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Article:
Motivations and expectations of study abroad: evidence from a study of Chinese undergraduate students on a higher education Trans-National Education (TNE) programme

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Motivations and expectations of study abroad: evidence from a study of Chinese undergraduate students on a higher education Trans-National Education (TNE) programme

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Abstract

Universities around the world are providing increased opportunities for students to participate in international education. It is important, however, that both the recipient and source universities understand the motivations and expectations of students wishing to study abroad in order that they may design Trans-National Education (TNE) programmes that meet the needs of the students as well as to inform their promotional and marketing activities. The difficulty, however, is that student motivations and expectations can and do develop and change over time and so it is necessary to conduct regular research in order to ensure that decision makers are aware of the latest trends. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to report the findings of a contemporary study that sought to generate insight into students' motivations and expectations relating to study abroad. The study is based on a survey of Chinese students registered on a TNE programme operated by a UK university and a Chinese partner university. While this study is limited by sample size and restricted to only one TNE programme involving a Chinese partner, the findings do provide insights into the motivations and expectations of students currently engaged in TNE. The findings indicate that *experience with other cultures* and a *desire to broaden horizons* were the primary motivations for the students to consider study abroad while the main expectations were that they would develop their *personal and practical skills*. The findings confirm the importance of the *intercultural aspects* of TNE programmes and may be used by university administrators and policy makers to assist in the design of courses and promotional campaigns.

Keywords: Trans-National Education (TNE); study abroad; motivations and expectations of study abroad; Chinese students

Context and Objectives

Since the 1970s, the number of students studying abroad has increased considerably worldwide (Altbach *et al.*, 2009). In 2017, approximately five million HE

students were enrolled in studies outside their home country (ICEF, 2017). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has estimated that the total number of international students will reach eight million by 2025 (Mok *et al.*, 2017).

In the UK, official figures (HESA, 2018a) reveal that 442,375 students, some 19% of the total number of students studying in UK universities in 2016-17, were international. Chinese students account for almost a third of the non-EU international students attending UK universities. The trend for Chinese students to study abroad has developed over several decades but recently received fresh impetus when the Chinese government adopted the *Belt and Road* initiative which encourages collaboration between Chinese and foreign HE institutions (Wu, 2018). China is currently the largest exporter of international students with 15.2% of all students enrolled in HE outside their home country (Chen, 2016) and, according to Jacob *et al.* (2017), there is a growing trend for Chinese students to study in western countries like the UK, USA, Australia and Canada. Indeed, today 55% of Chinese students studying in the UK start their studies in a TNE program (UKCISA, 2018).

In the academic year 2015-16, the number of students studying for a UK HE qualification outside of the UK reached 701,010 with 65,199 being in China (UUK, 2016). Thus, the number of Chinese students studying for a UK qualification in China increased 14.5% from the previous year, and over 80% over the past five years. This makes China the fastest growing host country of UK TNE, with 275 approved joint programmes and institutes (HESA, 2018b) possibly because the UK is the favoured overseas partners for Chinese universities wishing to deliver undergraduate TNE programmes (Wilkins, 2016).

A useful working definition of TNE proposed by Blight *et al.* (1999) is “...*the provision of a HE degree programme leading to a UK qualification for students based in a country other than the one in which the awarding institution is located*”. As such, TNE may take many forms including branch campuses, distance learning, online provision, joint and dual degree programme, short courses, or mixed models (Hussain, 2007).

TNE has the potential to confer advantages on the sojourner students such as, improved intercultural competences and an openness to cultural diversity, language proficiency, and personal development (Hayden *et al.*, 2003; Morshidi, 2006; Naidoo, 2015; Sirat, 2005). TNE may, however, also benefit others including the domestic students, the teaching staff, the universities, and even countries and their governments (Adam, 2001; McBurnie and Pollock, 2000; McBurnie and Zигuras, 2001 and 2006). Indeed, according to Universities UK International (UUKI), TNE is now an important component of the UK government’s education export strategy and some 82% of UK universities now offer TNE with two thirds being at undergraduate level and the balance being postgraduate (Boe, 2018).

In order that TNE provision be properly managed and promoted, various authorities on the subject (e.g. Knight, 2015; Tarrant *et al.*, 2014; Soria and Troisi, 2014; Altbach, 2015) have recognised a need to understand student motivations and expectations. These motivations and expectations are summarised in Table 1. Although the motives to study abroad may vary from one student to another (DuFon and Churchill, 2006) key motivations include the perceived high quality of overseas

education (Hernández, 2010a), and a desire to improve inter-cultural competence (Chirkov *et al.*, 2008; DuFon and Churchill, 2006; Allen and Herron, 2003) while key expectations are personal growth and development, including self-confidence (Anderson *et al.*, 2006), adaptability and flexibility (Wilkinson, 1998), and the attainment of practical skills and abilities, for example, foreign language proficiency (Presley *et al.*, 2010).

Student expectations regarding studying abroad are often closely linked to their motivations and the expected benefits and learning outcomes. These expectations not only influence the decision to study abroad but also the choice of destination and post-study evaluations of their experience abroad as well as the TNE programme with which the students engage (Kim and Goldstein, 2005).

Table 1 Motivations and expectations of study abroad

Categories		Factors	Sources	
Motivations	Academic	High quality of overseas education	Hernández, 2010b; Morshidi, 2006	
		Cultural experiences	Desire to improve global competence	Chirkov <i>et al.</i> , 2008
	Desire for understanding foreign culture		DuFon and Churchill, 2006	
	Interest in different cultures		Miller-Idriss and Hanauer, 2011	
	Travel to other countries		Wilkins and Huisman, 2012	
	Personal growth	Experience something new	Allen and Herron, 2003	
		Personal development	Kauffmann, 1992	
	Career development	Environment conditions	Freed, 1990	
		Broader career opportunities	Isabelli-García, 2006	
	Entertainment	Future job prospects	Chirkov <i>et al.</i> , 2007	
Personal pleasure		DuFon and Churchill, 2006		
Language skills	Language acquisition	Van der Wende, 2003		
	Developing English language skills	Dwyer, 2004		
Expectations	Personal growth and development	Self-confidence	Anderson <i>et al.</i> , 2006	
		Adaptability and flexibility	Adaptability and flexibility	Wilkinson, 1998
			Creativity	Martin, <i>et al.</i> , 1995
			Independence	McLeod and Wainwright, 2009
		Responsibility	Responsibility	Burns <i>et al.</i> , 2018
			Crisis and resource management	Salisbury <i>et al.</i> , 2009
		Patience	Patience	Petzold and Moog, 2018
			Enthusiasm	Burney <i>et al.</i> , 2017
		Initiative	Initiative	Schmidt and Pardo, 2017
			Perseverance	Suutari and Brewster, 2003
Practical skills and abilities	Practical skills and abilities	Increased cultural tolerance	Dwyer, 2004	
		Foreign language proficiency	Foreign language proficiency	Presley <i>et al.</i> , 2010; Anderson, 2007
			Time management	McKeown, 2009
		Enhanced employment opportunities	Enhanced employment opportunities	Anderson, 2007
			Capability to handle stress and difficult situations	Carlson, 1990
		Capacity to learn quickly in new situations	Capacity to learn quickly in new situations	Cushner and Karim, 2004
			Appreciation of differences and cultures	Engle and Engle, 2003
		Increased understanding of global, economic, and political matters	Increased understanding of global, economic, and political matters	Badstbner and Ecke, 2009
			Advanced knowledge and skills	DeKeyser, 2007
		Problem-solving skill	Williams, 2005	

Knowledge and understanding of motivations and expectations is key to operating successful TNE programmes. However, motivations and expectations are dynamic and change over time, which means that there is a need for regular and ongoing research in this area. Thus, the aim of the research underpinning this paper was to generate data and contemporary insight into the motives and expectations of a group of students engaged in a TNE programme offered by a UK university and a partner institution in China.

Methodology

The study reported here was part of a larger project based on students enrolled in the TNE programme operated by Harper Adams University (HAU) and Beijing University of Agriculture (BUA). This TNE collaboration is based on a 3+1 model, with three years delivered in China and the final year delivered in the UK (Walley *et al.*, 2017). Ethical approval was obtained from the HAU Ethics Committee prior to data collection.

The survey questions were developed from the literature on student motivations and expectations regarding study abroad and presented to the students in English. Prior to use, the research instrument was pilot tested and the data used to test for validity, reliability and normality. Content validity was determined by the comprehensive literature review and face validity via the questionnaire being piloted with a group of academics with substantial international experience.

The fieldwork took place in September 2016 with a total of 72 students who had just arrived in the UK to complete the final year of their TNE programme. The questionnaire was presented to the students in an online format (Google Forms) and the purpose of the study was made clear at the outset. Participants were asked to indicate their *motivations* and *expectations* with regard to a range of statements using five-point Likert-scales with a sixth point for *Don't Know* responses.

Analysis of the data was undertaken with SPSS version 24. The completed questionnaires were examined and those with missing values excluded from the analysis. In total there were 60 (83.3%) fully completed questionnaires used for the subsequent analysis. Cronbach's Alpha (CA) model of reliability was used to measure internal consistency. All the data had CA scores of 0.7 or above and so internal consistency was deemed to be good (Bonett and Wright, 2015).

The sample comprised 36 females and 24 males with a mean age of 21. It is believed that this profile is typical of Chinese students registered on undergraduate TNE programmes in the UK (CCG, 2016; Bolton, 2018). According to CCG (2016), there were 60% female compared with 40% male Chinese undergraduate students enrolled in UK TNE 2015/16, with an average age of 21.

Results

The data relating to motivations for studying abroad are shown in Table 2. The most important motives for studying abroad were “*I wanted to broaden my horizons*” and “*I wanted to experience different cultures*”, followed by the desire “*to improve my foreign language skills*” and “*improve the chances of getting a good job*”. The statements with which the respondents agreed the least were “*I particularly wanted to study in the UK*”, “*I particularly wanted to study at an institution with an international reputation*”, and “*I thought that my preferred course is better quality in foreign countries*”. The ratings confirm the importance of *cultural experience* in the study abroad decision-making process which indicate that non-academic reasons are primary motives driving Chinese students to study abroad. Moreover, it appears that the international students from this study consider course type or subject area first, institution second and country third. These results suggest that they may not have a particular overseas study destination or particular institution in mind before they make the decision to study abroad.

Table 2 Motivation - Reasons for study abroad

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
1. Broaden my horizons	43	71.7%
2. Experience different cultures	43	71.7%
3. Improve my foreign language skills	39	65.0%
4. Improve the chances of getting a good job	36	60.0%
5. Better English for better employment opportunities	24	40.0%
6. Become more independent	18	30.0%
7. A better-quality education than offered in my home country	17	28.3%
8. Make a change in my life	16	26.7%
9. My preferred course is better quality in foreign countries	14	23.3%
10. Study at an institution with an international reputation	14	23.3%
11. Study in the UK	12	20.0%

The data relating to expectations of study abroad are shown in Table 3. According to Table 3, participants expected to develop a variety of personal traits ranging from *social development* to *emotional development*. The expectation was highest for “*problem-solving ability*”, followed by “*control over my own actions*”. The lowest ratings were for “*willingness to take risks*” and “*developing a social network*”. It is interesting to note that the mean value of all the variables is more than three (on a five-point scale) which indicates the perceived importance of all the factors measured.

In terms of practical skills, the respondents indicated that those they most expected to develop while on the TNE programme were “*advanced knowledge and skills*” and “*foreign languages*”. The least useful practical skill that they expected to develop was “*knowledge of different cultures*”. However, all the practical skills listed in the survey scored more than three which, again, suggests that the students perceive them all to be important.

It is apparent that in this study most of the expectations rated more highly by the students were a direct reflection of the factors that motivate them to choose to study abroad in the first place. This then appears to confirm the relationship between *motivations* and *expectations* identified in the literature.

Table 3 Expectations

Personal traits:

Variable	No influence	Slight influence	Moderate influence	Strong influence	Very strong influence	Don't know	Mean
1. Problem solving ability	1 1.7%	4 6.7%	9 15%	20 33.3%	26 43.3%	0	4.10
2. Control over my own actions	2 3.3%	3 5%	9 15%	23 38.3%	23 38.3%	0	4.03
3. Independence	1 1.7%	5 8.3%	4 6.7%	21 35%	26 43.3%	3 5%	3.95
4. Decision-making	3 5%	2 3.3%	9 15%	24 40%	21 30%	1 1.7%	3.92
5. Confidence	1 1.7%	5 8.3%	12 20%	25 41.7%	17 28.3%	0	3.87
6. Determination	1 1.7%	3 5%	18 30%	21 35%	17 28.3%	0	3.83
7. Flexibility	2 3.3%	3 5%	16 26.7%	25 41.7%	14 23.3%	0	3.77
8. Creativity	2 3.3%	6 10%	18 30%	17 28.3%	16 26.7%	1 1.7%	3.60
9. Develop a social network	1 1.7%	14 23.3%	19 31.7%	11 18.3%	15 25%	0	3.42
10. Willingness to take risks	4 6.7%	9 15%	15 25%	21 35%	10 16.7%	1 1.7%	3.35

Practical skills:

Variable	Not useful at all	Slightly useful	Moderately useful	Very useful	Extremely useful	Don't know	Mean
1. Advanced knowledge and skills	1 1.7%	3 5%	8 13.3%	20 33.3%	28 46.7%	0	4.18
2. Foreign languages	2 3.3%	4 6.7%	5 8.3%	24 40%	25 41.7%	0	4.10
3. Broadened mind	2 3.3%	4 6.7%	9 15%	13 21.7%	31 51.7%	1 1.7%	4.07
4. Widened social network	1 1.7%	5 8.3%	12 20%	19 31.7%	23 38.3%	0	3.97
5. Knowledge of different cultures	2 3.3%	3 5%	13 21.7%	21 35%	20 33.3%	1 1.7%	3.85

Discussion

While the machinations of validation panels may well imply that the main reason that students from overseas wish to study in the UK is *for the UK qualification*, and the oft-repeated mantra of the Vice Chancellors is that they are here because of *institutional reputation*, this study suggests that other, student-centered factors are at play. Indeed, the findings of this study suggest that the most important motivations for Chinese students to study in the UK are a desire for *cultural experience* and a *broadened perspective*. These findings are not out of line with the findings of previous studies. For instance, an investigation of TNE provision in France by Allen and Herron (2003) found that the most frequently reported reasons for participating in study abroad were all *culturally related*. They found that students considered

motives such as *meeting people from a different culture* and *getting to know the foreign country* are the most important motives for study abroad participation, while *receiving an education* or *earning an overseas degree* were considered less important.

As a result, in designing and promoting TNE programmes, university administrators and policy makers are advised to stress the *intercultural aspects* of their courses and demonstrate what the TNE programme can offer in terms of *cultural experiences* and field trip opportunities, in addition to the academic content.

Furthermore, while clearly prioritised, the findings of this study actually suggest that the main expectations of overseas education are that it involves *personal, academic* and *professional* development. Participants reported the main expectation of joining a TNE programme is to enhance their *problem-solving ability* and *gain advanced knowledge* and *skills*. This is probably because these skills are highly valued by employers in today's globalized workplace. Indeed, DeKeyser (2007) suggests that *advanced knowledge* and *skills* will enable students to see the ways in which theory can be applied in practice while Williams (2005) concluded that *problem-solving skills* are an important personal quality, which will improve productivity and give a competitive edge in the job market. The findings of this study also concur with Anderson's (2007) research on study abroad choice, expectations and experiences, which suggests that *educational achievement, social environment, personal growth, cultural exposure* and *language development* are what students expect when studying abroad. In particular, students deciding to study abroad largely expect to improve their *career prospects*. Consequently, university administrators should not forget that students expect TNE programmes to improve their job prospects and so it is important to both the students and the future success of TNE programmes themselves that these student priorities are included within the design of such programmes.

Conclusion

The fact that this study was based on just one TNE programme operated by a UK university and a Chinese partner means that the findings cannot be generalized to all TNE programmes. However, the TNE programme at the centre of this study is not untypical, especially in terms of undergraduate TNE programmes with Chinese partners, and so the findings do appear useful.

The goal of this study was to explore Chinese students' motivations and expectations of study abroad. The respondents in this study expressed clear expectations regarding *personal development* with respect to *educational, social, and professional* matters as well as a desire to *better understand culture*. The findings from this study also suggest that students prioritize factors with *cross-cultural experience* the most important factor and *destination country* the least important factor.

These findings have clear implications for UK HE institutions. It is readily apparent that universities do need to understand international students' motivations and expectations. This is imperative if they are to design, promote and manage effective

TNE programmes that will deliver genuine value to the students. Learning outcomes should concentrate on *personal development* and *gaining advanced knowledge and skills* and promotion of the TNE programmes should also focus on these factors.

While these findings clearly confirm that non-academic factors are very important motivators for study abroad, the fact that quality of education and institutional reputation are lower in the list is somewhat unexpected given the efforts that UK universities put into promoting these factors and the actual recruitment of overseas students. While the discrepancy might be explained in terms of quality of education and institutional reputation being promoted to a different audience (e.g. other Vice Chancellors or researchers) or possibly that these factors will mean more to students when they become alumni, there is also the possibility that their importance is underestimated because of the communicative research techniques used in this study. Subsequently, it would seem appropriate that further research be undertaken into students' motivations and expectations regarding study abroad and that these studies use a different methodology to that used here as well as embracing a larger sample of TNE programmes.

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The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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