Article

We have to change; they stay the same: Chinese international students' academic experiences at an Australian university

Mingxin Qu
Xianlin Song
The University of Western Australia

ABSTRACT

In the current climate of global international education, overseas student integration and difficulties in adjusting into the academic life of the host country are often posited as personal failures. However, the categorization of international students is premised on them not being active subjects in the curriculum and the ways in which they can contribute to the internationalization of higher education. The current study addresses this negative characterization through a selective qualitative methodology, observing and interviewing 24 Chinese international students at an Australian university. Conducted during the COVID pandemic period, this study offers new insights into how the shift to online learning exacerbated the failure of the teaching, learning, and curriculum models that predominate in Australian universities. We conclude that as the pandemic subsides, deeper conversations are necessary over the continued prevalence of the deficit model while considering international students' agency in their learning practices.

Keywords: academic life, Australian universities, categorization of international students, Chinese international students, international education, overseas student integration

With a growing number of international students worldwide, 'internationalization' has become a catchphrase on university campuses, and literature highlights an overall acceleration of internationalization activities by universities. (Knight, 2007; Song 2020; Singh & Jack 2022; Mathies & Karhunen 2021; Yang et al., 2022; Xu & Keevers 2022; Tran et al., 2022). However, the definition of internationalization remains vague, with many policy documents and academic articles taking its meaning for granted. The most cited definition of internationalization is by Knight (2004), who describes it as 'the process of integrating an internationalization, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education.' Internationalization has been considered instrumental in preparing students, producing useful knowledge, and generating solutions to the proliferating challenges of an increasingly interconnected world (Teichler, 2010). Further, it has been asserted that the curriculum should also prepare students to be ethical and responsible citizens and human beings in our globalized world (Leask, 2016). However, despite institutions' idealized goal of global learning, there is a lack of clearly expressed standards and principles to direct the progression of universities' international activities. According to Kingston and Foreland (2008), there is a cultural and lived gap between international students and host academics. De Wit (1999) argues that most internationalized activities take place in a piecemeal manner rather than as part of a thoughtful, strategic, and integrative process. Reflecting on 30 years of educational internationalization, de Wit and Deca (2020) argue that the traditional values that have driven international activities in higher education in the past, such as exchange and cooperation, peace and mutual understanding, human capital development, and solidarity, although still present in the vocabulary of international education, have been sidelined by pursuits of 'competition, revenue and reputation/branding' (p. 5).

As Chinese students constitute the largest cohort of international students studying overseas (Song 2020), they are integral to ongoing debates on internationalization, the shift from education and common good values to that commercialization and revenue raising for higher education institutions and national export benefit. Despite 30 years of overseas education among different cohorts of Chinese outward flows, there remains a persistent characterization of Chinese students as deficit learners in the academic literature (Song, 2012; Ryan, 2002; Ryan & Louie, 2007; Smith & Zhou, 2022). This creates an incomplete understanding of their experiences in a foreign country and perpetuates the stereotype that they are incompetent and struggle to live up to Western standards. To address this pervasive deficit in the literature, the current article presents a case study based on 24 Chinese international students debunking the deficit syndrome, describing how they negotiate their academic experiences at an Australian university.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Chinese international students in the academic imaginary

Academic publications on Chinese international students have focused on their growing number and the academic challenges they encounter while adjusting to Western campuses, as well as the challenges they present to host universities working toward accommodating international students' needs. Although the majority of international students gain international experience and degrees abroad, many non-white (non-Western) racialized students are still perceived as academically and culturally inferior in Western societies (Dervin, 2011; Lomer & Anthony-Okeke, 2019; Simpson, 2020). Chinese international students are frequently positioned as 'lacking' language ability, academic skills, or other characteristics intrinsic to academic success (Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2021; Mittelmeier & Yang, 2022; Ryan, 2002; Tight, 2022). This portrayal is prevalent in policy and institutional discourse as well as in academic literature (Lomer & Anthony-Okele, 2019). Of particular note was the challenges that international student can face in integrating into the life of the host university (Wang & Shan 2007; Yeoh & terry 2013; Howes, 2021). Within the extant scholarship international students who faced challenges in integrating into the host university were typically positioned as 'in deficit' (Siczek, 2015).

An issue often identified as causing particular concern in Australian universities revolves around the different cultural and social experiences and values that Chinese students bring to Anglophone universities. For example, Chinese students are sometimes portrayed as demonstrating very different ways of 'reasoning.' They are often regarded as lacking 'critical thinking' that is central to academic criteria and assessment (Song, 2016). They are also described as 'passive' rote learners who adopt a surface approach to learning and who are not capable of meeting the demands of university study programs (Leask & Carroll, 2011). Claims such as their English proficiency is poor, and China's educational system is deficient are ubiquitous (Lu & Singh, 2017). This literature erroneously ignores the diversity of this cohort and labels them in totality, which has been described as the 'Chinese student syndrome' (Song, 2020). According to Heng (2019), it is imperative to transcend a simplistic understanding of international students solely based on their nationality or through the dichotomy perspective of "international vs domestic students". The findings of her research (2019) suggest that within a single nationality, the experiences of international students encompass a confluence of diverse elements, including nationality, year of study, field of study and gender.

The universality of these deficit descriptions seems to be taken for granted by some scholars; the question of how these international students view teaching activities in the internationalization process of higher education has rarely been explored. As has been pointed out, some international student literature objectifies and silences international students by speaking about them rather than speaking with them (Moosavi, 2022). This is indicative of a research gap; indeed, hearing the voices of international students is important as they are active players in internationalization projects. Rather than characterizing international students as passive or weak agents who have become pawns to maintaining a neocolonial political economy, they should instead be seen as strong agents, as Marginson (2013) described. Since they are in a unique position to reflect on their experiences

and comment on teaching activities, their insights are needed, such that they can be engaged as participants in the production and negotiation of knowledge. Examining the perspectives of Chinese international students regarding internationalization can be an important step in narrowing the gap between rhetoric and praxis. It can also help address the implementation of internationalization activities at this historical juncture where the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted failures of the university as a public good and aggravated inequalities and exclusions in contemporary universities (Morreira et al., 2020).

METHOD

This ethnographic fieldwork was conducted at an Australian university in 2020, where the international student cohort comprised 20% of the total student population, 50% of whom were Chinese citizens. It documents and analyzes data derived from 24 Chinese international students pertaining to their experiences before moving to Australia for higher education and their lived experiences at an Australian university. We used two methods, participant observation and in-depth interviews, to explore and capture participants' thoughts and understanding. Qualitative research methods (e.g., participant observation) as a mode of gathering and producing data have been marginally employed in educational research on international students in Anglophone countries. However, these methods are considered useful tools for drawing out participants' knowledge in ways that challenge the dominant ways of generating knowledge and views about teaching and learning (Deuchar, 2022).

The research question and Qualitative research methodology during a pandemic

The research question is: How do Chinese international students describe their academic experiences in an Australian university?

The study was conducted with regulations for ethical research approval by the university Human Ethics Committee. Hoping to gain a deeper understanding of Chinese students' experiences, the first researcher initially planned to be immersed in both the academic and social aspects of the students' lives and engage with them, accordingly, including taking their classes, participating in weekly social events held by the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA), and attending occasional social gatherings. However, the COVID-19 pandemic made it impossible to conduct this study as planned. Due to the COVID-19 lockdown, all classes were transferred online, and weekly social events were canceled. Therefore, in the first semester, participant observation was carried out on Zoom by participating in three undergraduate units comprising a large number of Chinese students: two in level 1 business school courses on finance and company law, and one in a social science course at level 3. In the second semester, participant observation was carried out in diverse on- and off-campus settings

including classrooms, campus events, weekly social events held by the CSSA, and occasional social gatherings.

To recruit participants, unit coordinators helped the researcher send study information flyers to students. Study information flyers were also sent to WeChat (a Chinese social media platform) groups of Chinese international students, including the 'New Students Group 2020,' 'Student Accommodation Group, 'Students Group 2019,' and 'Students Group 2018.' Each group comprised 400 500 members. Flyers were also sent to > 1000 Chinese students who subscribed to the official CSSA account via the CSSA official WeChat account. The participants were incentivized with small tokens of appreciation for their voluntary participation. A snowball recruitment strategy was also employed, which involved requesting that every interviewee send study information flyers to interested friends or colleagues. Once the students responded to the flyer, they were assigned pseudonyms agreed upon and asked questions regarding their major, level of study, gender, and age to ensure the inclusion of first-year (N=12) and third-year (N=12) students of both genders from a wide range of majors.

Two waves of interviews (N=24) were conducted, one during each semester of the university's 2020 academic year. This allowed for a longitudinal investigation of the participants' changing attitudes and feelings. The first wave of interviews was conducted online via WeChat video because of the social distancing rules during the COVID-19 pandemic. The second wave of interviews was conducted face-to-face on campus. Verbal consent was obtained and recorded for both waves of the interviews.

Thematic analysis was employed for this research, and it is both exploratory and inductive. This is a method of enabling the systematic "identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set", which allowed researchers to make sense of the participants' experiences and meanings, with each theme working together to create a larger narrative about the data (Braun and Clarke 2012). The data used in this study are part of a longitudinal ethnographic study. Three broad divisions have been made in the presentation of the data in this paper: 'assessment,' 'teaching/learning style,' and 'curriculum.'

Trustworthiness

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, various strategies were employed. 1)reflexivity: the research team includes two individuals: one doctoral student and one established research scholar. It should be noted that the first researcher documents her feelings about the participants' responses as well as our similarities and differences in the fieldnotes, in order to create a multi-voiced narration, which offers more "factual evidence" (Ellis et al. 2011. p282) to "tell it as it is" to the readers (Jootun et al. 2009. p44); 2) prolonged involvement in the study: the first researcher spent a great deal of time with participants in the Chinese student community. As familiarity grew, some participants became increasingly willing to express their authentic thoughts and ideas. This prolonged engagement with the participants increases common trust, potentially reducing

respondent biases; 3) member checking: the interpretation of the data was discussed with several key informants who paid close attention to the well-being of the Chinese international students. This allowed them to provide feedback and comments on the researcher's interpretation of all the quotes.

Ethics

The study was conducted with regulations for ethical research approval by the university Human Ethics Committee. For permission to be in the classroom/zoom class for participant observation, study information flyers, and consent forms were sent to unit coordinators to ask for permission to be in the class. Unit coordinators also sent study information forms and consent forms to students so that informed verbal consent from students could be obtained.

For participating in the weekly social events held by the Chinese Studentsand Scholars Association (CSSA) and occasional social gatherings, the researcher contacted the leader of this organization for permission to be present in their activity.

For those who agreed to participate in the interview, all participants received a participant information sheet describing details of aims, objectives, ethical concerns, and researchers' contact information and a consent form in electronic form. Involvement in the research was voluntary, allowing participants to withdraw at any stage of the study. All participants have been given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

RESULTS

Assessment: critical thinking and participation

During the year, a significant volume of our conversations was devoted to discussing participants' attempts to make sense of the assessment criteria of Australian universities, as grades are the most important concern for students, according to some participants. Students made comments about how they perceived 'critical thinking,' which they heard about many times, and what was expected from them to prove their criticality. Several participants believed that teachers may have different standards for critical thinking, and they were not provided a clear definition of what constitutes critical thinking, even though they were required to be critical. They were often unsure if they demonstrated 'enough' critical thinking in their essays; they were constantly struggling with this uncertainty and sensing a conflict between their understanding of critical thinking and that of teachers:

> Teachers have vague requirements for critical thinking. I received different feedback from different teachers; one said I showed great ability for critical thinking and got High Distinction, and another said I did not have that. I got confused.

I think teachers may need to have a clear standard for critical thinking. I never received detailed feedback regarding this. I discussed with other international students; it turned out we had a different understanding of 'being critical'. If it is listed as a teaching objective, I need to know how you will teach it and how to measure if I mastered it or not.

In most of my units, teachers listed critical thinking as a teaching objective. But they did not show us how to do this or if I did it in the right way. I am already a level 3 student, but I still do not know if I have this skill or not, based on their criteria. The problem may be due to the teachers. Maybe some teachers do not know how to teach this skill.

A student specifically expressed his confusion, 'critical thinking may virtually exist in teaching…you cannot see it, rather you can feel it.' It seems that critical thinking is a vague and subjective notion, and it is not possible to determine who is proficient in it (Moosavi, 2022). Moore (2011) found that despite being regarded as a key feature of university education, there still exists a wide variation in how academics understand critical thinking. Ryan and Louie (2007) also commented that there is currently no agreement among academics about this crucial concept [critical thinking], and that international students are often judged to lack this attribute. In this context, a recommendation is to question and evaluate whether and how academics are implementing critical thinking in their teaching before determining whether international students lack this skill. Song (2018) argued that generic critical thinking courses impose Western logic yet fail to problematize the notion of critical thinking.

Unsurprisingly, some students were aware that there is a difference between the Chinese and Australian education systems. However, this variance does not deter them from possessing critical thinking skills in both education systems. They expressed how unreasonable it is to assume that Chinese students lack critical thinking skills and how they exercise their agency in adapting to disciplinary requirements and practices at an Australian university:

It is the difference in the writing format, rather than critical thinking. I learned how to write an English essay from a Chinese teacher at this university. He showed us the format and what to write in each paragraph. Once I know it, all I need to do is practice writing a good academic essay. The logic is the same; if you don't have that logic, you cannot write either in Chinese or in English.

As long as Chinese students realize that they need to be critical, this is learnable. It is not like you will never get there.

I learned how to write an English academic essay from a Chinese media platform [Little Red Book], where I was taught by Chinese teachers. Many Chinese international students learn from there; we share our feedback and discuss how to improve our writing. We figured out our ways to follow the rules in this game, and that's how I got HD in my last semester.

Several students reported that it was true that some Chinese students were quieter than native students. The native students seemed more enthusiastic about asking questions and joining class discussions. Several of these comments came up during the interview. When asked the reason for this, consistent with previous findings, the most frequent answer was language. Most of the students explained that it is difficult to think and respond quickly in a second language:

> Native students can express themselves freely because they are using their native language, but for us, we have to understand the knowledge and logic first, then translate everything in our mind before we say it. Sometimes, we get stuck on a word we don't know.

Several students expressed frustration and even anger that native students were much faster than them, and their native classmates had already answered the questions while they were busy translating everything in their minds.

An important issue to note here is that while the criticism of international students not being critical thinkers is based on them not verbalizing their responses in class, it is actually a second language problem. In fact, in this observational study, seminar discussions in a class taught in Chinese by a Chinese teacher were found to be the liveliest, with most of the Chinese students raising their hands and contributing to the discussions. These students were comfortable participating when they felt they were in their "language comfort zone". Thus, rather than assuming that Chinese students lack critical thinking skills when they do not speak in the classroom, it could be inferred that it is challenging for them to demonstrate this skill in a second language. Some students commented, 'I believe it is hard for native students to do this [taking the class and participating] in Chinese.' Though educators may believe that 'verbal evidence of critical thinking is the surest sign that someone is a critical thinker or that critical thinking has taken place' (Atkinson, 1997, p. 84), according to the participants of this study, these seemingly less-vocal students should not be presumed and identified as lacking critical thinking skills. While they may answer questions and speak up in the classroom a comparatively lesser number of times than the host students, we cannot conclude that they do not have a deeper understanding of the knowledge than more active and talkative students.

Other reported factors for not speaking in class were unfamiliarity with the content, culturally influenced perceptions of participation in the classroom, and tutors' attitudes. Some students said that they do not ask questions or speak up because they think 'we know how to do it and what we should do, but we do not show off,' or that 'if I had other questions, I would ask the teachers after class'; they mentioned hating the feeling that everyone is staring at them when they speak up or they hate the feeling of being embarrassed by tutors. A student expressed his frustration, 'I tried to be active in the class discussion. But that was one time that the tutor said, "I do not understand your accent." This was embarrassing. I was afraid to speak English.'

Interestingly, some students responded differently in the first and second interviews when asked if they thought native English students were better than Chinese students in critical thinking. In the first interview, which was conducted three weeks after participants enrolled in the university, several students responded to the researcher in the same (rather cliché) manner, such as 'they are better than us because they are so active in the classroom, and they are so good at asking questions; we are hugely influenced by Confucian culture, so we are encouraged to remain silent and quiet,' or 'they learned to be critical since they were young, of course they are better than us.' However, during the second interview, several participants changed opinions. For example, one student commented,

> At first, I thought I was inferior to native students, learning in English, and I'm at 'their' place. But now, I don't think so. I talked with some native students. I know we are the same. Some of them also do not want to speak up in the classroom, if it weren't for participation grades. I am active in the class, not because I like to share my views, but because I want a higher score. In terms of being critical and thinking from different perspectives, I've seen brilliant ideas both from Chinese students and natives.

The researcher asked the students why they had different attitudes and answers. One participant answered that she felt intimidated by the foreign environment after arriving in Australia. Another student reported, 'Before I went abroad, I was told by my overseas education service agent that foreign universities have great expectations for critical thinking that Chinese students normally do not have.' However, several students shared that after forming groups with local students or studying in Australia for a longer time, they found that they did not experience much difference in their ability to think. The main difference is that native students are in their "language comfort zone", but Chinese students are not.

An analytically interesting point is that the students accepted these stereotypes before they started their studies in Australia. Some students internalized the stereotype and attitude that they did not possess critical thinking skills, so they were inferior to the native people. This mentality prevented some Chinese students from making friends and forming social/academic groups with native students. The perceptions of Chinese students and education may be so ingrained that some Chinese students may also consider them unquestionable truths. These perceptions regarding themselves may have devastating consequences, such as feelings of insecurity and lowered confidence or self-esteem (Moosavi, 2022). Some students reported that they were influenced by a popular saying when they were in China, 'The foreign moon is fuller,' which means the West is understood to be at the top of the global hierarchy and is better than their own country. A particular senior student, Anji, commented in a rather radical way that the stereotype is so prevalent that it is possible that when Western students take notes diligently, it is considered hard work, but when Chinese

students do so, it reflects a lack of critical thinking and rote learning, 'double standards always exist'.

These stereotypes of Chinese students not only affect their perceptions of themselves but also the perception of tutors. According to David, a first-year student, a tutor gave him lower grades in class participation than other native classmates in his group when they appeared to have the same level of participation. He expressed poignantly, 'I discussed this with him [his native classmate]; he is a very timid person, afraid to speak up in the class, worse than me. Perhaps the tutor saw his English name and thought that he was good at spontaneously participating.'

Student-centered teaching?

As noted above, the participants went through an unsettling and worrisome period during the first wave of the pandemic, and much of the talk (including discussion in interviews and social activities the researcher joined in) tended to orient more toward students' disappointment toward both the university and the host country. Interview data revealed that although teaching styles in Western universities are promoted as 'student-centered,' many participants have contradictory comments. More than half of the participants arrived at campus three weeks after the orientation. Several of them expressed disappointment due to the lack of guidance from the university surrounding their adaptation to their new university life:

> We are at least two or three weeks behind other students due to COVID-19. There are only 11 weeks in one semester. If the university cares about us, they should take responsibility for what we missed in the first several weeks. How can you call it 'student-centered learning' if we are not even in the class?

These students felt that teaching practices and assessments depend on tutors and unit coordinators; students do not have much agency in this regard:

> Tutors have a big say in students' grades. If a student does not behave in a way that teachers ask for [expect], this student would not achieve a high score. For example, I know a Chinese student, a very timid person. He refused to answer questions in class and talked back, and he failed that unit. I think students' performance should be assessed based on how much knowledge they acquire, rather than teachers' personal opinions. Part of a student's grade is determined by teachers' opinions of that student.

> I don't get the student-centered way of teaching. Does having more interaction mean being student-centered? It is superficial…

I did not feel much difference [in teaching styles between China and Australia]. The only thing I noticed is that some Australian teachers like to play games with students in class.

Several participants also noted that the teaching quality is determined by how good the tutor is, 'Some tutors fail to perform their role as a facilitator. Spending most of the class time in group discussions does not mean that the class is student-centered. Sometimes, tutors throw everything at students to figure out what's important.' One interviewee commented, 'It is understandable, as far as I know, that teaching performance is not linked to their promotion. However, if we pay a large amount for education, we deserve a better education.' They believe it is likely that some tutors are not qualified, and they do not know the authentic way to 'center' students in their teaching. One participant commented, 'I have seen a tutor who divided the group based on students' nationality. This is weird.' Some students have doubts about the tutors' ability to teach, and some expressed their frustration with the poor management of the university, also stating that the university should do more to improve their teaching quality; a student questioned: 'Why do I have to pay such an amount of money to listen to them reading from slides?'

An important issue here is the nature of academic labor in Australia, where over 50% of teaching is conducted by casual staff at an hourly paid rate, and they are part of a highly segmented system where they feel alienated from both the permanent academics and the students (Norton, 2014). Casualization has produced a fundamental shift in the Australian academic labor market, with the majority of teaching now conducted by casual staff, limited industrial protection, few professional standards, limited research and course design capacity, and constrained academic freedom (Percy et al., 2008). Klopper and Power (2014), in their analysis of sessional teaching staff, found that the precarious nature of the casual staff and their lack of funding for preparation and assessment adversely affected student-centered learning. Delaney et al. (2010) investigated students' perceptions of the qualities of effective teachers in higher education, reporting that students prominently expressed such teachers to be respectful, knowledgeable, and approachable, and as placing students at the center of learning; however, they found that these values were unequally evident in Australian teaching programs. In their survey of international students during the pandemic, Weng et al. (2021) found that students experienced a heightened sense of alienation and increased stereotyping, which affected their learning environment, and educators were unaware of the cultural and racial pressures on students caused by the pandemic.

Curriculum

The interview data revealed that despite romanticized thinking about studying abroad among some participants, the experience of internationalization did not involve the diversity marketed and promised by universities. According to several participants, in some units, the content is mainly dominated by narrow Western knowledge, 'Some academics are not even trying to incorporate global

dimensions into the curriculum. They adhere to textbooks mainly in the Australian context, using no other learning materials.'

Several students commented that when they had to complete group projects, tutors would specifically mention that Australian local projects were preferred and recommended; a participant commented with indignation, 'A teacher did not incorporate any international cases to the content.' Another interviewee also mentioned:

> One time, he requested all of us to analyze the same company in Australia, BHP. I did not learn much from other students' presentations because we are all doing the same thing. I believe it would be more international if he could be more flexible, like having more students involved.

According to some participants, teachers may lack the ability to deal with increasingly diversified student cohorts or may not pay attention to dealing with this issue.

However, the dominance of Western content was not always criticized. One participant specifically expressed his understanding of the limited scope of knowledge and the lack of international dimensions in the curriculum. He commented, 'I believe sometimes they have their concerns. Teaching must be delivered in the "safe zone." For example, they must be careful not to defend certain students or a particular culture.' According to him, censorship is everywhere, and incorporating international cases or dimensions can be risky: 'For example, I know a few years ago, a Chinese student reported to the university that the professor is racist for mentioning Chinese people have a culture of eating dog meat.'

In contrast, several participants shared the feeling of 'studying in an international environment' because of the global dimensions incorporated into various aspects of the formal curriculum, such as the learning materials. These units were praised by students, who expressed having multinational and global outlooks as a result: 'This university has units that can help students to know more about the globe, such as some language units.'

> At least one-third of the lectures and tutors I met exposed us to different business cultures and different policies around the world. We have a comprehensive understanding of the world. For example, in a finance unit, the lecturer would update his slides and learning materials based on changes in related international situations.

Several participants paused a while when asked about the arrangements of the curriculum and commented, 'I did not think much about it. This depends on the attitudes of lecturers and tutors, such as whether they incorporate international dimensions or consider diverse student groups when designing a syllabus. It can be hard, or even impossible.' They believed that the course content might not be able to attain a geographic balance.

Several participants did not see a connection between some subjects and the future careers that they wanted to pursue. Interview data revealed that although their lecturers tried to blend in Asian examples in the curricula, because of the significant number of Asian students, they felt some degree of disconnection between the content and the local context of China. For example, one participant reported:

> My major is Marine Science. The textbooks, projects, and cases are limited to Australia. We barely touch upon other areas or make comparisons between different areas. This is mainly local and not global. Many theories may not apply to the context of China.

They felt that the country's curriculum and education were designed to 'serve the local job market.'

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of this study point to some key considerations regarding the education of Chinese international students and the development of internationalization. First, we conclude that the generic graduate attributes mandated by the university, such as critical thinking and verbal participation in the classroom, are problematic, as they still assess students with a universalized and superficial set of standards without much international student involvement. Several students specifically commented that the 'student-centered' way of teaching is superficial; as all the reading materials, syllabus, and even group projects are determined by academics, they do not feel the pedagogical materials or techniques to be student-centered, but rather as led by teachers.

This study also shows that international students can perceive that ethnocentric worldviews underwrites the curriculum, assessment, and teaching practices on the campuses where they study. A sense of civilizational superiority can be seen in the design, teaching, and assessment of course materials. International students, who mainly pursue careers outside the host country after their education, felt that they are expected to learn and adopt 'rules'. that might not be applicable in their home country. The core assumption that international students are deficient learners will remain as long as the underlying pedagogical model is that international students should be assimilated or integrated into the host education system (Haign, 2014; Madge et al., 2015).

The flow of knowledge is primarily in one direction, with Chinese international students in this research experiencing little autonomy in teaching activities, curriculum design and assessment processes. The data in this study shows that Chinese international students themselves are eager to be treated as active agents who are engaged in the production and negotiation of knowledge. They are not convinced that the Australian academic system is superior to that of their own country or elsewhere. Further, from the study it was found that Chinese students' career interests are not aligned with integration, as it has limited benefits for when they returned to China. This is in line with the previous study that suggests that international students are rarely perceived as complex agents that

can alter the academic world through their knowledge practices (Madge et al., 2015). There has been limited discussion regarding the specific distinctive cultural resources and literacy backgrounds that Chinese international students introduce into Australian classrooms. For example, Seats (2022) argues that despite wide variations in the form, distinctive rationality, and reason from Confucianism that Chinese international students bring to the host campus, students can coexist by transcending linguistic and cultural boundaries, also contributing to knowledge decolonization and radical curriculum reform. Lomer and Anthony-Okele (2019) also suggested that students can be active in the process of determining, creating, and evaluating course content; they further commented that by encouraging multiple modes of participation (verbal and direct in the taught sessions, textual in the blogs and comments as well as indirectly through reading others' blogs and referring to them in their writings), students' active intellectual engagement can be acknowledged, even though they remain 'silent.'

Ideally, the presence of international student mobility necessitates a reimagining of the world away from the Euro-American-centric frame, because of which racial discrimination of both Indigenous and Asian peoples has not disappeared but remains a potent force in Western higher education (Andreotti et al., 2015). However, the findings from this case study reveal that in practice, 'international' seems to be equated too often with other Anglophone and Western locations, thereby enacting a form of colonialism (Brooks & Waters, 2022), with little space for international students to make changes. Although this study shows that some global dimensions (examples) are incorporated into the teaching materials, this is mainly a shallow interpretation of internationalization. A geographic balance has not yet been achieved.

Overall, our results have important implications for higher education administrators and policymakers. First, academics are of paramount importance to the internationalization and decolonization of higher education. Pedagogy for internationalization requires educators to reflect on their practices and seek to make them transparent to students, approaching them as equal participants in the learning process (Dervin & Simpson, 2021; Lomer & Anthony-Okele, 2019). As Trahar (2010) argues, the teaching and learning practices of internationalization are rarely subjected to critical scrutiny, laying the blame squarely on international students. This may be due to pedagogical weaknesses. In this study, several participants suggested that tutors and academics examine their teaching practices more carefully for the sake of students' interests.

It is also of utmost importance that the necessary support structures and spaces for dialogue among students and instructors and universities are provided, alongside the role of policymakers in achieving internationalization. To facilitate internationalization, we need to be aware of our cultural positionality, worldview, and values, which in turn shape our curriculum (Vickers, 2020). The result of this calls for a shift to real diversity and inclusion in the internationalization project. It should be a place where students' voices matter. International students should be valued for their intellectual contributions. In this process, several questions deserve careful consideration: who gets to speak authoritatively about internationalization development? To what extent are international students

involved in internationalization projects? Should they be seen as subjects with agency in the internationalization of higher education in the context of Australia, especially when the Prime Minister of Australia announced that international students should return home and Australian education is for domestic students?

At this historical juncture, a rethinking of the values underpinning international higher education and greater attention to how the internationalization project is achieved in practice is required. However, as the evidence above shows, the COVID-19 pandemic with off-site and online learning highlighted the ability of universities to quickly adapt their teaching, but also revealed the failure of universities to adapt to different international student learning needs and their international experience. Participants in this study admitted that they reflected more on their experience in Australia and realized its negative side after the outbreak of COVID-19 that led to many overseas students studying online at home following a standardized curriculum. After hearing the prime minister's suggestion that international students should return home, more Chinese students started to think about what they had obtained from this study-abroad experience and what they meant to the university and the host country.

Finally, students were aware that their presence were politically problematic during the pandemic. For example, like has been mentioned before, when Chinese international students from the mainland were denied entry into Australia. These students (> 50 students), who were going through an unsettling period, made an appeal to the student administrative office, yet received no response, although other universities provided relief aid. These political issues harmed students' perceptions of universities and the government and could have a lasting negative impression of Australian higher education. Therefore, in the current environment where the pandemic is subsiding, it is integral to reconsider ways to involve international students in internationalization projects in an 'authentic' way and recognize that simply returning to the old model will repeat its underlying failings for international students.

In consideration of the study's outcomes, several recommendations emerge for future researchers in the field. While this study was limited to a sample of students at one Australian university, there were themes emerged which might be transferred across other groups of international students in Australia and internationally. However, to test the transferability of the findings to other settings, further empirical work is required. Firstly, this study focuses on the perceptions of first-year and third-year undergraduate students at one Australian university. Their experiences might be distinctively different from postgraduate students, especially postgraduate research students. An option for future investigation could involve replicating the study in an alternative setting, utilizing a significantly larger, more randomized sample, and potentially conducting a multi-sited ethnography in multiple insights, as universities' education systems and internationalization strategies may differ from country to country. Secondly, this remains an under-researched issue in the Australian context, with the question of what international students can contribute to the university in terms of their knowledge and perspectives particularly under explored. There is also a dearth of

research into findings out how an internationalization of higher education can be re-formed as a two-way flow of knowledge and genuine mutual learning.

Acknowledgment

REFERENCES

Adriansen, H. K. (2020). *The internationalization of higher education is not neutral*. University World News. Retrieved from https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200204102252726.

Alvesson, M., & Sköldberg, K. (2017). *Reflexive methodology: new vistas for qualitative research*. Sage.

Atkinson, D. (1997). A critical approach to critical thinking in TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly, 31*(1), 71-94.

Andreotti, V., Stein, S., Ahenakew, C., & Hunt, D. (2015). Mapping interpretations of decolonization in the context of higher education. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, education & society, 4*(1).

Braun, Virginia& Victoria Clarke.2012. Thematic analysis. In Harris Cooper, Paul M. Camic, Debra L. Long, A. T. Panter, David Rindskopf & KennethJ. Sher(eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology*, (pp. 57–71). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Brooks, R., & Waters, J. (2022). Partial, hierarchical and stratified space? Understanding 'the international studies of international student mobility. *Oxford Review of Education, 48*(4), 518-535.

Buckner, E., & Stein, S. (2020). What Counts as Internationalization? Deconstructing the Internationalization Imperative. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 24*(2), 151–166.

Dervin, F. (2011). A plea for change in research on intercultural discourses: A 'liquid approach' to the study of the acculturation of Chinese students. *Journal of multicultural discourses, 6*(1), 37-52.

Dervin, F., & Simpson, A. (2021). *Interculturality and the political within education*. Routledge.

Deuchar, A. (2022). The problem with international students' 'experiences and the promise of their practices: Reanimating research about international students in higher education. *British Educational Research Journal, 48*(3), 504-518.

De Wit, H. (1999). Changing rationales for the internationalization of Higher Education. *International Higher Education*, (15).

de Wit, H., & Deca, L. (2020). Internationalization of higher education, challenges and opportunities for the next decade. *European Higher Education Area: Challenges for a New Decade*, 3–11.

Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: an overview. Historical social research. *Historische sozialforschung,36*(4), 273-290.

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), 607-623.

Howes, J. M. (2021). How to integrate international students into the local society and how that will affect their satisfaction level. In B. Shneikat, C. Cihan, & T. Cem (eds), *Global perspectives on recruiting international students: Challenges and opportunities* (pp. 187-196). Emerald Publishing Limited.

Jootun, D., McGhee, G., & Marland, G. R. (2009). Reflexivity: promoting rigor in qualitative research. *Nursing standard, 23*(23), 42-47.

Kingston, E., & Forland, H. (2007). Bridging the gap in expectations between international students and academic staff. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 12*(2), 204–221.

Klopper, C. J., & Power, B. M. (2014). The casual approach to teacher education: What effect does casualization have for Australian university teaching? *Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 39*(4), 101-114.

Knight, J. (2004). Internationalization remodeled: Definition, approaches, and rationales. *Journal of studies in international education, 8*(1), 5-31.

Knight, J. (2007). Internationalization: Concepts, complexities and challenges. In J. J. F. Forest & P. G. Altbach (eds), *International handbook of higher education* (pp207-227). Dordrecht: Springer.

Leask, B. (2016). Internationalizing curriculum and learning for all students. In E. Jones, R. Coelen, J. Beelen, & H. De Wit (eds), *Global and local internationalization* (pp. 47-53). Brill.

Leask, B., & Carroll, J. (2011). Moving beyond 'wishing and hoping': Internationalization and student experiences of inclusion and engagement. *Higher education research & development, 30*(5), 647-659.

Lomer, S., & Anthony-Okeke, L. (2019). Ethically engaging international students: student generated material in an active blended learning model. *Teaching in Higher Education, 24*(5), 613-632.

Lomer, S., & Mittelmeier, J. (2021). Mapping the research on pedagogies with international students in the UK: a systematic literature review. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 1-21.

Madge, C., Raghuram, P., & Noxolo, P. (2015). Conceptualizing international education: From international student to international study. *Progress in Human Geography, 39*(6), 681-701.

Marginson, S. (2014). Student self-formation in international education. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 18*(1), 6-22.

Mathies, C., & Karhunen, H. (2021). International student migration in Finland: The role of graduation on staying. *Journal of international students, 11*(4), 874-894.

Mittelmeier, J., & Yang, Y. (2022). The role of internationalisation in 40 years of higher education research: major themes from Higher Education Research & Development (1982–2020). *Higher education research & development, 41*(1), 75-91.

Montgomery, C. (2010). *Understanding the international student experience*. Macmillan International Higher Education.

Moore, T. J. (2011). *Critical thinking and language: The challenge of generic skills and disciplinary discourses*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Moosavi, L. (2022). The myth of academic tolerance: the stigmatisation of East Asian students in Western higher education. *Asian Ethnicity, 23*(3), 484-503.

Morreira, S., Luckett, K., Kumalo, S. H., & Ramgotra, M. (2020). Confronting the complexities of decolonising curricula and pedagogy in higher education. Third World Thematics: *A TWQ Journal, 5*(1-2), 1-18.

Norton, A. (2014). *Mapping Australian higher education 2014–15*. Grattan Institute. Retrieved from http://grattan.edu.au/report/mapping-australian-higher-education-2014-15/.

Percy, A., Scoufis, M., Parry, S., Goody, A., Hicks, M., Macdonald, I., ... & Sheridan, L. (2008). *The RED Report: Recognition-Enhancement-Development: The contribution of sessional teachers to higher educatio*n. Sydney: Australian Learning and Teaching Council.

Seats, M. R. (2022). The voice (s) of reason: conceptual challenges for the decolonization of knowledge in global higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education, 27*(5), 678-694.

Singh, J. K. N., & Jack, G. (2022). The role of language and culture in postgraduate international students' academic adjustment and academic success: qualitative insights from Malaysia. *Journal of International Students, 12*(2).

Song, X. (2016). 'Critical thinking'and pedagogical implications for higher education. *East Asia, 33*(1), 25-40.

Song, X. (2020). 'Chinese students syndrome 'in Australia: Colonial modernity and the possibilities of alternative framing. *Higher Education, 79*(4), 605-618.

Song, X., & McCarthy, G. (2018). Governing Asian international students: The policy and practice of essentializing 'critical thinking'. *Globalization, Societies and Education, 16*(3), 353-365.

Song X. And McCarthy, G. (2020). *Governing Asian International Mobility in Australia*. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

Song, X., & Cadman, K. (2012). *Bridging Transcultural Divides: Asian Languages and Cultures in Global Higher Education*. University of Adelaide Press.

Ryan, J. (2002). *University education for all? Teaching and learning practices for diverse groups of students* [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. Ballarat: University of Ballarat.

Ryan, J. & Louie, K. (2007). False dichotomy? 'Western' and 'Eastern' concepts of scholarship and learning. *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 39*(4), 404-417.

Saarinen, T., & Ennser-Kananen, J. (2020). Ambivalent English: What we talk about when we think we talk about language. *Nordic Journal of English Studies, 19*(3).

Siczek, M. M. (2015). Developing global competency in US higher education: Contributions of international students. *CATESOL Journal, 27*(2), 5-21.

Simpson, A. (2020). "Do you eat dog meat and monkey?... I didn't know anything about China back then": Problematizing Chinese heritage students through the lens of critical interculturality. *Education and Society, 38*(1), 73-88.

Smith, C., & Zhou, G. (2022). Teaching culturally and linguistically diverse international students: Connections between promising teaching practices and student satisfaction. In C. Smith & G. Zhou (Eds.), *Handbook of research on teaching strategies for culturally and linguistically diverse international students* (pp. 1-16). IGI Global.

Teichler, U. (2010). Internationalizing higher education: Debates and changes in Europe. In D. Mattheou (ed), Changing educational landscapes: educational policies, *schooling systems and higher education-A comparative perspective* (pp263-283). Springer Science & Business Media.

Tight, M. (2022). Internationalization of higher education beyond the West: challenges and opportunities–the research evidence. *Educational Research and Evaluation, 27*(3-4), 239-259.

Trahar, S. (2009). Has everybody seen a swan? Stories from the internationalized classroom. In E. Jone (ed), *Internationalization and the student voice: Higher education perspectives* (pp. 169-180). Routledge.

Tran, L., Blackmore, J., Forbes-Mewett, H., Nguyen, D., Hartridge, D., & Aldana, R. (2022). Critical considerations for optimizing the support for international student engagement. *Journal of International Students, 12*(3), i-vi.

Vickers, E. (2020). Critiquing coloniality,'epistemic violence'and western hegemony in comparative education–the dangers of ahistoricism and positionality. *Comparative Education, 56*(2), 165-189.

Wang, T., & Shan, X. (2007). *A qualitative study on Chinese postgraduate students' learning experiences in Australia*. Proceedings AARE 2006.

Weng, E., Halafoff, A., Barton, G., & Smith, G. (2021). Higher education, exclusion and   belonging: Religious complexity, coping and connectedness among international students during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia. *Journal of International students, 12*(S2), 2162-3104.

Xu, J., & Keevers, L. (2022). 学霸 Academic Hero: An Investigation of an Informal Bilingual Volunteer Peer Teaching Model in Supporting Chinese International Students' Learning. *Journal of International Students, 12*(3), 756-776.

Yang, Y., Lomer, S., Lim, M. A., & Mittelmeier, J. (2022). A study of Chinese students' application to UK universities in uncertain times: From the perspective of education agents. *Journal of International Students, 12*(3), 565-586.

Yeoh, J. S. W., & Terry, D. R. (2013). International Research Students' Experiences in Academic Success. *Universal Journal of Educational Research, 1*(3), 275-280.

Author bios

Mingxin Qu, is a PhD candidate in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Western Australia, Australia. Her major research interests lie in the area of internationalization of higher education and multiculturalism. Email: mingxin.qu@research.uwa.edu.au.

Xianlin, Song, is an Associate Professor in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Western Australia, Australia. Her interests span international student mobility, global higher education, gender studies, Chinese women's literature and trans-culturalism. Email: xianlin.song.xs@gmail.com.