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A Non-Essentialist View of Temporality: Theorizing International Students' Experiences as Forms of Future-Oriented Waiting

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ABSTRACT: *Time is a pervasive dimension of international students' experiences. However, little research has examined international students' temporal experiences, particularly how time elicits affective responses. This article addresses this gap by adopting a non-essentialist view of time. Through narrative interviews with four Chinese postgraduate students in the UK, I find that they experienced temporal oppression due to the compressed, accelerated program. They often stayed up late to make time for their academic assignments. However, students reclaimed their temporal agency when they used a prospective perspective (imagining looking back on the present from the future), and they then viewed the accelerated one-year programme as valuable and precious. By theorizing international students' experiences as future-oriented waiting, this study explores the affective dimension of temporality in their everyday lives and provides empirical insights into students' lived temporal experiences.*

Keywords: Chinese international students, clock time-as-affect, future-oriented waiting, non-essentialist approach, temporal agency, temporal experiences

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INTRODUCTION

This article defines international students as those who study in a country other than their home country (Lane & Bhandari, 2024). Compared with domestic students from the country where the institution is located, international students come from abroad (Brooks & Waters, 2022). Scholars have written extensively about international students' experiences but have rarely considered temporal aspects, i.e., students' lived time (Shahjahan et al., 2024; Shahjahan & Zembylas, 2025). This article addresses this gap by exploring the temporal experiences of one-year MA international students. As Walker (2009) writes, global higher education is increasingly shaped by accelerated temporalities and intensified expectations for productive and successful time management, which makes students' academic lives feel rushed, unstable, and constantly subject to external forces. Understanding temporal experiences is urgent and significant given the uncertainty and unpredictable futures that international students face. For example, in the UK, due to unexpected policy implications, new immigration policies bring major changes: stricter English language requirements, shorter Graduate Visas, higher financial requirements, and tougher access to the job market (Prospects Editor, 2025). In the US, the Trump administration enforces visa restrictions and anti-immigration policies that directly affect both prospective and international students already studying in the US (Nietzel, 2025). In Canada, the federal government restricts international students' enrollment and work permits, causing fear and uncertainty about their futures (Mughees, 2025). Such policy uncertainties shape how international students imagine their futures and experience time.

Other broader contexts, such as academic cultures and socioeconomic factors, also shape students' temporal experiences. As Cheng and Adekola (2022) point out, Chinese international students are concerned about assessment in the UK, which primarily involves essay writing, whereas the Chinese system relies on examinations. Many Chinese families value an education-first culture and studying abroad is often seen as a significant investment to improve children's future career opportunities and social mobility (Liu & Wu, 2025). Taken together, immigration policies, academic cultures and socioeconomic factors influence how Chinese international students experience time abroad and future planning.

However, little research has explored how international students experience time- and future-oriented uncertainty while studying abroad. Therefore, this article addresses this gap by presenting empirical data on students' temporal experiences in a UK university and is situated in the global phenomenon of future uncertainty faced by international students. This article draws from the theory of time in international education, specifically clock time-as-affect, by Shahjahan and Zembylas (2025) to explore students' temporal experiences.

THEORETICAL GROUNDINGS

Below, I first review the literature about international student experience and the emerging temporality dimension. After discussing the research gap, I present the theoretical framework for this study: clock time-as-affect.

International Student Research

The significance of researching international students in higher education and their studying abroad experiences is well established (Ammigan et al., 2023). Many scholars have written about international students (e.g., Rabiei-Kashanaki et al., 2025; Rahim, 2025), and studying abroad is often viewed as a journey filled with acceleration: increased cognitive development (Loes & An, 2023), self-formation (Marginson, 2014), or opportunities for employability (Fakunle, 2021). Many studies focus on Chinese international students in UK universities, among which a variety of themes have been discussed, such as group learning (Zhuang & Bell, 2024), value for identity development (Hattersley & Nicholson, 2024), and COVID-19 pandemic education mobility (Liu & Wu, 2025). In the intercultural communication field, scholars theorize international student experience based on the stages of acculturation, such as the intercultural maturity model (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005). However, the temporal dimension of international students' experiences is under-researched, despite their experiences incorporating temporal complexities. As Brooks and Waters (2022) point out, international students need to take action to shape their futures while pursuing a degree abroad. Similarly, Shahjahan et al. (2024) highlight that international student experience is by nature temporal, as host countries use temporal markers to measure their stay abroad, such as how long their visas last or working hours allowed during their studies. Next, I visit some emerging studies that discuss temporality in global higher education and present my research gap.

Emerging Temporality in International Student Research

A few studies discuss the temporal dimension of international student experience. For example, Waters (2022) explores temporal dimensions by focusing on the duration of studying abroad, such as how the length of mobility programs (e.g., short durations of 1-2 months) could affect and benefit students' experiences and outcomes. Taylor et al. (2025) examine the temporal complexities of international undergraduate students' experiences in Canada and

find that students face pressures to be more productive and strategic in order to sustain their mobility aspirations. Similarly, Granja and Visentin's (2023) study examines the relationship between mobility duration and international students' academic performance at a Brazilian university. Both Lin et al. (2025) and Gonzalo and Escamilla (2025) find that short-term programs can also be effective in developing intercultural skills. These studies view time as a way to measure the duration of studying abroad (i.e., how much time or how efficiently or productively the time has been lived) and ignore how international students emotionally experience time or how they live through such temporal pressures.

Although Gomes' study (2022) of international PhD, MA and Honors students in Australia explores and addresses how students emotionally experience the temporal dimension of studying abroad, her study is limited to the crisis context (the COVID-19 pandemic). Hansen (2015) explores how Chinese elite students abroad affectively live time, and he finds that students experience a sense of restlessness (浮躁 fú zào) as studying abroad makes them live in a not-yet-purposeful time. However, his study theories affect as an existential condition or a human condition that elite students live in, while my study will be looking at how students emotionally live and experience the institution time abroad. In Xu's study (2021) of Chinese international students in UK higher education, students' engagement with the future is shaped by temporal structures, and time is viewed as a class differentiation. In other words, her focus on temporality is related to classed career strategies (e.g., deferred gratification; temporal destructuring), rather than affect or emotion. Naidu (2023) specifically focuses on cultural temporality: how Australian students in Indonesia experience Indonesian time (they get used to a slower pace and waiting) and how such experiences pedagogically shape students' intercultural learning. Dickson et al. (2024) report Arabian Gulf student-parents in a UK university, and their study specifically focuses on student-parents' daily routines (time to wake up the children, drop them off to school, go to university, return home and cook, etc.) and they find that these students experience a sense of isolation. While these studies address temporality, they often foreground crises, career strategies, class differentiation, or daily routines rather than how students emotionally live and experience time. This study addresses this gap by using a non-essentialist view of temporality.

A Non-essentialist Temporality: Clock Time-as-Affect

This article adopts Shahjahan et al.'s definition of clock time, which is the "dominant temporalities associated with mechanical or digital clocks and calendars" (2024, p. 2-3). Shahjahan et al. (2024) argue that clock time facilitates international students' academic assignments, degree attainment, and access to social support. Studies of international students often view clock time as a research background (Sarauw, 2024; Shahjahan et al., 2024; Impola, 2023), such as the year of data generation or the duration of students' programmes abroad (see the above section). These perspectives emphasize that experiences happen over a period of time. Clock time is often viewed as different stages of adaptation and acculturation in intercultural communication competence (e.g., the U-Curve

Model of intercultural Adjustment, Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1962; the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, Bennett, 1986). Such an essentialist view understands time as standard, homogenous, linear, and universal (Shahjahan et al., 2024). This may lead to an essentialist understanding of student experience, which risks generating a stereotypical understanding of students in which they are viewed as a homogenous group with fixed characteristics (Holliday, 2011; Huang, 2022) or students grow as a result of studying abroad (Shahjahan et al., 2024).

In comparison, a non-essentialist approach is to view clock time as relational and affective, and to place time as a dynamic force that generates affective responses, because time itself is affective and shapes relationships and subjectivities (Shahjahan et al., 2024). This resonates with Adam's concept of temporality (1998, 2004), which refers to phenomena concerned with how people experience time through time-related changes. As Shahjahan and Zembylas (2025) point out, clock time creates affective experiences, such as urgency, anxiety, detachment and belonging. Shahjahan and Zembylas (2025) propose linking the concepts of clock time and affect to explore how clock time generates affective experiences, which they call clock time-as-affect. Clock time-as-affect is defined as "academic life, at the microscale, is structured affectively, and affect might serve as a site of contestation and alternative temporal imaginaries" (Shahjahan & Zembylas, 2025, p. 4). They highlight that clock time-as-affect understands time as an affective force that is felt, lived, and organized in multiple and sometimes conflicting manners (e.g., durational, cyclical, or linear), and time produces different affective responses such as anticipation or anxiety (Shahjahan & Zembylas, 2025). In other words, clock time-as-affect reveals the interconnected relationships between clock time and affect, and it helps to explore the issues of sacrifices or prejudices and raises the questions of belonging within educational institutions (Shahjahan & Zembylas, 2025). Shahjahan and Zembylas (2025) propose this concept to decolonize higher education by understanding how affect reveals the power relations in the dominant Western linear clock time system and how alternative temporalities emerge. Clock time-as-affect disrupts the assumption that clock time is neutral, linear, or homogenous and foregrounds a non-essentialist approach to time: relational and affective, which views clock time as an affective force for negotiation and alternative temporal imaginaries.

International students experience and live in intricate temporalities, and clock time is "an inherent shift in many international migration experiences, as students are living new, unparalleled clock times" (2024, p. 4). Living in compressed and accelerated clock time in higher education (Walker, 2009), student experience is often cocreated by both time pressure and imagined futures. Using clock time-as-affect provides a non-linear and non-essentialist approach for researching student experience. Drawing on narrative interviews with Chinese MA students at a UK university, I explore how students make sense of their time. This paper contributes to the limited research on temporal dimensions of international students' experiences in higher education and challenges the deficit understandings of time in education, which tends to reduce the temporal dimensions of students' experiences to something measurable or linear (Collins & Shubin, 2017) and

ignores the lived experiences of times (Naidu, 2023). Next, I will discuss my methodology.

METHODOLODY

The data were originally generated for my doctoral study, which explored Chinese international students' intercultural experiences through the lens of rhythm. An earlier analysis of the dataset through the lens of rhythm has been published elsewhere (Zhao, 2026). In this article, I reused it with informed consent to illustrate international students' lived experiences from a different analytical perspective: clock time-as-affect experiences. I focused on Chinese international students, as they were the largest group of non-EU international students in the UK: in 2023-24, approximately 149,885 studied in the UK (HESA, 2025). This qualitative study was conducted at one of the most globally diverse public research universities in the UK: The University of Manchester. Approximately 9,000 international students are from China, the largest international student group at this university. Through purposive sampling to select information cases (Patton, 2015), I recruited 5 Chinese international students (one withdrew before an interview date was set) who were MA students in the International Education Programme. All participants' names are pseudonyms. Below is a table of participants' overview:

Table: Participants Overview

Pseudonyms	Year of Study	MA Course	Age	Gender
Yi	2022-23	International Education	30-34	Female
Xia	2022-23	International Education	23-25	Female
Rui	2022-23	International Education	23-25	Female
Hu	2022-23	International Education	23-25	Female

Yi worked as an English teacher for approximately 8 years in China. Her first attempt to study abroad was soon after she had completed her BA studies, but she had to delay it, as her family was opposed to her plan. Despite the delay, she appreciated the fact that she encountered many questions during her teaching that she hoped to find answers to from her MA studies. She felt her study was purposeful. Xia started her MA studies immediately after she completed her BA studies in China. Initially, she wanted to study in the UK and then explore different places and travel. She wanted to be adventurous. However, after she had witnessed the redundancy situation during the COVID-19 pandemic, she prioritized looking for a stable job upon completing her MA studies. Hu chose the International Education program because she wanted to explore a new career option of becoming a teacher. As a BA hotel management student, she interned at

a hotel in China. She had to constantly switch between day and night shifts, which made her experience an irregular work and rest schedule. Having decided to become a teacher, she researched her MA courses before she started her study because she wanted to make sure the courses she chose would speak to future employers. Specifically, she would choose the courses that her potential employers can understand that she trained to become an English teacher. Similarly, Rui also had one internship that made her want to change her future career. Specifically, she worked as a financial officer handling numbers all day, which she found dull. She wanted to become a teacher. She was excited to start her MA studies and go abroad with her friends. However, she had to take a gap year because her parents were concerned about her safety; at the time, the impact of COVID-19 was still ongoing. She soon decided to make use of this year and do something meaningful for her future: she worked as an online teacher.

The Research Ethics Committee at the University of Manchester approved this study (Review Reference No. 11149-20508), and all participants provided informed consent and signed the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form before data generation. The qualitative data collection in Mandarin Chinese language (chosen by the participants) was through one-on-one narrative interviews conducted in 2022 through the Zoom platform. Each interview session was audio recorded and ranged from 60-100 minutes. For this study, I used thematic analysis to examine students' affectively lived time by analyzing the Mandarin Chinese version of transcripts. Following Shahjahan and Zembylas' clock time-as-affect framework (2025), I closely looked at students' narratives that 1) mentioned time both implicitly (such as slowness, acceleration, delay or urgency) and explicitly (such as academic duration, temporal pressures or academic pacing) and 2) included affective experiences, such as hope, expectation, anticipation, frustration, or exhaustion. For the date presentation, I used literal translation to render the relevant quotes into English, making students' stories accessible to readers. Although the sample size was small, narrative research focuses on the depth of exploration of participants' lived experiences (Lyons & Scull, 2023), and thematic saturation was reached as similar themes were identified across the interviews in this study.

FINDINGS

This section presents students' clock-time-as-affect experiences: different affective responses to time from their study-abroad journeys. Specifically, I identified students' narratives about their affectively lived clock time (semester time) and their views on the one-year MA program when looking toward the future (a prospective perspective). Last, I reveal how students hold a future perspective: viewing their time abroad by imagining themselves looking back from a future time and a different space.

The Friction between Semester Time and Affect

Overall, semester time produced a sense of time pressure for students. Some students felt a temporal squeeze because their semester time was very short and fast, and they were often occupied by their academic tasks. For example:

> I feel that each semester is truly short. When I first came to the UK, I was still getting used to the living environment and hadn't yet quickly adapted to postgraduate study. The adjustment process took me quite a while but there was only so much time in the first semester. It felt like time just flew by before I had even figured out how to write an assignment, it was already time to submit. In the third semester, I had to meet my supervisor and prepare work to submit to him in advance. I felt the time was truly tight. I haven't truly had the chance to fully enjoy life. Soon I'll be going back home. Most of my time here has been spent between the university, the library, and my dorm. I haven't had many opportunities to truly see the world outside. (Rui)

This extract shows that students hoped for more time and a more flexible arrangement of time for other things (e.g., leisure) in addition to time for studying and academic tasks. Below, Xia shared how she experienced an abnormal time in the UK compared to a work and rest schedule she got used to when she studied in China:

> In China, my daily routine was quite regular. I usually got up approximately 6:00 or 6:30 in the morning, followed a steady schedule, took a nap at noon, and then studied in the afternoon. Things were quite different here. I found it hard to adjust because there was no midday break. I often stayed up late at night. Most of my classes were scheduled around midday, so I had to get used to having no nap. Now I've already adapted to staying up late, usually writing assignments at night. (Xia)

Thus, a new work and rest schedule provided by her institution in the UK made her experience an irregular and abnormal time, to which she had to get used to, along with staying up late to study. Similarly, Hu also articulated that she had to stay up late under the pressure of the deadline:

> My ideal way of studying is not to leave things until the last minute but to work on them gradually and give myself plenty of time - some buffer time. Otherwise, it ends up like when I had several deadlines at once. I had to finish four assignments at the same time, and it was overwhelming. Even though I tried my best to plan ahead and often stayed up late, I still felt there wasn't enough time. (Hu)

This narration demonstrated how she had to arrange time in advance and stay up late to be able to work on her academic deadlines in a state that she enjoyed. The deadline also created a sense of time pressure for her. These narratives suggest that students experienced time pressures when transitioning to the host

institution caused by the academic workload and temporal structures. Below is another extract about the affective experience of time at student dormitory:

> You just get so lonely, you know? I was in a bad mood. There was the pandemic, so I just stayed in my dormitory with no one to talk to. (Yi)

These stories portray students' affective experiences of their semester time, where they felt time was short, tense, and they were busy, studying up late due to the assignment deadlines and pressure from their academic tasks, or abnormal as it differed from a work and rest schedule they were used to, and a sense of loneliness at their dormitory. In other words, students spent most of their semester time on academic learning, resulting in reduced investment in socializing or leisure.

One-Year Programme: Temporal Compression as a Strategy

When students narrated their views toward the one-year MA programme time, they often referred to how studying abroad may benefit their futures. In other words, temporal compression became a strategy for students to save time and start their future career sooner:

> Since the program was short, I could return home after a year. By then, I would still be at a suitable age to quickly start looking for a job. (Xia)

> Studying abroad is a good choice for me. It is very cost-effective, as I can use one year to complete a degree that requires three years in China. It saves a lot of time. It is very much worth it. I feel that the whole experience is still very good. (Rui)

> People say that studying for a master's degree in the UK is a "Shui Shuo". I truly don't agree with this term. During this one year, you gain things you could never get from spending two or three years on a master's program in China. You broaden your horizons, experience different cultures, visit new places, and see how people live in other countries. I feel that this one year has been especially worthwhile. I've been trained in critical thinking. Now, whenever I face an issue, I tend to look at it from multiple angles, with a critical mindset. (Hu)

Students viewed their one-year MA time as time-saving and worthwhile, and they evaluated the time relationally as they compared it with the clock time for an MA degree in China. In this case, they felt that saving time was worthwhile, particularly in relation to their future life. How students valued the short MA programme in the UK and compressed schedule during each semester shows that they make use of such accelerated temporality to reclaim agency toward their future. From this perspective, acceleration and compression of time became an advantage, as they saved time. How students preferred the one-year MA programmes in the UK also reflects a strategic temporal compression. In this case, students actively choose to accelerate the transition into their future career. Thus, a shorter duration represents productivity and efficiency.

Prospective Meaning-Making

Another prominent theme is that students lived their one-year programme in anticipation of how they would view it from a future time. For example:

> When I look back on my life in the future, I want to have something to hold onto. This year has been very precious and has become an unforgettable memory. This year felt very relaxed because I didn't have financial burdens. Once I graduate, I'll have to work and support myself. It's also my final year of campus life, which feels relatively simple and pure. Right now, as a student, the pressure I feel is quite low, almost none, apart from the usual academic stress such as meeting deadlines. (Rui)

This is a prospective meaning-making about the one-year study abroad time. From this perspective, the affective experience of time became more positive. As shown in the above narration, students felt it was a very precious year, free from financial concerns, and it was a simple campus life. This view was shaped by students' imagined future time that they might be working and faced with more pressure. Below is an extract about the affective experience of time when looking back on from the future and how this view shaped students' meaning-making about their life in the UK:

> On weekends, I make sure to set aside at least one day to go out. I've already been here for more than half a year, and in another half year or so, I'll be going back to China. That makes me truly value every single day here. I try to spend time seeing the scenery and exploring. I like to visit different small towns and observe their architectural styles. Each place gives you a unique feeling and memory. Once I went into a vintage store and bought a few small items: a hand-painted picture from Italy and a little spoon. I've had quite a few trips like this. Buying these small things gives them a special sentimental value, as they add an invisible sense of depth and memory to my travels. Later, whenever I look at them, I'll immediately remember where I bought them. (Hu)

In this case, Hu hoped to maintain a sense of sentimental value from the present for her to look back on from a future time and in a different space through materials (e.g., souvenirs). This view made her arrange more time to explore and create more experiences while she was still in the UK. In contrast, Rui resorted to digital media:

> I usually record my study abroad life through videos. I often film little clips and then edit them together. I also share my study abroad life and travel experiences on social media. For me, it's about having something to look back on in the future. (Rui)

Digital media in this study is found to be a medium for international students to connect with their future time. Specifically, students used digital media (photos

and videos) as a resource for meaning-making and a medium to extend the present time to a future clock time. Below is another quotation about looking the future:

> I think waiting is a kind of coexistence of anxiety and hope, and it is purposeful. I think it is because you especially hope that you can get the result you want at the end of the waiting point. I think it still is a kind of purposeful waiting; it doesn't mean that I'm aimless: I'm just being here. It's purposeful, I hope it's a good result, I hope what I waited for was the result I imagined, or an ideal result, such as good IELTS results so that I can finally get an offer from a certain school. At present, the waiting is over for that stage, but for the next stage, it may have just begun. (Xia)

This narration portrayed the affective conditions that students experience: studying abroad is not a linear progression; students lived in both anxiety and hope; and the end of some events may only mean the start of waiting for another.

This section demonstrates that students' clock time-as-affect experiences are closely related to future time. During their studies in the UK, students imagined how they would look back on their time abroad from the future (valuable, unforgettable, carefree, simple, precious, sentimental, something to look back on, to wait for). In this case, students project into their future where they utilize their studying abroad journey, and such a prospective perspective enables the present time pressure caused by their semester time to become something meaningful for their future. In short, such a future orientation perspective to some extent makes students step out of the present time pressures. Below, I discuss these findings in relation to the literature.

DISCUSSION

The findings show how temporal compression and acceleration can produce oppression while simultaneously turning into something favorable when students orient themselves toward imagined future outcomes. As seen in students' stories, they often had to stay up late to work on their academic assignments to make up for the tight schedule. Students also hoped for a more flexible and freer schedule to allow them more time to engage with other activities in addition to their academic assignments. However, I observed a prospective perspective from students' narratives, which turned the oppression from the temporally compressed one-year MA programme into a site of temporal agency. The compressed programme became productive and efficient, which differs from Shahjahan and Zembylas' (2025) and Shahjahan's (2025) findings about perceptions toward accelerated time. Overall, these findings suggest that temporal experiences shape students' everyday lives and their orientations toward the future, which resonates with previous studies that highlight the affective dimension of lived temporal experiences (Shahjahan, 2025; Kaya, 2020) while extending this literature by demonstrating how a future perspective shapes students' lived experiences of anticipation.

Building on my findings, I conceptualize international students' clock time-as-affect experiences as a form of future-oriented waiting. Future-oriented waiting

is an affective and temporal condition in which international students connect multiple stages of their progression, and the completion of one stage indicates the beginning of the next phase of anticipation rather than signaling the end. As shown in the findings section, students' views of their semester time as short, tight, and busy yet precious, worthwhile and valuable demonstrate how waiting is lived under conditions of temporal compression. In this situation, waiting does not denote temporal governance (e.g., Dobler, 2020) or endurance (e.g., Hage, 2009), suspension (e.g., Ramachandran & Vathi, 2022) or strategic waiting (e.g., Xu, 2021; Jeffrey, 2010; Naidu, 2023) or waiting within mobility (e.g., Bissell, 2007). In comparison, future-oriented waiting demonstrates an affective temporal condition, and it is a type of processual waiting across multiple stages. International students live in this condition while simultaneously being oriented toward an anticipated future time. Moreover, students narrated an awareness of time, where each semester, each week and each day were significant. In this sense, students experienced waiting as a time pressure and an affective experience of time. At the same time, students' stories show how their imagined future was consistently shaping their present actions. Students valued the time spent on their academic tasks and viewed such time allocation as meaningful because it was expected to be useful in the future, such as for their future careers or long-term goals. Students even viewed their weekend trips, leisure activities and digital media as the means to invest in their future memory. In other words, students valued their experiences abroad not only while they were happening or happened at that particular moment but also for how they might be remembered in the future and a different space.

Future-oriented waiting differs from the approaches that reduce students' experiences as a linear progression or adaptation, such as the intercultural maturity model by King and Baxter Magolda (2005), the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity by Bennett (1986), or the aspirational approach of international students' experiences that assume students develop or grow from studying abroad (Shahjahan et al., 2024). Instead, future-oriented waiting captures the state that students often live in, which often indicates a sense of uncertainty about their future plans, such as after graduation, or longer-term goals. However, such a state of uncertainty did not mean inaction; instead, it generated a form of active waiting in which students' futures remained open and exploratory, and students continued to affectively live in the present. Therefore, future-oriented waiting represents students' ongoing and procedural negotiation between their anticipation and everyday practices. Future-oriented waiting also explores international students' affective and temporal experiences between the clock time while studying abroad and their imagined futures. This article offers empirical evidence for Shahjahan and Zembylas' clock time-as-affect (2025), disrupts the linear narratives of students' experiences, and incorporates the future dimension into the research. It also provides empirical evidence for understanding how students' present and future shape their engagement with their academic learning abroad (Shahjahan et al., 2024). Last, the concept of future-oriented waiting provides an approach to understanding how students navigate compressed programs while maintaining future-oriented anticipations.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have discussed students' clock time-as-affect experiences from a UK university setting. My aim is to reveal international students' nonlinear, subjective, affective, and relational dimensions of time experiences in their journey of studying abroad. As demonstrated by the example data, students were not just living and studying abroad for one year; they experienced temporal intricacies and responded to the clock time: sometimes calendars made them feel tense, stressed, and busy. They experienced temporal compression and oppression, which could also become a site for reclaiming agency when students used a prospective meaning-making perspective. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of international students' lived experiences and the significance of temporality in shaping students' experiences in higher education contexts. Furthermore, these findings extend discussions of waiting by illustrating that waiting is not only experienced as something passive but can also function as a future-oriented engagement with anticipated possibilities.

Theoretically, by adopting the theory of clock time-as-affect (Shahjahan & Zembylas, 2025), I presented students' microlevel negotiation and resistance and theorized students' experiences as forms of future-oriented waiting. Future-oriented waiting demonstrates how international students reclaimed their affective agency from the dominant, linear, and neutral clock time, which speaks to Shahjahan and Zembylas' (2025) proposition of decolonizing time in higher education. This approach differs from the understandings of linear progression and adaptation of international students and highlights a non-essentialist perspective of researching international students' experiences. This article generates practical insights for UK universities in terms of academic scheduling. Specifically, universities should consider more flexible temporal support systems that address the non-linear, subjective, and relational experiences of international students. Future-oriented waiting exemplifies a non-essentialist approach to student experience research by foregrounding clock time as lived, affective and relational. Overall, this article contributes to broader discussions of temporality and international student experiences in higher education.

The limitation of this article is that I only have a small sample size; however, narrative inquiry often encourages qualities, as it allows for in-depth exploration of individual stories and experiences rather than generalization of the findings to all Chinese international students. Future studies may consider using more creative research methods such as photography (Huang & Cockayne, 2025) to capture students' clock time-as-affect experiences. Future research should also consider how international students' prospective meaning-making transforms after they return to their home countries within the current global labor market.

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