Transnational tourism education and student approaches to learning: is there a mismatch?

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ABSTRACT
This article employs a novel approach by investigating Chinese students from a transnational tourism management programme in Hong Kong and Chinese students studying on a similar programme at the degree-awarding UK university. This quantitative study investigates whether there are any differences between two groups of students in terms of their approaches to learning, preferred learning and teaching methods and their satisfaction with the programme. The findings demonstrate significant differences between the two cohorts, indicating that a programme cannot be easily exported. The implications of the findings for the transnational curriculum, learning and teaching practice and theories of student approaches to learning are discussed.

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Transnational tourism education; approaches to learning; learning and teaching methods; curriculum; student satisfaction

Introduction
Western higher education institutions are increasingly spreading their activities and brands across borders (Fang & Wang, 2014). A number of tourism and hospitality courses from the United Kingdom, Australia and United States have been offered abroad (Lashley & Barron, 2006). This pattern of internationalisation is often referred to in the literature as “transnational education”, “offshore education” and/or “cross-border education” (UNESCO, 2001). A recent analysis of transnational education provided by UK universities indicated that approximately half a million students are studying for a UK degree overseas (Matthews, 2012). The provision of transnational programmes predominantly flows in one direction, from western to Asian countries, such as Hong Kong and China (Keay, May, & O’Mahony, 2014; Ziguras & Rizvi, 2001). Academic research has mainly focused on the operational side of managing such programmes (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2001), but has not given similar consideration to transnational education in terms of the expectations and experiences of individual learners (Fang & Wang, 2014; Waterval, Frambach, Driessen, & Scherpbier, 2015). Assessing the state of tourism education, Tribe (2002, p. 73) similarly argues that “how to teach has been overshadowed by what to teach and issues of effective teaching and assessment have been overlooked”. He further explains that tourism education research mainly deals with
curriculum-related matters, but ignores other important aspects like student progression and learning and teaching.

Although western educational literature has been dedicated to understanding differences between western and Chinese educational systems (for instance, Kember, 2000; Kennedy, 2002; Marton, Dall’Alba, & Tse, 1996), transnational programmes did not assume that replication of a western curriculum in the Chinese context may raise numerous issues. This relates in particular to a misunderstanding of students’ approaches to learning (SAL: deep vs. surface learning) and preferred learning and teaching methods (Richardson & Sun, 2016; Waters & Leung, 2013). Limited evidence demonstrates that teaching and assessment methods do not meet the needs of Chinese students (Richardson & Sun, 2016; Waters & Leung, 2013). As indicated by a recent review of SAL and Chinese learners, Richardson and Sun (2016, p. 115) indicated that “[i]nstead of taking the simplistic view that Chinese students’ approaches to studying are culturally determined, teachers need to recognise the variety of contextual factors that affect these students’ capacity to adapt to living and learning at universities in other countries”. Both Chinese students involved in transnational programmes in their home countries (transnational students) and Chinese students studying abroad (international students) report that the mismatch between SAL and the classroom techniques used by western educators was the most important challenge for those students (Barron, 2007; Currie, 2007; Penfold & van der Veen, 2014; Waters & Leung, 2013). Barron’s (2007, p. 2) study on international Chinese tourism and hospitality students in Australia demonstrates that these students had to “make substantial changes to their educational approach and were required to become involved in a variety of new and unusual classroom situations and had to cope with potentially uncomfortable learning situations.” This is important for several reasons. A mismatch between SAL and teaching methods may lead to dissatisfied students (Price et al., 2011; Webster, Chan, Prosser, & Watkins, 2009). A number of studies among transnational students (Chapman & Pyvis, 2005; Cuthbert, Smith, & Boey, 2008; Hoare, 2012; Waters & Leung, 2013; Ziguras & McBurnie, 2011) have found that these students have different learning behaviours than expected by a transnational curriculum. Sander, Stevenson, King, and Coates (2000) argue that the current climate in higher education suggest that students could be seen as primary customers, who are becoming increasingly aware of their customer rights. Therefore, low satisfaction rates may result in a lower reputation of transnational education programmes and fewer students in the future (Waters & Leung, 2013). Furthermore, the reputation of both the degree-awarding institute and the transnational partner institute may potentially be jeopardised. Research by Keay et al. (2014) demonstrates that transnational partnerships mostly deteriorate due to mistrust and disturbed relationships; however, these institutions still have a long way to go to adopt a more business-like approach, which will have centre on its students as customers. As transnational tourism education happens mainly among Asian countries (Matthews, 2012), investigation of students’ approaches to learning and preferred learning and teaching methods among Chinese students appears as an important task for tourism and educational scholars. As argued by Richardson and Sun (2016, p. 115), most research on Chinese learners “confounds the culture of the students in question and the context in which they are studying. The effects of culture and context can be separated by considering the experience of students from mainland China who travel to other
countries to study.” In our study we focus specifically on ethnically Chinese students studying in Hong Kong and the UK.

The most common form of transnational education is a franchise model. A provider in the source country (the UK in this study) authorises a provider in another country (Hong Kong in this study) to deliver its (UK) programme. The degree is awarded by the provider in the UK only. In contrast to other studies that investigated either Chinese students on transnational courses (Waters & Leung, 2013; Wilkins & Stephens Balakrishnan, 2013) or international Chinese students (Kwek, Bui, Rynne, & So, 2013; Lashley & Barron, 2006; Meza & Gazzoli, 2011; Volet & Ang, 1998), this study employs a novel approach. Our study aims to explore SAL and preferred learning and teaching methods among 84 Chinese students on a transnational programme in Hong Kong and 33 Chinese students studying at the degree-awarding institution in the UK. We do so to compare and contrast the approaches to learning of the two groups of Chinese students, and how differences in SAL affect the students’ preference for learning and teaching approaches, and subsequent learning satisfaction and performance.

By comparing two groups of Chinese students our study provides new insights into the theoretical debate as to whether there are significant misconceptions concerning the approaches to learning of Chinese students and whether degree-awarding universities can simply replicate their curriculum and teaching experience with transnational programmes without taking these important issues into account. This issue is of significant importance for tourism higher education, which, in the UK, according to Ayikoru, Tribe, and Airey (2009, p. 215), does “demonstrate a strong positive commitment to ensuring the relevance of programmes to students”. Within the Chinese context, Zhang and Fan (2005) suggest that tourism higher education needs to enhance various elements, such as curriculum design, but in particular it needs to develop more effective teaching methods. Although we acknowledge from the onset that the drivers, motivations and contexts of these two groups of Chinese students in our study may be substantially different, recognition and understanding of different approaches to learning embedded in students’ cultural heritages is crucial for higher education as, otherwise, “higher education cannot achieve one of its most important goals: to provide quality education for all” (Seo & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005, p. 184).

A major theoretical implication of our research is that it underlines that a western educational model that reflects certain values, such as individualism, critique and participation, may not be preferred across all cultures. In transnational education many strategies of western educators may be flawed, as “transnational higher education in South East Asia has commonly involved Western educators exporting a locally developed curriculum, with minimal modifications” (Gribble & Ziguras, 2003, p. 212). This study demonstrates that the idea of a “universal” curriculum widely applied in transnational education brings to light various issues to consider, such as: appropriate learning and teaching styles; the assessment methods; student engagement; and students’ expectations regarding the teacher. A recent review of transnational education and factors that promote or inhibit its further development by Waterval et al. (2015, p. 65) supports our findings by demonstrating that “simply copy-pasting a curriculum is generally considered to be destined for failure”. They further point out that it becomes questionable whether the host institution should aim for full conformity of learning behaviours and teaching styles with those of the home institution. This suggests that the
Theoretical background

Transnational higher education

Among Asian countries the number of international degrees available locally to students has grown significantly in recent years. The British Council (2011) estimates 22,000 students in Hong Kong are studying on British degree programmes, compared with 20,845 in Singapore and 10,450 in Mainland China. A key concept in transnational education is programme mobility, in which learners are located in a country different from the institution that is awarding the degree (UNESCO, 2001). This model often requires its staff members to travel overseas and present courses there, usually in intensive teaching blocks over a few days (Smith, 2014). An increasing number of scholars point to the potential pitfalls when “exporting” western educational models without sufficient consideration of the norms and values of the host country (Nguyen et al., 2009). For instance, a number of case studies in Asian countries identified that the western model – often incorporating a student-centred approach to learning, such as problem-based learning – requires significant adaptations to Asian cultures as well as a culturally sensitive implementation process (Walker, Bridges, & Benjamin, 1996).

However, in transnational education a western curriculum is often perceived as “universal” and is applied uncritically and indiscriminately across Asian countries (Waterval et al., 2015; Ziguras & Rizvi, 2001). The potential impact of such transnational curricula is often discussed only at an institutional level in terms of managerial issues (e.g., quality assurance), and not at the pedagogical level of meeting individual learners’ expectations. Stergiou, Airey, and Riley (2008, p. 631) argue that the activity of teaching “constitutes an integral part of the educational context … it is within the context of teaching that the curriculum is interpreted and acted upon”. However, the practice of having a “universal” curriculum in transnational education implies that “implicit social values of the exporting countries will inform curriculum, and the social and cultural context in which students live will be largely ignored by such courses” (Ziguras & Rizvi, 2001, p. 5). One of the main concerns raised by educators and academics (for instance see Hoare, 2012, 2013; Keay et al., 2014; Waterval et al., 2015) is that curriculum designers are often unconsciously enmeshed in a dominant university paradigm that relies on “western” ways of knowing and English-language traditions. Interestingly, these conclusions are reported from both studies focusing on transnational providers and studies focusing on source providers. For instance, Hoare’s (2012, 2013) research has focused on a transnational institution in Singapore and she strongly criticised the adoption of a universalist mind-set and ignorance of different learning styles and cultural differences in general when exporting a curriculum. O’Mahony (2014) on the other hand investigated UK higher education institutions (HEIs) currently providing transnational programmes and reported similarly, i.e., that misunderstandings of
different learning styles and learning and teaching methods are judged by UK staff to be some of the most challenging aspects of transnational delivery. Therefore, it can be argued that a mismatch in transnational education may happen when (potentially different) approaches to learning and students’ expectations of learning and teaching are assumed to be similar to those in the home country of the degree-awarding institution.

**Student approaches to learning**

Webb (1997, p. 195) argues that over the last 30 years, “the notion of ‘deep’ and ‘surface’ approaches to learning has been a foundation stone upon which much of the research, theory and practice of higher education has stood”. In the late 1970s (1976a, 1976b), Marton and Säljö conducted a series of qualitative studies aiming to identify how students tackled specific learning tasks within a course, and identified two qualitatively different “levels of processing”: deep-level and surface-level processing. Deep-level processing was used to denote those students who treated the text as something that contained a structure of meaning, whereas in the case of surface-level processing students experienced the text as a collection of discrete units of information that should be memorised in order to answer the questions. Marton (1976), for the first time, used the expressions “approaches to learning” (p. 37), “deep approach” (p. 34) and “surface approach” (p. 34) when referring to the different ways in which students typically went about their academic studies.

It is widely assumed that students who adopt a “deep approach” search for the meaning in the task and that there is a personal commitment to understanding the material (Biggs, 1996). This is reflected in using various strategies such as reading widely, discussing ideas with others, reflecting on personal experience and applying knowledge in real-world situations (Marton & Säljö, 1976a). The reason a deep approach to learning is important is because it is found to be associated with an enjoyable learning experience and with higher quality learning outcomes (Richardson & Sun, 2016). In contrast, a (seemingly less desirable) “surface approach” emphasises rote learning and memorisation techniques. Within such a study regime, the goal of studying is to avoid failure, for example in an examination, instead of grasping key concepts and understanding their relationship with other information (Biggs, 1996).

Various questionnaires were constructed to measure SAL, such as the Approaches to Studying Inventory (Ramsden & Entwistle, 1981) and later the Revised Approaches to Studying Inventory (Tait & Entwistle, 1996). Biggs (1978) devised the Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ), which was later modified to the Revised Two-Factor Study Process Questionnaire (Biggs, Kember, & Leung, 2001). These questionnaires were applied widely and have confirmed the existence of different SAL (see Richardson, 2000; Richardson & Sun, 2016).

Despite the widespread adoption of the SAL framework in higher education research, many researchers have raised concerns about the deep and surface categories (Case & Marshall, 2004; Webb, 1997). First, some researchers have assumed the existence of deep and surface approaches prior to commencing their studies, with such bipolar descriptions often hiding some of the nuances in students’ learning experiences (Case & Marshall, 2004). Second, deep and surface approaches may have very different
manifestations in different disciplines and course contexts, as originally emphasised by Marton and Säljö (1976a), and can also be related to personality factors (Aubke, 2009; Chamorro-Premuzic, Furnham, & Lewis, 2007) and the level of social and academic integration (Crawford & Wang, 2015; Rienties, Luchoomun, & Tempelaar, 2014). For instance, Case and Marshall’s (2004) study identified two additional approaches among South African engineering and chemical engineering students and showed how SAL change over the duration of the course, depending on students’ perceptions of the course context. Sadler-Smith and Tsang (1998) investigated a sample of 183 undergraduate students in Hong Kong and 225 students in the UK. Their findings suggest that the SAL may to be related to the espoused academic values and systems of assessment. A longitudinal study among hospitality students in Hong Kong by Chan and Tang (2006) revealed a significant drop in the deep score of students after one year. Further analysis of the interviews with students showed that the tight study schedule, excess material in the curriculum, insufficient time and heavy workloads encourage a surface approach. Trigwell, Prosser and Waterhouse’s (1999) analysis of students’ approaches to learning and teachers’ approaches to teaching among 3956 science students and 46 science teachers reveals that information transmission or a teacher-focused approach to teaching is associated with a surface approach to learning, while a student-focused approach to teaching is associated with a deep approach to learning.

Finally, the bipolar categorisation of deep and surface is considered to contribute to the “paradox of the Chinese learner” (Case & Marshall, 2004). Chinese students are often portrayed as surface learners, relying heavily on memorisation and rote learning (Kember, 2000). Richardson and Sun (2016, p. 110) argue that such a portrayal of Chinese learners “reflects a tendency for expatriate Western teachers in Hong Kong to resort to a transmissive approach to teaching when they are confronted with large classes of ethnically Chinese students”. However, research suggests that Chinese students may outperform their western counterparts and generate higher level learning outcomes (Biggs, 1996; Hau & Ho, 2010). Marton et al. (1996) explained that memorising, one of the unique features of the surface approach, can also be used effectively in a form of the deep approach. One approach to understanding this paradox has been to recognise cultural differences in learning and teaching and the impact these have on students’ learning (Charlesworth, 2008; Currie, 2007; Tempelaar, Rienties, Giesbers, & van der Leef, 2012). The approaches to learning adopted by Chinese learners are often attributed to their Confucian values (Kennedy, 2002). De Vita (2001, p. 167) explains these characteristics as a “cultural learning style”. This concept re-proposes learning as a culturally based phenomenon, which “may then explain why teaching methods, learning tasks and environments which promote learning in some cultures may be ineffective in others”. For instance, Chan (1999) notes that Chinese culture promotes conformity and reinforces a passive role in class where students are not encouraged to speak out or to criticise for fear of being wrong and thus losing face. Major (2005, p. 85) argues this is quite different from the western culture of learning, where dialogical practices are the norm featuring “questioning, criticising, refuting, arguing, debating and persuading”.

In addition, the idea of the “Chinese learner” also imposes another stereotype, that “Chinese learners” are a single homogeneous group (Richardson & Sun, 2016). A common explanation for what makes Chinese learners as they apparently are is their shared cultural heritage rooted in Confucianism (Clark & Gieve, 2006). However, an approach
consisting of memorising with understanding has been found among different cultural settings such as the South Pacific (Mugler & Landbeck, 2000) and even the UK (Entwistle & Entwistle, 2003). Similarly, Smith (2001) compared ethnically Chinese international students at two universities in Australia. Significant differences in SAL were found among students from Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong. Therefore, there is a danger when students from so-called Confucian-heritage cultures are assumed to be a homogeneous group (Mathias, Bruce, & Newton, 2013; Richardson & Sun, 2016). Clark and Gieve (2006, p. 69) suggest that researchers have to move away from “explanations and understandings based reified, abstracted and frozen conceptions of culture” as the influence of national culture will be moderated in a different context (situated identity) and the learner will attempt to negotiate new identities in a new environment (agency).

Recognition and understanding of different approaches to learning appear to be of crucial importance for educators, as SAL are often found to be a significant predictor of students’ expectations of teaching and thus satisfaction (Appleton-Knapp & Krentler, 2006) and attainment (Iannelli & Huang, 2013). Despite the studies conducted within the UK higher education yielding mixed results (for instance see Hau & Ho, 2010; Iannelli & Huang, 2013), they do point to certain individual differences like age, gender, ethnicity, prior academic achievement and experience as being possibly significant factors in influencing learning outcomes (Cantwell, Archer, & Bourke, 2001; Richardson, 2008). The most recent study on understand academic performance differences between Chinese and UK students by Crawford and Wang (2015) clearly showed a dramatic drop in performance among Chinese students from year 1 to year 2 and increasingly significant performance gaps between Chinese and UK students in the final academic year by gender, prior academic performance, degree programme, prior academic qualification and enrolment year. Among Chinese students, their final degree mark was not influenced by individual differences such as gender, prior academic performance, prior academic qualification or degree programme. These results contribute to the research stream which argues that educators should understand how different characteristics of Chinese students, such as their SAL or preferred learning and teaching and consequent curriculum design, can affect their academic attainment (Crawford & Wang, 2015; Richardson & Sun, 2016).

**Students’ expectations of learning and teaching methods**

Research suggests that students’ expectations of teaching and learning are dependent on a number of factors, such as institutional culture and the mode of study (Stevenson & Sander, 1998). For example, Sander et al. (2000) developed the University Students’ Expectations of Teaching (USET) instrument to measure preferred, expected and not wanted learning and teaching methods. In a study amongst 395 first-year students at a UK university, Sander et al. (2000) found that students expected to be taught by formal and interactive lectures, but they actually preferred more interactive lectures and group-based activities. Furthermore, in terms of whom students rated as good teachers, those with good teaching skills and approachable attitudes were preferred over teachers who were knowledgeable and well organised.

Surveys that have been devised to measure students’ expectations and also perceptions of their learning and teaching environment (such as, for instance, the Course
Experience Questionnaire by Ramsden, 1991; or the Experiences of Teaching and Learning Questionnaire by Entwistle, McCune, & Hounsell, 2003 have confirmed a relationship between SAL and students’ perceptions. For instance, the study by Parpala, Lindblom-Ylänne, Komulainen, and Entwistle (2013) among Finish and British students suggested that positive perceptions of the teaching–learning environment were positively related to deep approaches to learning, and negatively related to a surface approach to learning, which is in line with other studies (Entwistle et al., 2003; Lawless & Richardson, 2002; Lizzio, Wilson, & Simons, 2002; Richardson, 2007; Sadlo & Richardson, 2003). Price et al. (2011) administered Chinese versions of the CEQ and the RASl to 356 students at Gansu Radio and Television University. A factor analysis of both questionnaires yielded just two factors: quality of the academic support and the academic demands of the course (CEQ) and a deep/strategic and a surface approach (RASI). Students who rated their courses positively in terms of student support were more likely to adopt a deep/strategic approach. Students who rated their courses positively in terms of course demands were less likely to adopt a surface approach.

It should, however, be appreciated that the relation between students’ experiences and their approaches to learning appears to flow in both directions, in other words, students’ experiences affect approaches to learning, but approaches to learning affect students’ experiences as well (Biggs, 1993; Ning & Downing, 2010; Richardson, 2007, 2010). For example, the results of Lizzio et al. (2002) among undergraduate students demonstrate that perceptions of heavy workload and inappropriate assessment influenced students towards surface learning, and perceptions of good teaching towards deep approaches to learning. Importantly, school-based achievement was not associated with a deep approach to university study and students’ perceptions of their current learning environment were a stronger predictor of learning outcomes at university than prior achievement at school.

However, teachers and students from different cultural backgrounds may differ significantly in interpreting their roles in the classroom and what constitutes learning and teaching (Currie, 2007). Studies investigating international Chinese students in western countries report that a major problem lies “in the gap between expectations and an unusual teaching style that does not meet the needs of these students” (Kingston & Forland, 2008, p. 209). International Chinese students expected to be taught more by formal lectures rather than participating in class discussions; preferred less emphasis on oral presentations due to the language barriers (Barron, 2007; Cai, Wei, Lu, & Day, 2015; Hills & Thom, 2005); considered timed examinations as the most challenging; and preferred essays as an assessment method (Kingston & Forland, 2008; Lu & Adler, 2011). Waters and Leung’s (2013, p. 4) study shows that the immobility of transnational Hong Kong students and their “in situ experience of international education” has a significant impact on students’ expectations.

However, a growing numbers of studies are revealing that academics’ perceptions of Chinese students as being fixed in their approaches as surface learners are based on misunderstandings (Kennedy, 2002). For instance, Penfold and van der Veen (2014) investigated approaches to learning among Confucian undergraduate hospitality and tourism management students in Hong Kong and teachers’ perceptions. Their findings revealed that the vast majority of first- and final-year students embrace a deep approach to learning, which is in stark contrast to the teachers’ perspective because they believe
that the students generally adopt a surface approach to learning. Kember (2000, p. 105) concludes that “if the learning of Chinese students’ involves understanding as well as memorising then it is neither rote-learning nor a surface approach”. He named this strategy a “narrow orientation”, for which students had the intention to both memorise and understand. In addition, variability in SAL implies that students may use both surface and deep approaches at different points in their studies (Case & Marshall, 2004). Increasing numbers of studies investigating the adaptation of international Chinese students argue that a range of factors, such as professional identities, motivations, the power relationships and the learning context, all have significant influences in the adaptations made by Chinese students (Richardson & Sun, 2016; Rienties et al., 2014; Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013). However, even though the stereotype of the Chinese learner as a “rote” or “surface learner” has been widely questioned, it has been far from abandoned in the western literature (Kember, 2000; Richardson & Sun, 2016).

Therefore the purpose of this study is to address the following research questions: (1) to what extent do transnational Chinese students in a transnational (Hong Kong) centre differ from Chinese students at the degree-awarding partner (UK) university in terms of adopted approaches to learning?; (2) to what extent do transnational Chinese students in the transnational centre differ from Chinese students at the degree-awarding partner in terms of preferred learning and teaching methods?; (3) to what extent are students’ satisfaction with a student-centred approach and performance different across the two geographical cohorts?

The study

Setting and participants

This study took place in a second-year undergraduate tourism management module of the degree-awarding British university and one of its transnational partner institutions in Hong Kong. A female, European lecturer from the British university (L1) taught both implementations of the module, while she was supported by a male British lecturer at the British university (L2), and two Chinese local tutors at the transnational institution (L3 and L4). The module uses a student-centred, active approach to learning. Students worked in small groups of five in a computer simulation, whereby groups had to start up and run an online hotel business.

At the British university, the module had three contact hours per week during 11 weeks of teaching, where the first hour was spent explaining different topics relevant for running a hotel business. The remaining two hours of tutorials were spent on different tasks, which aimed to encourage students’ participation and group work. Groups presented their findings from the business simulation twice during the semester. In contrast, the module in Hong Kong occurred over five consecutive days of intensive delivery, with six hours of teaching each day. L1 aimed to deliver the module in a similar format and combined both lecturers and tutorials. The remaining two weeks of teaching were conducted with two hours of tutorials by two local tutors (L3 and L4) who prepared students for the assignments and monitored the group work (business simulation). This delivery mode is commonly encountered in transnational education, given the
financial costs associated with such programmes and the time restrictions of the staff involved in transnational courses (Gribble & Ziguras, 2003).

In total 91 students were enrolled in the "British" cohort and 84 students in the transnational cohort. As our study was aimed at Chinese students, we excluded 25 British and 33 "other" international students from the British cohort in the follow-up analyses. That is, we compared 33 Chinese students studying in the UK with 84 Chinese students studying in Hong Kong on the transnational programme. As our study focuses only on the Chinese learners, we have included in our sample only students from Mainland China and Hong Kong (for both cohorts) and have excluded all other “Asian” students. The average age of participants was 21.66 years (SD = 1.30), 74% of the Chinese participants were female, and the grade point average (GPA) after one year was 60.49 (SD = 9.66) and after two years 56.36 (SD = 9.35). Most students had at least 16 months of experience with the university.

**Instruments**

**Students’ approaches to learning**

In order to measure the students’ approaches to learning, we used the revised two-factor Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ) of Biggs et al. (2001) at the start of both modules. It consists of 20 items on two scales, 10 Deep Approach (DA, e.g., “I find that at times studying gives me a feeling of deep personal satisfaction”) and 10 Surface Approach (SA, e.g., “My aim is to pass the course while doing as little work as possible”). The survey used a five-point Likert response scale from A (never true for me) to E (always true for me). The Cronbach’s alphas were 0.69 and 0.70 respectively, indicating reasonable reliability and in line with previous implementations of the SPQ (Leung & Kember, 2003).

**University students’ expectations of learning and teaching**

The participants’ preferred learning and teaching methods were measured at the start of the module by the University Students’ Expectations of Teaching (USET) instrument developed by Sander et al. (2000). The USET instrument consists of three parts, namely the preferred learning and teaching method, qualities of a good teacher and the preferred method of assessment. While in the study by Sander et al. (2000) students were measured in the first week of the first year, our participants had already been studying at their institution for 16 months. Therefore, we adjusted the two question stems of Sander et al. (2000) from “hope for” and “expected” to “preference for” a particular learning and teaching method. Thus, students were asked to identify their three most preferred and three most disliked learning and teaching strategies out of a list of nine options (formal lecture, interactive lecture, student-centred teaching, student presentations, teaching sessions based around group work, tutorials, group work, private study, student role play). In the qualities of a good teacher section, using a Likert response scale of 1–5, students were asked to rate the qualities of a good teacher based on five categories (approachableness, enthusiasm, organisation, knowledge, and teaching skills). In order to understand what students perceive by different qualities of a good teacher, they were asked to write short attributes or explanations on the questionnaire.
Finally, students were asked to rank the three assessment methods they liked most/least from seven options (examinations, individual essays, PowerPoint® presentations, oral presentations, group reports, business simulations, problem-solving exercises). In line with Sander et al. (2000), we coded students’ most preferred method and least preferred method as “3”, followed by the second most preferred method and least preferred method as “2”, the third as “1”, and the other methods were coded as “0”. Furthermore, if a particular method received a vote (irrespective of the actual ranking), this was coded separately as either a preferred or a disliked method.

The response rate for the SPQ and USET instruments was 82% for the British cohort and 71% for the transnational cohort. In line with Sander et al. (2000), in the statistical analysis the USET data were assumed to be non-parametric as they were derived from ordinal data points.

**Students’ learning satisfaction and learning outcome**

On the last day of teaching, we measured student learning satisfaction using an internally developed student evaluation questionnaire (Rienties, 2014), consisting of 14 items on a five-point Likert response scale and two open text boxes. Three subscales were identified, namely learning experience (8); teaching support L1 (3); and teaching support L2 (3). For students in Hong Kong four subscales were identified: learning experience (8); teaching support L1 (3); teaching support L3 (3) and teaching support L4 (3). Student data were collected anonymously, whereby 67 students (80%) from Hong Kong and 38 students (42%) from the British university completed this questionnaire, with Cronbach’s alphas of 0.82 and 0.91 respectively. As student satisfaction data were collected anonymously, we can only report average scores of the entire cohort, as we are unable to separate Chinese from other students.

**Results**

No significant differences between the British and transnational cohort were found in terms of age, gender and average performance after one year at the start of the module, although Chinese students in the British programme were shown to have a significantly higher average performance score in their second year ($t = 3.188, p < 0.05$). In order to determine whether there was a non-response bias, we compared whether participants who responded to the two questionnaires were similar to those who did not respond in terms of demographics and academic performance. We found no differences in the British cohort, while in the transnational cohort participants who responded to the two questionnaires had better academic performance in the second year ($t = 4.560, p < 0.05$), which is a common finding in educational literature, i.e., that better performing students are intrinsically more interested to engage with psychometric questionnaires (Richardson, 2012).

**Deep vs. surface approach**

As illustrated by the means (M) and standard deviations (SD) in Table 1, in contrast to prior expectations, participants in the transnational programme had significantly higher deep approaches to learning in comparison with Chinese students following the British
programme, with a moderately strong effect size ($d = 0.67$). Furthermore, although transnational students also had a higher surface approach to learning, this was not significant at a 5% confidence level. Follow-up Mann–Whitney analyses of the 20 items indicated that four items were significantly different between the two cohorts. First, transnational students used more rote memorisation strategies than Chinese students who studied in the British programme. Second, transnational students used more deep approaches to learning strategies as highlighted by the three other items in Table 1. This approach to learning appears to correspond to that reported by Kember (2000), whereby understanding precedes memorisation and memorisation is used as a strategy to achieve or enhance understanding.

**Preferred learning and teaching methods**

We found a significantly negative correlation ($r_s = -0.42, p < 0.01$) between the teaching and learning methods that were preferred and those that were disliked. The teaching and learning method most preferred (in terms of number of votes received) by Chinese students in the British institution was the interactive lecture (59%), while the formal lecture was most preferred by the transnational students (56%). Group work was the third most preferred teaching and learning method for both cohorts, although Chinese students in the British institution seemed to have a stronger preference for group work than transnational students.

In Table 2, the preferred and disliked learning and teaching methods for transnational and Chinese students studying at the British institution are illustrated (0 = no preference, 1 = 3rd, 2 = 2nd, 3 = 1st). Using chi-square analyses, Chinese students at the British institution had a significantly higher preference for interactive lecturing and marginally higher preference for teaching sessions based on group work, while transnational students had a marginally higher preference for student-centred learning. This may reflect a degree of cultural learning style adaptation of the Chinese students at the British institution to the teaching context (De Vita, 2001). It can be argued that although students at both institutions spent 16 months at the university, were engaged in a full-time programme and none of the students hold a full-time job that would make group

**Table 1. Deep and surface approaches to learning.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deep approach</th>
<th>Transnational</th>
<th>British</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>z</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I find most new topics interesting and often spend extra time trying to obtain more information about them (DA).</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learn some things by rote, going over and over them until I know them by heart even if I do not understand them (SA).</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I come to most classes with questions in mind that I want answering (DA).</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I make a point of looking at most of the suggested readings that go with the lectures (DA).</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Independent sample $t$-test (2-sided) and MW analysis of transnational ($n = 60$) vs. British ($n = 27$). Likert response scale from 1 (= this item is never or only rarely true of me) to 5 (= this item is always or almost always true of me).

**Coefficient is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).**

**Coefficient is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).**
work challenging, due to the nature of transnational programme delivery Hong Kong students may not be entirely comfortable with working in active learning formats, while Chinese students at the British institution may be more accustomed to working in small groups.

Although there were some significant differences in the types of learning and teaching methods preferred by transnational students and Chinese students at the British institution, there were no significant differences in the methods students disliked. The most disliked method was student presentations (65%), directly followed by private study (63%) and student role-play (46%).

In terms of the qualities of a good teacher, there were subtle differences between the expectations of the transnational students and the Chinese students studying at the British institution. As illustrated in Table 3, while teaching skills were the highest rated characteristic of a good teacher for transnational students, Chinese students studying at the British institution clearly preferred a teacher with strong knowledge who at the same time is also approachable. In the qualitative feedback boxes, Hong Kong students elaborated that “teaching skills” refer to the capability of transmitting knowledge in a formal lecture setting. Chinese students at the British institution perceive a teacher as approachable if help is provided to facilitate their learning.

Table 2. Preferred and disliked teaching methods.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Preference Transnational</th>
<th>Preference British</th>
<th>Dislike Transnational</th>
<th>Dislike British</th>
<th>$X^2$ preference</th>
<th>$X^2$ dislike</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal lecture</td>
<td>10.48</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>00.96</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>00.78</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive lecture</td>
<td>00.97</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>10.37</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>00.22</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group work</td>
<td>00.80</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>10.11</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>00.45</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutorials</td>
<td>00.67</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>00.48</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>00.23</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-centred teaching</td>
<td>00.53</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>00.32</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private study</td>
<td>00.53</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>00.89</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>00.95</td>
<td>10.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student role-play</td>
<td>00.50</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>00.95</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>00.48</td>
<td>10.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching sessions based around group work</td>
<td>00.28</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>00.61</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>00.95</td>
<td>00.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student presentations</td>
<td>00.17</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>00.49</td>
<td>00.26</td>
<td>00.76</td>
<td>10.48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-square analysis of transnational (n = 60) vs. British (n = 27).

*Coefficient is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

aCoefficient is significant at the 0.10 level (two-tailed).

Table 3. Qualities of a good teacher.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Transnational</th>
<th>British</th>
<th>$X^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching skills</td>
<td>40.10</td>
<td>10.27</td>
<td>30.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>30.00</td>
<td>10.47</td>
<td>30.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation</td>
<td>20.75</td>
<td>10.23</td>
<td>20.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
<td>20.66</td>
<td>10.32</td>
<td>20.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approachableness</td>
<td>20.49</td>
<td>10.19</td>
<td>30.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-square analysis of transnational (n = 60) vs. British (n = 27). Likert response scale from 1 (= totally disagree) to 5 (= totally agree).

*Coefficient is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

aCoefficient is significant at the 0.10 level (two-tailed).
Learning satisfaction and learning performance

As highlighted in Figure 1, in comparison with students at the British university, students at the transnational institution were significantly less satisfied at the end of the module with their learning experience ($t = -6.424$, $p < 0.001$) and the teaching support from L1 ($t = -7.306$, $p < 0.001$), with a strong effect size. Using a cut-off value of 3.25 as a positive learning experience, 63% of the transnational students were satisfied with the learning experience, while 97% of the students at the British institution were satisfied. In total, 67% of the transnational students were satisfied with L1, while 89% of the students at the British university were satisfied with L1. Some students also added qualitative feedback (18 students in Hong Kong and 11 students at the British institution). Transnational students mainly emphasised the additional attributes they expected from the teacher as “caring for students” and “teach us more”. In contrast, students at the British university were more diverse in their comments, asking for more feedback and interesting examples. Finally, in terms of learning performance Chinese students at the British university significantly outperformed Chinese students at the transnational institution ($M_{UK} = 64.60$, $SD_{UK} = 8.85$, $M_{HK} = 52.86$, $SD_{HK} = 8.02$, $t = 6.864$, $p < 0.001$), with a strong effect size.

Conclusions

During the last decade, tourism schools from the UK have expanded internationally and offer a vast number of courses in Asian countries (O’Mahony, 2014). Also, tourism programmes in the UK attract significant numbers of international students, in particular from China (Lashley & Barron, 2006). Although the educational literature demonstrates that students’ approaches to learning are of significant importance for curriculum development (Kember, 2000) and that Chinese students may face numerous challenges when studying abroad or on transnational programmes (Campbell & Li, 2008; Waters &
Leung, 2013), only limited attention from tourism educational scholars has been given to the students engaged in those programmes (Barron, 2007; Nield, 2007). This study has analysed and compared SAL, preferred learning and teaching methods, learning satisfaction and academic performance of two groups of Chinese students studying on the same tourism transnational programme in Hong Kong and at the degree-awarding British university. The main objective was to investigate whether there are significant differences between Chinese students on a transnational course and international Chinese students studying at a British university. Our findings make two key contributions.

Our first finding reveals that there are significant mismatches in the preferred learning and teaching methods and in students’ expectations of a good teacher between transnational and international Chinese students at the two institutions. Transnational Chinese students preferred more formal lecturers, expected their teachers to have good teaching skills, to care for students and to spend more time on lecturing, compared with Chinese students at the British institution. It is important that these differences are taken into account when the curriculum is created and when universities export their curriculum to transnational institutions (Brookes & Becket, 2011). Despite the fact that tourism education literature places a significant emphasis on the tourism curriculum, research by Tribe (2002) and Stergiou et al. (2008) demonstrates that “the preoccupation of authors and researchers with what is and what ought to be taught – the curriculum – has tended to drive out issues related to the conduct of teaching, to the extent that research on teaching within the field is notable mainly for its absence” (Stergiou, Airey, & Riley, 2002, p. 150). Tribe’s (2005) further research reveals that in last 25 years only eight articles out of 302 identified explored teaching, learning and assessment methods in tourism education. Neglect of learning and teaching methods and assessment preferences in the tourism curriculum may also (in part) explain the lower (perceived) learning experiences and teacher support scores amongst transnational students.

Learning and teaching constitute an integral part of tourism education and as such cannot be seen as a fairly straightforward process of transmitting knowledge and skills and be excluded from the tourism curriculum (Stergiou, 2005). Li and Campbell (2008, p. 30) argue that recognition and understanding of cultural differences in approaches to learning has the potential to change the current educational practice and curriculum, where many of the underlying discourses of western pedagogies, such as the learner participation discourse and patterns of classroom interactions, are often taken for granted as “the ethnic defaults”. Therefore, for tourism educational scholars there are implications for not only the content of the curriculum, but also how the tourism curriculum is delivered in a classroom. From a social science perspective, development of tourism knowledge has been immense, but Stergiou et al. (2008) argue that the full effect of such knowledge can easily be diminished, if it is not communicated effectively to students.

Our second contribution pertains to the binary notion of SAL such as deep and surface: on the basis of the evidence reported here this appears to be too simplistic and also exclusive. Indeed, this dichotomy has contributed to the creation of stereotypes in the educational literature, such as “the Asian learner as a rote learner” (Biggs, 1996). In common with Kember (1996) and a recent review by Richardson and Sun (2016), our findings demonstrate that Chinese students in both settings use more deep approaches
to learning than surface approaches. However, students at the transnational institution seem to use a deeper approach, while at the same time using more rote memorising strategies than Chinese students at the British institution. The most recent studies that compare Chinese students with a range of other nationalities (Charlesworth, 2008; Rienties, Beausaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet, & Kommers, 2012) also report that students of the Confucian culture adopt significantly higher memorisation-based learning processes.

In our study, Chinese students who had been studying at the transnational institution had significantly higher preferences for memorisation strategies. In addition to the Confucian cultural influences, language may also trigger higher memorisation-based strategies. Although English is used as the medium of teaching, the mother tongue of these students is Cantonese. Studying in a foreign language may even further encourage memorisation strategies, as a limited ability in the language may lead to a “narrow systematic pattern of study” (Kember, 1996, p. 341). This appears of crucial importance for transnational education, as Waters and Leung’s (2013) study outlined the language issue as one of the most significant barriers for transnational Chinese students. However, Chinese students who had been studying at the British university had a significantly higher preference for interactive lectures, something which may reflect their adaptation to the British educational system and teaching context (the use of a business simulation). Therefore, SAL are not only a function of culture, but also a dynamic interaction of the individual characteristics of the learner and the teaching context (such as the forms of assessment and the learning task). This appears of crucial importance for educational scholars, as a number of researchers (for example, Biggs, 1996; Nguyen et al., 2009; Richardson & Sun, 2016) argue that misconceptions of Chinese students happen mainly because of a lack of understanding of their distinct conceptions of learning. In particular, given our findings that students from the transnational institution were less satisfied with the (perceived) learning experiences and teacher support, and underperformed relative to students in the UK, this may indicate that some students at the transnational institution struggled to adapt to a more student-centred approach to learning and teaching.

**Study limitations**

There are several limitations to this study. First, all three instruments were self-report with the usual caveats regarding social desirability. Nonetheless, a large body of research (see Leung & Kember, 2003) has found that SPQ provides a robust predictor for learning approaches. Although the USET instrument (Sander et al., 2000) is still in an early stage of development and has not been applied as widely as the SPQ, it did identify coherent and interpretable relationships. Also, all three instruments had acceptable reliabilities and high response rates in both our settings. A second limitation is our relatively small sample of students in the two contexts and the nested nature of our study. As indicated by Richardson and Sun (2016), the reasons why Chinese students go abroad or stay in China might substantially influence their approaches to learning and attitudes towards teaching in learning. A major benefit of our study is that we conducted this study after students had substantial experience with the respective pedagogical approach of the institution. A final limitation is that we did not conduct a qualitative analysis of learning.
interactions between students and teachers, such as that carried out by Volet and Ang (1998) exploring the influence of culture. The majority of studies investigating Chinese students have compared ethnic Chinese students at their home institutions with western students at universities in, for instance, Australia or the UK. Sun & Richardson’s (2012, p. 301) analysis demonstrates that these studies may be of limited value as they have “confounded differences in culture with differences in context”. By comparing two groups of Chinese students, our study offers some control for the potential effect of culture.

Study implications for transnational tourism education

Educational and marketing scholars argue that institutions of higher education have to adopt an “outside-in” approach in order to gain a larger share of the international market and to survive in the context of increasing competition (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2010). This approach, adopted by the successful service industries, researches what customers expect from the service and how they can provide service that meets expectations (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1990). However, evidence suggests that education, as a service provider, has adopted an “inside-out” approach, meaning that teachers and institutions assume that they know what students need and what they expect from the teacher (Sander et al., 2000). Gribble and Ziguras (2003) argue that “inside-out” approach has been widely applied in transnational programmes. On one hand, standardisation of the curriculum in transnational education may seem as desirable for a number of reasons, such as: the benefits of economies of scale; accreditation procedures which often require that the course delivered offshore is identical to that delivered in the home country; and also because of student mobility between campuses (Ziguras, 2000).

On the other hand, such “inside-out” practice has created significant problems for transnational students, as they do not have time to adjust their learning approach due to the intensive programme delivery and spending very limited time with the overseas faculty (Smith, 2014). Observed differences in our study between Chinese students in Hong Kong and Chinese students at the British University imply that western educators cannot assume that the curriculum is “automatically” transferable when schools expand internationally, as this assumption dissociates education from the social and cultural origins of a country. The “universal curriculum” in transnational programmes has created significant issues for transnational students and this study has demonstrated that tourism programmes have to consider in more depth their learning and teaching practices for Chinese transnational and international students. Failing to meet students’ expectations and assuming that only students have to adapt, universities are risking their positions in the international market. This study has alerted us to the needs of those students and also demonstrated that despite both groups of students spent equal time at university (16 months), students on a transnational course may need more time for adaptation than international Chinese students, because of their “in situ” experience of higher education.

Therefore, we need to design curricula and teaching in transnational courses that take into account the role of cultural identity and heritage embedded in a particular cultural framework. However, most transnational programmes allow for only a limited amount of
time with the lecturers from the degree-awarding institute (Gribble & Ziguras, 2003), thereby potentially limiting the opportunities for students and teachers to adjust and align their expectations, needs and preferred learning and teaching methods. Given the substantial financial costs of extending the duration of contact with international staff, one possible solution would be to provide more professional development opportunities and support for local academic staff at the transnational institution.

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Disclosure statement

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References


