

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Travelling the River: Chinese International Students' Engagement at UK Universities

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**Research Domain:** Student experiences (SE)

**Abstract:** The UK Higher Education institutions' expectations on students can be directly found on websites and in relevant materials, but the students' voices on their expectations, experiences and the process of achieving their learning goals throughout their learning journey are still under-researched. In particular, the voices of the large numbers of Chinese international master's students about various aspects of their learning are somehow overlooked. Though existing research describes Chinese Master's students' perceptions on a particular aspect of learning (e.g., reading and writing), it is still necessary to understand the contextual influences, their everyday experience and the outcomes of their learning through the lens of *Student Engagement*. Employing a combination of qualitative research tools, i.e., longitudinal collection of audio diaries and drawing-featured interviews, this research aims to gain a holistic understanding of Chinese international student's multifaceted experiences in UK universities and inform educational and pedagogical practices.

**Paper:**

### Introduction

Increasing numbers of international students bring distinct cultures, languages and educational backgrounds to HE, and they expect their experiences and interactions in HE institutions to be a rewarding journey (Bryson, 2014; Kettle, 2017). Despite critical efforts on the parts of policymakers, educators and researchers to understand international students' learning and experiences, one key issue – the dynamic and multifaceted concept of student engagement as a vital indicator of the quality of student experience – is still yet to be addressed thoroughly and deserves more attention.

Student engagement is viewed as a 'psycho-social process' that varies in intensity and evolves over time, with the institutional and personal factors play influential roles (Kahu, 2013, p. 768). A richer and deeper understanding of the student experience should be ensured as the universities need this knowledge to optimise student's learning experiences, and students can also benefit from such an understanding for a better learning outcome. A large number of Chinese TESOL learners (CTLs) coming to the UK master's programmes intend to experience an international learning trajectory and gain better professional knowledge before returning to China (to teach English). As future English teachers, their learning experiences in UK universities contribute to the development of 'internationally minded teachers' (Copland et al., 2016; Trent, 2011) with strengthened skills and essential teaching abilities. Investigating their perceptions and experiences through the lens of Student Engagement in Higher Education (Kahu, 2013) is theoretically and practically crucial in facilitating their learning at UK universities, and their development to become English language teachers. Such understanding is potentially useful not only for those involved in the TESOL

programmes but also for CTLs themselves, and arguably for their future students. Their knowledge about English teaching and learning is constructed through their everyday engagement, cognitively, affectively and behaviourally with TESOL input (Kubanyiova, 2012). However, a search of the literature found that most existing studies focused on their participation rather than embracing the complexity of their learning with attached emotional responses and huge mental effort.

Given the fact that international students' voices on their expectations, experiences and the process of achieving their learning goals throughout their learning journey are still under-researched, especially the voices of the large numbers of Chinese TESOL students about various aspects of their learning in this programme are somehow overlooked, it is necessary to understand the contextual influences, their actual everyday experience and the outcomes of their learning through the lens of student engagement; gaining this understanding can help programmes improve their learning outcomes and foster better engagement. Particularly for TESOL programmes that highlight professional development and aim to foster changes in TESOL students, an in-depth exploration and examination of Chinese TESOL learners' (CTL) experience through the interdisciplinary lens of student engagement and conceptual change from multiple perspectives (i.e., institutional and student) is arguably helpful and insightful to illuminate and indicate contextual learning trajectories, student engagement and success.

### **Research aims and questions**

This research endeavoured to address three intertwined research questions that link to the complex, multifaceted international master's student engagement and their developmental trajectory as future English teachers:

- 1) What opportunities for learning are explicitly provided via the MSc TESOL programme to CTLs?
- 2) How do CTLs perceive these direct and indirect learning opportunities provided via MSc TESOL programmes?
- 3) In what ways does CTL's engagement within and outwith the TESOL programme contribute to their conceptual change?

### **Research methodology**

Key stakeholders concerning CTLs' engagement were invited to contribute to this in-depth exploration, through three phases spanning an academic year: 1) document analysis, classroom observations and debriefings with TESOL programme leaders to identify institution-provided opportunities for engagement, 2) 22 CTLs at two Scottish universities recorded monthly audio diaries (Dangeni, Elliot and MacDiarmid, 2021) to capture their everyday learning, and 3) drawing-featured interviews, i.e., River of Experiences (Iantaffi, 2011) with CTLs and semi-structured interviews with TESOL staff respectively at the end of the year for a reflective view. Employed and guided by Kahu's Student Engagement in HE framework (2013) and Kubanyiova's Language Teacher Conceptual Change model (2012), a deductive thematic analysis was facilitated by the NVivo software. The rich findings illustrate the influential factors for CTLs' learning, i.e., the variety of institutional effort, with the highlighted factors that CTLs' brought to their study (e.g., cultural backgrounds, insufficient academic skills, etc.). It also provides rich and detailed insights into CTLs' dynamic state of engagement, i.e., their intertwined emotions, cognitions and behaviours in everyday learning. The

findings also depict their development trajectory of becoming English teachers with key factors and activities that foster their conceptual change.

## References: References

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