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O'Dea, Mike ORCID:

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# Learning Effectiveness of Semester and Year-Long Study Abroad Programmes: Perspectives of International Students in a UK and China Context

Xianghan O'Dea<sup>1</sup> · Chen Wang<sup>2</sup> · Mike O'Dea<sup>3</sup>

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## Abstract

Research on international students' learning experiences pays much less attention to those studying semester and/or year-long programmes in a country that differs significantly from their home country with respect to culture and the education system. Adopting transformative learning theory as the theoretical framework, this paper explores the learning effectiveness of students on such programme in a Chinese and in a UK university. It analyses the narratives of 27 students in relation to their cognitive and behavioural activities and also their self-reflective and collaborative reflective activities. The findings indicate that these students only partially achieved transformative learning. The main reasons are: (1) the duration of this type of programme was not long enough to achieve a full transformation and (2) both host universities did not include reflection in the learning process properly. This paper makes a contribution to cross-border learning literature in the Chinese and the UK contexts.

**Keywords** International students · Learning experiences · Self-reflections · Study abroad programmes · Transformative learning

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✉ Xianghan O'Dea  
x.o'dea@hud.ac.uk

Chen Wang  
lucychen332@hotmail.com

Mike O'Dea  
m.odea@yorksj.ac.uk

<sup>1</sup> Huddersfield Business School, University of Huddersfield, Queensgate, Huddersfield HD1 3DH, UK

<sup>2</sup> School of Education, Durham University, Stockton Road, Durham DH1 3LE, UK

<sup>3</sup> School of Arts, Design and Computer Science, York St John University, Lord Mayor's Walk, York YO31 7EX, UK

## 1 Introduction

To many international students, cross-border education is highly valuable, since it helps develop their intercultural competence, an essential skill for the global workplace (Huang 2022; Zhou et al. 2020). Semester-long or year-long programmes appear to be more favourable to international students compared to other study abroad options because of their shorter duration and lower cost. Even though research has been carried out regarding these two types of programmes, little attention has been paid to evaluating the learning effectiveness of students studying such programmes across more than one country. This paper aims to address the gap. It adopts transformative learning theory as the theoretical foundation and examines the learning experiences of a group of Chinese students studying a year-long top-up programme in a UK university, and a group of international students studying a semester-long language programme in a Chinese university.

The UK has always been a popular destination for Chinese students. In recent years, with the development of transnational partnerships between Chinese and British universities, more Chinese students have chosen to study a one-year top-up programme in a UK university (HEFCE 2014). Similarly, due to its policy of internationalization of higher education, China has also begun to attract increasingly more inbound students to study semester-long programmes in Chinese universities (Yang et al. 2022; Ma 2017).

The emphasis on these two countries is of interest not just because they are two of the most popular destinations for international students (ICEF 2018), but also because the transformative learning experience of international students studying year-long or semester-long programmes in these two countries is under-investigated. In addition, the cultural and educational settings in the East and West are substantially different. China is a typical representation of the East, and the UK is a typical representation of the West. Developing nuanced knowledge and understanding in this area is likely to help China and the UK, and potentially other countries enhance their international education offerings and programmes for the future.

Transformative learning theory (Mezirow 1997) argues that adult learners must alter their existing learning beliefs if they want to learn effectively within changing contexts. It has been used regularly to analyse learning experiences of international students (Yang et al. 2020; Conceição et al. 2020; Kumi-Yeboah and Wayne 2014), and some studies indicate that there is an interlink between the length of a study abroad programme and the success of transformative learning (Han 2022; Stone et al. 2017). However, there is still work to be done on how transformative learning theory can help us gain a good understanding of whether and/or how well international students on year-long and semester-long programmes achieve learning effectiveness and whether and/or how well the pedagogical approaches of their host universities have helped them achieve such effectiveness.

This paper therefore seeks to answer the following question: *what are the key factors affecting transformative learning in year-long and semester-long study abroad programmes?* It is hoped that the findings will make a contribution to the literature, have an input into universities' development of future pedagogical strategies and teaching practice, as well as academic support to international students.

## 2 Semester Long Versus Year Long

There are many study options for international students. They can pursue an entire first-degree abroad, which is usually three or four years long. They can also study a year-long programme by joining directly onto the final year of a degree, or study abroad for a semester only, which varies between 1 and 8 weeks (O'Donnell et al. 2022). The latter two options have increasingly become popular with international students as they provide an opportunity for these students to experience the higher education systems in a foreign country and enjoy a study abroad experience at a lower cost (O'Dea and Stern 2022). As a result, both study abroad options have attracted a great deal of research attention, and mixed results have been reported. For example, Chwialkowska (2020) has explored the impact of semester-long and year-long language programmes on students' cross-cultural learning in American universities. The findings show that student learning effectiveness relies significantly on the support they are provided, and it is important to push student out of their comfort zone. O'Donnell et al. (2022) have examined the learning experiences of nursing practitioners on a semester-long programme in an Irish university. The authors believe that the student nurses enhanced their learning experience through attending localized clinical practices and working in partnership with local healthcare organizations. However, the research conducted by Pedersen (2010) suggests that a year-long programme is not sufficient in helping students develop effective global citizenship due to the short study period and also a lack of adoption of appropriate cross-cultural pedagogy for these students.

Whereas some existing studies have examined the cultural impact on cross-border learning and student learning effectiveness from different aspects using transformative learning theory, such as learning process, student development of critical reflection and components to facilitate cross-cultural learning (Huang 2022; Chwialkowska 2020; Johansen and Tkachenko 2019; Stone et al. 2017; Bai et al. 2016), a majority of them seem to be conducted in a single-country context, namely the USA. Major research gaps thus exist in the area of evaluating the learning effectiveness of students studying year-long or semester-long programmes not only in other country contexts, but also across more than one country. This paper aims to help bridge the gaps. It uses transformative learning theory as the analytical foundation to examine the learning experience of a group of Chinese students studying a year-long top-up programme in a UK university and a group of international students studying a semester-long language programme in a Chinese university.

## 3 Transformative Learning Theory as the Theoretical Foundation

Mezirow (1997) argues learning can become a challenging and daunting task to adult learners when their learning environment and the surroundings are changed significantly, since what they are experiencing can be very different from what

they have become accustomed to. This ‘disorienting dilemma’ then triggers the need for these adult learners to transform their attitudes, their beliefs and their usual way of thinking radically, and take actions accordingly in the new settings (Jones and Miles 2017; Schrittester et al. 2014).

Transformative learning theory (Fig. 1) therefore contains both cognitive and behavioural activities. Cognitive activities, also called frames of reference, concern how individuals view the world and develop their sense of understandings. They are the prerequisite of behavioural activities and include two elements: points of view and habits of mind. Points of view refer to the thoughts, feelings and opinions of learners within particular contexts. They are affected most easily by the social contexts and hence are much easier to change (Wang 2020). For example, individuals develop opinions towards some government policies through watching the news and reading other people’s comments on social media. Habits of mind refer to the ‘habitual ways of thinking and feeling’ (Mezirow 1997, 5) and form the foundation of individuals’ worldviews. In comparison with young learners, it is more difficult and time-consuming for adult learners to change their habits of mind, since their ideology, values and learning habits have been developed from an early age and become more consolidated over time (Jones and Miles 2017).

Behavioural activities can be considered as the ‘results’ of cognitive activities. After they have identified the modifications they need to make to their formerly held values and beliefs, adult learners must take actions to implement the changes to their habits of mind to make them more inclusive and versatile. This is because learners won’t be able to learn effectively in the new environment if they don’t actively change the way they learn.

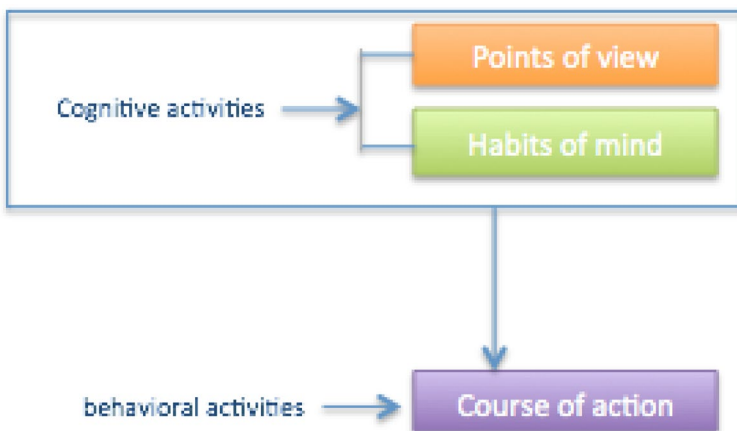


Fig. 1 Transformative learning theory model, as represented by the authors

## 4 Self- and Collaborative Reflections

To learn effectively within new contexts, transformative learning theory advocates that adult learners should develop a habit of reflecting individually and with others, because this helps them question their existing habits of mind and amend them accordingly (Santiparp et al. 2014). Self-reflection is a process that consists of thinking, evaluating and decision-making (Wang and Rieger 2022; Cheng et al. 2015; Kitchenham 2008). During this process, learners analyse their present surrounding contexts, look back on experience and lessons learnt and then develop more effective plans or coping strategies for future (Veine et al. 2019; Mezirow 1997). Reflecting with others, such as their peers, friends and tutors, can help learners broaden their views and reflect more deeply, since they may be challenged with questions that they haven't yet considered themselves. In addition, learners are able to gain feedback on their planned actions and to examine the situation they are in from new perspectives (Tsang 2011; Wilson 2016).

The effectiveness of reflective practices is supported by existing evidence. For instance, when students are transitioning from school to university, those who are able to critically reflect on their learning experiences and make adjustments to their learning habits and approaches tend to settle in better in the more complex and demanding learning environment and potentially perform better academically (Joubert and Slabbert 2017; Cheng et al. 2015). Research on reflective practice also suggests that students should reflect *in* action and also *on* action (Schön 1991). The former happens during a particular event or situation, so that timely changes can be applied throughout the process, upon dealing with the ongoing problems and challenges. The latter occurs after an event has taken place, and the emphasis is on learning from what has happened and developing improvements and better solutions for the future (Olteanu 2017).

## 5 Transformative Learning in a Study Abroad Context

Mezirow advocates that transformative learning can be initiated when learners face a 'disorienting dilemma'. Study abroad has been identified as a disorienting dilemma in a number of studies (Ye and Edwards 2018; Stone et al. 2017; Jones and Miles 2017) and fulfils the criteria of the kind of disorienting dilemma that provokes transformative learning, since the academic environment and teaching approaches in the host country are often significantly different from what international students have experienced at home.

Existing research has examined the connection between the length of a study abroad programme and the success of transformative learning (Stone et al. 2017) with regard to short-term study programmes (e.g., several weeks or a couple months) and different outcomes emerged. For example, quantitative studies carried out by Strange and Gibson (2017) and Stone et al. (2017) report some positive results: the authors found that the students on short-term programmes

indeed experienced some level of transformative learning; a small number of them even achieved full transformation. In contrast, some authors (English et al. 2016; Dwyer 2004) argue that short study abroad programmes are not adequate to create transformative learning. They do not help international students achieve academic excellence and also do not help them develop their cross-cultural competence as effectively as long-term programmes (Wang 2016). However, little attention has been paid to year-long and semester-long programmes.

## 6 About the Individual Studies

This paper is drawn from two studies, and both gained ethical approval from their university. A brief summary is provided in Table 1. Simply put, both studies share many similarities in the area of research aim, methodology, data collection and analysis method. For example, they were both qualitative studies, aiming to explore the learning experiences of a small group of international students studying in a foreign country, which has a very different culture and customs from their home country. Both studies focused on a single university and used semi-structured interviews to collect data. Themes were identified using thematic analysis. The main differences between them, however, are in the area of research design, the programme studied, the research participants and also the disciplines. For instance, the first study was a longitudinal study and revolved around Chinese students studying a year-long business management-related programme, while the second study was a cross-sectional study and focused on international students from various European countries studying a semester-long language programme. In spite of the differences, the main purpose of drawing on the data from both studies is that both aim to show that international students studying such a year-long and/or semester-long programme tend to have similar learning experiences, face similar difficulties and challenges and require similar types of support from their host institution, regardless of their country of origin, learning and cultural background and the language they speak. This is in particular the case for those when there is a greater cultural distance between their home and host culture. Further details of the individual studies, including data collection and analysis process, are listed below.

### 6.1 The First Study

The first study was a longitudinal qualitative study. The main aim was to explore the perceived views of Chinese students studying a one-year top-up programme (Business subjects) in a UK university with regard to their personal experiences. A top-up programme is a type of transnational programme. It enables students who have completed a UK Higher National Degree (HND) or an equivalent qualification to enter directly onto the final year of an undergraduate programme in a UK university and subsequently to receive a bachelor's degree upon successful completion (Barber and Breeze 2015).

**Table 1** A brief summary of both studies

	The first study	The second study
Study design	Longitudinal qualitative study	Cross-sectional qualitative study
Research aim	Exploring the perceived views of Chinese students studying a one-year top-up programme (Business subjects) in a UK university with regard to their personal experiences	Exploring the personal experiences of international students (mainly European students) studying a semester-long language course in a Chinese university
Host country	UK	China
Discipline	Business management	Language
Study duration	Year-long programme	Semester-long programme
Methodology	Case study	Case study
Sample size	12 Chinese students	15 international students
Data collection method	Semi-structured interview	Semi-structured interview
Data analysis	Thematic analysis	Thematic analysis



Twelve Chinese top-up students were recruited from the UK university using convenience and opportunity sampling techniques. This was partially because, at the time, the investigator (one of the authors) was working at the same academic school. In addition, Chinese top-up students arrived at the UK university at different times due to the length of their pre-sessional language course. The details of the participants are provided in Table 2. Before coming to Britain, these students had already studied in a Chinese university for three years and had been awarded an HND or an equivalent international degree. The comments of the participants suggest that their tutors in China adopted mainly teacher-centred approaches even though the teaching was supposed to follow the British style.

Semi-structured one-to-one interviews were used as the principal data collection method, and data were collected three times at the moving in (after arrival), moving through (halfway through their studies) and moving out stage (the end of their studies) with individual participants. In total, 36 interviews were conducted. Each interview was between 60 and 90 min and audio-recorded with the permission of the participants. Because the students and investigator are Chinese, all interviews were carried out in Chinese, and at a location chosen by the participants, aiming to create a relaxing atmosphere for the participants. After each set of interviews, written narratives for individual participants were produced and subsequently sent back to the participants for comments and feedback on the accuracy of narratives. As discussed below, one of the key benefits of this process was that it provided time and opportunities for the participants to examine and reflect on their study abroad journey (Mueller 2019; O'Dea 2021) and consequently triggered some changes regarding their habits of mind.

Due to the longitudinal nature of the study, data were analysed in stages using first- and second-coding methods. The first cycle coding was the initial stage of coding and designed to reduce the size of the data without losing the 'richness, the depth and context' of it (Seers 2012: 2). After transcribing the interview audios,

**Table 2** The profile of Chinese students studying in the UK (S1)

Pseudonym	Gender	Programme and subject studied in China
Alan	M	HND programme in Financial Services
Alex	F	International programme in Finance
Amanda	F	International programme in Finance
Daniel	M	HND programme in Accounting
David	M	International programme in Finance
Harry	M	HND programme in Business Management
Jane	F	International programme in Business Management
Laura	F	International programme in Hotel Management
Lisa	F	HND programme in Financial Services
Michelle	F	HND programme in Accounting
Rachel	F	HND programme in Accounting
Sophie	F	International programme in Business Trade

the investigator familiarized herself further with ‘the depth and breadth’ of the data (Nowell et al. 2017: 5) and then identified the key areas emerging in the interview transcripts and narratives (Bengtsson 2016). The second cycle coding involved developing themes in each stage, and also an understanding of the key story the data were evidencing across the moving-in, moving-through and moving-out stages (Miles et al. 2014). This process was carried out using NVivo. This qualitative data analysis tool enabled the investigator to organize, manage and analyse all data in one location.

## 6.2 The Second Study

The second study was also a qualitative study. It focused on the international students (mainly European students) studying a semester-long language course in a Chinese university. This university is located in North China and is one of the elite Chinese universities. At the time when the research took place, the university had approximately 3574 foreign students from 116 different countries. Fifteen international students were recruited from the university using the convenience sampling technique. The samples were conveniently accessible because the investigator (one of the authors) had a personal contact with the Dean of the academic school. The details of the student profile are listed in Table 3.

As with the first study, data were collected mainly using the semi-structured one-to-one interviews with individual participants. The interview questions focused mainly on understanding the academic and social experiences of the participants during their studies in China. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 min. Each interview was

**Table 3** The profile of international students studying in China (S2)

Pseudonym	Gender	Nationality
Christina	F	American
Kaho	F	Japanese
George	M	British
Steven	M	American
Struan	M	British
Matilyn	F	American
Ben	M	British
James	M	Spanish
Lauran	F	American
Matthew	M	American
Hannah	F	Dutch
Michelle	F	American
Patrick	M	South African
Olivia	F	British
Dasha	F	Russian

audio-recorded and carried out in English. To put the participants into a relaxed mindset, the interview location was chosen entirely by them. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that the author of the second study noted the limitation of doing a cross-sectional study (Solem 2015). This was mainly due to the time and scale restrictions at the time when the research took place. She recommended the use of longitudinal design for future research, with an intention to gain a more nuanced understanding of the target population.

Thematic analysis was adopted in this study as the analytical tool. Because the size of the data was relatively small, coding was carried out manually. The investigator firstly became familiar with the data by transcribing the interview audio recordings herself and gradually identifying patterns through repeated reading of the transcripts. She then organized segments of data into meaningful codes that were relevant to the research questions and collated these together with their matching data extracts. Once this was done, the investigator began to search for themes. The thematic analysis at this stage was mapped onto pre-existing frameworks and models within the literature (Braun and Clarke 2006) and included the following steps: (1) capturing the essential meaning that each theme represented by organizing the corresponding data extracts into a coherent and consistent account; (2) refining all the themes through a detailed analysis of each theme and identification of the relation between themes; and (3) identifying any subthemes that might also emerge at this stage through refining the initial themes to illuminate a hierarchy of meaning within the data.

### 6.3 Third Cycle Coding

An interesting theme that emerged from both studies was student dissatisfaction with their learning effectiveness. A third cycle coding was subsequently implemented on the transcripts of both studies to identify specifically the related subthemes. The transformative learning theory was used as the main framework to analyse the qualitative data. The emphasis was on cognitive activities and behavioural activities, and both co-curricular and extracurricular activities were explored. Cognitive activities focus on habits of mind only and are concerned with the change and development of individuals' beliefs (Jones and Miles 2017). This is because cognitive activities are not only essential, but also more critical for achieving successful transformative learning experience, compared with points of view. Behavioural activities describe the actions that individuals take to implement the changes to their habits of mind. The third cycle coding was carried out initially by the third investigator. The identified themes were then reviewed and evaluated by the other two investigators with the intention to enhance the trustworthiness (Giesen and Roeser 2020). The finalized themes are presented in the section below.

## 7 Results

### 7.1 Cognitive Activities

Regarding co-curricular activities, the cognitive development of the participants in both studies appears to be different. All Chinese students in the UK seem to have updated some of their habits of mind, not only because of the length of their studies, and more importantly because of the unexpected self-reflection conducted through research participation. However, the international students in China did not, owing to the fact that the duration of their studies in China was much shorter, and they did not appear to have been provided opportunities to do self-reflection. The findings in this area reinforce the importance and necessary of conducting reflections in this type of shorter period study abroad programme. The findings will be listed and discussed in detail below.

For instance, almost all Chinese students reported that they became aware of the modifications they needed to make to their learning attitude and also the way they learn if they wanted to achieve good results in the more learner-centred environment in the UK, when they progressed into the second semester.

When I was in China, I didn't need to study very hard. By memorizing the answers provided by my tutors, I gained very good results. However, in this UK university, I think I really need to work very hard and change the way I study, because I realize that I have to rely on myself, if I want to get good results. (Michelle, S1)

I realize that when living abroad, I have to become more independent and rely on myself to deal with things in relation to my studies and daily life, since the situation between the two countries is very different. (Laura, S1)

The change of the habits of mind relating to the Chinese students appears to be caused by two reasons. Firstly, through the experiences they gained in their first semester, almost all students in the group reported that they have developed a better understanding of their top-up programme, and the academic setting of the host university.

I am still facing difficulties and challenges in this semester. However, I am not feeling so panicked or stressed. After going through the first semester, I think I know what to do now [to deal with the situation I am in] (Harry, S1)

Secondly, 10 out of 12 Chinese students commented on the unexpected benefits of the self-reflective practices they carried out through taking part in research, which appears to have helped them analyse the situation they were in, and identify some of the areas they might want to change regarding their study habits and attitude.

As discussed above, the investigator of the first study sent the written narratives back to the participants for comments and feedback. During this process, these participants said that they were not only encouraged, but more importantly, were provided with opportunities and guidance (specific narrative-related interview questions) to look back and think deeply on their one-year study abroad

journey, which otherwise they would not have been able to do due to the academic pressure they were under. Their self-reflection could potentially have a significant effect on their later life, especially if they met similar situations.

We normally wouldn't spend time to think and reflect, because we wouldn't remember what we did or said. But reading the narratives and answering your questions really helped. I actually spent quite a bit of time thinking and reflecting deeply on my experience. I could make a better plan for my studies [in the second semester]. (Laura, S1)

However, it is worth noting that the Chinese students by and large reported that even though they had group discussions in the classroom, they were largely revolving around the specific subject knowledge and were not designed to foster and encourage collaborative reflections. Besides, 11 out of 12 of commented that the chances of them working with home students were minimal, as their module tutors made very little effort in class to assist the Chinese top-up students to break down communication barriers.

I am always in a group with other Chinese students when having group discussions. Our module tutors don't seem to care who we are with in a group, or whether we speak to each other in Chinese or in English. (Harry, S1)

In our seminars, we are often required to read a case study or watch a YouTube video together. The questions the tutor asked are mainly related to the video or the case study. (Sophie, S1)

In contrast, the majority of international students in China (13 out of 15) commented that the duration of their study in China was not long enough for them to realize that they needed to change their existing habits of mind significantly and develop some new learning skills to study effectively in this more didactic environment, as they spent most of their time to get to know the alien environment.

I don't really feel like they (tutors) are teaching us, .... I need maybe a one-on-one tutor or something to explain why something is said in a certain way; and how can I learn better. I often don't really know what is going on, it (the learning and teaching) is very different from home (Matilyn, S2)

In addition to the short duration of their studies, 8 out of 15 international students in the second study mentioned that their tutors provided hardly any opportunities and guidance for them to conduct self and/or group reflections inside and outside the classroom, which could potentially help them better understand the situation they were in. Besides, the composition of the student body in lessons, as described by the participants, consisted only of international students.

But in terms of interacting with Chinese people I don't think these courses are helpful, because you start classes with other foreign students, and the only people you are talking to, other than your professor, are not native Chinese students, so you are practising not fluent Chinese with other not fluent Chinese speakers. (Struan, S2)

With respect to extracurricular activities, the outcome nevertheless seemed to be the same. There was a lack of engagement in these activities from both groups of students. In addition to the short duration of their programme and the academic pressure they were under, a lack of sufficient and appropriate university support seems to be another major cause. The participants of both groups reported that the UK and Chinese university provided various extracurricular activities for their international students, such as various field trips, cultural festivals and global cafés, with the intention to help them integrate into the new environment and make new friends. Nevertheless, the take-up rate of these activities was low within both groups. Consequently, it appears that almost all participants studying in the UK and China did not manage to change their habits of mind. They felt that they failed to develop a proper understanding of the local culture and consequently change their way of thinking relating to the local culture and custom. Language and cultural barriers were reported to be the main barriers.

I think there are a lot of opportunities for me to interact with Chinese students, but the biggest barrier is the language. I see a lot of texts about Pingpong group organised by postgraduates from the Department of Economics, they are all in Chinese, and I didn't know where to go to join them. (Matthew, S2)

I feel I know nothing about the British culture and customs...I don't really like the activities organised by the University, such as having picnic or having a day trip out. I would like to do things that are more fun, such as karaoke or escape rooms. (Sophie, S1)

In addition, 6 out of 12 Chinese students reported the extensive impact of academic pressure on them due to the short duration of their top-up programme.

I didn't realize the deadlines were this close to each other. I felt that all I did in the second half of the first semester was working on my assignments. I did not have time to eat and shower properly, let along to attend these extracurricular activities. (Laura, s2)

## 7.2 Behavioural Activities

Even though the Chinese students seem to have changed some of their habits of mind, data suggest that few participants in both groups actively managed to change the way they were studying and socializing with others, in particular, home students during their time in the host university. As with cognitive activities, the findings suggest similar causes, such as the short duration of their programme and a lack of adequate support from their host university.

For example, most of them quickly lost motivation and interest in establishing new friendships with local students.

I was expecting to make friends with a lot more Chinese people, but it has been a lot harder than I thought. ...I am only here for 6 months, I now have to accept the fact that I may not be able to achieve my goal. (Olivia, S2)

I have my own [Chinese] friends already. Besides, it isn't worth the effort since I only stay in this city for a year. (Daniel, S1)

Consequently, majority of the students in both groups (11 out of 12 in S1, 13 out of 15 in S2) reported that they were not entirely satisfied with their study abroad experience and did not achieve the academic success they were aiming for.

I know what I need to do to get better results. However, in the second semester, [I was having the same habit of] leaving my coursework to the last couple of days before the deadline. (David, S1)

I came here to learn Chinese, but I don't think I have managed it...I would like to have discussions in class... the teaching is so different... I don't really know how to study here in China. (Hannah, S2)

Almost all students in both groups believed that the short duration of their studies was one of the main reasons. As mentioned, the length of a top-up programme in the UK university was one year, and the length of the language programme in the Chinese university was 6 months. It appears that these students were facing a much steeper learning curve and additional academic-related pressure since they were expected to hurdle the barriers and also the differences between their home and host countries at the same time.

Moreover, both groups of students reported that there was a lack of sufficient support and help at the university level. For instance, 8 out of 12 Chinese students in the first study and 12 out of 15 international students in the second study mentioned that their tutors in the host university did not provide dedicated activities or tailored support to help them settle in quickly and amend any of their existing habits of mind.

Everything is new and different, in particular the Chinese system...I really want to learn Chinese properly, however, I don't think tutors understand our needs and expectations...I don't just want to read and follow the textbooks, I would like more opportunities to communicate and practice my Chinese with Chinese students. (James, S2)

Some Chinese students (5 out of 12) also admitted that a lack of changes was caused by their individual circumstances. For example, one participant said that she was losing personal interest and motivation in studies because of the persistent tiredness. And another appeared to have lost confidence in herself, because of the experience she had in the first semester.

I feel that I have never recovered completely from the tiredness of the previous semester, and can't maintain the same level of motivation anymore. For example, I normally got up to attend the morning lecture in my semester one. But in this semester I was too tired to get up on time. I often skip the first class in the morning and attend the second one. (Rachel, S1)

I am still hoping to gain a 2.1, but I know this is going to be extremely hard for me..... I did a quick calculation, in order to get a 2.1, I needed to achieve at least one 70, and one 65 [in this semester] because there aren't

many modules in the second semester. ....I think it is almost like a mission impossible for me. (Amanda, S1)

## 8 Discussion

This paper adopts transformative learning theory (Mezirow 1997) as an analytical foundation to explore the learning effectiveness of international students on year-long and semester-long programmes. The key question addressed was *what are the key factors affecting transformative learning in year-long and semester-long study abroad programmes?*

Transformative learning theory reinforces the necessary and importance for adult learners to change their attitudes and usual way of thinking radically and take actions accordingly within the changing contexts (Jones and Miles 2017). Therefore, it contains both cognitive and behavioural activities. Cognitive activities involve both points of view and habits of mind. The former refers to the opinions and views individuals develop within a particular context; the latter refers to individuals' worldviews.

This paper makes the following two main contributions. Firstly, it helps to extend existing transformative learning and transnational education literature by exploring the learning experiences of international students studying a year-long or semester-long study abroad programme not only in countries other than the USA, but also across more than one country, namely China and the UK. These two countries represent typical examples of the East and West. Secondly, this paper specifies the critical role self-reflection plays in enabling the learning and transformation of international students studying a year-long or semester-long programme.

With regard to the first contribution, the findings show that regardless of their country of origin, learning and cultural background and the language they speak, students on this type of programme tend to have a roller coaster experience, and their learning effectiveness and study abroad experience are affected significantly by a combination of factors such as the length of their study, university support and also personal characteristics. For instance, the participants of both groups appear to only partially experience transformative learning. They commented that the duration of their programmes was too short for them to achieve their targeted learning objectives, even though the Chinese students stayed in the UK 6 months longer than the international students in China. Consequently, they only appeared to have partially experienced transformative learning.

The findings strengthen what has been identified within the studies that have previously been carried out in the USA. Engle and Engle (2003) reported that short study abroad programmes do not help students develop their cross-cultural competence as effectively as long-term programmes and also do not help them achieve academic excellence as well as long-term programmes. This view is supported by Dwyer (2004). He conducted a longitudinal study with students who went on study abroad programmes provided by the Institute for the International Education of Students (IES) abroad and reported that those who were on longer-term study abroad programmes tended to perform better academically and also were better at



developing their intercultural competence. In fact, one of the main reasons that the Chinese students in the UK were able to transform some of their habits of mind appears to be that they had more time to adjust to the new academic environment, compared to the international students in China.

With respect to the second contribution, the findings indicate that for international students who only study in a host university for a short period of time (e.g., between one week to 12 weeks), it is highly important for reflections, in particular self-reflection to be embedded into co- and extracurricular activities, in order to support these students to achieve transformative learning (Kreber 2012). This is because these reflective activities appear to be able to help international students foster global perspectives quickly and attain knowledge through experimental hands-on learning in more active ways (Bell et al. 2016). For example, the Chinese students in the UK managed to carry out some self-reflection informally through participating in research. The opportunity seems to have helped promote and enhance the transformation of their habits of mind. In contrast, the international students did not appear to be provided with the opportunities and support to conduct their reflective practice inside and outside the classroom. It might therefore have been beneficial to all students in both studies if they were guided and supported more systematically inside and outside the classroom to reflect with themselves and others. And perhaps, as the result, they could be able to put more energy and effort towards changing the way they learn actively.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the transformation of Chinese students during the research regarding their cognitive development was unexpected, mainly because developing habits of mind, as discussed above, is challenging and requires learners to carry out self-reflective and collaborative reflective practices (Tsang 2011; Santiparp et al. 2014; Veine et al. 2019). The Chinese students were supposed to be less experienced than the international students in this area, since they said that they acted mainly as listeners and were more used to following tutors' instructions when they were in their home universities in China. It is commonly known that this type of teacher-centred approach does not require or support students to do much thinking and reflecting themselves (Garnjost and Lawter 2019).

Behavioural activities refer to the actions that learners take to adjust their learning habits and methods. These actions are based on their cognitive activities and are equally important for learners if they wish to experience transformative learning (Christie et al 2015). This is because learners aren't be able to learn effectively in the new environment if they don't actively change the way they learn. The findings showed that the international students in China didn't take any actions, because they didn't update their learning habits and beliefs when they were studying in the Chinese university. Their reactions supported what has been identified in the literature (Jones and Miles 2017; Mezirow 1997). The Chinese top-up students in the UK seem to have revised their habits of mind more than the international students. However, they didn't make the full range of changes to their learning habits and style either. This might be because the academic pressure and difficulties they were facing were much greater than what they had expected. In addition, the duration of their study was still not long enough for them to make such changes. As the result, they became demotivated.

Their lack of motivation, as the data suggested, was caused mainly by the fact that they were underprepared while they were studying in their home university in China. Consequently, when they arrived in Britain, the participants felt that they were put in a strange environment and situation, which they weren't prepared for.

## 9 Conclusion and Recommendation

This study set out to explore the learning experiences of a group of Chinese top-up students studying in a UK university and a group of international students studying in a Chinese university. Although this is a small-scale study, it has provided important insights into the lived experiences of international students in two host countries, other than the USA, through the application of transformative learning theory. Simply put, the findings support the following views. Firstly, the duration of a study abroad programme truly has a major impact on the development of transformative learning (Stone et al. 2017), in particular, when the settings and contexts between the home and host countries are notably different. The longer the duration, the more it helps international students learn more effectively. In addition, it is very important for the host university to provide sufficient and appropriate support to help these students to go through such a roller coaster experience. And secondly, study abroad as a disorienting dilemma is not sufficient in itself to enable transactional learning to take place (Mezirow 1997) when the duration of the study abroad programme is short. Self- and collaborative reflections need to be encouraged inside and outside the classroom. This means that host universities need to provide appropriate opportunities and assistance in fostering and supporting transformative learning.

The generalizability of this study must be considered in the contexts within which it was carried out; it is limited as it investigated only two particular universities and also two small groups of international students studying in these two universities. Therefore, further research is needed to explore whether international students who study year-long or semester-long study abroad programmes at other host countries demonstrate similar learning experiences as the participants in this study. The findings of these future studies will potentially help gain a more comprehensive view and understanding of the development of international students' transformative learning experiences in these hosting universities.

Based upon the findings, this study offers the following recommendations. Firstly, it is highly important for transformative learning to take place because it helps international students foster global perspectives, achieve deep learning gains and develop their problem-solving skills in the global contexts. With regard to international students on year-long or semester-long programmes, explicit reflective activities need to be built into the programmes and enabled through both co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. In order to decide which types of teaching approaches and strategies are most appropriate for promoting and supporting international student reflection, tutors in the host universities should gain a good understanding of the educational background and learning style of the international students.

Secondly, before coming to the host university, international students perhaps need to be made aware that they will need to make an explicit effort to reflect on

their studies, and the related training and support should also be provided by their home and host universities. This is mainly due to the fact that the compressed nature of year-long and semester-long programmes often makes it very challenging for international students to undertake reflection. Thirdly, it is highly important for international students sufficiently prepared by their home universities to be more resilient and flexible during study abroad. In other words, they need to be made aware to prepare themselves physically and emotionally to deal with whatever difficulties and challenges the new environment may bring to them.

And finally, international students should develop the willingness and also habit of conducting critical self-reflection regularly. By asking themselves the following questions, such as ‘*what are the major differences between the education systems in my home country and the host country?*’, ‘*whether and to what extent does my existing skill sets fit into the new learning environment?*’, ‘*what methods I am using now are working or not working?*’, ‘*what kinds of training and support do I need?*’ and ‘*how can I gain the help and support I need from my tutor?*’, international students are able to help themselves identify their strength and weakness, the opportunities and challenges they are facing in the new academic environment at the host university. This consequently will help them recognize the alterations that they need to apply to their existing habits of mind more quickly.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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**Xianghan O'Dea** is a Senior Fellow of Higher Education Academy, and a member of SRHE. Currently she is a Subject Group Leader (Logistics, Transportation, Operations and Analytics) at Huddersfield

Business School, University of Huddersfield. She has more than 20 years of experience in the UK Higher Education sector as an academic leader, tutor, researcher and academic developer. She is active in research and her research interests lie in the areas of AIED (AI in Education), digital transformation and digital technology adoption in higher education. She is currently co-editing a special issue for *Studies in Higher Education*, entitled "AI text generators: a threat, an opportunity or an asset to higher education?". She is also an associate editor (Educational Technology) of an Australian Journal - *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*. Previously she was a lead guest editor of the *British Journal of Educational Technology* (BJET).

**Chen Wang** completed her Doctor of Education in 2018 in the School of Education, Durham University. Her research interests include internationalisation in higher education, and intercultural education and communication.

**Mike O'Dea** is a Senior Lecturer in Computer Science at York St John University, and is a Senior Fellow of the HEA. His interests are in Machine Learning, Databases, Learning Technologies and Serious Games. His research is in the fields of Learning Technologies and Serious Games.