

Participating in a study-abroad program

Concerns and hopes of intending international students

Trevor Lovett

Xi'an University of Architecture and Technology, China

This small-scale narrative investigation identifies not only the concerns but also the hopes of undergraduate psychology students from a southwest Chinese university who are about to embark on a program of study abroad. While past research has tended to focus on the anticipated negative experiences international students are likely to encounter, this study enabled students to express both their hopes as well as apprehensions in regard to the intended overseas experience. Although the data confirmed a number of findings from previous studies they also revealed that the students' thinking is not preoccupied with the academic side of the impending study. Positive and enduring friendships are something many of the respondents expect to develop. However, a further review of the literature indicated that current attitudes and practices towards international students in Australia may restrict the participants in this research from realising those goals.

Keywords: friendships, international students, narrative, social exclusion

Introduction

The implementation of the Chinese open-door policy in 1978 provided opportunities for a greater number of students from the People's Republic of China to travel abroad and become more familiar with different cultures (Chiu, 1995). Overseas study therefore is now accessible to many students for whom such an experience would have previously been impossible. Contemporary study-abroad programs offer individuals a chance to develop global awareness and intercultural understanding. However, despite the increased demand for, and popularity of, study-abroad programs, students understandably remain unsure about their intended overseas experience (Bell, 2016). The following qualitative, narrative investigation addresses both the apprehensions and hopes of second-year undergraduate students, from a southwestern Chinese university, who are about to undertake a study-abroad program in psychology at the Australian National

University (ANU) in Canberra, Australia. An important consideration in this research is cross-cultural awareness. A Western-based approach informs the structure and content of the study. As a consequence the researcher remains conscious of the need for cultural and contextual sensitivity in regard to the way in which the study is conducted (Dimmock, 2000).

Review of the Literature

Rationale: This review examines previous research related to the concerns and hopes of students, not only intending to study overseas but those, who have already participated in educational programs abroad. The literature review identifies the findings of prior studies and evaluates their relationship to the current small-scale investigation. The review specifically reveals some of the contested theoretical perspectives that underpin individuals' motivations for overseas study. The general

character of the review reflects the discovery orientation and inductive approach of qualitative work. This method reduces the possibility of earlier research limiting or predicting the findings of the current study (McMillan, 2004 p. 70).

Study-abroad programs are defined as those that occur outside the students' countries of origin (Kitsantas, 2004). There is a trend by many universities both in Australia and overseas to promote international study opportunities for overseas students. The benefits for the hosting institutions are not only social and political but also financial (Ladd & Ruby, 1999). In the United Kingdom for example, fees generated by international students contribute substantially to the UK's universities' budget (Brown & Holloway, 2008). Despite the inevitable economic benefits of these programs, they are nonetheless designed to enable individuals to obtain a global perspective as well as intercultural competence and awareness (Ahn, 2014). Studying abroad has been shown to increase the participating students' self-confidence and competitive edge in regard to future employment (Potts, 2015).

To identify perceived concerns and hopes of students intending to study abroad, Bell (2014) examined some theoretical frameworks that explain individuals' choices for taking up overseas study. One significant factor said to influence a student's decision to study abroad relates to future employment prospects rather than the actual educational experience (Thirolf, 2014). Perna (2006) on the other hand suggests that decisions are weighed up in terms of the potential personal and educational benefits when compared to the anticipated costs associated with the study. For Chinese students in particular who choose to study abroad, the new environment is undoubtedly going to contribute to a degree of uncertainty at both a social and educational level (Zhang, 2007). Other preoccupations associated with participating in such programs include: obtaining academic credit for the overseas course, prolonging one's graduation date, missed employment prospects, family considerations and, most significantly, financial constraints (Foster, 2014; Lenz & Wister, 2008; Shaftel *et al.* 2007).

Students who study abroad not only have to deal with the normal issues associated with being a student but must also contend with the added pressures related to living in an unfamiliar cultural context as well as studying in a different educational system and dealing with the challenges of language (Campbell, 2012). The review has summarised and analysed some important themes related to international students' intended study abroad and has

deliberately drawn attention to those issues considered to be the most relevant to the following investigation.

Methods

The methods used to collect and analyse data in this study are similar to those adopted by Lovett (2014a). Although a qualitative investigation, the research does incorporate some statistical analysis. The meaning of the participants' written responses however relies on an interpretive-descriptive approach (Belenky, 1992; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The interpretivist paradigm, in which the point of view of the actor informs an understanding of social phenomena, is the primary means of collecting, analysing and interpreting the data (Weber, 1947). Data are brief written responses to the research question "What concerns and hopes do you have regarding your intended course of study abroad?" Each response is informed by an individual's personal understanding and experience.

To infer that the concerns and hopes identified among this specific sample are typical of all Chinese students who intend to study overseas is unjustified. Nonetheless there are some points raised by the students in this study that could be considered generalisable (McMillan, 2004). Recruiting participants for this study relied on opportunistic sampling (Lovett, 2010) due to my obvious accessibility to the respondents. I teach research skills to this particular cohort. The participant sample consisted of fifty-nine, second-year undergraduate psychology students involved in a 2 + 2 program between their own tertiary institution and the ANU. Two variables, identified as significant in the collection, analysis and interpretation of the data, were age and gender. Data were generated in tutorials during the second week of the first semester 2017. Individuals were encouraged to be candid when responding to the research question. The data therefore are credible first-hand accounts of the students' anticipated experience. To ensure participants' confidentiality all responses were anonymous.

The participants' written responses were analysed using Ricoeur's (1976) interpretation theory. A detailed examination of narratives identified specific units of meaning. This critical reading however was preceded by an initial cursory or naïve reading. Each student's response was studied for themes, the participant's use of particular words and any inconsistencies in what the individual had written. Themes are conceptual labels aligned with events and other phenomena. They are abstract constructs that connect the expressions in the written responses to objects and images (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Analysis

A preliminary analysis described all of the participants' responses individually. Interpretation of the responses occurs in the next stage of the study. Interpretation, although acknowledging each participant's experiences and views separately, treats the themes collectively (Lovett, 2014b). The analysis of the data did not set out to solve a specific problem. Both a literal and interpretive treatment of the data identified the more important concerns and hopes of this student cohort's intended study abroad. Characteristics of the students' writing that were not discernible as standard English were edited from responses. Removing grammatical inconsistencies reflects my concerns about language and its capacity to label individuals. Imposing myself on the data is an attempt to reduce any potential strictures of participants due to language. The representation of each student's response nonetheless remains essentially intact (Fairclough, 1992). Emerging from the data are numerous themes that are consistent among the sample. One preoccupation in particular relates to the challenges of communication. For example:

I may not be able to catch up with the native learners in my study work (Female, 21).

My concerns are language gaps and culture gaps (Female, 19).

A concern is that I won't understand the lectures because of language (Female, 20).

My oral English may not be good enough to talk with foreigners (Female, 19).

I will be concerned about the academic environment, security and language barrier (Male, 20).

I'm worried about language which plays a vital part in life. Even though I have studied English for a couple of years ...it's still a little difficult for me to communicate fluently like a native speaker. I'm not certain whether others have the same problem (Female, 21).

Another significant theme identified among the cohort is the question of cultural difference:

I worry about the culture shock if I go abroad. Students who come from other countries may not understand Chinese culture. It might be difficult to relate to one another (Female, 19).

I think about the culture differences particularly in food and communication (Female, 19).

I'm concerned that cultural differences may bring about conflict (Female, 20).



Fig. 1: Concerns (Worditout, 2017)

Loneliness and culture differences concern me (Female, 20).

A concern of many individuals is the academic challenges they could face:

I'm concerned about a lot of things. Firstly how many classes I will have per week and how I will perform in them. This is a criterion measuring how I will digest the knowledge and skills (Female, 20).

My concerns are how teachers develop lectures. Will they be the same as the Chinese pattern? Are the final exams like those in China? Will we have to write a paper? Can I choose the tutors that teach the research area in which I'm interested (Female, 20)?

A concern is if the exams are too hard and I cannot succeed in my final examination (Male, 20).

The following responses identify what a majority of the students want to achieve from their intended experience abroad. Something not addressed in the literature and somewhat unexpected was a genuine desire among the participant sample to establish personal friendships:

I hope I can make some foreign friends (Female, 19).

I hope I can get along with many foreign people and build a solid relationship between countries (Male, 20).

I hope I can make some new friends in Australia with whom I can study and talk (Male, 19).

Make good friends with people from all over the world (Female, 19).

I wish to have a beautiful boyfriend (Female, 20).

If it's possible I'd like to make more friends who are from different countries (Female, 19).

The most important thing is to make some fantastic friends (Male, 18).

I want to make a pretty good friend (Other, 20).

Educational aspirations predictably constitute the greatest number of responses among the sample:

I hope to learn more skills and gain greater expertise (Female, 19).

I want to get a master's degree in psychology and acquire much more knowledge (Female, 19).

I hope I can do well in my courses at university and get a good final score (Male, 19).

To learn frontier research from another country (Male, 20).

I hope to attain a good score in my studies and learn plenty of knowledge to help broaden my horizon (Female, 19).

The data identify the personal views of this student group. Both the narrative responses and the representations of them (Figures 1, 2 & Table 1) help to provide an understanding of the research focus, namely international students' concerns and hopes about studying abroad. The study demonstrates that the preoccupations of this student cohort, regarding their intended overseas study, are numerous and varied. A literal and interpretive treatment of the data suggests that the issues of most concern, among a majority of the respondents, relate to the challenges of language and academic requirements. Conversely academic development and establishing friendships reflect the more positive expectations of the group. A number of themes identified in (Figures 1, 2 & Table 1) are consistent with previous research, for example: language, money, academic demands and cultural difference. However, as a social researcher and teacher the response of most interest to me is the students' hopes of establishing personal friendships when they are abroad.

Discussion

Evidence from the literature indicates that students who study abroad not only contend with issues one normally associates with being a student, but also face challenges of educational, cultural and linguistic difference (Campbell, 2012). The data indicate that a priority among the participant sample is to develop strong positive personal relationships with others during their overseas study program. To accommodate this expectation it is incumbent upon hosting institutions, and the communities of which they are part, to ensure international students feel included both socially as well as educationally. Paltridge, Mayson &

Table 1. Student Concerns and Hopes

	Males	Females	Other	Total	%
<i>Concerns</i>					
Academic demands	6	17	-	23	38%
Accommodation	1	9	-	10	16%
Cultural differences	3	16	-	19	32%
Language	4	25	-	29	49%
Money	3	7	-	10	16%
<i>Hopes</i>					
Develop academically	7	28	-	35	59%
To graduate	3	11	-	14	23%
Experience a different culture	-	13	-	13	22%
Be happy	1	8	1	10	16%
Make friends	7	22	1	30	50%

Study sample comprises 47 female, 11 male & 1 other student/s

Schapper (2012) however argue that a gap exists in the social support education institutions offer international students when the students are off campus. The researchers examined international students' experiences in Australia and found that the students' temporary visitor status created conditions for social exclusion. The suggestion is that many international students have difficulty involving themselves in the cultural and social aspects of Australian life.

Evidence to support claims of social isolation can be found in the Melbourne example. International students comprise almost one third of all young people who live in the city. Most are postgraduate or undergraduates under 25. Significantly the data indicate that the majority live alone. Melbourne City's own statistics show that the international student population grew rapidly from 17,000 in 2002 to 29,000 in 2011. As a consequence, the local government decided to become proactive in developing strategies to ensure the experiences of this diverse demographic are positive. Some of the plans include: providing opportunities for students to engage with the local community by connecting with libraries, arts and cultural programs as well as recreational centres. Local businesses and professional associations are also encouraged to offer internships and employment for international students (City of Melbourne, 2017). If adopted Australia wide this approach has the potential to improve international students' overall study experience



Fig. 2: Hopes (Worditout, 2017)

and contribute to their increased participation in the wider community: particularly in relation to establishing friendships with local Australians.

The volunteer and mentoring programs developed by Adelaide University similarly enable international students to meet others from all over the world: including locals. Students who participate are encouraged to become socially active and take a break from their studies. According to the website many of those involved in the program have developed lifelong friendships (Adelaide University, 2017). Another common belief is that homestay accommodation provides international students with opportunities to not only learn more about the country in which they are studying but it also gives students a chance to develop enduring friendships with local families. This may be true to some extent however Campbell's (2004) study of Chinese students' homestay experiences in New Zealand revealed that in many instances it was quite the opposite.

In light of the findings of this study, the ANU like other universities has a responsibility to guarantee that students get opportunities to fulfil the expectations they have in regard to developing positive personal relationships while in Canberra. According to The International Student Living Guide (2017) the primary concern of the International Students' Department (ISD) at ANU is to ensure the wellbeing of overseas students who live in the nation's capital. Given the evidence of social exclusion often experienced by overseas students within Australia it is hoped that the expectations of this study's participants can be met.

For a long time the issue of social inclusion has concerned the Australian tertiary education sector (Naylor & James, 2016). Universities obviously have a role to play when it comes to making international students feel welcome not only on but also off campus. The current policies and practices of Australian universities, and more specifically ANU, undoubtedly promote intercultural understanding and awareness. But do these policies actually help individuals develop enduring personal friendships, something this study's participants are looking for? I argue it should be the responsibility of teaching faculty as well as university administrators to get involved in developing activities both within and outside universities for those students who might feel socially disenfranchised.

Conclusion

This study has identified some concerns and hopes of students from a south-western Chinese university

who intend to study abroad. Consistent with previous research are preoccupations related to language, cultural difference and the anticipated academic demands of the intended study. An unexpected theme emerging from the data relates to students' willingness to develop strong personal friendships with others from the host country. However, a further review of the literature shows that these aspirations could possibly go unrealised. Paltridge, Mayson & Schapper's (2012) investigation indicates that international students' legal status and marginal location contributes to their social exclusion.

As a consequence, they require not only increased on-campus support but also a greater degree of acceptance among the wider community. According to Holmes (2000) cultural stress is a consequence of the uneasiness that develops from interacting in a culture different from one's own. Kashima & Loh (2006) cite previous research conducted by Furnham & Bochner (1986) that identifies different levels of social networking among international students: monocultural, bicultural and multicultural. Personal experience working with students from abroad, and in particular Chinese students, tells me that individuals tend to gravitate towards the monocultural network. It is natural to assume networking with other co-nationals would be easier than either biculturally or multiculturally. It is suggested that further qualitative research into these students' experiences is required. Individuals need to share more of their personal stories. I would hope for the sake of the students who participated in this research that their intended study abroad becomes more than just an academic undertaking.

Trevor Lovett is a teacher at the Xi'an University of Architecture and Technology, China.

Contact: hongkonglovett@hotmail.com

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