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Evaluating the student experience at UK-China joint institutes

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Joint Institutions are created from two different universities joining together to create a collaborative research and education effort. Compared to traditional universities, several unique challenges present themselves from this arrangement. We are especially interested in the student experience at UK-China Joint Institutes. We therefore organized a conference with the UK-China Joint Institute Alliance to aggregate knowledge on this issue. This paper summarizes the topics presented and discussed at the conference including: student learning and methods with which to measure and improve it, monitoring and incentivizing student engagement, the transition period from high school to university, teaching evaluations of staff, and lastly, learning and teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.

KEYWORDS

joint institutes, student learning, student engagement, teaching evaluations, COVID-19 teaching, transnational education, China, UK

1 Introduction

Joint transnational education (TNE) institutes face a unique range of issues that traditional universities typically do not need to address. When two universities join together into a new collaborative effort, challenges arise from needing to merge the values and systems of the participating universities (Cuiming et al., 2012). In particular, Joint Institutions between the UK and China have their own set of distinctive difficulties that they must overcome (Feng, 2013).

With the collaborating universities typically in different countries, there are many logistical issues that need to be solved (Cuiming et al., 2012; Feng, 2013). How will the teaching be structured? How portable is content between institutions? Will professors travel to teach classes on the ground, and if so,

will it be for a year, or in shorter blocks of time? High staff turnover is also a persistent issue, alongside ensuring the quality and consistency of the content that is delivered.

Differences in culture also present themselves and need to be addressed—Joint Institutes must navigate both Western and Eastern schools of thought and present a cohesive blend of the two that students are able to immerse themselves in. In addition to that, teaching students whose native language is not English is a challenge that needs to be addressed carefully, in order to prevent an unfair bias towards students whose English level is better than their peers. The classroom environment and student interaction level may also be distinct enough between Western and Eastern cultures that it should be considered when preparing teaching materials (Cuiming et al., 2012). At the same time, identity language can impact on the student journey, and it is important not to cast international students as “other” (Grimshaw, 2007). It is important to acknowledge the language we use to describe international students to ensure we have “intercultural diversity” (Ploner et al., 2022). Perhaps the language we use to describe international students can be consciously re-imagined.

How do such challenges impact the student experience? Also how can this be measured? To aggregate the knowledge and experience from different Joint Institutions, we proposed and organized a workshop to serve as a platform for discussion in the UK-China Joint Institute Alliance (JIA).

2 Background

2.1 Situation of the Workshop within the UK-China Joint Institute Alliance

The UK-China Joint Institute Alliance (JIA) was established in 2017 by the British Council and the China Education Association for International Exchange (CEAIE) to promote the development of high-quality joint TNE institutes. There are 22 UK and Chinese founding member institutes, with a total of 42 UK-China Joint Institutes in 2023. The Alliance seeks to promote and advance the quality and development of TNE institutes in teaching, research, and training (British Council, 2023). The JIA was recently named a “key player” in UK-China transnational education by *The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education* (2024). Members of JIA institutions meet regularly for joint workshops and conferences and can access startup funding for projects relating to UK-China transnational education.

We wanted to learn from the collective experiences of JIA members about how they assessed the student experience at their institutions, and what they had learned from it. The original plan was to organise a 2-day symposium, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we had to move to an online format using the video conferencing software Zoom. The workshop took place over six weeks in the spring of 2021, from March 29th to May 17th, in weekly two hour slots. 16 speakers presented from 7 different Joint Institutes as depicted in *Figure 1*. The average number of participants was 23 people, with 32 at the highest, and 16 at the lowest. The sessions were all uploaded to YouTube, and have amassed more than 600 views combined by Dec, 2023.

The sessions can be found here: <https://sites.google.com/view/evaluatingthestudentexperience/schedule>.

2.2 Methodology

In this paper, we summarize the content of the meetings, with a particular focus on common themes that emerged from the presentations.

We followed an informal thematic analysis approach (McKenzie, 2013), similar to other papers reporting outcomes of conferences (see, for instance, Waltemath et al., 2020): First, the first and last author individually reviewed their notes from the conference and re-watched the lecture videos, with a special focus on identifying salient common themes and insights. They then discussed with each other and produced a preliminary draft. This was then shared with conference speakers and attendees, with an invitation to contribute to the work. Those who accepted (the co-authors on this paper) offered comments, critiques, ideas on grouping and illustrating themes, links to similar work in the field, and textual edits. Through this iterative process, the final narrative of common themes and insights emerged.

3 Common themes and insights

Several reoccurring themes emerged from the talks, related to measuring student learning, student engagement, student feedback, teaching evaluations, and the transitional period from high school to university. Most speakers mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic and the problems that arose from suddenly being thrust into an online learning situation without prior preparation (see also Jones et al., 2021).

3.1 Student learning

One of the major themes that members of the conference have been working on is the measurement and improvement of student learning (Stefan et al., 2015; Bremner, 2021; Liu et al., 2021; Wijeratne et al., 2021).

Bremner (2021) at the University of Glasgow spoke on the use of pair-wise multiple choice questions to distinguish between student achievement levels. Pair-wise questions are a pair of multiple choice questions that ask the same thing but with different wording. Hypothetically, students who understand the material would be able to answer both pair-wise questions correctly more often than those who have a lesser grasp of the material. The results of the study show that the usage of pair-wise questions does indeed allow better distinction between students who genuinely understand the material and those who do not.

Wijeratne et al. (2021) at Queen Mary University of London-Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications ran a case study on learning styles, in an effort to adjust their teaching styles to improve student performance. Reid (1987)'s learning inventory cites six learning styles: visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, tactile, group, and individual (but see also Rohrer and Pashler, 2012 for an opposing view). Using online questionnaires, student feedback and



exam results, they found no significant differences between groups based on learning styles. There were also no significant differences between male and female students (Wijeratne et al., 2021).

3.2 Student engagement

How can we monitor and incentivise student engagement? One way of doing it is by using data generated from the online learning platforms like Canvas or Blackboard, such as page views and engagement with online modules or quizzes (Clerkin, 2021). In principle, this could extend to using technologies like gaze tracking and image analysis to monitor students' focus and attention (Hussain, 2021). While powerful, the ethical implications of such tools need to be carefully considered (Alwahaby et al., 2022).

Wijeratne et al. (2021) from Queen Mary University of London-Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications used machine learning on attendance records, assessments, lab assessments, and class tests to evaluate factors affecting student academic performance. In the setting studied, attendance was the strongest predictor of student performance. The study provides an interesting proof-of-concept of the use of neural network models to analyse data on student engagement and success.

How can student engagement be incentivised? Ponciano (2021) from the University of Glasgow used digital badges to measure and encourage student engagement on their online learning platform. Students were given concrete goals to unlock digital badges, which in turn served as certificates signifying the skills they had learned. These badges could also then be exported to external backpack

websites, where the students were able to display the badges as they liked. As digital credential networks start to gain traction (Gibson et al., 2013), the badges can then give students a way to evidence their skills for future employers.

3.3 Transition to university

A particular challenging time in a student's life is the transition from high school to the first year of university. Is this experience of transition different between students studying at a transnational education institution compared to students at a British university? Daw and Shan (2021) from Zhejiang University-University of Edinburgh Joint Institute set out to address this question using both surveys and interviews with students as they were coming to university and again after their first year.

All students approached the first year of university with some amount of anxiety, but the causes of anxiety were different and related to the themes dominating both students' expectations of university and their experience during year 1. For students based in the UK full time, concerns were around moving away from home and making friends, while students coming into an English-speaking TNE course in China worried about the workload and the demands of studying in English.

In-depth interviews supported a picture by which the transition to university is seen as a transition into adulthood by students at the UK university, and as a transition towards being a better (more skilled, more knowledgeable, and more open-minded) scholar by the joint institute students.

In addition to these differences there were also important similarities between the students. One prominent example was that time management, resulting from the transition to being independent learners, was seen as the biggest challenge by both cohorts.

3.4 Teaching evaluations

Ren (2021) talked about the development of a teaching evaluation tool at Southampton Ocean Engineering Joint Institute at Harbin Engineering University. The first iteration relied on a compulsory student survey with an overall final score, which was shared with instructors and impacted their salaries. There was some discussion after the talk on possible issues with tying salaries to a potentially biased metric such as student evaluations; see, for instance, Fan et al. (2019) and Chávez and Mitchell (2020).

This evaluation tool came with a few problems, notably not giving exact and actionable feedback to teaching staff. Based on this, a literature review, and guidelines such as the Washington Accord (International Engineering Alliance, 2022) and Chinese Engineering Education Accreditation (China Engineering Education Accreditation Association (CEEAA), 2022), they designed a new 3-pronged approach to feedback, based on student evaluations (from a more detailed survey and a focus group, the results of which were turned into recommendations), peer review of teaching, and teaching supervision. This new method was able to provide more focused and action-oriented feedback to instructors (Ren, 2021).

3.5 Learning and teaching during COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has required institutions to change their learning and teaching model at short notice (Jones et al., 2021; Yan et al., 2021). In particular, both teaching and assessment had to be moved online. Research so far on teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic has shown many problems that arose due to the rapid transformation. Some of these include reports of technological issues, difficulties for students to maintain attention or self-management, a sense of isolation, and more (García-Morales et al., 2021).

Several speakers at our meeting reported on how the move to online teaching affected the student experience at their institutions.

Two speakers reported on surveys conducted at their respective institutions. Li (2021) reported on a student survey done at Zhejiang University (ZJU) to understand student experiences with online learning and teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey was built adapting previously developed measurement instruments (Dixson, 2015; Hung and Chou, 2015) and deployed to 1,500 undergraduate students (years 1-3) at Chu Kochen Honours College. A second speaker, Clerkin (2021) talked about a survey conducted at China Queen's College (CQC), a joint institution by China Medical University and Queen's University Belfast.

Other speakers (Groves, 2021; Wood, 2021) shared their own personal experiences and perspectives on the issue.

Both surveys found that some students liked online learning (Clerkin, 2021; Li, 2021), though the ZJU survey showed that around half of the students do prefer in-person education (Li, 2021). However, the viability of in-person education needs to be deliberated, should travel restrictions continue to be imposed world-wide and it will vary from institute to institute depending on whether staff are based on campus or travel to the campus multiple times a year. Should existing quarantine periods remain, the latter could have a huge impact on staff and student well-being, contribute to a higher staff turnover, and ultimately lead to further teaching disruptions (Burns et al., 2020; Godber and Atkins, 2021). Therefore, the effective delivery of hybrid models of teaching should be carefully considered when re-imagining forms of delivery.

Some members pointed out that even upon return to pre-pandemic travel policies, retaining elements of hybrid teaching can be useful. For instance, experts from one institution could deliver one or two specialised lectures at the partner institution without the cost, effort, and ecological impact of having to take a round trip.

3.5.1 Motivation and self-discipline

Several speakers commented on how remote learning requires higher levels of self-motivation both from students (Campbell, 2021; El Hashash, 2021; Wood, 2021) and instructors (Wood, 2021). This was also borne out by the survey conducted at ZJU, which found that students listed self-discipline as one of the main challenges associated with remote learning during the pandemic (Li, 2021). But students also recognised this as an opportunity and reported becoming better self-directed learners as one of the positive outcomes of the new pandemic education model (Li, 2021).

3.5.2 Interaction

Another change that was keenly felt was the reduction of in-person interactions between students and instructors. Various forms of online teaching during the pandemic offer different levels of interactivity: institutions used a combination of asynchronous and synchronous sessions such as live online sessions, discussions, polling or Q&A sessions (Campbell, 2021; El Hashash, 2021; Groves, 2021; Li, 2021; McDonald, 2021; Wijeratne et al., 2021; Wood, 2021; Yang, 2021) and asynchronous formats such as recorded lectures or discussion boards (Clerkin, 2021; Groves, 2021; Li, 2021; McDonald, 2021; Wijeratne et al., 2021). Both types of approaches were made more difficult by the fact that instructors and students were often in different time zones (Groves, 2021; Wood, 2021).

Even though some students in the ZJU survey reported that their interactions with instructors in and after class had increased during the pandemic, a bigger proportion of students reported a decrease in student-teacher interactions (Li, 2021).

What was noted as a positive was the increased connections between students via social media and online study groups (Campbell, 2021; Wood, 2021), suggesting that it may be beneficial to further encourage such online groups even after teaching fully returns to campus.

3.5.3 Access and equity

The move to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has raised questions around access and equity. While students were learning from home, not all of them had fast and reliable internet connections and access to quiet study spaces (Clerkin, 2021). After campuses re-opened, students of Chinese nationality were able to get back to campus, but some international students were not. In this situation, teaching and assessments need to be very carefully designed to ensure equity for both on-campus and off-campus students (El Hashash, 2021).

One positive aspect students mentioned is that recorded lectures allowed them to re-watch lectures several times (Groves, 2021; Li, 2021). This is thought to be particularly useful for English as a Second Language (ESL) students, especially when lecture videos are captioned (though care needs to be taken with automatic transcription systems in terms of accuracy (McDonald, 2021).

3.5.4 Technical issues

Several speakers reported technical issues affecting the student experience. These included problems with functionality of software or tools used for teaching (Clerkin, 2021; McDonald, 2021; Wood, 2021), and problems with access to high speed internet and reliable internet connection for both students and staff away from campus (Clerkin, 2021; El Hashash, 2021; McDonald, 2021).

In addition, online teaching tools require specific skills sets, for both students and faculty (El Hashash, 2021; Groves, 2021). Staff training is an important part of improving digital capability and testing tools (McDonald, 2021). Exploring the theme of teaching quality in a technology-enhanced transnational learning (TETL) context is also important (McDonald, 2021). Several speakers highlighted the need for training, guidelines, taxonomies and toolkits at institutional, staff and student levels (Guy and McDonald, 2020; El Hashash, 2021; Li, 2021; McDonald, 2021). Transnational toolkits have been developed, for example by AdvanceHE (Smith, 2017). Perhaps it is important for institutions to develop their own technology-enhanced transnational toolkits (McDonald, 2021).

Charity Campbell from Surrey International Institute at Dongbei University of Finance & Economics (Campbell, 2021) talked about the power of harnessing students' existing skills. Students are already experts in online engagement practices (including social media, online forums, emoji, sharing and reposting, etc.). Designing courses that use these forms of online engagement encouraged student participation and communication.

4 Discussions and conclusions

The talks presented at the conference consisted of 16 speakers from 7 different Joint Institutes. They included professors, researchers, lecturers, and university staff with backgrounds in a multitude of different disciplines, including: medicine, engineering, education, etc.

4.1 Practical implications

Drawing from the talks presented, a number of practical uses may be gleaned. In regards to multiple-choice questions and the limitations they currently have on determining student understanding of a subject, the usage of pair-wise questions may prove useful for a more accurate analysis of student understanding (Bremner, 2021). With online modules on the rise, student engagement can be analysed with the data that is automatically generated from some online learning management systems like Canvas or Blackboard, for example, how often a student accesses a page, activity, or quiz (Clerkin, 2021). The usage of digital badges to certify a student's mastery of material can likewise be a driving motivation for student engagement and a proof of skill that can be brought into the workplace (Ponciano, 2021). Machine learning can also be used to analyse data on student engagement and success, such as the study in which machine learning was used to find that attendance was a strong predictor of student performance (Wijeratne et al., 2021).

While the mindset to approaching university may differ between cultures for first year students in their transition from high school to university, it could help ease student anxieties and time management issues to allocate more research and support in those areas (Daw and Shan, 2021). To provide instructors with better, actionable feedback in the area of teaching evaluations, a 3-pronged approach that consists of student evaluations (surveys and focus groups), peer reviews, and teaching supervision is recommended (Ren, 2021).

Although the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions on universities have largely been lifted now, there are a number of lessons that may still be put to use. Motivation and self-discipline (Campbell, 2021; El Hashash, 2021; Wood, 2021), and the importance of student and-teacher interactions (Li, 2021) were especially highlighted during the pandemic. This can serve as a guideline for the struggles students may still face. The use of online study groups and social media for student-student interactions could be encouraged further in the present day, as students reported it as beneficial to have such increased connections (Campbell, 2021; Wood, 2021). Hybrid teaching may be useful, especially for Joint Institutes. Recorded lectures have been received positively by students for the ability to review the lectures again (Groves, 2021; Li, 2021), and they may also be used to alleviate some of the difficulty in sending lecturers to another country. As digital technologies are used more and more, it may also be beneficial to recognize that both students and faculty may not be familiar with digital technology. Training and guidelines may therefore be useful to bridge this gap (El Hashash, 2021; Li, 2021).

Several speakers have highlighted how important it is to reflect on our practice and further develop toolkits for transnational education (El Hashash, 2021; Li, 2021; McDonald, 2021). Blogging can be a way to reflect on change and to make sense of the challenges of TNE-focused activity for example, the Digital Transformation blog at the Royal Agricultural University (RAU) China series (Guy and McDonald, 2020; McDonald, 2021). Action research could form an important part of a TNE toolkit and the future of international provision (McDonald, 2021).

4.2 Limitations and delimitations

This paper reports on a series of online meetings where members of the UK-China Joint Institute Alliance shared their insights on evaluating the student experience. We have focused on extracting common themes and recommendations. Since speakers came from a variety of institutional and disciplinary backgrounds and roles, their methodologies, approaches and conceptual frameworks varied widely. Readers interested in the detail of specific speakers' contributions are referred to the recordings of the talks, available through the conference website.

Many of the insights and recommendations refer to the student experience in general, not just within institutions of transnational education. Research on education within other transnational settings has shown that they experience similar issues as that of UK-China Joint Institutes. Many challenges have arisen due to cultural differences in UK and Australian institutions joined with those of Iraq, Palestine, India (Bovill and Watters, 2015), and Ghana (Bovill and Watters, 2015; Owusu-Agyeman and Amoakohene, 2020). Quality of teaching, training of teaching staff, and strong policy structures to ensure continued sustainability and credibility of the institutions are also significant challenges (Bovill and Watters, 2015; Owusu-Agyeman and Amoakohene, 2020). But further research is needed in this area overall, including on the ethical dimensions of the international student experience (Ploner et al., 2022).

How are our students doing and how do we know how they are doing? With this conference, we wanted to create an inclusive and interdisciplinary forum for staff at UK-China transnational education institutions to share examples of how they assess student learning and the student experience, and what they have learned from it so far. We found a number of common themes relating to assessment, engagement and feedback. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought additional challenges, for example, working with different types of uncertainty (Guy and McDonald, 2020; McDonald, 2021). As education becomes more international, future research into how the student experience can be assessed and improved is crucial.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding authors.

Author contributions

CL: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Project administration, Visualization, Writing – original draft,

Writing – review & editing. DB: Investigation, Writing – review & editing. CC: Investigation, Writing – review & editing. MD: Funding acquisition, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. SH: Funding acquisition, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. PM: Investigation, Writing – review & editing. JM: Writing – review & editing. JCM: Writing – review & editing. JP: Investigation, Writing – review & editing. SS: Funding acquisition, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. MJS: Writing – review & editing. SW: Funding acquisition, Writing – review & editing. HY: Funding acquisition, Writing – review & editing. MIS: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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