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2017

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Recommended Citation

Miao, Lili; Henderson, Fiona; and Supple, Briony, Online Pre-departure Peer Learning: What are the Transition Benefits for Chinese Students?, *Journal of Peer Learning*, 10, 2017, 1-17.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/ajpl/vol10/iss1/2>

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Online Pre-departure Peer Learning: What are the Transition Benefits for Chinese Students?

Lili Miao, Fiona Henderson, and Briony Supple

ABSTRACT

The transition into academic life for Chinese students coming to Australia can be difficult as they navigate different cultural, social, and educational norms. As a group of two academics from Australia and one from China, we were interested in exploring ways students from China could best be supported prior to leaving their country in readiness for academic life in Australia. As an international partnership, we examined transition issues for Chinese students by focussing on building students' peer learning partnerships, prior to their departure from China to Australia. Chinese students in China were paired up with students in Australia for a weekly online session via Skype discussing culture and university-related topics. In order to direct the conversations, weekly questions were developed for each session. Students and staff had access to a learning management platform to share information and exchange ideas. The impact on both Australian and Chinese students was measured qualitatively through thematic analysis of student Skype conversations, reflections, and open-ended survey questions, and quantitatively through multiple choice survey questions. The main finding for this paper, which focuses on the quantitative data, was that this pre-departure interaction alerted Chinese students in China to their English language limitations and motivated them to do further English language learning prior to and once they had arrived in Australia. The quantitative data also pointed to the kinds of information which students wanted to know prior to coming to Australia which in some cases was different from what had been anticipated by the researchers.

INTRODUCTION

Australian Education International (AEI) estimated in 2010 that about 100,000 international students were undertaking their Australian degrees offshore (ICEF Monitor, 2016). However, many, including Chinese students, travel to Australia for some of their studies (ICEF Monitor, 2016). These students contribute significantly to the Australian economy and to the richness of Australian education programs (Deloitte Access Economics, 2013). Some of these students come from long-standing joint programs which have pathway arrangements. For example, Henan University (HU) in China and Victoria University (VU) in Australia have a partnership which has been in operation since 2002. An early model of the partnership had Chinese students start the Australian institution's program in China with Academic English and the Diplomas of Business/IT. On successful completion of these subjects students then travelled to Australia to undertake the Bachelor of Business/IT.

The current model is more flexible and Chinese students may either continue their Australian studies in China or in Australia.

Each year, about 50 students from HU go to VU as part of their study towards their Bachelor degree (VU, 2015). Despite the long term partnership, students' transition from China to Australia has been a major concern for both VU and its offshore partners because of regular negative feedback from students that the experience has not been what they expected. Chinese students, once in Melbourne, were reporting back that they would have a more satisfying experience if they were able to participate in and achieve more from their university life in Melbourne. Chinese students are not alone in their dissatisfaction with students in other countries also expressing concerns about their experiences (Department of Education and Training, 2015).

International student transition issues have been well researched and identified thematically as: coping with independence, off-campus living and homesickness (Ying, 2002), language difficulties (Andrade, 2009; Harryba, Guilfoyle, & Knight, 2012), unfamiliar teaching practices (Lamberton & Ashton-Hay, 2015; Major, 2005), lack of local cultural awareness (Berry, 2009) and lack of global awareness by Australian students (Mazzarol, Kemp, & Savery, 1997). At the same time, based on daily classroom interactions in China and oral and written feedback from Chinese students undertaking the Australian Diploma, it was apparent that students had a strong desire to know transition-specific issues prior to their departure from China. Chinese students who intended to go to VU for the Bachelor degree were eager to know how to adjust themselves to the Australian campus and how to utilise university support services. Although the relevant HU support staff organised pre-departure lectures to familiarise students with potential problems, students suggested that they were more interested in hearing directly from local students studying in the Australian university setting. To address students' suggestions, it was decided to re-consider the VU-HU 2007 student peer mentoring model (Best, Hajzler, & Henderson, 2007) for the current context.

The 2007 student mentoring model allowed student to student interaction but had limited ongoing synchronous communication. In 2015, the increase in the number and types of live chat technology led to a rethink in terms of suitable platforms for facilitating student to student conversations.

Our over-arching research questions:

1. Can Melbourne-based VU students, regardless of language background, help to ease the transition of HU students before they arrive? More specifically, we were interested in finding out:
 - a. How will students face any perceived language difficulties in their conversations?
 - b. What kinds of topics will be of interest to the students?
 - c. Will these interactions help foster a sense of motivation ahead of the HU students visiting VU?
 - d. What do the VU students gain from the interactions?
2. What can educators learn from this student peer mentoring experience, in order for it to be replicated by other Chinese universities?

In essence the study brought together HU students as mentees and VU students as mentors in weekly online synchronous conversations guided by mutually agreed topics. Evaluations of the conversations as assisting transition were carried out qualitatively and quantitatively. The current paper focuses on the quantitative evaluation of HU student's perceived development with regards to personal and academic skills.

The study was funded by a VU International Teaching and Learning grant to encourage collaboration and greater understanding between VU and VU offshore teaching partner institutions. Selection of submissions is partly based on the likelihood of the collaborations being able to promote successful student experiences. In this case the collaborators included two lecturers from the Academic Support and Development unit at VU, one with experience in student peer mentoring, one with experience in cross-cultural teaching, and a Chinese English teacher from HU.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT TRANSITION

International Students (IS) have more specific academic and socio-cultural needs than their domestic counterparts (Harryba et al., 2012). In response, universities often emphasise international student orientation sessions and the provision of liaison officers, and may allow for specialised services to meet IS' specific needs. Some universities run pre-departure programs to develop Chinese students' understanding of the expectations for study and to improve intercultural competence skills (Lamberton & Ashton-Hay, 2015; Norris & Dayman, 2013). These pre-departure programs provide an insight into a western, inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogy and align with the whole-of-university and partnership notions fundamental to the transition pedagogy argued for by Kift, Nelson, and Clarke (2010).

Grounding this study is the researchers' fundamental commitment to student-with-student peer learning. This arises both from the engagement literature and the pedagogical stance that certain topics and messages carry more meaning when discussed with those who have more recent experience (Leach & Zepke, 2011). In the case of international transitions, the researchers wanted to develop the sorts of programs as described above by adding a student peer learning element to the students' experiences. They had the added potential to utilise internet based tools for communication between onshore and offshore participants.

It was anticipated that student peer mentoring, a form of peer learning, would be able to assist students with the challenges of perceived language and cultural barriers, and lack of awareness of support services faced by IS during transition (Harryba et al., 2012). For the HU students who wanted to be informed by local students, student peer mentoring was seen as a way to provide the requested student voice.

With regard to the challenges, international students do not access university support and services because of a lack of awareness of available help, lack of personal confidence, discomfort with "Western" services, and a preference for engaging the familiar as the "Source of Help" (Harryba et al., 2012). Ways to increase service utilisation, such as establishing peer mentoring and international student groups are recommended (Harryba et al., 2012). Tristana and Slade (2008) identify similar strategies such as establishing

student mentoring programs and international student career sessions to assist first year students with their transition to university life and enhance their skills in career planning, networking, and industry engagement.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Student engagement in Australia has attracted growing attention partly because engaged students are more likely to persist, achieve success, and complete qualifications (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). Student engagement has been researched from different perspectives, for example, from the socio-political context (McMahon & Portelli, 2004), institutional structures and cultures (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005), educators' pedagogy (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005) and student-student relationships (Leach & Zepke, 2011; Schuetz, 2008). In particular, active learning in groups, peer relationships, and the use of active and collaborative learning appear to be effective in engaging western learners (Ahlfeldt, Mehta, & Sellnow, 2005; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Student engagement in China has mostly been researched from a pedagogical perspective (Zhang, Hu, & McNamara, 2015; Yin, & Wang, 2016) but with little focus on the engagement perspective that can also be developed through student peer mentoring.

There are a number of factors (Russel & Slater, 2010; Zhang et al., 2015) that influence and encourage student engagement. Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, and Kuh (2008) emphasise the role of the institution in cultivating engagement, including the degree to which institutions actively facilitate programs that foster learning, whereas Leach & Zepke (2011) put forward institutional support as just one of four perspectives to engage students in learning, the others being motivation, transactional engagement, and active citizenship. Zepke & Leach (2010) suggest finding ways of integrating meaningful and supportive lecturer/student, student/student, and small group interactions within large classes.

The underlying message when HU students reported that they wanted transition-focused information from local students was that they were not engaged when the same information came from professional HU staff. These staff did not appear to have the credibility of peers with Melbourne experiences.

ENGAGEMENT THROUGH STUDENT/STUDENT MODELS

One way to increase the sense of credibility and meaningfulness of information was to use peer interactions. Interactions and engagement may be developed through peer mentoring. At the student to student level, Falchikov (2001) supports the view that one-on-one academic mentoring helps improve grades and that the interaction with peers helps students increase their knowledge and understanding. This type of mentoring has also been claimed to be motivating for students and increase student confidence and self-efficacy (Falchikov, 2001).

In particular, peer mentoring has become popular in higher education as it is regarded as an effective approach to enhancing first-year student engagement and success, due to its focus on issues selected by students for students (Ross & Grant, 2011). It also impacts positively on student wellbeing, integration, and retention, and is strongly recommended as an effective retention strategy as well as providing support to incoming first-year

students (Collings, Swanson, & Watkins 2014). Essentially, students are more likely to engage with academic mentoring because peers are less intimidating (Latino & Unite, 2012) and more relatable (Newton & Ender, 2010).

Furthermore, Skoglund, Millard, Francis, Nagle, and Brand (2015) state that peer-to-peer academic support benefits the engagement of both the mentor and mentee. This style of academic mentoring can be arranged to provide consistent and progressive help throughout the academic term or targeted, intensive help when needed. Recurring sessions also help build a collaborative, developmental relationship between mentor and mentee (Skoglund et al., 2015). Mentors are required to master course content but focus on reinforcing understanding and contributing to skill proficiency of the mentee (Falchikov, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Many researchers (e.g., Chen & Liu, 2011; Newton & Ender, 2010) emphasise bi-directional benefits with simultaneous growth in academic mentor confidence and self-esteem.

Different mentoring models and schemes exist across institutions, mainly based on what each individual institution intends to achieve, funding limitations, and the needs of their students. These include one-to-one mentoring and one-to-many mentoring, such as Peer Assisted Study Sessions and Peer Assisted Tutorial Sessions. These mentoring models use “near-peers,” which are slightly less “equal” peers. At VU, “near peers” are later year students working with earlier year students. They are peers in that they are students and studying the same units but near peers in that they are at different year levels. Tenenbaum, Anderson, Jett, and Yourick (2014) and Turner, White, and Poth (2012) examine a near-peer mentorship model that supports the development of mentee and mentor. Their results show that this mentoring model contributes to personal, educational, and professional growth for near-peer mentors and increased interest and engagement of both student mentors and student mentees.

STUDENT MENTORING “AT A DISTANCE”

Mentoring does not have to happen in the same physical space. Best et al. (2007) report on a pilot peer mentoring program which aimed to help Chinese students’ transition from China to VU in Australia, among which a DVD and live chat (WebCT) were viewed as the most successful parts. The DVD featured group and individual interviews with Chinese students (“student mentors”) who had been in Australia for six months discussing their own transition experiences. Students in China (“mentees”) viewed the interviews as a class activity, brainstormed questions, and then participated in a live chat with the students in Australia. The process encouraged students to enter informal chat and take their conversations beyond the initial brainstormed questions and outside the scheduled time. Some conversations continued between the offshore and onshore participants even when no longer formally supported as part of the teaching.

As a less structured format, Scott, Castaneda, Quick, and Linney (2009) put forward a naturalistic study of peer-to-peer learning for international students. They trialled a “Mentored Distance Program,” which provided a formal measure of how learners can provide symmetrical support for each other in a non-formal, live, online video meeting context, even without explicit scaffolding of lectures and seminars. Their findings showed learners

gave and received substantial and longitudinal mutual support and shared use of each other's time and effort. Similarly, Beckmann and Kilby (2008) found that well-designed online discussions not only negate the disadvantage of distance and the associated feeling of isolation, but also allow peers from one end of the communication channel to benefit significantly from the cultural and worldwide diversity of their peers on the other end. They claimed that online discussions can support peer learning by the interactions with each other and more shared engagement, building critical thinking about issues of concern, for example, by comparing their experiences of conflict, social justice, and the exploration of gender issues.

Mentoring for this study is defined as “a deliberate pairing of a more skilled or experienced person with a lesser skilled or experienced one, with the agreed-upon goal of having the lesser skilled person grow and develop specific competencies” (Murray 2001, p. xiii), a definition still current but reinforced as a “supportive one-to-one relationship” by Topping (2005). This current paper focuses on the quantitative outcomes of a student peer mentoring program as an effective peer learning strategy for the successful transition of HU students to Melbourne.

METHOD

This study aimed to improve student transition experiences of Chinese international students at VU and to explore the value of online peer communication as a way to assist Chinese students' successful integration into the Australian campus. Ethics approval at VU was granted to undertake the study. Student volunteers from HU and VU were asked to participate in this trial learning partnership, which involved students getting together online once a week for six weeks to undertake conversations around various topics related to making the transition as a student from China to Australia.

The two VU researchers, who are lecturers, advertised through the Academic Support unit for VU local students willing to learn about Chinese university culture to be involved in this program. Twelve students self-selected. The VU students were recruited from current students working in a peer mentoring program at VU. The selected VU students were paid two hours per week for their work in this VU/HU program. They represented different ages, colleges, ethnic backgrounds, and a mix of males and females, which is indicative of VU's diverse student population.

With twelve peer mentors from VU, the first 24 HU students who volunteered to participate in this program were accepted (from the 70 who would go to VU for their degree study). The 2:1 ratio (HU:VU students) was in accordance with feedback from HU students who indicated this preference as they were not very confident and comfortable to talk with a proficient English speaker on a one-to-one basis.

Two of the researchers—the VU academic facilitator in Melbourne and the Chinese facilitator in China—briefed their respective groups and distributed information and consent forms to be signed to confirm students were willing to engage in the six week pilot program (from April-June 2015).

The conversation topics were decided on in email consultations with the VU and HU students. For the weekly topics, researchers and students referenced

a wide range of support practices both in China and offshore and collaboratively selected the frequently mentioned issues international students encountered in Australia. The topics included life habits, cultural differences, time management, accommodation and transportation, policies of plagiarism, help-seeking, and socialisation. The researchers designed directed-questions for each topic. Participants focussed on these questions and student mentors and mentees were encouraged to talk beyond the suggested questions (see Appendix A for Details of the Speaking Sessions).

Prior to the commencement of the online peer chat program, instructions were provided about how to conduct the weekly sessions, how to use Skype (since most Chinese students had no experience before), how to take notes for each session, how to make contact with researchers, how to resolve problems with peers, and how to write reflections after each session.

In order to track how the students felt about their weekly Skype chat, both Chinese and Australian students were encouraged to write weekly reflections after finishing each week. The reflections were designed as a learning tool to enhance students' university cultural awareness and contribute to their preparation for the next session. However, the reflections also provided the researchers with insights into how each conversation went, whether students were happy about the topics, what problems existed, and what queries needed to be answered. At the end of the six weeks, both VU and HU students were invited to participate in an anonymous survey regarding their overall experiences in the project (See Appendix B).

DATA COLLECTION

This study was evaluated using a mixed methods approach. Qualitative data were collected via reflective journal entries from HU and VU students following their weekly Skype session. Following the six-week program, HU and VU students were also asked to complete a survey that included both qualitative and quantitative questions about the language and learning experience. An online version (Survey Monkey) was created for the VU participants. In addition, VU and HU participants were invited to join small focus groups in which they were asked questions about the language and learning experience. The comparison, integration and synthesis of findings from all the data sources aimed to increase validity and reliability within the limitations of the study.

RESULTS

A large amount of data was produced. The complexity of analysing and comparing the qualitative data from two student groups and a need for a decision to be made about repeating the program precipitated a focus on the quantitative data first. The quantitative results give an overall understanding of the Chinese context and the usefulness (or not) of peer mentoring as a strategy that should be implemented as a matter of priority to assist offshore to onshore transition of Chinese students. Hence, only the quantitative results from the HU student survey are presented and discussed in this paper. There were nine multiple-choice questions in total in the first part of the questionnaire: (see Appendix B).

1. The online VU-HU peer learning group is a good way for HU students to have a better understanding of VU.

2. The VU-HU learning partnership helped me have a better transition from China to Australia.
3. My confidence in becoming a successful student when I study abroad has increased as a result of my online communications with my VU peers.
4. I have established friendship with my VU learning partner, which would assist my transition when I am in Australia.
5. I have improved my communication skills in the process of conducting the online speaking session.
6. The online speaking session helped me improve my oral English.
7. The VU-HU peer learning group increased my ability to work in a team.
8. I was interested in the topics which were designed for the speaking session.
9. If possible, I would like to participate in similar online communication.

The combined results are shown in Figure 1.

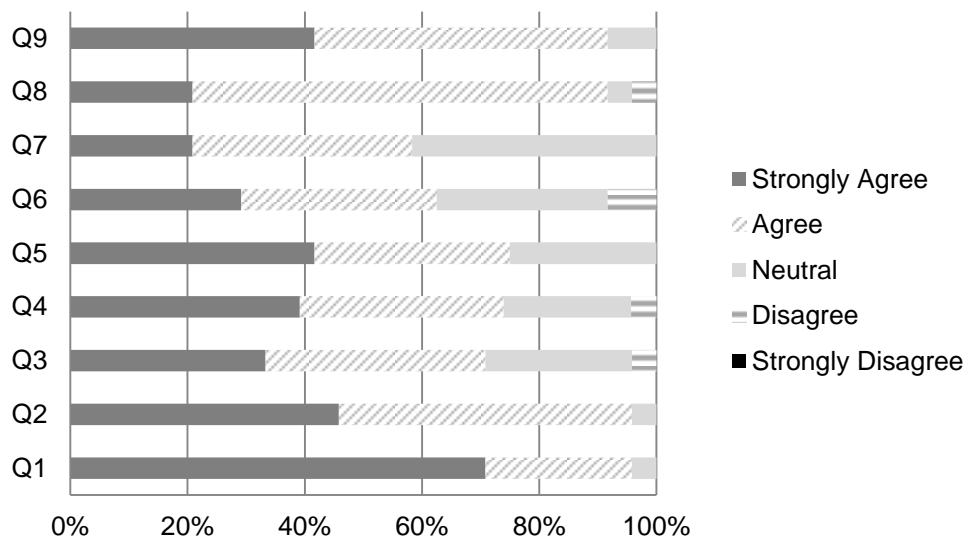


Figure 1. Combined Responses to Survey Part I, Questions 1-9 (N = 24)

In general, students responded very positively to the online peer learning groups. As shown in Figure 1, 95.8% of the participants agreed that online communication was a good way for offshore students to have a better understanding of the future host university (Q1). These positive responses were further confirmed by the fact that over 92% expressed their willingness to participate in similar online communication if possible (Q9). In terms of the trial topics, the majority of the participants favored the university and culture-related topics, with 91.7% of students saying that they were interested in these topics (Q8). The peer learning groups were considered to be generally beneficial to their transition as about 96% of the participants agreed that the VU-HU learning partnership helped them prepare for the transition from China to Australia and 71% participants agreed that their confidence for the transition to Australia was boosted (Q2, Q3). These responses echoed the aims of the project—to facilitate students' transition and to enhance students' cultural awareness.

With regards to the aim of improving students' oral English, 63% of participants said that the program helped them to improve their oral English, and 75% agreed that the process of speaking online improved their communication skills. Mentee language improvement occurred even with the idiomatic expressions sometimes used by mentors. Mentors and mentees all talked in English and the different communication skills also impacted the Chinese students' way of learning English (Q6, Q5). As to whether this program helped participants establish links with a VU learning partner, about 71% of the participants said "yes," but around 20% of respondents were unsure (Q4) and 4% of the participants said "no." This may be partly because of the short duration of the online partnership but indicates that longitudinal relationships might be considered and built into any future implementation of the program.

The questionnaire also included questions concerning the skills acquired through the peer learning groups. The results indicated that 58% of the respondents said that they improved their ability to work in a team in the process of engaging in the program, though 42% of students were unsure about their "working in teams" skills acquisition (Q7). Chinese students were not very comfortable with the one-to-one match for online talk as they were not confident they could understand their mentors. Mentees reported that embarrassing situations arose when they were not understood or were misunderstood or responded only after some delay, so they preferred having a Chinese mentee partner. How to negotiate and prepare for the questions and strengthen the interactions needed to be developed among the two Chinese mentees in each group, which seemed to improve their team-work skills. Negotiation skills were also needed to compromise and rearrange the time with the Australian students for each session if a change was required. The number of "unsure" answers suggests that students sometimes find it difficult to recognise personal skill acquisition.

The second part of the survey focused more specifically around knowledge that might assist the students' transition experiences. The questions were listed for students to indicate their responses on a given scale (see Appendix B):

As a result of participating in this project, I increased my

1. knowledge of Australian culture
2. knowledge of services available to VU students
3. knowledge about Melbourne
4. awareness of my own cultural norms and customs
5. awareness of challenges faced by international students in Australia

The combined results are shown in Figure 2.

As a result of participating in this project, 96% of participants agreed that their knowledge about Melbourne increased as many related topics were covered in the speaking sessions, such as weather, food, dressing, public transport, holidays and festivals, and places for traveling. These were often introduced in detail by VU peer partners so that the students in China gained first-hand and comprehensive information about Melbourne (Q3). The same percentage of students (92%) agreed that they increased their knowledge of Australian culture and awareness of their cultural norms and customs (Q1,

Q4). Cultural-related topics were included in the program and students' cultural awareness was enhanced as they reported knowing more about Australian culture from their VU partners. In terms of services available to VU students, the local students mentioned many aspects about this as they were experienced student mentors and introduced lots of VU services on the campus, such as academic support, library support, and student mentoring programs. Positively, 88% of participants agreed that their knowledge of services available to VU students had increased (Q2). Furthermore their VU partners had introduced totally new ideas about programs such as student mentors and student rovers. Various services on the campus, such as career recruitment and education, clubs and societies, and services, particularly for international students, were not included in their conversations because of limited time. Likewise, 88% of participants indicated that they had become aware of challenges faced by international students in Australia (Q5). This was clearly shown in the focus group open-ended questions with regard to different challenges they might face and will be the focus of a subsequent paper.

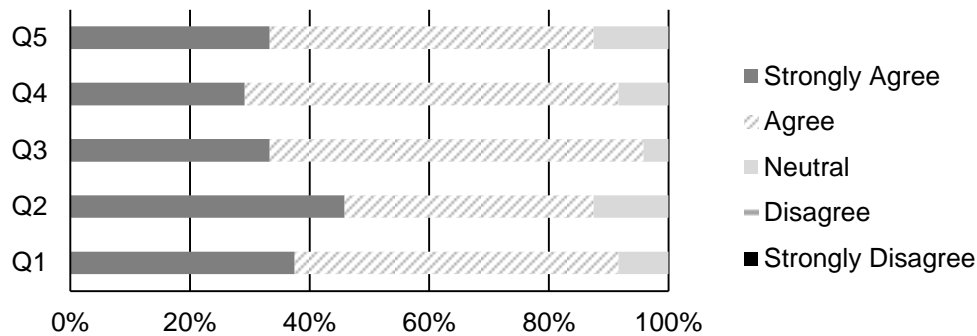


Figure 2. Combined Responses to Survey Part II, Questions 1-5 (N = 24)

DISCUSSION

From classroom discussions held in China prior to the online conversations, the Chinese students said they would prefer to communicate with English native speakers rather than Chinese students in Melbourne. This preference was based on a perception that native English speakers would be more interesting to talk with. In practice, all the speaking sessions were conducted in English as 10 out of 12 peer mentors came from English-speaking backgrounds and the two Chinese VU peer mentors chose to chat in English.

A compromised peer mentoring model, which was neither one-to-one nor one-to-many, was put into place in response to Chinese students' nervousness with a one-to-one conversation. HU students in the early classroom conversations showed great interest in participating in the Skype-based online peer learning program. Their strong desire to engage in selecting the topics and communicating with Melbourne peers contributed to the effective outcomes. Talking with English-speaking local students, Chinese students learned not only the native English communication styles, such as how to open and close conversations, but also gained authentic information about university and culture-related topics and built a further relationship to help them integrate into the local life in Australia. This in turn mentally prepared Chinese students prior to their arrival in a new country. At the same

time, this pre-departure interaction alerted Chinese students in China to their English language limitations and motivated them to do further English language learning prior to and once they had arrived in Australia. In addition, Australian students were very happy to know about different learning and teaching styles and cultural backgrounds. This online peer-learning partnership enhanced the Chinese students' experiences and understandings, such as their cultural awareness and sense of friendships, and it fulfilled their expectations of learning from the authentic experiences of their counterparts. Importantly, VU local students' online mentoring succeeded in reducing Chinese students' worries and confusion about the new setting and served as an effective strategy for better transitions prior to Chinese students' departure.

Other outcomes potentially include improved student retention and achievement as well as improved transition and success more generally, which is why many Australian universities have initiated peer learning/peer-mentoring programs (Borglum and Kubala, 2000; Tinto and Pusser, 2006). In this program, locally-based students (i.e., students currently studying at VU) worked as mentors to help Chinese students (mentees) learn authentic information about cultural and university-related topics prior to their departure, which definitely eased their initial transition fears.

CONCLUSION

This paper has focused on the successful transitions of Chinese students to Australia for further study through building a pre-departure Skype-based peer online chat program. This online peer learning partnership turned out to be mutually beneficial to both groups of students. On the one hand, Chinese students in China gained valuable inter-cultural experiences and academic-related advice from online communications with students in Melbourne. On the other hand, as is concluded in our forthcoming paper, the Melbourne-based students also learned about a new culture and educational system and strengthened awareness of their own cultural and learning contexts by having to prepare and be involved in talking with students from elsewhere.

In order to assist the in-coming offshore Chinese students to move smoothly to the new tertiary setting at VU, this successful online pre-departure mentoring program helped Chinese students in several ways. It helped them to understand VU and its campus services, contributed to their increasing knowledge of Australian culture, boosted their confidence to speak English, built new friendships, and motivated them to improve their skills to communicate and work in a team. All these quantitative outcome-based findings from the program proved the generally perceived expectations of better transition of Chinese students to VU for further study. This success may influence other universities to develop a similar program prior to departure for international students moving to a new tertiary setting.

Although the program was successful, there were limitations. The program's main limitation was not enough post-arrival face-to-face facilitated meetings to build on the pre-departure Skype familiarisation-level conversations. Ongoing contact between VU and HU students was not built into the study design, which meant that the Chinese students could not build on their online relationships face-to-face when they arrived at VU (Melbourne). Ideally the

next iteration will address this, reinforcing the cohesive intent of transition pedagogy.

Despite these limitations, in light of our initial research questions, Melbourne-based VU students, regardless of language background, can help to ease the transition of HU students before they arrive. Educators could make this a meaningful experience for Chinese students and educators could learn from this experience that can be replicated for other universities.

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APPENDIX A: DETAILS OF SPEAKING FOCUS FOR WEEKLY SESSIONS

Week No.	Date	Topics	Questions to direct weekly speaking session
1	13 April—19 April	Life habits and Cultural differences	<p>Introduce each other</p> <p>Outline the typical cultural differences in your area</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • food differences • any special days (festivals) • fashion and dressing habits with changes of weather conditions • talking and communication patterns
2	20 April—26 April	Time Management	<p>What extracurricular activities do you usually participate in?</p> <p>How many hours do you spend attending classes each week?</p> <p>How many hours do you spend on academic study after class each week?</p> <p>How many hours do you spend with computers? If you like, could you talk with each other about what you are doing online?</p>
3	27 April—3 May	Accommodation and Transportation	<p>Where do you live?</p> <p>How many roommates do you have?</p> <p>What are the options for students' accommodation?</p> <p>How do you travel to the campus? How about the transportation fees?</p>
4	4 May—10 May	Policies of plagiarism	<p>Describe how exams are going on at HU and VU. How do you prepare for the final exams?</p> <p>What policies do VU and HU have if plagiarism happens to students?</p> <p>What are the possible ways to recognise and avoid plagiarism?</p>
5	11 May—17May	Help- seeking	<p>If in an academic need, how can a student get help from, for example, academic staff, or an organisation which offers academic help?</p> <p>If in a medical need, what does an international student do to seek help?</p> <p>Are there some volunteering groups from which international students can get financial support?</p> <p>Are there any peer assistance groups which can relieve international students' stress engaging in diverse relationships with domestic students as well as with other international students?</p>
6	18 May—24 May	Socialisation	<p>What cultural shocks might students face? What are the stresses that prevent students from grabbing opportunities? Are there some programs whereby students can meet, communicate with each other, and foster friendship?</p> <p>Are there some activities through which I can become more connected with local community?</p> <p>Are there any immigrant communities which may contribute to my feeling of a sense of belonging and oneness?</p>

APPENDIX B: VU-HU PEER LEARNING PROJECT SURVEY**Name:****Class:****Major:****Dear Students,**

Thank you for your recent participation in the HU and VU online student mentoring partnership project. I would appreciate just a few more minutes of your time to answer the following questions about your experiences in the project.

I. Instructions: Please read the following statements and choose the situation that suits you most.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The online VU-HU peer learning group is a good way for HU students to have a better understanding of VU.					
The VU-HU learning partnership helped me have a better transition from China to Australia.					
My confidence in becoming a successful student when I study abroad has increased as a result of my online communications with my VU peers.					
I have established friendship with my VU learning partner, which would assist my transition when I am in Australia.					
I have improved my communication skills in the process of conducting the online speaking session.					
The online speaking session helped me improve my oral English.					
The VU-HU peer learning group increased my ability to work in a team.					
I was interested in the topics which were designed for the speaking session.					
If possible, I would like to participate in similar online communication.					

II. Please indicate your responses on the scale below.

As a result of participating in this project, I increased my....

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
knowledge of Australian culture.					
knowledge of services available to VU students.					
knowledge about Melbourne.					
awareness of my own cultural norms and customs.					
awareness of challenges faced by international students in Australia.					

III. In the process of participating in the project:

1. What did you enjoy about being involved in this project?
2. What did you find difficult/challenging about this project?

IV. Specific questions concerning the project:

3. Did you learn anything new/interesting/unexpected about Australian culture by participating in this project?
If yes, please explain.
4. Did involvement in this project increase your interest in Australia and wanting to visit there?
Why/why not?
5. What do you think are the greatest challenges faced by international students coming to Australia?
6. Did this project make you aware of these challenges? Please explain.
7. Will you be making plans to meet up with your VU partners when you arrive in Australia?
Why/why not?
8. Apart from the topics included, what other themes should be included?

Thank you very much for your participation in this project and your cooperation in taking the time to answer the questions in this survey.