

A Social Practice Lens on Student Engagement in Sino-Foreign Postgraduate Dual-Degree Programs in China

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Abstract: There has been a growing interest in the dual-degree programs offered jointly by Chinese and overseas universities. However, what needs further exploration is the influence of student engagement in the settings and relations of the ongoing processes. This paper uses social practice theory to analyze this theme in depth. For this purpose, two focus groups of twenty postgraduates and five semi-structured interviews have been conducted. The study shows that the “joint” dimension should be understood as the aspect of relevance of these programs, demonstrating both the compatibility of the programs and the situations. Moreover, such a detailed perspective on the students’ relationship to education gives insight into the solutions adopted by postgraduates in the new learning spaces. Thus, the findings of the study were the foundation for considering methods of creating more inclusive and effective models for international education at the university level, as well as their impact on the wider sector of transnational higher education.

Keywords: Sino-foreign joint programs; Social practice theory; Student engagement; Postgraduate education

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1. Introduction

The globalization of graduate education has gained momentum over the past few decades because of the need to train scholars and leaders to live and work in the globalized world. Following this trend, the government in China has laid down criteria to promote the internationalization of the postgraduate educational system, inspiring universities to incorporate international practices into their systems. Their efforts in this regard have been backed by the need to conduct international exchanges. One major example is the promotion of Sino-foreign joint programs for double degrees, which enable master’s students to study at home for their first year, followed by at least two years of education at a partner university abroad, where they will obtain a double degree diploma provided by both universities^[1].

Both authorities and educational institutions have accepted joint initiatives as contributing to the

development of international postgraduate education and multicultural learning^[2]. Examples include globally recognized programs and initiatives, such as the Fulbright program and Global Affairs Canada. Examples in China include the China Scholarship Council's program and the Ministry of Education strategies that promote international cooperation involving joint programs.

Internationalization in graduate education has become a topical issue for researchers, but most research debates focus on separate factors and cognitive processes of the subject. These individualistic and mental viewpoints present essential insights into evaluating, either directly or indirectly, the effectiveness of internationalization efforts. However, they may not fully represent the complexities of postgraduate students' ambitions for adaptive practices that can promote their future research and career opportunities, as well as the difficulties of the cross-context educational situations that come up in joint programs.

Shifting from individualistic paradigms, this research promotes an alternative perspective advocating that student engagement in joint programs requires a broader social (extra-individual) and practical (situated) view^[3]. Using Social Practice Theory (SPT), which concentrates on the relationship between individuals and the practices performed by them, this research attempts to study student engagement in context by focusing on the development of particular practices used by workgroups^[4]. Furthermore, instead of seeing learning as the mere attainment of knowledge, as the traditional cognitive perspective sees it, SPT holds that learning takes place in the real world while participating in communities of practice^[5]. Considering this perspective, the current research aims to investigate the manner in which students are engaged in collaboration while taking joint programs through the modality of SPT.

2. Student engagement: A literature review

Higher education worldwide is becoming more internationalized. Universities are compelled to train students to meet the demands of the multicultural world. At the heart of this goal is a concept of student engagement which comprises a multitude of actions, attitudes and interactions that affect the learning gains and academic performance. Student engagement thus occupies a central role in efforts to internationalize university programs, and its significance has been widely acknowledged in recent literature.

Vietnam's case study shows how involved students promote diversity and inclusion within internationalized institutions^[6]. Although student academic engagement is regarded as an important indicator of education quality and success, student engagement in international contexts is still based on conventional behavioral or psychological models, which emphasize individual attitudes, behaviors, and decisions^[7-8]. Investigation into international students' extracurricular activities in U.S. schools shows that attention has mainly been given to traditional programs^[9]. Similar studies that were conducted in China suggest that personal factors such as personal preferences, ability to speak a particular language, and motivations also influence the participation of students^[10]. As engagement can be related to social interactions, cultural circumstances, and institutional structures, this individual approach does not cover all the connections and experiences that students pass through in educational systems. Nonetheless, individual agency is essential, considering that individuals influence practices. Document analysis shows the rigidity of institutional policies on joint programs, which stems from the top-down approach of technical rationality. This kind of approach may restrict students' agency in favor of pre-defined results rather than the more nuanced realities of student experience^[11]. In this context, postgraduate students can benefit from an integrated approach that immerses students in broader sociocultural contexts and fosters effective interaction among peers, faculty members,

and incumbent systems.

Cognitive perspectives have been primary in examining student involvement in internationalization initiatives. Numerical data analysis of 285 Business students indicates that students' cognitive skills play a key role in the implementation of internationalization methods ^[12]. Similar narrative-based investigations have focused on the experiences of eight doctoral candidates participating in a Sino-American project in Education and have identified cognitive skills that help throughout their research endeavor in China ^[13]. Yet these cognitive assessments are considered to be limited in studying postgraduate student involvement in contextual practices, as they detach social and institutional factors from the paths that postgraduate students follow in and across contexts. Conversely, the longitudinal research on interests in study among students in cross-context academic programs claims that the effectiveness of treatment relies on contextual factors. The authors propose shifting attention from traditional program concepts to contextual matters like connections, social connections, and actions to ensure those processes are delivered ^[14]. Their ideas are elaborated by a case study showing the importance of the historical and social context in transforming institutions due to the actions taken towards internationalization ^[15]. In the end, the full understanding of the phenomenon requires a multi-faceted view, taking into account individual, sociocultural, and institutional aspects.

3. Enhancing student engagement: A social practice perspective

SPT's strong focus on both the importance of context and people makes it a powerful tool for understanding students' journey through these programs in evolving practice and changing educational contexts. The inclusion of SPT in joint programs brought an innovative angle, overcoming limitations of previous studies that were limited by methodological individualism and cognitive aspects. Social practice is defined as a type of behavior that is repetitive and involves social and historical elements, and entails the interlinked activities, things, and knowledge involved in it. Additionally, social practice may be described as a recurring constellation of activities that pursue certain objectives ^[16-17].

In this context, internationalization practices are generally ordinary and habitual activities. However, every practice has its unique form, including the educational goals, instruments within the practice, its content, power relations, and the subjectivity of people involved, since all of this works with its complexity and dynamics ^[18]. That is why practices effective in one situation cannot necessarily be applicable in another. Therefore, an analysis of the students' involvement in joint programs requires an analysis of contextual factors that are mixed up within the nexus of practices that condition people's choice, but still do not determine it rigidly. When it comes to joint degree programs, an area still developing in terms of China's graduate education system, it is important to give considerable importance to the "sensitivity to context" principle while trying to create the desired impact.

The concept of learning extends to social engagement. As SPT puts it, "Learning is part of students' changing participation in changing practices" (p. 150) ^[19]. Student participation in joint learning scenarios is characterized by continuous and discontinuous interaction across various cultural and educational contexts. Therefore, an expansive view of learning in the context of social practice that sees knowledge as something culturally constructed and situated provides deeper insights into relations between people and practices in the context of their mutual influence. In addition, different practices and institutional systems have an important impact on how students react. This is especially applicable to postgraduate students who adjust their skills

and contributions depending on the circumstances they find themselves in. Experienced students can be flexible in responding to what is going on, making sure that their past experiences are taken into consideration but also looking into the future. Such a conceptual framework works well for studying the reflections of postgraduates on their experience since the current situation and other circumstances influence their reactions. The holistic approach developed by the social practice perspective offers an opportunity to investigate the various nuances of postgraduate students' participation and experience in joint study programs.

4. Research methods

To gain a thorough understanding of student engagement in specific contexts, detailed qualitative research is necessary. Although there are concerns about subjectivity and generalization, the methodological approach suits the goals of the study, including description, induction, and theory building. A practice-based ethnography was adopted by combining focus group discussions with semi-structured interviews in order to gain insight into contextual factors and the influence they have on the engagement of postgraduate students. Purposive sampling was used to identify appropriate participants^[20]. Twenty participants were shortlisted and divided into two focus groups, out of which five were selected for further semi-structured interviews. The research took place in a “university town” consisting of various types of universities to minimize bias. Participants came from a variety of disciplines. Among them, 70% were female, and 70% were master's degree students. Focus groups help to gain insights through group discussions. Two focus groups (FG) were established based on attitudes toward joint programs. FG1 consisted of individuals unwilling to join these programs, while FG2 included those who expressed the intention, were engaged in, or had already graduated from them. Each of the sessions lasted one hour and was recorded and transcribed. From FG2, five participants were chosen for interviews to gain further understanding from them. The interview guide was structured around questions that addressed the objectives and expectations of participants, the role they currently play, as well as the different challenges and opportunities. The interviews were recorded upon obtaining the consent of interviewees. Once both datasets were produced, they were subjected to a systematic coding process. FG data went through content analysis, while interview data were classified according to key themes.

5. Results and analysis

Thematic analysis showed the different ways students cope with new developments in joint programs. Even though all participants recognized internationalization as a new issue, their reactions varied greatly; some adopted “relatively new” activities to deal with issues and continued employing their familiarity with proven practices in terms of research, while others opted for “completely new” ways in academia, trying certain activities and building networks.

FG1: When faced with research challenges, the use of unfamiliar methods may be avoided. It is important to note that the use of change comes with risks and should take into account the effectiveness of the new methods in the feasible ongoing matter. In general, we tend to adopt methods that are less novel or have previously produced good results for our associates or us.

FG2: If we find ourselves content with our condition and sense the need for a change, we will be inclined to actively look for new undertakings and possibilities that would promote our development personally and academically.

Personal interviews confirmed these differences. Some respondents have made their decisions based on previous experiences of exchange, giving them motivation to move forward, while others with a rich background of studying abroad have valued differences over something established. Alternatively, certain participants were conservative and went for the programs compatible with their backgrounds. It demonstrates the complex role of agency and context in the behavior of people and the way to make interventions more efficient.

All participants stressed the need to match contexts. It was critical to match educational goals with aims that could be materialized through having dual degrees and making progress in their careers. Respondents with better goal alignment felt more secure.

FG1: When we compare the educational objectives of the programs to our plans, we might find that these experiences do not seem to directly or significantly benefit us.

FG2: We are aware of program goals and potential advantages, which appeal to us and could help us to create a bright future.

Social position did play a part in concepts. Some valued the university's reputation as a key determinant in employment potential, believing that a prestigious degree is the key to social advancement. The correspondence between old and new practices became significant. Participants spent considerable time analyzing the teaching and research process for compliance. One of the respondents narrated about the detailed examination of the instruction before signing.

Postgraduate students want activities suited to their needs, saying that some learning content is poorly organized and certain regulations are too general. They pointed out different expectations from the participants, which showed that a "one-size-fits-all approach" does not solve all problems. So, there are lessons that can be learned from their responses.

Participants saw joint programs as valuable projects impacting their futures wherein specific preparatory measures can be taken beforehand. Each transition period has a number of problems that involve high levels of stress and uncertainty. One participant was worried about her willingness to engage at a deeper level but questioned whether her behavior would be considered acceptable in a new university environment. Another was frank about the existence of a "difficult transition stage" for him despite a lot of learning experiences that helped him cope with it. Cultural differences, other scientific traditions, problems with languages, and feelings of loneliness made the transition process even more difficult.

Some students managed to find a "joint point," which was a space for connecting with the new environment. They became leaders in the college and joined in on local academic life or adapted to laboratory practices. One of them describes it like this: "It was a very uncertain moment, but I had a strong force that urged me to accept this change." Another individual noted that the real benefit was not the certificate received at the end, but rather the experience of becoming part of a research group as part of an identity shift from being an outsider to someone who really belonged.

Effective strategies included maintaining communication with peers and supervisors. One participant described the shift from solitary researcher to integrated community member through an open academic atmosphere. However, not all succeeded immediately. Some continued balancing worry with confidence due to campus discontinuity. Despite challenges, participants described their journey as an "adventure" shaped by opportunities and constraints, with optimism prevailing. A persistent gap between policy assurances and implementation hindered progress. Issues related to credit recognition, supervisory arrangements that failed to be established, and a continuous sense of ambiguity surrounding who was in charge of what led to the

growing mistrust of the participants. Their response was for more real cooperation between institutions, better procedures for credit transfer, and effective communication.

6. Discussion and conclusion

A social practice approach is used in this study to analyze the context concerning postgraduate involvement in joint programs rather than focusing solely on individual or cognitive aspects. Integrating this perspective means moving away from technical individualism and cognitive development. The findings point to the fact that students take into account the changes in their environment in their decision-making, which is consistent with the claim that interventions work within specific contexts. SPT's view on the relevance of the participants' strategies relies on their awareness of the balance that exists between the calls offered by the external environment and their past experiences in similar contexts. Thus, the participants are encouraged to connect multiple past and current experiences and, in this way, see the necessity for producing effective strategies aimed at achieving short-term goals.

Policy actions should revolve around a practice-based approach focusing on: 1) internationalization as understood in practice; 2) context-based discrepancies; 3) uncertainties; and 4) contextualized approaches. This is consistent with discussions about the general education system, illustrating the importance of a solid implementation modality. A framework of social practices indicates that changes combine a continuity aspect and a discontinuity aspect, which gives rise to possibilities and barriers. When transferring from the home university to a foreign university, students are offered various academic options and, at the same time, face challenges such as adapting to cultural and structural meanings. Cooperation among various academic networks such as students, instructors, and advisors is important for a successful transition process. The experience of graduating students and direct exchange of ideas with fellow students prepare the students for the challenges ahead, while the advice of instructors, faculty members, and mentors helps establish a community.

The findings shed light on how postgraduates make decisions as they adapt to changing practices. Contextual factors, fit, and connection together allow us to understand how effective engagement can be achieved amid the difficulties and the opportunities. Among the limitations, there are demographic biases present, as well as the use of purposive sampling, both of which impair the generalization of the results. In future studies, longitudinal designs should be used to examine the factors at the institutional and policy levels more thoroughly.

Despite these limitations, it is very important to use the view of social practice, as it can contribute to improving the policies in question. The approach that it offers serves as a signal of practice that is flexible enough, well-communicated, and coherent in structure. The approach works for the expansion of the engagement of people in joint programs and the creation of effective educational settings for postgraduates.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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