords. Transnational programme; Undergraduates; Teaching and learning; Intercultural dialogue framework

Introduction

Transnational higher education (TNHE), i.e. where the country of study differs from the country base of the awarding body, has developed swiftly since 2009 (Kahn and Misiaszek, 2019) and concerns have arisen about the quality (Tsiligiris and Hill, 2019) of its practices, one of which is the teaching and learning experience. The learners' experience of teaching and learning is often closely related to student retention, satisfaction, and academic success (Ammigan and Jones, 2018). Several studies have examined student satisfaction at international branch campuses and probed learners' perceptions of teaching and learning as key indicators of TNHE quality (Ahmad, 2015; Miller-Idriss and Hanauer, 2011; Wilkins et al., 2012). A better understanding of the learners' lived study experience also helps to reveal the gap between policies and practices in TNHE and provides useful information for curriculum development (Dai et al., 2020).

China has 2,447 transnational programmes and institutions approved by the Ministry of Education (2022), with 500,000 students on campus and 16,000,000 graduates (Wang and Devarajoo, 2022). Despite the huge number, studies on students' experience of teaching and

learning are limited (Wang, 2016) and students' voices have largely been overlooked and under-researched (Liu et al., 2021). Recent studies (Chen, 2021; Dai et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2021) took a closer look at lecturers' and students' teaching and learning experiences of transnational institutions and programmes. A number of topics which are either common to any form of education or specific to transnational education, have been covered such as language instruction and learning, Western and Chinese styles of teaching, cultural differences and intercultural learning, course design and assessment. Several researchers (e.g. Dai et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2021; Qin and Te, 2016) have called for more studies on transnational programme students' detailed experiences of teaching and learning at the micro-level of higher education internationalisation. The present study uses the lens of the intercultural dialogue (ICD) framework (Wang, 2106) to shed light on transnational programme teaching and learning from the undergraduate perspective. The research question asked is: In the light of the ICD framework, what are the students' experiences of teaching and learning in the case transnational undergraduate-level programme?

The ICD framework

The ICD framework (Wang, 2016) was created to better understand teaching and learning in the transnational context and it is often used as a lens to examine the learners' perceptions and experiences of teaching and learning in the transnational programme. Intercultural dialogue has been defined as 'an open and respectful exchange of views and interaction between and among students and teachers with different backgrounds and heritage on the basis of mutual understanding and respect' (Wang, 2016, p.529). This framework encompasses five prominent components: understanding of learners and contexts, culturally sensitive pedagogy, contextualised curriculum, context-specific assessment, and a supportive learning environment. Instead of the traditional perspective which stresses the differences between cultures, the ICD framework emphasises the dynamic interactions between cultures.

Drawing on the critical post-colonial perspective (Cousin, 2011; Singh, 2009), Wang (2016) claims that it would be inappropriate to impose Western prescriptions on developing nations as if the West is in a superior position. Adult learners from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds and their prior learning experiences must be understood, as well as the influence of 'cultural and learning traditions on their learning style preferences' (Wang, 2016, p.531). Therefore, it is important to recognise academic norms in the society of learners. Lecturers teaching in a cross-cultural setting should be flexible reflectors who can adapt to the demands of students from other cultures, as well as crucial supporters of student learning resilience.

The second key element for the ICD framework is a culturally sensitive, participatory pedagogy. In the light of Mezirow's (2000) transformative learning theory and Knowles et al.'s (1998) adult learning theory, such a pedagogy takes into account learners' cultural values, beliefs and assumptions, and enables teachers to understand learners from a cultural angle (Chen, 2021). Therefore, cultural differences should be valued, and this is a precondition for effective culturally responsive pedagogy (Alim and Paris, 2017). Wang (2016) contends that culturally sensitive pedagogy can be achieved through mini-lectures, learning teams, interactive activities and online discussion forums.

Culturally responsive and contextualised curricula incorporate the contextualised contents into the course design (Chen, 2021). The materials and activities need to be connected with the learners' prior knowledge, experience, and social and cultural settings (Liu et al.,

2021). Such curricula can facilitate ‘relevant, deep learning for transnational students through being grounded in culturally relevant beliefs and contextualised learning’ (Wang, 2016, p.533).

Authentic and context-specific assessment stimulates problem-solving and innovation. Through completing authentic assessments, learners are expected to display their knowledge and skills in meaningful environments. They may also promote their transferable skills via context-specific evaluations. Liu et al. (2021) and Chen (2021) similarly agree that Wang (2016) implies a learner-centred assessment, which takes the students’ own characteristics into consideration.

Finally, a supportive and safe environment shows respect for and values diverse perspectives. Specific rules should be created to ensure respectful discussions and the provision of forums for the exchange of perspectives. Lecturers should encourage the participation of students ‘from non-dominant backgrounds’ (Wang, 2016, p.535). An atmosphere that is safe and inclusive can promote equal dialogue between teachers and students, and among different learners.

Methods

The programme

A case study approach (Yin, 1994) was employed in this research as it is appropriate for ‘how’ or ‘what’ questions regarding some phenomena within real-life contexts. The case study programme is an International Economic and Trade (IET) ‘4+0’ programme which was established cooperatively between a Chinese and an Australian university in 2004. The numbers before ‘+’ refer to the years of study in local universities and the numbers after ‘+’ signify the years of study in foreign partner universities. For this programme, all the students are required to complete their undergraduate study at the Chinese university. This programme awards dual degrees (i.e., a Chinese degree and an Australian degree) and charges tuition fees eight times higher than domestic programmes.

The teaching staff consists of both Australian and Chinese lecturers, and the teaching and learning materials are in English. While some courses are taught by Chinese lecturers only, many ‘collaborative curricula’ (*he zuo ke*) are delivered bilingually and cooperatively by both Chinese and Australian lecturers such as Accounting for Decision Making, Personal Financial Planning and International Marketing. A few language courses are provided solely by foreign lecturers. Students begin to be educated by Australian lecturers as soon as they enter the programme and they have to improve their English and learn the Australian academic norms during the first two years of study.

Data collection

The data were mainly collected through semi-structured interviews with the student participants in Chinese. The maximum variation principle was followed while choosing the participants, taking into account their gender, age, and year of study. All the participants who volunteered to attend the interviews were International Economics and Trade (IET) undergraduates. The student participants group covered all four grades, with 8 first-year, 11 second-year, 2 third-year and 2 fourth-year students. In terms of gender, there were seven males and sixteen females. The interview questions centred on the students’ experience of teaching content, teaching approaches, learning experiences, assessment modes, and curriculum design in both Chinese and Australian lecturer-taught courses. The length of interviews varied between 40 and 60 minutes. The undergraduates’ participation was completely voluntary, and they all

gave their informed consent to participate in the investigation on an anonymised base. Although the number of participants is not as big as those in quantitative studies, it is large enough to offer an understanding about experiences of teaching and learning by in-depth interviews.

With the lecturers' consent, we were able to conduct classroom observation in two Chinese-taught and three Australian-taught sessions. Written notes were taken to record what we saw, felt and perceived throughout the whole class process. Additionally, we searched the programme's official website for pertinent information such as the introduction, structure, history and training plan. We also collected hard copies of the student handbook which detailed the course information and curriculum structure. This data served as supplements to the interviews, enriching our knowledge and understanding of the programme and helped to triangulate the interview data.

Data analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and then sent back to the participants for any corrections necessary to ensure its trustworthiness before analysis. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was employed to analyse the data collected. We read all the transcripts three times to familiarise ourselves with the data. Next, we independently coded the transcripts, compared the codes, and then sorted and collated all the pertinent data into themes. We negotiated with each other to come to an agreement when we encountered discrepancies. In the refinement stage, we reviewed 'the coded data extracts for each theme to consider whether they appear to form a coherent pattern' (Nowell et al., 2017, p.9). Finally, we extracted the substance of the themes and ascertained the different aspects each theme captured. Data collected via observation and document analysis were also compared and triangulated with the main interview data.

Findings

Teaching and learning in the 'Australian style'

Some participants favoured the Australian classroom, as the atmosphere was relaxed and the teacher-student relationship was close.

... our foreign teachers are very friendly and easy-going. We have become good friends. (S13)

It seems to me that the Australian lecturers are like friends, not teachers. There is no sense of distance. (S14)

The various approaches to classroom teaching were also a significant factor that contributed to Chinese students' preference for the Australian courses. Regularly used approaches included case research, presentations, brainstorming and debates. For instance, the Australian staff could skilfully use group learning which promoted cooperation, division of labour and communication.

... the Australian teacher gave us some playing cards and asked us to form groups randomly. Each team was required to make an oral report each week. I felt I learned a lot from it. (S15)

Using case research as an example, S13 claimed that the cases were close to daily life and could meet the learners' real needs:

... the foreign lecturer didn't talk too much about the theoretical aspects; he thought it was better to take some cases and examples from real life. He stressed case research; I think

this is good. Moreover, he also takes into account the students' real needs, rather than simply doing his teaching tasks.

The foreign lecturers also acted as participants or learners who enthusiastically joined in the classroom activities to facilitate the student-led discussions and debates, and helped students to achieve deep learning. Moreover, teachers might play the role of 'rescuer' to ensure the class could proceed as planned. When observing one session, we noticed that one student was giving a presentation and posed some questions, but no one answered. Then the lecturer got involved and gave a response. He also praised the presenter, saying that certain parts of their presentation were good and called on everyone to applaud. At the end of the session, the lecturer handed out sweets to reward all the students for their good performance and engagement in the classroom activities.

Such diverse teaching approaches successfully interested the students and led to a high-level learning engagement:

All the students were participating and engaging in the discussion; no one was distracted or doing their own stuff. We felt great. (S14)

My classmate and I obviously feel that we're participating in the class activities. This feeling is good. (S19)

This independence and autonomy of learning is prevalent in the Australian or even Western contexts at large. Yet the rights of self-decision offered by the Australian lecturers to the Chinese learners made them confused.

... he says today we're going to write something about economics: you choose or create a brand and then describe the major features of the commodity or service ... we don't know what to do or how to do it... (S23)

However, some participants later understood the rationale. For instance, S17 initially did not accept the ways which the teacher used but appreciated it later.

He just informed us what the final product was, ... but didn't tell you what you need to have, what procedures you need to follow, you think about it all by yourself. But later I found that that stuff was all in the textbook and I could learn by myself. No need to be taught in class. I then understood what the lecturer meant, though in the beginning I couldn't accept it.

Teaching and learning in the 'Chinese style'

Unlike the Australian lecturers, the Chinese teachers emphasised the systematic and logical delivery of knowledge. The students had no problem acclimatise themselves to this style of teaching because it was what they were used to in the Chinese education system, which was seen as an advantage by some:

... our Chinese teachers follow the course outline and their slides give you some general frameworks and theories and principles ... We're familiar with this style ... (S13)

The whole class is filled up with teaching content, no gaps. I think this is excellent and I like it. (S2)

Another difference was the space left for students regarding certain learning tasks. While the foreign teachers left a huge space that sometimes caused confusion as noted above, the Chinese lecturers would confine and specify the learners' choices.

The teacher asked each study team to give a presentation on a regular basis. But the topics were decided by the teacher, and the materials we collected had to revolve around the topics and be of high quality. The structure of the presentation was also asked to follow a certain format. (S15)

However, there were also some similarities between the Chinese and Australian-led curricula. First, a few teachers focused on the relevance of the teaching and learning content to the learners and its usefulness; this was positively evaluated by students:

I like those Chinese teachers' courses which are useful and practical. They are not far away from our life and so useful that you have to learn. (S4)

The finance lecturer teaches something very useful, and he also asked us to analyse some real issues and do research by ourselves and make presentations. (S8)

Second, both nationality teachers attempted to make their courses interesting through the use of multiple pedagogies. The Chinese lecturers moved away from a traditional teacher-centred approach to a more learner-centred approach to engage more students in learning.

Our marketing course taught us the marketing mode and ad design through tea-tasting; it was really interesting. (S3)

The teacher encouraged all of us to participate in the discussion, instead of just lecturing himself. He can arouse the enthusiasm of all the students. He is good-tempered and doesn't get angry because of what we say. You just feel free to ask questions when you have them... (S21)

We observed an accounting course given by a Chinese lecturer, who divided all the learners into teams and assigned team leaders to supervise the group members' learning and attendance. All the members became more responsible in this way, as each of them represented their teams. Also, their mutual support was obvious, making learning more interesting and cooperative. This was confirmed by S12 who recalled, 'I liked this class, because it was so special and each of us represented our team. We all wanted our own team to be the best; I would also make myself better, and I thought for the whole team as well to make it stronger.' This was a good example of organisational change in learning, which was successfully promoted by a Chinese teacher.

When it came to the reasons for the similarities between the Chinese and Australian lecturers, S13 explained, 'most of our Chinese teachers are returnees from developed Western countries where they obtained their PhD degree ... so no wonder their teaching styles are Westernised'. Such a convergence in terms of teaching could be attributed to the Chinese faculty's overseas education background.

Finally, the Chinese lecturers were concerned with the real needs of students and tried to build close relationships with the students. They were willing to offer help and provide guidance on learning when necessary. For example, S9 appreciated the Chinese teacher's attitude and emphasised his help and guidance.

When I was in my first year, the Chinese teacher asked us to write an essay but we did not know how to begin He then guided us on how to search for useful materials and how to write a literature review. Those were not his tasks, but he explained in detail. We felt grateful

...

Course design

The design and content of some courses did not match the expectations of the students. For instance, S16 felt that having to learn about tax law in Australia was neither practical nor useful considering many students' plans to study in countries other than Australia in the future:

All the content was in the Australian context. ... the only purpose of learning was to pass the exam. ... I'll never use it for the rest of my life! What's more, most of us apply to British or American universities, so what is the point of learning so much Australian stuff? So this course wasn't useful or helpful.

The 'collaborative curriculum' was a feature in transnational programmes, and combined Chinese and Australian lecturers in the same course.

At the beginning, the Chinese teacher gave us an outline, and then for the following weeks all the courses were taught by the Australian lecturers. Each session lasted for three to four hours. These lecturers taught for the whole morning or afternoon. After they had finished their task weeks, the Chinese teachers took over. (S13)

However, the students reported a lack of satisfaction with such courses. Asked to rate this particular course, S22 said she would only give 2/5 due to the intensive course schedule. The Australian lecturers had to finish their teaching in one week and then return to Australia, a short time with a great deal of content to be taught. The students found it very difficult to follow such a long period of teaching in English and assimilate the content.

The attendance rate is low as the students think it's too intensive and quite hard to follow what the foreign lecturers say. (S10)

I don't quite understand the foreign teachers. I can study by myself even if the foreign teachers don't teach me. (S22)

Noticeably, the students reported that they had too many courses to take. We double-checked this against official documents such as the student handbook, which indicated that the undergraduates studying in this transnational programme were required to achieve 193 credits (compared with 150 credits for non-transnational degree) to be awarded the bachelor's degree. Given that this was a cooperative programme, taught by lecturers from both countries, it was unsurprising that students' workload was so high. S9 complained that her timetable was filled up with courses, from 8 am to 9 pm almost every day. Such a heavy learning burden made most participants depressed and overworked: as S17 said, 'When you are tired, you still have to take another course. Many students play on their mobile phones in class, others are absent-minded or sleeping'.

'Australian style' vs. 'Chinese style' assessment modes

With respect to assessment, the differences between Chinese and Australian lecturers were significant and the university's institutional regulations widened this gap.

For Chinese teachers, the final closed-book exam was the most important form of assessment. S17 complained that she did not like this style of evaluating students, particularly because she was often extremely busy and exhausted before the final exams. It was during this period that most undergraduates are obliged to memorise everything taught in the class throughout the whole term. They usually had very limited time to rest.

The teacher would underline key points in the textbook or slides and then you must keep all this stuff in mind to pass the final closed-book exam. I don't like exams. We have to memorise many things because we've taken many courses. The two weeks before the exams are tough; your biological clock is abnormal and you have to learn everything every night.

Moreover, the university required all compulsory courses be assessed by a final closed-book exam.

There are some Chinese lecturers who do want to change the assessment methods, but our university stipulates that there must be a closed-book exam at the end of each term for each compulsory course. (S20)

Indeed, a number of Chinese teachers began to learn from their foreign counterparts, placing more emphasis on the undergraduates' daily performance and the entire learning process. The actual performance and engagement in learning was a crucial indicator while evaluating a student. S6 found that their teacher assessed them on the basis of both daily performance and the final exam results:

For this Chinese course, we have a daily performance, based on assignments, essays, group discussion performance, and a final exam result. These two sections add together to determine my overall mark.

The Australian teachers based their evaluation on the learners' performance throughout the entire learning process. Both S1 and S10 confirmed this by stating that the teachers held assessments every other month. Also, these took varied forms, such as presentations and writing. The standards for each assessment were clear as well.

For a presentation, the Australian lecturer evaluates based on the content of our presentation, body language, grammar, tense, different sentence structures used ... All of these are included in the standards of scoring. (S14)

A majority of students favoured the Australian way of assessment because it included learning and performance in daily study. Some participants explained the rationale for adopting the essay writing evaluation mode by comparing it with the final closed-book exam. S20 said:

[The essay] is more scientific, because I can pass a closed-book exam by memorising the materials in two nights. But for an essay, you must first guarantee the quality and length. You must spend some time writing and researching materials and organising your thoughts; all of this takes more than two nights. Throughout this process, you would expand your horizons and deepen your thinking on a certain topic.

Nevertheless, other students expressed their preference for the traditional closed-book exam mode. Some attributed their preference to their long-term education experience: as S23 said, 'I've got used to the traditional Chinese evaluation method. Under the pressure of end-of-term exams, I can review the things learned and remember them clearly.' Others talked about the drawbacks of the Australian assessment method: for example, S2 complained that 'the foreign teachers arranged assessments too often, every month or two weeks, we felt a little bit tired.'

Discussion

The research findings provided rich information about and insights into the students' experience of teaching and learning in the transnational programme. In the light of Wang's (2016) ICD framework, numerous emerging themes are worth further exploration.

In the ICD framework, Wang (2016) points out that the first principle is understanding learners and contexts. She further expounds that those who teach in an intercultural environment must be flexible reflectors who can adapt to the needs of students from other cultures. Both the Chinese and the Australian lecturers were found to echo this principle. Understanding the essay writing difficulties encountered by first year undergraduates, the Chinese faculty offer detailed assistance to help them. The students' needs are thus met, which may further strengthen their learning resilience (Wang, 2016). The foreign lecturers' understanding of learners is also clear, as some students affirmed that the Australian teachers fully consider their actual needs instead of simply completing the teaching tasks. Indeed, many participants' impression of the Australian lecturers' teaching, as reflected in the transcripts, can be described as practice- and life experience-oriented, thus meeting the requirements of students who are in pursuit of practicability and usefulness.

Wang (2016, p.532) suggests the implementation of 'learning teams' which 'integrate Chinese collectivist value and achievement orientation with Western inquiry and cooperative learning approaches.' Such an approach resembles our observations from the Chinese lecturer-taught sessions where the students were grouped and team leaders were assigned. The members of the learning teams reported that they had clearer senses of identity and responsibility and were more motivated to learn due to their 'shared vision and commitment' (Wang, 2016, p.532). The participatory approach to teaching, including methods such as group discussions, brainstorming, case studies and debates, is the core of the culturally sensitive and participatory pedagogy within the ICD framework (Wang, 2016). These interactive activities are effective ways to engage learners and facilitate deep learning. The findings show that the Australian lecturers expertly employed discussions, case studies and debates to increase students' engagement in class. The participants also expressed their willingness as well as high-level motivation to follow the foreign teachers' arrangements in class. The whole atmosphere was dynamic, yet also organised. Furthermore, with years of overseas education experience, some Chinese lecturers also borrowed and utilised these teaching approaches. The stereotyped difference between teaching styles in the West and China appears to be blurred for some courses within the transnational programme.

Interestingly, not all the participating students favoured the Western approaches: a few still preferred the Chinese style of teaching. Some of them attributed this to adaptation, others talked about the merits of traditional teaching such as strong structure and logic, and rich instructional content. In transnational teaching and learning settings, as Liu et al. (2021) claim, the student and context disparities ought to be given attention and culturally sensitive pedagogical approaches are important considerations. The different emphasis placed on the independence and autonomy of learning between the Chinese and Australian lecturers is noteworthy. While the Chinese lecturers seemed to limit or confine the students' choice, the Australians obviously allowed much more space to promote learners' autonomy. Scholars in the West contend that a significant outcome of higher education is individuals who have the ability to study and behave autonomously (Fazey and Fazey, 2001). The Chinese education context, however, has been characterised as examination-oriented and teacher-centred (Shen et al., 2020), therefore they are more likely to show low-level abilities of self-study and pertinent

learning strategies (Guo and Qin, 2010). This problem could be even more serious for those who are at an early stage of their university study.

Given the contextual differences, Ennew and Yang (2009, p.31) propose that even though the curricula in the collaborative institutions from distinct cultural backgrounds should 'be equivalent in terms of content and learning outcomes', they do not need to be the same. While the core content and outcomes should be ensured, the elements of delivery such as materials and cases are allowed to adapt to the local situation (Ennew and Yang, 2009). Wang (2016, p.533) states that her curriculum had been contextualised via 'carefully designed resources and workplace-linked activities' as her students are school leaders; in this study, the participants are mainly full-time students. The lecturers were found to relate to the learners' prior learning and life experiences to strengthen the relevance of learning content to them.

Quite frequently, the participants expressed their preference for those curricula which are not dissimilar from their daily life and prior learning experience; for example, the commercial brands and economic phenomena used. Additionally, the marketing course, which revolved around Chinese tea, illustrated that the contextualisation can also be linked with traditional culture and heritage. Nonetheless, a few courses failed to meet the learners' expectations and future needs were not contextualised well: similar results can also be found in Liu et al. (2021). One particular example was the introduction of Australian tax law, which students found to be neither practical nor useful given their plans and expectations to study in countries other than Australia in the future. In cases such as this, adjustments should be made to the teaching and learning content.

The assessment method has an impact on the content and approaches to learning (Biggs 1996). Scouller (1998, p.454) claims that assessment determines 'how much, how (their approaches), and what (the content) students learn'. Assessments can either 'provide certification of achievement' or 'facilitate learning' (Boud and Falchikov 2006, 401). Similar to Dai et al. (2020), Han et al. (2015) and Liu et al. (2021), this research also finds that the textbook-based closed-book exam, which seems to be summative (Dai et al., 2020), is prevalent among the Chinese lecturers, but what existing studies have seldom shown is that such practice is due to the university's institutional regulations. The rigid and inflexible official rules make it difficult for Chinese lecturers to change their methods of evaluation. In a transnational education context, according to the ICD framework, the authentic and context-specific assessment should be valued and promoted. This is because such an assessment is based on problem-solving and innovation, and requires students to show their understandings of knowledge and skills in meaningful contexts (Wang, 2016). The more traditional exam method seems to focus only on reproducing knowledge learned. In contrast, the diverse assessment methods used by the Australian lecturers such as essay writing and in-class presentations were valued by many participants.

A noteworthy finding is that some Chinese lecturers also learn from their Australian counterparts to implement similar assessment methods and emphasise daily performance. Spreading the assessments across the whole term, the foreign lecturers' emphasis on daily performance rather than solely the end-of-term exam was also appreciated, concurring with Dai et al. (2021). The students could combine what had been learned with specific issues of interest to themselves, which implies a more learner-centred way of evaluating (Chen, 2021; Liu et al., 2021) and personalised innovative thinking and solutions (Wang, 2016). However, despite these merits of the Australian assessment mode, a few participants complained about the high

frequency of tests throughout the learning process. Teachers should be aware of both advantages and drawbacks and design and use methods of assessment with care.

Wang (2016) contends that the supportive environment shows respect to and stresses diverse perspectives. In this study, the Australian lecturers incorporated the Chinese undergraduates' diverse perspectives and experiences into their teaching and created an atmosphere where students were encouraged to express, exchange and even challenge existing knowledge or others' viewpoints. The inclusive environment emphasised by Wang (2016) is apparent in this study. While Wang (2016, p.535) intends to 'ensure no students become isolated' and show concern to the disadvantaged groups, our findings show that an inclusive setting contributes to student engagement, higher learning motivation and better academic performance. Not only the students, but the Australian teachers also actively engaged in the classroom activities and offered their comments as well as appreciation for the presenters. Such behaviours are both necessary and timely, and are indispensable for building up a supportive learning context. A good temper or tolerant attitude has been found to be a necessity for a 'safe' learning environment. As the participants noted, they had the courage to freely express their opinions and ask questions whenever they had the Chinese lecturer-taught courses because the teacher was generous, while the close relationship built up between both sets of teachers and the students further helped to maintain the safe learning environment.

Conclusion

This study has revealed a complex picture of the undergraduates' experience of teaching and learning in the transnational programme. Several key findings are noticeable and worthy of summarising. First, although the stereotyped teaching style differences between the Chinese and Western teachers still exists, the study also shows that the Chinese lecturers were making efforts to Westernise their approaches to teaching, possibly as a result of their own overseas education experience. Second, although many students preferred the Australian ways of teaching and assessment, a few still favoured the Chinese methods of instruction and evaluation. This was found to be due to the learners' familiarity with and adaptation to the traditional Chinese education ways of study and evaluation. This raises a question for educators about how to deal with the diverse preferences and expectations of students in transnational programmes. Third, some aspects of individual course content were negatively commented on because of their irrelevance and failure to meet the students' needs and expectations, as was the intensity of curricula schedule.

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