Adapting to a new learning environment: Mainland Chinese students studying in master's degree programmes in Hong Kong

Manhong Lai (iD) and Genshu Lu (iD)

How to cite this article

Peer review

This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-blind peer review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymized during review.

Copyright

Open access

London Review of Education is a peer-reviewed Open Access journal.

Adapting to a new learning environment: Mainland Chinese students studying in master's degree programmes in Hong Kong

Manhong Lai* – *The Chinese University of Hong Kong*
Genshu Lu – *Xian Jiaotong University, China*

Abstract

This article investigated the learning experiences of mainland Chinese students in master's degree programmes in Hong Kong. Using a qualitative research approach, 20 mainland Chinese students in master's degree programmes in a first-tier Hong Kong university were interviewed. It observed, first, that mainland Chinese students appreciate the teaching and learning approaches adopted in Hong Kong, but that they take some time to adapt. Thanks to heavy financial support from parents and parental expectations, they are pressed to adapt as soon as possible and get high marks in the one-year programmes in Hong Kong. Second, the mainland Chinese students' previous experiences of participating in campus activities in mainland China and their instrumental views of learning restrict their involvement in informal learning through campus activities. Third, their limited interaction with local and foreign students constrains the development of their intercultural competence.

Keywords: internationalization, higher education, mainland Chinese students, adaptation, learning experiences

Introduction

Internationalization is perceived to be a major way to enhance the competitiveness and educational quality of higher education in Hong Kong. Consequently, Hong Kong universities have been eager to admit non-local students in recent years. The manner in which Chinese students achieve (or fail to achieve) academic and social adaptation to other societies remains one of the most tension-ridden issues in higher education. This article investigates the learning journey of mainland Chinese students studying master's degree programmes in Hong Kong by examining their formal teaching and learning experiences, their informal experiences of campus life, and the development of their intercultural competence. Using a qualitative method, and with reference to the above questions, we interviewed 20 mainland Chinese students in four master's degree programmes in Hong Kong. The interviews helped to provide an in-depth understanding of their perceived learning experiences in master's degree programmes in Hong Kong.

Major issues regarding the learning experiences of non-local students

Internationalization is defined as the process of integrating an international and intercultural dimension into an institution's teaching, research and service functions

*Corresponding author – email: mhlai@cuhk.edu.hk

(Knight, 2004; Söderqvist, 2002). Studies have identified major issues encountered by Chinese students in the formal teaching and learning processes in Western societies. First, some students encountered problems regarding taking an active role in learning without any formal guidance from the teacher. Classes in China are mainly text-based, with the teacher adopting an authoritarian stance in the classroom, in contrast to the learner-centred teaching in a Western classroom, where the teacher seldom uses a textbook and requires a lot of participation from students themselves (Parris-Kidd and Barnett, 2011). The difficulty has been found to be not entirely related to the culture of learning, but also has to do with personal factors. Preparing faculty members with culturally responsive pedagogies can enhance the non-local student experience (Heng, 2018). Second, some Chinese students reported struggling to find an appropriate role in classroom participation (Parris-Kidd and Barnett, 2011). However, Wu (2015) found that, during class discussions, mainland Chinese students' quietness does not indicate a lack of interest, rather it is in keeping with the Chinese cultural values of harmony and respect for authority. Yin and Wang (2016) indicated that mainland Chinese students do engage personally in learning, but they seldom actively participate in open discussion. Teachers should understand more about Chinese students' unique ways of classroom engagement. Third, Chinese students took time to adapt to the teaching and learning approaches in foreign countries (Heng, 2018). Chinese students are very focused on test achievement, which is in contrast to Western systems that emphasize ability to work independently, think critically and find alternative solutions (Parris-Kidd and Barnett, 2011). Chinese students have been found to struggle with new academic expectations that demand self-directed learning (Tran, 2008), cede epistemic authority to learners (Wu, 2015) and emphasize argumentative writing (Heng, 2018). Guo and Chase (2011) found that a special programme that included understanding of the foreign academic environment, cross-cultural communication and learning effectiveness across cultures could help non-local students grasp new teaching and learning approaches. Fourth, Chinese students tended to be silent participants in group work (Wang, 2012). Most students had a strong tendency toward conformity and were predisposed to depend upon the stronger members of the group (Wu, 2015). Turner (2009) suggested that group work that enabled all to demonstrate competence, that did not implicitly privilege local insider cultures and that challenged cultural stereotyping and embedded intercultural elements could help to alleviate participative inequalities.

During the initial struggle and frustration when adjusting to a foreign academic environment, some students experienced academic distance from Western teaching and learning styles in the adaptation process (Parris-Kidd and Barnett, 2011). However, Gu (2011) showed that many Chinese students experienced positive adaptation to their academic studies over time. They developed self-confidence, became involved in class activities and gained a strong sense of independence in learning. Wu (2015) found that Chinese students' behaviour and beliefs about learning evolved as a result of contextual influences. When given sufficient time, and the freedom to take risks in experimenting with new and unfamiliar learning methods, they integrated new learning skills and developed more effective learning techniques. Expectations within each new context they encountered not only contributed to tensions they experienced, but also to changes they underwent as they adapted to different expectations. Their abilities, attitudes, behaviours and values changed in response to different contexts. Chinese students did make deliberate efforts to overcome the challenges (Heng, 2018), even though their experiences diverged according to year of study and field of study. Heng (2019) showed that students in humanities and social sciences needed to grapple with unfamiliar sociocultural, economic and political references, while

mathematics used a more universal language. Academic fields requiring structured team learning, such as business, enhanced students' interactions with host peers. Given these varied findings, it is evident that there is a need to investigate mainland Chinese students' learning experiences in Hong Kong to enhance our understanding of their adaptation process.

Leask (2013) described internationalization in education as the incorporation of an international and intercultural dimension into formal and informal educational activities. Internationalization in formal education should focus on 'what is taught and learned' and 'how it is taught and learned'. Informal education includes the various extra-curricular activities that take place on campus. Intercultural learning through formal and informal education encourages people of different cultures to engage with each other and learn from each other, and emphasizes the importance of the direct exchange of ideas, principles and behaviour (Portera, 2011).

On the social front, Gu (2011) found that culture continued to function as a source of stress and struggle, and most students employed emotion-coping strategies such as endurance (Yan and Berliner, 2011). Students reported difficulties navigating the host culture (Moores and Popadiuk, 2011) and found it hard to integrate into the local community (Guo and Guo, 2017). Students' social integration was not only influenced by social-level acculturation factors (for example, society and culture), but also by individual-level factors (for example, gender, major subject, expectations, pre-departure knowledge and skills) (Yan and Berliner, 2011). Concerning cultural adaptation, scholars have also emphasized the acquisition of broad competencies (for example, intercultural competencies), rather than competencies narrowly defined as profession-specific needs and requirements (Haigh, 2009). Intercultural competence refers to the process of acquiring the culture-specific and general cultural knowledge, skills and attitudes that are required for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures (Paige *et al.*, 1999). Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2001) initiated five dimensions to investigate students' intercultural competency: (1) cultural empathy; (2) open-mindedness; (3) emotional stability; (4) social initiative; and (5) flexibility. Cultural empathy refers to the capacity to clearly project an interest in others, and to obtain and reflect a reasonably complete and accurate sense of another person's thoughts, feelings and experiences. Open-mindedness refers to an open and unprejudiced attitude towards the members of other groups and different cultural norms and values. Emotional stability is defined as a tendency to remain calm in stressful situations. Flexibility refers to the ability to learn from new experiences, and social initiative refers to a tendency to approach social situations in an active way and to take initiative (Van Oudenhoven and Van de Zee, 2002). Chinese students reported that it was more difficult for them to socialize with people from different countries than other nationalities. They pointed out that cultural distance played a major role, but also mentioned the impact of individual factors (such as personality, preference for an easy option and emotional satisfaction from mixing with people with a similar background) (Spencer-Oatey *et al.*, 2017). At the surface level, every Chinese student needs to make some adjustments to conform with educational standards in Western countries, but also at a deeper level where some fundamental beliefs and values exist. Yuan (2011) found that Chinese students differed from each other on whether they attempted to adapt or not. Their level of satisfaction and attitudes towards cultural assimilation varied depending on their majors, personalities and previous experiences. Relatively speaking, students majoring in science and technology felt more satisfied than those from the social science disciplines.

The manner in which Chinese students' academic and social adaptation plays out remains one of the most tension-ridden issues in higher education. This article puts the academic discussion above into the specific context of Hong Kong to investigate mainland Chinese students' perceptions of their learning experiences. Based on the reviews of previous research, we investigate the learning experiences of mainland Chinese students studying master's programmes in Hong Kong, mainly through the following three dimensions: (1) the formal teaching and learning experiences; (2) the informal experiences of campus life; and (3) the development of intercultural competence.

Enhancing internationalization of higher education in Hong Kong

In mainland China, studying in Hong Kong is perceived as studying outside the territory of China (*jingwai jiaoyu*) because Hong Kong's cross-cultural sophistication has permitted it to provide broad perspectives in higher education. Studies indicated that there were no significant differences in teaching approaches between Hong Kong, Australia and Canada. The continuum that included imparting information, transmitting structured knowledge, student–teacher interaction, and facilitating intellectual development in Australia and Canada could also apply to Hong Kong (Leung *et al.*, 2008). However, the proportion of front-of-class lecturing may be larger in Hong Kong than in Western societies. Generally, non-local students have regarded greater international exposure as an invaluable advantage of studying in Hong Kong (Lei, 2018). However, mainland Chinese students have also noted that they encountered difficulties when trying to adapt to the teaching, learning and social life in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Ideas Centre, 2013).

The 2010 policy address in Hong Kong stated that developing the city into an education hub and enhancing internationalization were the main focuses of higher education policy (HKSAR Government, 2010). Specifically, such a policy aims to attract more non-local students to study in degree and postgraduate programmes in Hong Kong. The major objectives of the policy are to attract talented students from other countries and to create an international environment on campuses so that Hong Kong students can broaden their horizons. It is hoped that Hong Kong could be developed as an education hub in Asia (HKSAR Government, 2010). In the 2017/18 academic year, the number of non-local students in Hong Kong reached 17,050, not including those in self-financed programmes. Of the non-local undergraduate students, 63.7 per cent came from mainland China, while of the non- local postgraduate research degree students, 83.5 per cent came from mainland China (University Grants Committee, 2019).

To facilitate this increase in non-local enrolment, the quotas for undergraduate, non-local student admissions at University Grants Committee-funded institutions were increased by 20 per cent. At the graduate level, no quota exists for non-local student admission to enter postgraduate programmes on a self-financed basis. Given the lack of a quota, the postgraduate programmes are seen as a potential area to recruit even more non-local students. Mainland Chinese students are perceived as non-local students in Hong Kong, as there are differences in the use of language (Cantonese in Hong Kong and Putonghua in mainland China), historical background (Hong Kong was a British Colony for over one hundred years) and teaching and learning approaches in university between Hong Kong and mainland China. Further investigation of the learning experiences of mainland Chinese students would help to inform Hong Kong universities on how to help mainland Chinese students' adaptation in Hong Kong.

Research methods

In this article, we employed a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter, attempting to make sense of or interpret a phenomenon in terms of the meaning people bring to it (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). As this article seeks to investigate mainland Chinese students' perceptions of their learning experiences in Hong Kong, a qualitative approach was deemed the most suitable.

With reference to our conceptual framework, which aims to investigate mainland Chinese students' learning experiences in the formal teaching and learning process, and their informal learning through campus activities, as well as the development of their intercultural competence, this article is guided by three major research questions:

1. How do mainland Chinese students perceive their learning experiences through formal teaching and learning in our sample university?
2. How do mainland Chinese students perceive their learning experiences regarding participating in campus activities?
3. How do mainland Chinese students develop intercultural competence in a master's degree programme in Hong Kong?

The selection of University C for our case study was based on purposive sampling. University C is a first-tier university in Hong Kong that, in 2017, has eight faculties with 20,608 students and 1,697 members of teaching staff. As a first-tier university, University C is a comprehensive research university with a mission to combine tradition with modernity, and to bring together China and the West. It aims to nurture students with specialized knowledge and multiculturalism, but it has seldom addressed a mission on national integration. Hong Kong's University Grants Committee provides preferential grant funding to the local tertiary institutions to conduct research into 21 selected Areas of Excellence (AoEs). Eight of these AoEs are being led by researchers from University C. As a first-tier university, University C admits the best mainland Chinese students, who obtain the highest marks and have the best attitudes to academic and social adaptation in Hong Kong.

In our study, four major academic areas of University C were selected: arts, social sciences, science and engineering, and business. Due to the various epistemic bases of the four areas, the mainland Chinese students we interviewed were exposed to different learning contexts and teaching and learning approaches. A total of 20 informants from four areas were interviewed (see Table 1). The selection of interviewees was based on areas of study, so as to ensure the most relevant and richest data. All interviews were recorded, and verbatim transcripts were made for data analysis. Please refer to Box 1 for further explanation on data analysis and selection of quotations.

Findings

Formal teaching and learning helped broaden mainland Chinese students' vision

The mainland Chinese students studying master's degree programmes in Hong Kong stressed that they encountered different teaching and learning approaches that helped to broaden their vision. Informants stressed that their teachers had mainly studied in famous foreign universities and often shared with students various research approaches to conduct their cutting-edge research. A translation student

Table 1: Information about the informants

No.	Gender	Age	Course of study
1	F	23	Social science (Education)
2	F	23	Social science (Education)
3	F	23	Social science (Education)
4	M	23	Social science (Social policy)
5	F	23	Social science (Social policy)
6	M	23	Social science (Journalism)
7	F	23	Social science (Journalism)
8	M	24	Social science (Journalism)
9	F	23	Social science (Journalism)
10	F	23	Arts (Translation)
11	F	23	Arts (Translation)
12	F	24	Arts (Linguistics)
13	F	23	Arts (Linguistics)
14	M	23	Science (Physics)
15	M	23	Science (Physics)
16	M	23	Science (Physics)
17	M	23	Science (Physics)
18	M	23	Business (Marketing)
19	F	23	Business (Marketing)
20	M	24	Business (Marketing)

Box 1: Data analysis and quotation selection

In this study, we employed thematic networks analysis for data analysis. First, we dissected the text into manageable and meaningful text segments with the use of a coding framework. This was based on the conceptual framework of this study and recurrent issues in the text. Second, we went through the text segments in each code and extracted the significant themes. Then we went through the selected themes and refined them further into themes that were specific enough to pertain to one idea and broad enough to find incarnations in various different text segments. Third, we arranged themes, selected basic themes, rearranged into organizing themes, constructed global themes and illustrated the thematic network. Once the networks had been constructed, we returned to the original text and interpreted it with the aid of the networks. Then we presented a summary of the main themes to make explicit the patterns emerging in the exploration. Last, we returned to the original research questions and the theoretical interests underpinning them. NVivo was used to help coding in the process of data analysis.

For the selection of quotations, we grouped quotations by research questions and emerging themes. We made a table for categorizing the quotations and counting how many people mentioned each theme. Then we came up with summary statements on the responses to research questions and themes. In the beginning, we identified the most exemplary quotations for research questions and themes. The selection of typical quotations should reflect the most common responses, to provide evidence for each theme and offer readers greater depth of understanding. In the meantime, we also selected those quotations that were evocative and image-filled to give participants a voice and to enable them to speak for themselves. The actual words spoken were a better representation of the depth of feeling.

thought that what she learnt in Hong Kong was cutting-edge knowledge as in her undergraduate programme in China, the published dates of the textbooks were very old, and so the knowledge they learnt was outdated. A physics student shared that:

> This is a process to integrate various views. In mainland, all students receive the same teachers' thoughts … All students should follow the line of thought set by teachers. In Hong Kong, different teachers have different standpoints. They would not offer you a fixed mode of thinking. Students also come from different backgrounds (with different standpoints). I love this process and I learn a lot from the process [in which students and teachers] exchange different viewpoints. (Informant 14)

They appreciated that lecturers often introduced diverse standpoints on certain issues during lectures. Regardless of the teaching approach, lecturers were eager to encourage students to think and analyse. A social policy student highly appreciated one lecturer who stressed employing theoretical perspectives to analyse, and who arranged mixed groups for discussion. Every lecture, the teacher formed groups with different students, so students could encounter different classmates who adopted different standpoints and analytical approaches. A linguistic student emphasized that teachers should never tell students the answers, but instead let the students grasp the substantial background and possible theoretical perspectives, and then guide students to go through an analytical process by asking questions, finally encouraging students to come up with their own standpoints. Many informants often highlighted that their parents spent a lot of resources to support them studying, and pressed them to work extremely hard and obtain a high mark.

In the meantime, students stressed that they learned a lot from lecturers' case analyses, particularly the case studies of international companies. A marketing student shared that some teachers had experience in a wine company and had ample experience encountering government officials, while some worked as consultants for ten companies in different regions. As their teachers worked at different large enterprises, the case studies introduced by teachers helped students gain an in- depth understanding of the practices of different companies, as well as of how to apply Western theories to analyse authentic cases. Through in-depth analysis of case studies of various countries, a marketing student stated that 'we look at the world through the eyes of [our] teachers' (Informant 18). Another master's degree student in marketing said that 'staying in Hong Kong seems like jumping over from the cage of the mainland. Standing on this small island I feel like I can look at the whole world' (Informant 20).

Students stressed that teachers particularly emphasized the process of analytical thinking, which included a grasp of basic concepts and understanding of fundamental questions. A social policy student shared that a lecturer guided students to tackle substantial readings on certain issues and then pressed them to critique. He said, 'in mainland, he [the teacher] performed like a big machine to instil into you [the knowledge one-sidedly], he kept talking and instilling into you.' After students clearly understood the background and a possible perspective from which to analyse this issue, they obtained substantial foundation to develop their critical thinking, which they rarely had a chance to develop in their undergraduate programmes in mainland China. Teachers employed intuitive ways to help students obtain in-depth understanding on various issues. Through this approach, students could follow teachers' lines of thought and develop ways of analytical thinking:

> When he [the teacher] talked on a question … he explained why there is this question … It would not happen in a vacuum. Most of the time,

> we faced a problem and there would emerge a new question … then we should define the concepts first … then further investigate the questions, and then induce the conclusion … He stressed analysing a question through various aspects … and the process … that is what I learnt, which was very different from my old ways of thinking. (Informant 4)

A marketing student shared:

> my ways of analysis have been changed … They [teachers] raised certain approaches of analysis which I never encountered before … I have seriously been enlightened. After that, when I encounter some incidents, I will [try to] analyse according to the approaches introduced by teachers. (Informant 19)

However, two science students still thought that even though teachers encouraged them to develop analytical thinking, they only changed a bit, due to the long-standing thinking approaches moulded by past learning experiences in mainland China.

Although the mainland Chinese students appreciated the interactive classroom, they were not eager to express their viewpoints. A translation student recalled his mainland years: 'There, mainly the teacher talked in my undergraduate programme. Sometimes, some students raised questions, but the teachers were unwilling to answer and thought that you are troublesome' (Informant 11). Another translation student shared that the academic culture is particularly good in Hong Kong, which was more liberal than the mainland. In Hong Kong, teachers are eager to express different viewpoints and students are brave enough to raise questions. Even when there were different viewpoints, students and teachers could embrace each other's views. She stressed that in mainland China, good students seldom raise questions, and in fact these kinds of students did not know how to analyse properly. Some mainland Chinese students expressed that even when they had their own viewpoints, they were not used to expressing them openly. Some preferred to ask questions with teachers individually after the lecture. Some expressed that they did not want classmates to perceive them as a student who loved to show off. Some students worried that their replies might not fit the teacher's expectation. They felt threatened when other students thought that their answer was wrong. Some reflected that they were afraid to express viewpoints that were different from those of other students. Informants generally shared a belief that they should memorize what the teacher taught and do well in examinations, according to their learning experiences since primary education. Previous learning experiences on the mainland discouraged the expression of individual viewpoints and created worries about one's viewpoints not conforming to the model answer, and about losing face, all of which contribute to the passive responses of mainland Chinese students in classroom interaction. Students from first- and second-tier universities had had few experiences of student presentations and group work before; they had learnt the format but were still not very clear on the substantial meanings of student interactions. The students from ordinary universities had seldom encountered interactive classrooms, which made it harder for them to adapt. Some students stated that if a teacher put class participation as 30 per cent of the term assessment, then mainland Chinese students would become actively involved in discussion. However, after a term, many informants shared that they changed their perceptions of classroom discussion. A linguistics student considered that there are no model answers and that she should read more references to have a solid foundation for developing her own viewpoints.

Engagement in campus activities as informal learning

Even though most informants appreciated the various activities on campus, they seldom participated in them. Informants usually stressed that there were many references that they should read before the lectures, and many assignments that they should finish. Most science students shared that they spent most of the time in the laboratory, and it was rare to participate in campus activities. Some thought that there were cultural differences that meant that they were not as enthusiastic as local students when participating in music festivals or concerts. Some expressed hesitation because local students were very serious in the organization of student societies. They worried that they could not put in enough effort in organizing student societies like local students. Most of them expressed that their poor local language was a major hurdle preventing them joining volunteer work for disadvantaged locals. Regarding participation in campus activities, a translation student said: '[if] you don't know Cantonese, [it is] very hard to integrate with them; then [you] feel alienated' (Informant 10). In general, mainland Chinese students tended to form small circles in which they felt more stable emotionally. A physics student clearly stated that he often hung out with a few mainland Chinese students and felt no interest in participating in campus activities.

Their previous experiences with campus activities on the mainland affected their willingness to participate. A social work student stated that students seldom participate in student activities in mainland universities, where the activities organized by the student union have many constraints placed on them by party secretaries at the university, faculty and department levels. Therefore, most of the students would not attend. Many students stressed that they had a heavy workload, and that they focused on getting high marks. The instrumental view of getting their degree as soon as possible also affected the mainland Chinese students' participation in campus activities in Hong Kong. A marketing student shared that in the past she was a member of a student political party in her undergraduate programme in mainland China. She was impressed that members of Hong Kong's Mainland Student Association fired the president and said:

> In mainland China, you could never imagine you could do that. Because it would never happen in mainland, you [even] don't have the right to elect [the president]. But in Hong Kong, you could turn down the president if you don't respect and agree with him … This is the big difference … The student political association in mainland is supervised by teachers … it tends to [have strong connection with the party secretary]. (Informant 19)

She felt that the members of student political parties in mainland China were more bureaucratic, behaved like government officials, and were hostile.

The rare students who gained stronger open-mindedness and flexibility, and who participated in student associations in Hong Kong universities, observed distinct differences from their participation in student associations on the mainland. An education student also joined the Association of Mainland Graduate Students in Hong Kong (AMGSHK). She felt that working as the secretary of AMGSHK offered her many opportunities to train herself. On the mainland, she needed to ask for her teachers' approval when booking a venue, preparing a poster or writing invitation letters. In Hong Kong, teachers were seldom involved, and the students found their own ways to handle the logistics of the student association. She needed to walk around the campus to promote their society. She had to obtain 30 per cent member support before establishing their cabinet. In the meantime, she had to design the

demonstration to take place in the train station to attract members' attention. She loved the work experience in the student association in Hong Kong, which helped to strengthen her cultural empathy as well as her flexibility, and she said, 'student association work was very tough in Hong Kong, but once you achieve [it], you receive the greatest satisfaction' (Informant 1).

Limited development in intercultural competence

The mainland Chinese students seldom had opportunities to communicate with local students and seldom participated in campus activities, which restricted development of their intercultural competence. Even though the few mainland Chinese students who could speak Cantonese had more chances to chat with local students, it was still very hard for them to develop close friendship with local students. However, the mainland Chinese students observed there were different ways to participate and communicate with Hong Kong students even through their limited collaboration with local students. A student in social policy suggested that mainland Chinese students should have emotional communication first. Groupmates of certain work groups could have dinner and watch movies together first, and then discuss their project. The Hong Kong and foreign students did not care what each other liked to eat or what they did recently, but they both cared about the discussion focus for the day, their groupmates' academic backgrounds and whether their groupmates could work well on the project. During group work, the sense of respecting the discussion process and various viewpoints was stronger with the Hong Kong students than with mainland Chinese students.

The mainland Chinese students noted that they were able to encounter different voices and perspectives in Hong Kong. Although he seldom participated in campus activities, a physics student observed the presence of a democratic wall around the student canteen that would not appear on the mainland. A journalism student believed that people in Hong Kong have more autonomy to choose what they talk about, and a stronger sense of individual rights. Through distant observations, the mainland Chinese students strongly believed that the liberal atmosphere of Hong Kong society differed from that of the mainland. Most of our informants shared that their greatest regret was their lack of a chance to communicate with local students, which may reflect their own insufficient flexibility and social initiative. They perceived that Hong Kong students were more serious on matters of transparency, respect and consensus. When a new member would like to join a work group, the mainland Chinese students would just add the new member, but Hong Kong group leaders asked every member in the group to ensure everyone agreed on the new participant. The mainland Chinese students often muddled through a task, but would not bear responsibility when problems emerged. Another journalism student observed that Hong Kong students stressed clearly defining the boundary of rights and responsibilities when participating in group work.

The mainland Chinese students perceived Hong Kong people as polite and considerate in daily life. They developed some cultural empathy through their limited encounters with local people. Many mainland Chinese students reflected that they had become more polite since coming to Hong Kong, and observed that Hong Kong students were polite but kept a distance from other people. Hong Kong people would not speak loudly outdoors or stand in the middle of a path to hinder others. A marketing student shared that he learned about Hong Kong society through daily life, such as going shopping and taking transportation. He remembered that a neighbour wrote him a letter reminding him not to make noise when pulling out chairs because it affected the sleep of an older adult in the neighbour's home. He felt that Hong Kong neighbours were very polite, but that they did not have the same close connections as

mainlanders. He took as an example that his neighbour felt very odd when he wanted to borrow some chairs. A physics student appreciated local students emphasizing work–life balance, but thought that an understanding of local students could not be learnt from formal lectures.

Through their very limited encounters with the local community, the mainland Chinese students observed that systems and institutions were better in Hong Kong. Some mainland Chinese students learned about the local society due to the nature of their specialization, such as journalism or social policy. Particularly, a social policy student learned a lot about the social services and various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Hong Kong. He found that the practice of using non-governmental organizations was systematic and authentically helpful for disadvantaged people in Hong Kong. The work of affluent NGOs did not overlap, and ensured that different kinds of disadvantaged people could be helped. The teachers in journalism pushed students to understand more about Hong Kong society. Therefore, those students read newspaper stories about local news every day. A journalism student mentioned that, 'after coming to Hong Kong, I confirm that there is a more comprehensive system and a more perfect judicial system … People have a higher sense of authority … I think it is good for the mainland to learn' (Informant 9). However, most of the mainland Chinese students could only learn about Hong Kong society through the stories of their mainland classmates. A physics student said, 'my classmate lost his wallet and mobile phone in a minibus. Someone sent it back. On the mainland, [people] are not willing to help' (Informant 16). Another mainland Chinese classmate told how she used her Octopus card (a smart-card for public transport) to take the subway but spent HK$20 too much. The subway corporation returned the money after a month. Indeed, most of our informants perceived that the cases encountered by their mainland Chinese classmates showed that the social system is comparatively well developed in Hong Kong.

Discussion

First, most of our informants perceived that the formal teaching and learning programme enlarged their vision. They particularly appreciated that lecturers shared diverse perspectives and cutting-edge professional knowledge. Informants from science and social science also emphasized the importance of case studies from various countries to help them gain in-depth understanding of academic theories. In the meantime, many students stressed that they learned analytical approaches through the lecturing. There were no significant differences between male and female students' observations. However, some who studied science did think that, even though they understood that teachers were eager to introduce various analytical approaches, their critical thinking was constrained by past learning experiences in mainland China. This may be related to their studying practice, in which they mainly work in the lab individually. Further, although most of the mainland Chinese students in master's degree programmes in Hong Kong agreed that the discussion process with groupmates exposed them to diverse perspectives, some still considered their previous learning experiences hindered their active involvement in discussions. Most of our informants reflected that expressing their own views was the greatest challenge they encountered studying in Hong Kong. These observations are similar to Parris-Kidd and Barnett's (2011) observations that some Chinese students struggled to find an appropriate role in classroom participation. Our informants further elaborated that they worried about giving the wrong answers, and about others perceiving them as showing off, as well as expressing different views from other students. All these factors

contributed to their hesitation to participate in classroom discussion. Our observations are also similar to Heng's (2018) observations that students struggled with the new academic expectations that emphasize argumentative writing. Informants further explained that they found it very difficult to write the term assignments, which stressed expressing their own views, as they were used to restating or integrating scholars' views in their past learning experiences. However, most informants appreciated the teaching and learning approaches used in Hong Kong, even if it took time for them to adapt. Previous learning experiences affected their participation in the discussion process, but their learning perceptions evolved as they participated in authentic situations (Wu, 2015). When mainland Chinese students gained confidence from teachers' and classmates' reactions in the process of adapting to the new learning approaches, their perceptions of the new learning challenges evolved with time. Compared to science students, social science students took less time to adapt to the new mode of teaching and learning, a finding that is different from Yuan's (2011) observation. Because teachers in social science strongly encouraged students to learn more about the Hong Kong social context, that facilitated discussions among mainland Chinese and local students. Students also reflected that the one-year master's programme allowed insufficient time for adjustment and adaptation, which is somewhat different from Wu's (2015) observations. Besides the personal motivation indicated by Gu *et al.* (2010), most informants shared that, as their parents spent a lot of resources to support their study in Hong Kong, they should adapt to the teaching and learning approaches in Hong Kong to get high marks as soon as possible. The heavy financial support from parents and parental expectations were also some of the prominent incentives for our informants to study very hard and to try their best to adapt in Hong Kong.

Second, due to their previous learning experiences, the very short study period, and the over-emphasis on final marks, the mainland Chinese students, no matter whether they studied science or social science, were seldom involved in informal learning through campus activities. Our study observed that receiving high marks was the greatest concern of our informants. They tended to ignore the most precious learning experiences, which were those that occur through informal learning in various campus activities, because they did not directly lead to receiving a high final grade. However, the activities they ignored may have been the most valuable opportunities to encounter different work norms and approaches in problem solving, which would help them develop generic skills. Generic skills are also very important for students' career development, apart from the professional knowledge they learn from their majors.

Third, limited interaction with local and foreign students hindered the mainland Chinese students' development of intercultural competence. Mainland Chinese students in both science and social science chose to stay in small circles that hindered their development of cultural empathy and stifled any tendency to approach social situations in an active way. Instead, they enjoyed the emotional stability of staying with a mainland friend circle, which is similar to Spencer-Oatey *et al.*'s observation (2017). This could reflect that most students' open-mindedness and flexibility were not sufficiently developed to reach out in Hong Kong society for new experiences (Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven, 2001). The exception was the social science students, particularly the ones who studied social policy and journalism. They were keen to have contact with the local community, as their teachers were very keen to develop students' attitude to learning more about Hong Kong society. Some teachers even required students to write term assignments using local cases. However, most mainland Chinese students' limited interaction with the local community led them to have superficial views of Hong Kong society.

Conclusions

With their confined perceptions of learning, it was easy for the mainland Chinese students to ignore the varied aspects of learning, such as informal learning through campus activities and the development of intercultural competence, available in Hong Kong universities. It is important that Hong Kong universities arrange welcoming seminars for non-local students, particularly for mainland Chinese students, in order to clearly explain to them the teaching and learning approaches, and the significance of engaging in campus activities, as well as the advantages of developing intercultural competence in Hong Kong. Active exchange between local students, international students and mainland Chinese students does not emerge automatically. It requires universities to design purposive activities, such as increasing opportunities to promote propinquity, encouraging multicultural dialogue, developing local buddy programmes, and incorporating non-local students as members of student associations, to engage the non-local students. Concerted effort should be made to enhance cultural exchanges between local and non-local students so as to offer sufficient opportunities for mainland Chinese students to develop generic skills and intercultural competence.

Acknowledgements

Notes on the contributors

Manhong Lai is Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Administration and Policy in the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her research interests include higher education, internationalization, governance in higher education, and academics' work life.

Genshu Lu is Professor and Director of the Institute of Higher Education Research in Xian Jiaotong University, China. His research interests include higher education, student learning in higher education, teaching quality assessment in higher education, and world-class university.

References

Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (eds) (2000) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Gu, Q. (2011) 'An emotional journey of change: The case of Chinese students in UK higher education'. In Jin, L. and Cortazzi, M. (eds) *Researching Chinese Learners: Skills, perceptions and intercultural adaptations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 212–32.

Gu, Q., Schweisfurth, M. and Day, C. (2010) 'Learning and growing in a "foreign" context: Intercultural experiences of international students', *Compare*, 40 (1), 7–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057920903115983.

Guo, S. and Chase, M. (2011) 'Internationalisation of higher education: Integrating international students into Canadian academic environment'. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 16 (3), 305–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2010.546524.

Guo, Y. and Guo, S. (2017) 'Internationalization of Canadian higher education: Discrepancies between policies and international student experiences'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42 (5), 851–68. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1293874.

Haigh, M. (2009) 'Fostering cross-cultural empathy with non-Western curricular structures'. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 13 (2), 271–84. https://doi. org/10.1177%2F1028315308329791.

Heng, T.T. (2018) 'Different is not deficient: Contradicting stereotypes of Chinese international students in US higher education'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43 (1), 22–36. https://doi.org/10.1 080/03075079.2016.1152466.

Heng, T.T. (2019) 'Understanding the heterogeneity of international students' experiences: A case study of Chinese international students in US universities'. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 23 (5), 607–23. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1028315319829880.

HKSAR (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region) Government (2010) *Policy Address*.

Hong Kong: Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government. Online. www.policyaddress. gov.hk/09-10/eng/index.html (accessed 19 December 2019).

Knight, J. (2004) 'Internationalization remodeled: Definition, approaches, and rationales'. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 8 (1), 5–31. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1028315 303260832.

Leask, B. (2013) 'Internationalizing the curriculum in the disciplines: Imagining new possibilities'. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 17 (2), 103–18. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1028 315312475090.

Lei (2018) *Xiangang duyan hunmeihao liuqia gongguo hanxiku* [It's very good to study master program in Hong Kong but it's very hard to stay working here]. Online. www.theshare.cn/article/ detailp/2413 (accessed 14 November 2019).

Leung, D.Y.P., Ginns, P. and Kember, D. (2008) 'Examining the cultural specificity of approaches to learning in universities in Hong Kong and Sydney'. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 39 (3), 251–66. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0022022107313905.

Moores, L. and Popadiuk, N. (2011) 'Positive aspects of international student transitions: A qualitative inquiry'. *Journal of College Student Development*, 52 (3), 291–306. https://psycnet. apa.org/doi/10.1353/csd.2011.0040.

Paige, R.M., Jorstad, H., Siaya, L., Klein, F. and Colby, J. (1999) 'Culture learning in language education: A review of the literature'. In Paige, R.M., Lange, D.L. and Yershova, Y.A. (eds), Culture as the Core: Integrating culture into the language curriculum, 173–236. Center for Advanced Research in Language Acquisition Working Paper #15. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.

Parris-Kidd, H. and Barnett, J. (2011) 'Cultures of learning and student participation: Chinese learners in a multicultural English class in Australia'. In Jin, L. and Cortazzi, M. (eds) *Researching Chinese Learners: Skills, perceptions and intercultural adaptations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 169–87.

Portera, A. (2011) 'Intercultural and multicultural education: Epistemological and semantic aspects'. In Grant, C.A. and Portera, A. (eds) *Intercultural and Multicultural Education: Enhancing global interconnectedness*. New York: Routledge, 12–30.

Söderqvist, M. (2002) *Internationalisation and its Management at Higher-Education Institutions: Applying conceptual, content and discourse analysis.* Helsinki: Helsinki School of Economics.

Spencer-Oatey, H., Dauber, D., Jing, J. and Lifei, W. (2017) 'Chinese students' social integration into the university community: Hearing the students' voices'. *Higher Education*, 74 (5), 739–56. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-016-0074-0.

Tran, L.T. (2008) 'Unpacking academic requirements: International students in management and education disciplines'. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 27 (3), 245–56. https://doi. org/10.1080/07294360802183804.

Turner, Y. (2009) '"Knowing me, knowing you", is there nothing we can do? Pedagogic challenges in using group work to create an intercultural learning space'. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 13 (2), 240–55. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1028315308329789.

University Grants Committee (2019) *Non-Local Student Enrolment (Headcount) of UGC-Funded Programmes by Level of Study, 2017 to 2018*.

Van der Zee, K.I. and Van Oudenhoven, J.P. (2001) 'The multicultural personality questionnaire: Reliability and validity of self- and other ratings of multicultural effectiveness'. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 35 (3), 278–88. https://doi.org/10.1006/jrpe.2001.2320.

Van Oudenhoven, J.P. and Van der Zee, K.I. (2002) 'Predicting multicultural effectiveness of international students: The Multicultural Personality Questionnaire'. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 26 (6), 679–94.

Wang, Y. (2012) 'Mainland Chinese students' group work adaptation in a UK business school'. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 17 (5), 523–35.

Wong, H.L. (2013) *Ganpaio kan xianggang: Naidi laigang liuxue ji gongzuo renshi de xintai ji chujing yanjiu* [Mainlander expatriates looking at Hong Kong: The investigation on attitude and situation of mainlanders studying and working in Hong Kong]. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Ideas Centre.

Wu, Q. (2015) 'Re-examining the "Chinese learner": A case study of mainland Chinese students' learning experiences at British universities'. *Higher Education*, 70 (4), 753–66.

Yan, K. and Berliner, D.C. (2011) 'An examination of individual level factors in stress and coping processes: Perspectives of Chinese international students in the United States'. *Journal of College Student Development*, 52 (5), 523–42.

Yin, H. and Wang, W. (2016) 'Undergraduate students' motivation and engagement in China: An exploratory study'. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 41 (4), 601–21.

Yuan, W. (2011) 'Academic and cultural experiences of Chinese students at an American university: A qualitative study'. *Intercultural Communication Studies*, 20 (1), 141–57.