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Education Abroad as Knowledge Diplomacy: A Consortium Approach to Increasing Students' Participation in Study in China

Éducation à l'étranger comme diplomatie du savoir : une approche par consortium pour accroître la participation des étudiants aux études en Chine

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Résumé de l'article

Les expériences d'éducation à l'étranger sont bénéfiques pour la croissance personnelle des étudiants, leur sensibilisation interculturelle et leur préparation à une carrière. Cependant, le taux de participation des étudiants canadiens de niveau postsecondaire aux études à l'étranger est faible, en particulier en Asie. Le manque de ressources financières et l'incertitude quant au transfert de crédits sont identifiés comme étant les défis les plus courants qui font hésiter les étudiants à saisir de telles opportunités. Dans cet article, Canada Liaisons Internationales Chine (CLIC), un consortium de 12 universités canadiennes à forte intensité de recherche, est présenté comme un modèle permettant d'augmenter la participation des étudiants aux études à l'étranger en Chine. Après une introduction à la conception du programme, une analyse thématique est menée sur les expériences d'apprentissage déclarées par les étudiants afin de recueillir l'impact d'une telle initiative. Cette étude montre que les consortiums peuvent être utilisés comme une approche efficace pour promouvoir le taux de participation des étudiants aux études à l'étranger. Sur la base des résultats d'apprentissage des étudiants, l'article soutient qu'un consortium d'éducation à l'étranger est un moyen idéal de réaliser la diplomatie de la connaissance.

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**Education Abroad as Knowledge Diplomacy:
A Consortium Approach to Increasing Students' Participation in Study in China
Éducation à l'étranger comme diplomatie du savoir :
Une approche par consortium pour accroître la participation des étudiants aux études en
Chine**

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Abstract:

Education abroad experiences are beneficial to students' personal growth, intercultural awareness, and career preparedness. However, the rate of Canadian postsecondary students' participation in education abroad has been low, particularly in Asia. Lack of financial resources and uncertainty in credit transfer are identified as common challenges that stop students from pursuing such opportunities. In this paper, the Canada Learning Initiative in China (CLIC), a consortium of 12 top Canadian research-intensive universities, is introduced as a model to increase students' participation in study abroad in China. After an introduction to the design of the program, a thematic analysis is conducted on students' self-reported learning experiences to glean the impact of such an initiative. This study shows that consortia can be utilized as an effective approach to promoting the rate of students' participation in education abroad. Based on students' learning outcomes, the paper argues that an education abroad consortium is an ideal way to achieve knowledge diplomacy.

Résumé :

Les expériences d'éducation à l'étranger sont bénéfiques pour la croissance personnelle des étudiants, leur sensibilisation interculturelle et leur préparation à une carrière. Cependant, le taux de participation des étudiants canadiens de niveau postsecondaire aux études à l'étranger est faible, en particulier en Asie. Le manque de ressources financières et l'incertitude quant au transfert de crédits sont identifiés comme étant les défis les plus courants qui font hésiter les étudiants à saisir de telles opportunités. Dans cet article, Canada Liaisons Internationales Chine (CLIC), un consortium de 12 universités canadiennes à forte intensité de recherche, est présenté comme un modèle permettant d'augmenter la participation des étudiants aux études à l'étranger en Chine. Après une introduction à la conception du programme, une analyse thématique est menée sur les expériences d'apprentissage déclarées par les étudiants afin de recueillir l'impact d'une telle initiative. Cette étude montre que les consortiums peuvent être utilisés comme une approche efficace pour promouvoir le taux de participation des étudiants aux études à l'étranger. Sur la base des résultats d'apprentissage des étudiants, l'article soutient qu'un consortium d'éducation à l'étranger est un moyen idéal de réaliser la diplomatie de la connaissance.

Keywords: education abroad, consortium, knowledge diplomacy, China, Canada

Mots clés : éducation à l'étranger, consortium, diplomatie de la connaissance, Chine, Canada

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Introduction

To set a larger context for the case study program, the paper will start by reviewing existing literature on the benefits of education abroad experiences in general and the challenges students face when participating in education abroad in the Canadian context. The review will then narrow down to the importance of Canadian education abroad in Asia, citing survey findings among Canadian businesses. Given that the focus of this study is on China, China's national policy environment for international education is also reviewed. A detailed introduction is then given to the Canadian Learning Initiative in China (CLIC), including its member universities, funding model, governance structure, and student services, followed by the main body of the study which is a detailed evaluation of students' learning experiences and learning outcomes while studying in China through the program. The discussion of findings will focus on the consortium approach and its advantages in promoting students' participation in education abroad in China and in promoting knowledge diplomacy as a major learning outcome.

Education Abroad and Challenges

One important goal for universities around the world to engage in internationalization is to help students acquire global competences (Stier, 2004) and turn them into good global citizens (Hunter, et al., 2006). Education abroad can be an immensely empowering and transformative experience for youths (Root & Ngampornchai, 2012). NAFSA in the United States has identified five important outcomes of education abroad experiences: improving completion, retention, and transfer (to degree programs) rates; improving grade point average; improving language learning; fostering intercultural understanding, providing a global context, and building enlightened nationalism; and increasing employability and career skills (Liu, 2019). The Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) has identified the following six top outcomes of education abroad: knowledge of the host country; cultural awareness and understanding; openness to difference; knowledge of world events; self-confidence, and awareness of one's own identity (CBIE, 2016). In general, education abroad experiences have been found to help students improve foreign language skills, increase intercultural sensitivity and competence, and decrease xenophobia, fear or ethnic distance (Parsons, 2010).

Despite the benefits of education abroad, students' participation rate in such opportunities is low. According to CBIE (2016), only about 2.3% of the total Canadian university student population went abroad for some share of their studies in the 2014–2015 academic year. As for the reasons, 80% of Canadian students reported that their families could not afford it, or that such travel would delay their overall education and keep them from getting into the workplace as quickly as possible. Some have concerns about how education abroad might or might not be reflected in their course credits. Also, according to CBIE (2016), about 60% of students received credit on their Canadian transcript for their most recent experience abroad. As for the destinations, overwhelmingly Canadian students choose to go to Western countries (e.g., France 14%, United Kingdom 9%, United States 8%, Germany 6%, and Australia 4%). Only 3% of Canadian students choose to go to China. Both the low participation rate and the uneven distribution of destinations can be problematic.

Education Abroad in Asia and China

Based on today's world GDP distribution, China is the second largest economy of the world (17.9%), after the United States (24.4%); and Japan (5.4%), which runs third place, higher than Germany (4.5%) (Neufeld, 2021). If we look at the contributing countries of the new GDP growth

in the world, China is the number one contributor (35.2%), much higher than the United States' 17.9%, and India's (another emerging Asian country) contribution (8.6%) is higher than the whole EU zone (7.9%) (Desjardins, 2017). As a country that is heavily dependent on international trade, Canada would be in the interest of having more Canadian youths to obtain Asian knowledge and Asian competences, given the region's increasingly important economic position in the world and the corresponding geopolitical influence. The low number of Canadian students participating in education abroad in Asia and in China is concerning.

According to a report given by the Asian Pacific Foundation of Canada and the Munk School of Global Affairs, Canada is lagging behind other countries in promoting Asian competences, and young Canadians need to have more exposure, experience, and expertise in Asia to secure long-term prosperity of Canada in the context of Asia's increasing importance in world economic growth (Sherlock, 2013). A survey commissioned by Universities Canada found that two out of three Canadian hiring managers in small and medium-sized companies believe that Canada is at risk unless young Canadians learn to think more globally, and 82% of them believe that employees who possess cross-cultural knowledge and an understanding of the global marketplace enhance their company's competitiveness (Universities Canada, 2014). Beyond the economic motives, education abroad in linguistically, culturally, and ideologically different regions can serve the goal of knowledge diplomacy in strengthening relations among countries, contributing to world peace, and addressing common global challenges (Knight, 2020). All things considered, it is imperative for Canada to send more students to Asia, China in particular.

China has indeed become an important destination choice for international students in the past decade (Ahmad & Shah, 2018). China's future development prospect is a major attraction for international students to choose the country as their study-abroad destination (Ma, 2017; Lee, 2019). The enhanced quality and reputation of China's higher education (HE) is another major pulling force of international mobility to China (Wen & Hu, 2019). Low cost is also a factor for international students choosing to study in China (Liu, 2018). A growing number of descendants of Chinese migrants also wish to return to their place of origin for HE in search of their cultural identity (Ma, 2017). The Chinese government is committed to attracting more international students to China. In 2010, the Chinese government issued its "Study in China Plan," aiming to attract half a million international students to China before 2020 (Liu & Liu, 2021). To achieve this goal, the Chinese government provided wide access to scholarships for international students, with about 12% of international students currently in China supported by Chinese government scholarships (Liu, 2021).

Different from the functional economic goal in international education pursued by major host countries of international students in the West, China has been pursuing a soft diplomatic goal (Liu & Lin, 2016; Ma & Zhao, 2018; Wen & Hu, 2019). Due to its socialist political system, China has faced many challenges in public relations with the West. The Chinese government has been depicted by the Western media as a dictator, and China's economic rise is perceived as a threat to the West-led world structure. In this context, international education in China is tasked to serve the goal of China's international diplomacy:

It is believed by the Chinese government that the adverse Western impression about China is a result of the lack of knowledge about China and the lack of experience in China. And the best way to change this situation is to encourage more people from the West to visit China and see with their own eyes the improvement of people's lives and the peaceful nature of China's economic development under the leadership of the Communist Party. Attracting more international students to China's top universities is considered an excellent vehicle to increase the world's understanding

of China and to contribute to a positive international environment for China's economic development. (Liu & Lin, 2016, p 362)

Currently most of the international students in China are from developing countries and regions, such as Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. After rapid quantitative growth in international enrollment, China is now aiming to improve the quality of international student recruits and to increase the diversity of sources (Liu & Liu, 2021). As a soft diplomatic goal is pursued, China is hoping to recruit more students from Western countries and turn them into international friends who are knowledgeable about China, friendly to China, and even fond of China (Liu & Lin, 2016; Liu, 2020). How can we connect the Canadian need to send more students to China and the Chinese hope to recruit more students from Western countries, such as Canada? And to what extent can China's knowledge diplomacy goal be achieved through international student education in China?

Canada Learning Initiative in China (CLIC)

Reported in this study is a consortium approach adopted by the Canadian international education community as an innovative initiative to increase students' participation in study abroad in China. The CLIC program is a consortium of 12 top Canadian research-intensive universities (who are all members of the U15, a Canadian national consortium of best research universities) and about 60 Chinese universities (who are mostly institutional partners of the 12 Canadian universities, also top research universities in China). It was established in February 2016 with strong endorsement and support from the governments of both sides. The 12 Canadian member institutions are University of Alberta, the University of British Columbia, University of Calgary, Dalhousie University, University of Laval, McGill University, University of Montréal, University of Ottawa, Queen's University, University of Saskatchewan, University of Toronto, and the University of Western Ontario. The key Chinese member universities include Tsinghua University, Peking University, Shanghai Jiaotong University, Fudan University, Zhejiang University, Beijing Normal University, Renmin University of China, Harbin Institute of Technology, and China University of Political Science and Law. The CLIC program is a funding program that supports both semester and full-year exchanges (based on institutional partnerships of the two countries) and short-term summer programs (vetted and approved to be included in CLIC).

CLIC was designed to address the key challenges Canadian students face with studying abroad (CLIC, 2021). On the financial side, the program leverages the Chinese government scholarship opportunities, with funding commitment from the China Scholarship Council to cover students' tuition fees, monthly living stipends, accommodation, and medical care during their study in China. The Canadian government also provides occasional funds to support the initiative. The application fees are also waived by the Chinese universities as a condition to join the program. The conditions for Canadian universities to join the consortium are to provide each of their participating students a travel scholarship, and to pay an annual membership fee to the CLIC liaison office in Canada. On the credit transfer side, both semester/full-year exchanges and short-term summer programs the CLIC initiative supports have pre-negotiated and predetermined credit transfer back to Canadian universities. Many summer programs were preexisting programs between a Canadian and a Chinese university, but were required to open up to students of all member universities upon entering the CLIC program. Since credits given by one Canadian university makes it easier for other Canadian universities to award similar credits, hence all students are assured that their study in China will earn them Canadian credits. In terms of the disciplines covered in the summer program offerings, there is a big range from education, health,

and economics to law, public administration, and entrepreneurship development. There are also language/culture programs and research internship programs.

The CLIC program is board-governed, with one senior international leader from each Canadian member university serving as the board member. The board makes strategic decisions and approves the annual budget of the program. Under the board, there is also an operational committee, composed of study abroad advisors from each member university. They discuss all matters at the operational level and deliver the program on a daily basis. The CLIC office negotiates an annual quota in the amount of student months (total number of months, as scholarship is provided by month) with the Chinese Ministry of Education, and one of the operational committee's jobs is to discuss and approve the allocation of quota among Canadian member universities. The operational committee members also work to promote the program in their own universities, recruit students, and prepare students for application and travel. The membership fees paid by 12 member institutions are used to hire a full-time manager to provide liaison services among Canadian member institutions and between Canadian and Chinese universities. The CLIC office also works to provide student support and services throughout the program, including Chinese government scholarship application, predeparture orientation, troubleshooting while in China, evaluation survey with students towards the end of their stay in China, and post-program alumni engagement. These are all on top of the services provided by individual Canadian and Chinese universities.

From 2016 when the program was first established to 2020 before the COVID-19 pandemic which interrupted international mobility, the program has supported over 850 Canadian students to pursue their study abroad opportunities in China (CLIC, 2020). Based on a questionnaire survey with past participants, students' experiences have been overwhelmingly positive, reporting that the program enhanced understanding and perception of China, and 80% of them hope to return to China again in the future (CLIC, 2020). In this study, we hope to look into students' learning experiences during their participation in the program in a detailed manner with the goal of determining the major impacts of this initiative on students in the form of their learning outcomes. Particular attention is given to knowledge diplomacy as an outcome of Canadian students' learning experiences in China.

Methods

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Canada and the People's Republic of China, the CLIC office invited past CLIC participants to share their experiences and reflections on their studies in China. About 50 students (some responded as a group due to their participation in the same program) responded by writing and sharing their stories and pictures, and they were compiled into a book, entitled *Treasured Memories: Stories of Canadian Students in China* (CLIC, 2020). The 50 students' narratives and reflections are used as data in this study and a detailed thematic analysis is conducted on the data to glean a few major areas of their learning outcomes. Thematic analysis is commonly used in qualitative research (see e.g., Creswell, 2006) where themes are taken as the structures of people's lived experiences (van Manen, 1990).

Bracketing learning outcomes of study abroad determined in previous studies, we used an open-ended bottom-up approach to analyze students' learning experiences with the hope of letting themes emerge from ground up. The students' stories have been given three rounds of coding. In the first round, we immersed ourselves in the deep reading of the stories, highlighting the salient statements. In the second round, we focused on the highlighted texts and aimed to categorize them

into different themes that cut across different individual stories. Over 10 themes were identified after the second round of coding. In the third round, we tried to merge previously determined themes to four general themes to make it manageable for research presentation. Highlighted texts were clustered to support the new general themes. The four themes represent the four major areas of students' learning outcomes, and they are presented as findings of this study. Each theme is supported by quotes from students.

Findings

In reporting findings of this study, we try to balance the summative nature of themes and students' own voices. The goal is to capture students' experiences in the most holistic and vivid way.

Personal Growth While Living Independently in a New Environment

One important aspect of students' learning outcomes in China is related to their personal growth and development due to the experience of living and learning independently in a new environment. Being pushed out of their comfort zone during education abroad is cited as the basis for their learning. One girl mentioned that she was "a small-town kind of girl at heart," so going to Shanghai, a huge city in China, seemed very daunting. Overcoming such fear was her growth point. But most students felt "comfortable and welcome" in China that they hardly noticed that they were on their own. One student wrote the following:

Going abroad isn't just about education in a classroom, it really is about pushing past your comfort zone and making new memories for personal growth. It's absolutely exhilarating to dive headfirst into a different culture with amazing new people, laughing and making mistakes along the way. For lack of a better cliché, going abroad, even just for one short month, was absolutely life changing.

Living and surviving independently in a different language and culture can be an empowering experience. A few students talked about their experiences travelling alone in China and how much pride they felt about their ability to do so. One girl from Quebec wrote about her experience studying in Beijing:

I never felt uncomfortable going out by myself, even when I left the big cities and went to explore China's rural areas. I went to Shanghai. I went camping on the Great Wall. I went hiking. As a young woman from a Western country, I never dreaded traveling on my own. I never felt insecure or came across issues I couldn't deal with. I didn't lose my calm even when I missed my train back to Beijing. With the help of Tik Tok and a translation app, I purchased my ticket for the next train. ... With regard to the impact of the CLIC experience on me, that would be it made me realize the power I had. I can do things that I never thought I could before.

Away from the familiar circle of family and friends, students had to establish new relationships and make new friends. "Part of what made the experience so memorable was the friends I made from all over the world," wrote one student. "The relationships I built were the clear highlights of my 11 months in China. Besides Chinese friends, I also made friends from all over the world," another student wrote. Meeting new people and making new friends are mentioned by many students as a key dimension of their study abroad experience in China. Apart from enlisting help from the locals, English speaking and French speaking students also got help from Canadian students who have different levels of Chinese proficiency to navigate their lives in China. The ability to connect with new people and establish new friendships is an important part of students'

personal growth and development, as one student said, “I grew as a person in terms of emotional intelligence, independence, adaptability, and connecting with other people.”

While being away from their comfort zone, experiencing some challenges, feeling some discomfort, and overcoming some difficulties are all indicators of personal growth and development, as one student suggested:

I do recommend the CLIC experience to those who recognize the value of stretching themselves. If you go in with the expectation that it’s going to be difficult at times, you will get so much out of it. Overall, CLIC is a rewarding experience that helps you grow, and the tough parts, like the good, are all part of the journey.

Overcoming Language Barriers With Increased Interest in Language Learning

One major area of challenges Canadian students faced in China was language barriers. The experience in China helped many students (who were learning Chinese before their trips) identify their gaps in their Chinese proficiency. The following are what a couple of students wrote in this regard:

As soon as I got to China, I began to use my Mandarin Chinese that I have learned. But I found nobody seemed to understand my pronunciation. This is a big blow to someone who has studied Chinese consistently everyday in the past few months.

I tried to use some Chinese words to communicate with the local people, but they didn’t seem to know what I was talking about. Many things were different from what I expected, but they were all part of my experiences.

The language barriers gave students opportunities to try different communication strategies, particularly non-linguistic strategies, and many shared their improved self-efficacy when they could communicate using their limited Chinese:

I used a lot of body language. I used the translation app on my cell phone too. Though it was a challenge, what surprised me was that, if you make efforts to find ways to solve the problem, you can always find a solution. It is not as difficult as I imagined.

My biggest challenges were linguistic challenges. Even as I got better at communicating, the gesturing and pointing persisted.

Some students learned to come to terms with the language barriers they had for communication. Instead of stressing over it, they had some fun with it. This can be a sign of intercultural maturity as well:

But the challenges were all a part of the fun. Imagine sitting down in a restaurant and finding out the entire menu is in Chinese characters, which are unreadable to you. You just play a game I like to call “menu roulette,” picking things off the menu and getting what you get.

Canada is an immigration country with close to 25% of the population born overseas. The experience as a speaker of a second language in China gave Canadian students understanding and empathy of non-native speakers back home:

As the daughter of South Korean parents who immigrated to Halifax in the early 90s, I came home with a new level of empathy for my own parents who still face language barriers to this day, a whole new level of appreciation for how language barriers can affect the lives of newcomers.

But most importantly, the experience in China has motivated many students to learn Chinese as a second language. They also expressed their happiness when we were able to communicate better towards the end of their stay in China:

What surprised me was how many non-Asian international students can speak perfect Mandarin. It was great that I could practice my Mandarin with both local and international students.

What made me really happy is that I have improved my Chinese and more local people could understand what I was saying.

Experiencing China and the New Developments in China

First and foremost, students got the opportunity to experience Chinese universities. All the CLIC host universities are China's top research universities with good international ranking, as mentioned above. Although they do not represent the full picture of Chinese HE, they offer Canadian students the experience of what the best Chinese HE could offer:

I was in awe of the technological advancement at Tsinghua and deeply impressed by their innovative mindset and work ethic. A robotics lab I visited, where students were designing the next generation of flexible robots, really made me understand why Tsinghua alumni founded so many tech start-ups.

Students who participated in discipline-specific programs had the opportunity to understand the Chinese context and perspective of the disciplinary area of their study:

This Asian giant's (China) conception of law has experienced much change. The Chinese conception of law today is a modern conception of law.

My courses, which were all taught through the Masters of Chinese Business Law program, ranged from commercial arbitration to international law to corporate governance. It was enlightening to consider these topics from the Chinese perspective and to engage in rich classroom discussions with my peers from around the world.

We have seen many emerging countries with robust economic growth as well as a new emerging way of governance.

At Tsinghua, I learned about the Chinese people's perception of democracy and their views on effective leadership.

As a Psychology major, I paid special attention to observing interpersonal relationships when I was in China. I observed how Chinese couples showed their affection and argued with each other, and what couple dynamics surrounding privacy and exhibiting cuteness were culturally acceptable. In addition, I investigated the roles of females in romantic and professional career relationships. Seeing these relationship dynamics play out in front of me not only gave me a better sense of how couples operate in China, but also helped me to understand interpersonal relationships in different parts of the world.

The exposure to a different culture, a different system, and a different way of thinking gave students the much-needed intercultural sensitivity and openness to differences. Such mentalities give rise to students' intercultural competency:

When you've experienced a different cultural context, you understand why people operate the way they do.

Overall, my time in China expanded my perspective and made me realize that the way we do things in Canada may not be the only nor the best way, and we have a lot to learn.

Back in Vancouver, I found myself responding to everyday challenges through a wider lens.

As we mentioned in the literature review, many Chinese heritage students participate in education abroad in China to reconnect with their cultural roots. Getting more Chinese Canadian immigrant children to reconnect with China is in the interest of both countries, as they are more likely to serve as the bridges between the two countries and cultures:

My parents, both of whom emigrated to Toronto from China in their youth, speak fondly of their country of origin. I've always found it interesting to talk with them about Chinese politics and economics. They motivate me to be curious about my background and explore it for myself.

You hear one perspective on China from the Western media, another from family, and another from friends, and I want to experience the country in person and pursue my own answers.

A couple of students mentioned that they got opportunities to work as interns in China either during or after their programs, and they value such work experiences for their professional learning and their career prospects:

After I finished my study at CUPL (China University of Political Science and Law), I obtained an opportunity to work as an intern at Jingshi Law Firm. It is one of the biggest law firms in China.

Taking advantage of my experience working at the law firm in Shanghai, I conducted an extensive study on the Canadian and China Labor Law. I also found a job as a labor relations consultant in Montreal.

Confirming and Overcoming Western Stereotypes About China

Some positive stereotypes about China (that students had heard before they arrived in China) were strengthened. One such stereotype is that China has good food. Students were impressed by the food served at university canteens:

The food at Tsinghua is excellent. There are over 10 canteens all around campus, with a wide variety of Chinese cuisines that are clean, delicious, and healthy. It's hard to believe that campus food can be both good and inexpensive.

I enjoyed the affordable, authentic meal options offered by Tsinghua's elaborate system of canteens. I would eat my heart out for two Canadian dollars.

Students who travelled to China also witnessed a close-knit community on Chinese campuses:

To my surprise, I also experienced a stronger sense of community than anything I had experienced before. People like spending time together on campus more. There are no kitchens in the dorms. Everyone prioritizes eating meals together in communal dining halls.

A third positive stereotype about China that got strengthened was Chinese hospitality:

There are fewer foreigners here than I expected. People like to take my pictures and talk with me.

There are always Chinese students who would like to practice English with me and my friends, and to learn about our cultural backgrounds.

A trip to purchase tea for our family and friends was met by the biggest welcome from all the vendors, and an unforgettable tea ceremony experience for us all.

One of my friends connected me to nearby family members, who generously hosted me for Chinese New Year. I'll never forget the experience of making dumplings and watching the New Year's Gala on TV.

I learned before I went to China that the Chinese people are warm and hospitable, which is undoubtedly confirmed. I made many Chinese friends that I am still in touch with today.

Students' experience in China has also helped them develop an appreciation for the Chinese culture, hence changed some negative stereotypes about China:

I notice the negative images of China perpetuated by Western media, but I encountered people with the same dreams and aspirations as anyone else. In China, I met normal people trying to earn a degree, hold down a job, and raise a family.

Many people hold negative stereotypes about China, but my CLIC experience in China filled me with passion for this country. The country's old and traditional culture contains values that we often lack. The trip to China provided the social context of China to me, and it helps me understand the way Chinese people behave.

China is often seen in the West as a mono-ethnic country, but this perception was shaken during students' stay in China:

I was surprised at the diversity we encountered. I don't think most Westerners realize how many cultures and dialects China contains.

China is not a monolith. Fellow classmates and I got to experience the diversity of China firsthand on a trip to Xinjiang where Kazakh hosts fed and housed us.

China is a very diverse country, full of fascinating history and wonderful landscapes.

One student who stayed in Harbin, China's northeastern city, wrote:

I think the more valuable takeaway from the program than that was being exposed to the multitude of cultures and peoples that exist in East Asia for the first time. ...we went to Korean family restaurants, or for Korean barbeque, or to a Japanese izakaya. ... We went on field trips to appreciate Russo-Chinese architecture. That such multiculturalism and international influence exists even somewhere as seemingly remote as Harbin, the northernmost major city in China, is a testament to the diversity of Asia and the interconnectedness of the many cultures that make it up.

The Canadian students in China also helped change a couple of stereotypes Chinese people hold about people in Canada and in the West. One French Canadian student realized that few Chinese people knew about French Canadian culture and history. Their visits to China would help the Chinese learn about diversity in Canada. This speaks to the necessity of increasing accessibility of study abroad opportunities for Canadian Indigenous students. There would be fewer people in China who know about the Indigenous cultures in Canada. One Alberta student described his experience of participating in a Chinese singing contest, and his excellent performance helped change the stereotype that Chinese language is difficult, and that all foreigners are poor Chinese speakers:

When it came time to perform our song — 飘向北方 Stranger in the North — we knew it was our time to shine. The audience did not expect that I would handle the rap portions of the song. Seeing jaws drop, breaking stereotypes, and singing alongside some remarkable gentlemen made for an incredible night.

Discussion

Based on the above findings, the discussion will focus on the advantages of the consortium approach in securing the richness and depth of students' learning experiences in China, despite the large linguistic and cultural distances. Also discussed is the advantage of a consortium in bridging the gap between two governance systems and in leveraging resources from both governments. Students' learning outcomes reported in this study are broad, including increased self-confidence and cultural awareness, increased motivation to learn and to travel, increased knowledge of differences in governance, advancement of professional training and career prospects, and even influencing change in the host country, reinforcing findings in previous studies in the Chinese context, such as Dixon's (2013). But the most important outcome, also the focus of the discussion in this paper, is how students' education abroad experiences served the goal of knowledge diplomacy between the two countries.

China is a culturally and linguistically more distant destination for most Canadian students, and the location serves to pull students further out of their comfort zones. However, one salient aspect of student experiences that stood out in this study is their ability to learn through discomforts and language barriers. They felt rather comfortable with the discomforts they experienced. This can be explained to a large extent by how few concerns they had while participating in the program: waived tuition fees, free and walk-in ready on-campus accommodations, monthly living stipends enough for a very decent life in China, guaranteed credit transfer back to Canada, and any issues would be solved by the dedicated advisors from their host institutions, home institutions, and the CLIC office in between. With almost all possible issues addressed before they travel, students had the peace of mind to fully enjoy the program and to get the most out of their experiences in China. Carefully planned activities, meaningful interactions, and scaffolded reflections need to be done to increase chances of students' intercultural learning (Nyguen, 2017; Williams 2005). The quality of student experiences, together with the quantitative growth of participation within a few years, serves to show the advantage of a consortium approach to promoting students' education abroad.

Consortia are believed to have the potential to offer a wide variety of benefits to institutions of HE through innovative structure, operations, and delivery methods (Burley et al., 2012). In particular, consortia are seen as transformative spaces for reimagining and reframing internationalization in HE with commonly espoused values (Tadaki & Tremewan, 2013). This study offers a working example of how a consortium approach is utilized to promote student participation in study abroad. In typology, the CLIC consortium is a highly selective group of research universities (Blanco, 2021) from Canada and China for the sole purpose of generating more student mobility to China. The consortium is featured by complementarity as well as compatibility among the participating universities to ensure sustained success (Beerrens, 2004). The programs offered in Chinese universities provide the much-needed Chinese perspectives on the areas of students' studies to complement the Canadian programs. The member institutions are universities of high academic standing in both countries, and their similar institutional type and interest provide compatibility for this consortium.

Canada and China have very different governance systems in HE (see e.g., Liu & Yan, 2019). University consortia for countries with a decentralized HE system, such as Canada, are

effective in creating a collective voice in dialoguing with the Chinese government which runs a more centrally coordinated system of HE. On the Chinese side, the Chinese government also likes to talk to a consortium of universities as opposed to individual institutions in establishing international partnerships. The consortium approach is also effective in leveraging resources from multiple sources, in screening and securing the quality of programs, in providing quality student services and support, and in coordinating needs and interests of all parties. Many students in their stories express their appreciation for the work of both their host and home universities, for the funding opportunities from the Chinese government, the Canadian government, and their home universities, and for the rich learning opportunities in well-developed programs.

As mentioned above, China's engagement in international education has a soft diplomatic goal. To what extent has the CLIC program helped China achieve this goal? As shown in themes 3 and 4 in the Findings section, Canadian students in the program have witnessed the economic and technological developments in China, learned the Chinese perspectives on democracy and governance, and observed the Chinese values that underlie the Chinese behaviour patterns. They have developed appreciation for Chinese food, Chinese sense of community, and Chinese hospitality. Given their experiences on the ground, they also realized the negative stereotypes about China held by the West and began to see the Chinese as normal people "with same dreams and aspirations" who are busy "trying to earn a degree, hold down a job, and raise a family." The above evidence shows that the CLIC program is working well in helping China achieve its diplomatic goal of making more Chinese friends who can speak objectively and positively about China. But it must be pointed out that a better and more objective understanding of China by youths in the West benefits both China and the West. It gives us hope for a peaceful world when we read about students' improved intercultural awareness, sensitivity, openness, and their increased tolerance for cultural differences.

International HE has been increasingly motivated by profits rather than by government policy or goodwill (Yang, 2002), serving more instrumental and competitive goals for governments and institutions (Stier, 2004). However, what is shown in this study is the strong goodwill of the international HE communities in both Canada and China to promote student mobility and to engage in knowledge diplomacy at the people-to-people level, despite the ideological differences and the occasional political tensions. The field of international HE needs to transition from an ideological focus on soft power to a global focus on knowledge diplomacy (Knight, 2020). The positive impact on Canadian students studying in China, expressed in rich details through their stories and reflections, reminds us that increased knowledge diplomacy beyond political and economic motives through people-to-people and student-to-student interactions is the most effective way to deepen international and intercultural understandings. Turning these younger people with better understanding and appreciation of different cultural systems into future leaders is the best way to secure a peaceful development around the world. Knowledge diplomacy should become the most important goal in our work in international education, and a well-coordinated education abroad consortium is an ideal way to achieve this goal.

The COVID-19 pandemic has seriously interrupted students' mobility to China starting from spring 2020. Efforts were made to create some online programs, but with limited success in terms of students' participation. This is understandable, as in-person immersion is key to the richness of students' intercultural learning (Liu et al., 2022). Students have expressed that they hope to keep the funding opportunity for when in-person programs are possible. During the pandemic, the stereotype, xenophobia, and stigma about China have unfortunately been on the rise

in the Western world. This speaks to the necessity of ramping up efforts to send more Western students to China post-COVID so that they can learn about China firsthand on the ground, instead of relying on imagination or secondhand sources. With China's increasing economic growth and geopolitical influence, the West's dealing with China will not decline but increase. More knowledge about China, the Chinese society, and the Chinese business environment is needed by young people in the West. Decoupling with China does not make sense in a highly connected global world. Helping more Canadian and Western students develop a better understanding of China will be in the interest of Western countries and the rest of the world.

Conclusion

The CLIC program has proved to be a successful consortium designed to increase mobility of Canadian students to study in Chinese universities. The consortium approach is found to be advantageous in leveraging diverse resources, in securing quality of programming, in providing services for students, and in promoting knowledge diplomacy. Given the increase of participation within a short span of 4 years and the quality and depth of student experiences found in this study, the CLIC program serves as an exemplary case study on consortium approach to increasing students' participation in education abroad. And given the contexts of international education in the two countries, the CLIC program successfully connects Canada's interests in raising Canadian students' Asian competence and China's interests in attracting more Western students of good academic standing to study in China. Although transferability is not the most important goal for case studies, reference can be made to the case study program when other jurisdictions aim to build similar consortia. One key area of reference is in the close examination of the needs of all parties involved and aiming to meet such needs in the consortium. Another area of reference is in the goodwill and strong leadership in creating more and better-quality opportunities for students' educational experiences overseas for the goal of knowledge diplomacy.

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