

Mobility Programmes as Transformative Experiences in Higher Education

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Abstract

Student international mobility programmes (SIMPS) are often described as ‘life altering’ experiences, a pathway to raising social consciousness, as well as promoting cultural and social understanding. This qualitative research investigated the impact of SIMPs on seventeen students who took part in SIMPs during their course of study in two higher education institutions (HEIs) in Northern Ireland (NI). Transformative Learning theory (TL) was used as a theoretical framework to evaluate the impact of SIMPs on participating students. Data collection methods included the collection of demographic information on research participants, semi-structured interviews and photo-elicitation group discussions. Additionally, structured interviews were conducted with administrative staff at the global opportunities departments at the two institutions attended by the research participants. Research findings suggest potential for TL and positive social outcomes through SIMPs, albeit with limitations. Changes identified based on participants’ responses include a reassessment of beliefs and values, increased consciousness and understanding of others. These psychological and cognitive changes also resulted in some participants adjusting their behaviour to align with their newly acquired perspectives.

Introduction

In 2017, the UK government launched a national campaign to promote student international mobility programmes (SIMPs) in higher education institutions (HEIs), framing them as “life-changing” and “transformative” experiences (Erasmus Student Network, 2018b; UUKI, 2013). The Stand Out: Go Abroad campaign, had multiple objectives, including workforce development and strengthening the UK economy. This initiative was also seen as a potential solution to address social challenges and adapt to global trends affecting society and culture in the UK.

As interest in SIMPs grows, a key issue arises: the tension between how SIMPs are conceptualised and promoted to students versus how they are implemented and experienced. On one hand, SIMPs are portrayed through a social lens, emphasizing the development of "global citizens"—students who are socially conscious, globally minded, and committed to promoting diversity and social justice. On the other hand, they are framed as opportunities for individual professional advancement, focusing on the acquisition of transferable knowledge and intercultural skills necessary for competing in global job markets (Pengelly, 2018; Waibel, Petzold, & Rüger, 2018; Stone, 2014; Steves, 2012).

The conflicting conceptualisations of SIMPs and their objectives, despite the tension, are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In theory, students participating in SIMPs can acquire the specific professional skills for employment within a particular industry, while simultaneously developing a worldview which is conducive to raising social consciousness and social justice. However, prevailing arguments demonstrate that due to the influence of neoliberalism on HEI practices and policies, the social benefits of internationalisation, and in turn SIMPs, are severely limited (Brandenburg *et al.*, 2019; Altbach and de Wit, 2018; Giroux, 2014; de Wit, 2011). This is perhaps illustrated by the results of studies which suggest that merely taking part in a SIMP is not sufficient to raise social consciousness, despite claims by HEIs (Pengelly, 2018; Bodycott, 2015; Shannon and Smith, 2011).

This article argues that internationalisation practices and policies in HEIs, being informed by neoliberal practices and policies, could limit the social benefits of SIMPs. The study used a qualitative approach to address the following research questions:

1. How did the experience of a Student International Mobility Programme affect the participants?
2. To what extent, if any, did participants experience transformative learning?

Transformative learning (TL) theory is used as a theoretical framework to interpret the changes experienced by participating students with a specific focus on social implications, particularly in terms of how participants view themselves and others, as well as their general understanding of the world. Are participants' experiences influencing them in ways that go beyond their future professional careers? If so, in what ways? And does this benefit society as a whole? This framework is appropriate for assessing the impact of SIMPs from a social point of view as one aspect of TL theory focuses on the raising of social consciousness.

Furthermore, an interesting aspect of this research was the opportunity to explore the impact of SIMPs on participating students in a post-conflict society, marked by its own history and characteristics which may influence the experiences of both outgoing students from NI, as well as incoming international students. Further, while there is a significant body of research on internationalisation and mobility within the UK, little qualitative research has been conducted in NI or to address the impact SIMPs have on participating students.

Transformative Learning as a theoretical framework

Transformative Learning (TL) is a theory coined by Mezirow in the late 1970s. The theory emphasises the importance of critically reflecting on the assumptions, beliefs, and values that constitute an individual's worldview, and posits that individuals should strive to understand

the origins of their worldviews, as well as how these views impact the way they think about, and interact with, their material reality (Mezirow, Taylor and Associates, 2009; Taylor, 1998). TL is defined by Hoggan (2016) as “processes that result in significant and irreversible changes in the way a person experiences, conceptualizes, and interacts with the world” (p.71).

Frames of Reference

This research engages with three main perspectives of TL theory: psychocritical, psychoanalytic, and social emancipatory. Each of these perspectives considers the TL process from a different angle, respectively considering the social context of the individual, the psychology of the individual, and lastly, education for social emancipation. It is especially important to investigate the impact of neoliberalism on students, and how policies and practices from this specific socio-economic and political framework inform and influence an individual’s worldview and behaviour. Hegemony is a useful concept to consider when discussing neoliberalism. This of course is not to say that neoliberalism is the only influence, but rather that it is a key factor that should be considered.

The three perspectives, as illustrated in the following figure, share some common features within the TL process. The shared features of the perspectives appear on the right-hand side of the figure, in the central area between the three perspectives. All perspectives require critical reflection on assumptions, beliefs, and values, as well as understanding one’s identity and the full range of factors that inform that identity, including cultural, economic, educational, political and social factors.

The outer layer of the diagram on the right represents the four stages which an individual could go through when experiencing TL. Once the changes reported by participants are identified, the changes are then interpreted through consulting this framework to make sense of them. For example, if a participant reported changes in their thinking processes or worldview after conversing and being exposed to new perspectives while abroad, the framework is used to explore the changes described first, what the change is and what it

means. Finally, the research considers how these changes are expressed, and what this means for the participants.

The cycle of TL is an on-going process of negotiating and evaluating knowledge. TL is not instant and requires significant reflection on the origins and applicability of frames of reference, ways of being and understanding of the world. On the left side of the diagram, Hoggan's (2016) list of TL outcomes are displayed. These outcomes describe and highlight the specific type of changes experienced by individuals and are drawn from existing literature on TL theory and outcomes of studies that have applied the theory. Once participants' experiences are analysed and examined through the TL perspectives, the categories are used to list the impact discussed by participants. The outcomes are divided into six main categories, namely changes in worldviews, changes in the self, epistemological changes, ontological changes, behavioural changes, and changes in capacity. Using these outcomes to organise the impact of the experience will provide more clarity in how the experiences were analysed and understood.

Potential transformative learning outcomes

- Worldview**
 - Changes in attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, expectations and values.
 - Changes in how experiences are interpreted.
 - Developing a greater awareness of the complex world.
 - New understanding.
- Self**
 - Develop an understanding of self-in-relation to others.
 - Empowerment.
 - Development of identity and self-awareness.
 - Personal narratives.
 - Changes in personalities.
 - Finding a new meaning to life.
- Epistemology**
 - More selective in terms of what knowledge is and what is presented to them.
 - Employ more rational ways of knowing.
 - More open.
 - Changes in how individuals think.
 - More complex thinking.
- Ontology**
 - Understanding different ways of being.
 - More emotional outlook of life.
- Behaviour**
 - Actions are aligned with new perspectives.
 - Socially oriented.
 - Developing skills.
- Capacity**
 - Capacity development.
 - Raised consciousness.
 - Raised spirituality.

TL can encourage individuals to expose themselves to more experiences.

Transformative learning.

A disorienting experience / event

Psychocritical
Positioned within socially constructed realities:
Could be accomplished through interacting with others and challenging existing views through new experiences.

- Understanding and critiquing social influence, norms and structures.
- Understanding one's identity and its relation to the self and the world as a whole.
- Structural and educational influence.
- Critical reflection.

Psychoanalytic
Positioned within one's relationship with themselves, society and the world.
Could be accomplished through reflection on the self and society and the development of self and consciousness.

Emancipatory
Positioned within formal education:
Could be accomplished through interaction with others and reflection.
Nurtured through critical education and relationship with educators and peers.

New ideas / perspectives clashing with existing beliefs and assumptions.

Evaluate new perspectives and ideas. Could either be accepted or rejected.

If accepted, can lead to TL.

Negotiation of new information.

Note. This theoretical framework was created using TL perspectives which incorporate the work of Cranton (2006), Brookfield (2005), Dirkx, (1998), Taylor (1998), Mezirow (1978) and Freire (1972), and the work of Hoggan (2016, p.65-69) and Nerstrom (2014, p.328).

Methodology

Data collection methods

a. Students:

1. Demographic forms

Demographic forms were used in this study to understand the population represented in this research, and to outline factors that could have potentially impacted the participants' experiences, such as the length and destination of their SIMPs, participants' age and gender, accommodation, and language skills. Additionally, as the research was open to all registered students from the two HEIs, it was important to highlight the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of all participants to understand if this influenced how they perceived their SIMPs.

2. Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the main data collection method. The interviews aimed to discuss participants' reasons for choosing to take part in the SIMP experience, their feelings before the experience, prior perceptions of the host country, preparations before going abroad, their feelings while abroad, how they felt their experiences went as a whole, and finally, how the experience influenced them and why. In addition to these, participants were asked about other aspects, such as their backgrounds, their understanding of different concepts, their studies and host country.

3. *Photo-elicitation Group Discussion*

In addition to individual interviews, participants were invited to take part in a photo-elicitation focus group discussion which lasted an hour and 30 minutes. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, only one photo-elicitation group discussion was conducted.

b. Study Abroad Programme Administration Staff

Structured interviews with open-ended questions were used to interview administrative staff at the two HEIs involved in this research.

Research Population

The research population consisted of a total of seventeen individuals who took part in SIMPs as undergraduate students at the two HEIs. Thirteen students were from Institution A, while four students were from Institution B. The participants took part in different mobility programmes that ranged from a year to two weeks. See appendix for details of students' mobility programmes (see appendix 1).

Reflections on the Student International Mobility Programmes

Attempting to evaluate students' experiences through TL is to determine whether these experiences are conducive to raising social consciousness and social and cultural understanding. The analysis indicates that some of the participants did demonstrate aspects of a raised social consciousness and a certain level of concern with regards social justice, although these discussions were sometimes limited.

1. Evaluating Home Context

The first and most obvious impact was that almost all the research participants from Northern Ireland (NI) reflected on their home context, which led them to conclude that it is a relatively closed society. While some participants already had a degree of awareness of this aspect of their society, moving from their home context and participating in SIMPs seems to have emphasised and reinforced this understanding. Some participants attempted to understand how they have been impacted by their closed society, as well as the potential consequences of these restrictions on their respective worldviews.

The majority of students from the research population, who choose to go to university attend either Institution A or Institution B, meaning that many remain within the same friendship groups formed in high school. For example, Sean reported that “herd mentality” prior to his experience abroad meant that he and others had never considered approaching or interacting with international students, either during lectures or on campus. He stated in his interview:

“NI is quite small. Most people travel up an hour from home. They're... all their friends travel up an hour away from home. So, they have no need to make new friends and my friends are in my class now.”

A similar understanding was expressed by Julie during her individual interview. She explained that due to her experience at university, in which she took part in a SIMP and further experiences since returning from abroad, she came to the conclusion that her community is indeed closed. She stated:

“So, I grew up like in a rural area, and like, mostly just. It sounds awful, but sort of just white people. Like there's not very many people with different ethnicities where I live, and even still to an extent in Belfast, like it's still predominantly white. And so, I think probably going to university, in a sense, firstly, that probably changed my perspectives because I was interacting with people from different countries and cultures and... but definitely China extended that.”

Both Sean and Julie discussed their social backgrounds in their interviews, demonstrating a level of critical reflection that may have occurred due to participating in their respective SIMPs. The experience seemed to have facilitated a deeper understanding within the participants of their home contexts and their relatively homogenous, closed communities, which they were not aware of previously (Dirkx & Mezirow, 2006). The realisation described by the two participants seem to agree with results shared by Harrison and Voelker (2008), who believe that during SIMPs, participants are likely to develop an understanding of others, and in turn, themselves and their own societies.

Interestingly, the results highlight a prominent issue in HE, as despite HEIs competing to recruit large numbers of international students and attempting to provide internationalised curricula, a disconnect between domestic students and international students, and the absence of an understanding of contexts beyond their own, still seems to exist. The responses demonstrate to a degree that the opportunities to promote social and cultural exchange are not being fully taken advantage of, and the international dimension added to curricula seems to fail to provide alternative worldviews beyond hegemonic values and beliefs that are tied to neoliberalism (Hammond and Keating, 2018). It was therefore necessary for students to go abroad to develop a new understanding.

This is highlighted by Steven, who shared that the experience abroad encouraged him to consider how his home context impacted his perception of individuals who fall outside of the narrow boundaries of his community. His experience verified that his perception of other groups was not based on first-hand interaction, but rather was filtered through peers in his community, and, to some extent, media outlets that he and his community are exposed to.

Steven reported developing friendships through sharing accommodation with a diverse group of people and became sufficiently comfortable to discuss and learn about others' beliefs. As a result of these interactions, he evaluated and adjusted his beliefs to correspond with his personal experience, rather than merely adopting the views of media outlets or his peers at home. This eventually led to him seeing Muslims (a community he had

no previous relationship with) in a different light. In his individual interview, Steven stated that:

“They pray in front of you and stuff and I reckon before that if I was on a plane, I would have freaked out a little bit [...]. When I was there, I was just like, ‘Yeah, that is what they do.’ But I suppose when you see it in the context [...] you are not scared.”

Lytle (2018) and King's (2001) work suggest that in situations where groups essentially agree on many issues without exposure to new inputs can result in groups functioning as echo chambers which serve to reinforce existing ideas and opinions that are not necessarily grounded in reality. These ideas and opinions often result in creating stereotypes and ethno-national biases and can sometimes result in negative feelings towards others, as well as a sense of fear, which can act as a barrier preventing individuals from engaging with experiences which could otherwise motivate them to reflect on their frames of reference.

A key theme emerging from the individual interviews here relates to participants' heightened sense of awareness of their home contexts. Some have discussed how confinement to narrow, largely homogenous and unchanging social groups, with whom they share a language and cultural background (Allport, 1954), could have possibly led to an entrenchment of beliefs (Mezirow, 1978). The SIMPs seemed to have encouraged the research participants to reflect on existing beliefs which they reported to have largely inherited from their communities, and weighed them up against the new information, alternative worldviews and opinions that they encountered during their experiences (Fenwick, 2003).

A TL outcome which potentially emerges at this point, situated within the psychocritical perspective, is the ability to evaluate and understand the limitations of existing frames of references, particularly through identifying the roots of certain beliefs. In this case,

participants have demonstrated a critical understanding of the limiting role played by their home communities (Mezirow, 1978).

2. Evaluating Existing Frames of Reference

In relation to the previous discussion, the analysis outcomes showed that for some participants, the new understanding of their context seems to have resulted in further examination of their existing frames of reference. This resulted in changes in their perception of their host country, other countries and cultural groups.

For example, Sean in his interview reflected on his time in China, sharing that his initial perception of China was negative, especially as he attempted to prepare for his trip by reading literature which was primarily written from a Western perspective. He stated:

“The level of censorship and the control of government was quite powerful. And it was quite striking really reading up on it. So, it's a little... I wasn't afraid, but I just sort of looked at it from, from a little with caution. I think, I knew that that was largely... I had always known that wasn't the will of every single Chinese person. That's ridiculous. [...] I have to be careful what I say or do and all that sort of stuff, which was something that I was cautious about. Now, in reality, that was all... sort of over nothing.”

Sean went abroad with a cautious and a relatively negative perception of the political system in China, which according to him, was derived from the news he consumed. During his SIMP he made the decision to have conversations with the people in Chinese about some of the issues that concerned him. Sean believed that through these conversations, he developed a more balanced understanding of the political situation in China. He stated:

“Once I got a better understanding of my preconceived perceptions and why they were preconceived, I kind of loosened up a little bit.”

Sean’s decision to pursue an understanding of China from people in China could be considered TL, as he attempted to develop his own understanding of China through dialogue and, comparing and reflecting on his previous knowledge against what he learned and saw while in China (Mezirow et al., 2009; Freire, 1972). Exposure to new experiences and the ability to negotiate and elicit information about certain groups from its own members allowed him to recognise his preconceived views and ideas, and the limitations of these views against those he acquired himself. This change aligns with those discussed in a study conducted by Intolubbe-Chmil, Spreen and Swap (2012), as well as with TL perspectives, which emphasise the importance of critical dialogue among different groups in order for individuals to construct their own knowledge and understanding of the world.

Sean’s discussion also confirms suggestions made by Biggs and Tang's (2011), that is, the benefits of SIMPs are directly linked to the level of engagement from the participants and their willingness to take advantage of the opportunity to develop their own knowledge. This is evident, as Sean actively chose to recognise the limitations of his frames of reference and expand it to include what he personally learned in China.

Like Sean, both Jeremy and Julie had doubts about China before going abroad, but their existing views were challenged by what they personally experienced. Julie and Jeremy’s initial preconceptions, according to the participants themselves, were drawn from their families, peers, or the media they were exposed to. Both participants discussed a fear of having their freedom restricted by the Chinese political system. Other participants who travelled to China for their SIMP brought up words such as ‘oppressive’, ‘controlling’, ‘human rights violation’, ‘communism’ and ‘censorship’. However, they reported that their reservations faded once they physically arrived and experienced China directly.

In her interview, Julie, shared that she thought “the communist culture would be really [...] invasive and [...] we wouldn't be able to like do certain things or be allowed to go to certain places”. These apprehensions were quickly assuaged, as she stated that “It sounds awful, but these are perceptions that I had before I went.”

Individuals often unconsciously absorb and incorporate views drawn from their home context, which are reinforced through various influencers. These views then become filters through which individuals understand and interpret their experiences (Taylor, 1998). Interestingly, many individuals are unconscious of these filters and often believe that they made an informed and conscious choice of adopting particular views. The SIMPs seemed to have offered those participants an opportunity to directly interact with China, its people, and the culture, rather than reading about it through the filter of news outlets which have their own agendas.

Indeed, personal experience of the context seem to have had a positive impact on the participants in terms of enabling them to interact in that context, develop their own understanding of it and make their own judgment. This nonetheless was not the case for all participants, as Jeremy's views of China were not entirely challenged. He believed that due to political ‘oppression’, people in China will adamantly support their government. Having this preconception, which was initially shared by the organisation that planned the experience, seems to have prevented Jeremy from discussing that aspect with people in his host country to gain his own understanding of the matter. In addition, a lack of language skills from both Jeremy and the people in his host country could have also prevented dialogue among the two groups.

These discussions further confirm that exposure alone is not necessarily sufficient when it comes to addressing prejudice and differences among groups (Shannon & Smith, 2011). Instead, individuals ought to understand the filters through which their experiences are interpreted and to critically reflect on these frames of reference (Kitchenham, 2008). Furthermore, in addition to having dialogue with other groups, there needs to be a level of critical understanding of the patterns of power and the ways in which these patterns influence their views of others (Ahmed & Mohammed, 2021). An interesting way to interpret this is through Gramsci's work, as he states:

The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory (Gramsci 1929-1935 as cited in Said, 2003, p.9).

TL theory recognises and asserts the importance of analysing and understanding the social and contextual influences on an individual's experiences, the contexts in which experiences emerge, and the individual's subsequent interpretation and perception of those experiences (Brookfield, 2002). Bodycott's (2015) work is also useful to further examine this aspect, as there is a debate about the values and identities an individual holds, and they directly affect how individuals perceive experiences, as these experiences are filtered through the lens of that particular identity. It is therefore important for students to have a degree of self-critique and understanding of the hidden frameworks that guide their thinking, which are often confused as independent ideas and beliefs that came within the individuals themselves with no outside influence.

In this case, the three participants (Jeremy, Julie and Sean) who went to China are from a Western country (Northern Ireland). Their understanding of other nations is filtered through the lens of their own educational, economic, social, and political frames of reference. The 'Western' interpretation of the world becoming the default means anything that does not seem to align with the 'common knowledge' derived from Western interpretation is regarded 'different', 'flawed' or 'odd' (Boni & Calabuig, 2015).

Yet, to some degree, Sean attempted to incorporate the views and perceptions of the Chinese people to analyse his experience. As highlighted earlier in this chapter, Julie and Sean were two of the participants that discussed understanding the influence of their contexts and how that guided their understanding of the world. Despite some shortcomings, having this understanding enabled them to interpret their experiences more critically and through equal dialogue, reflection, questioning their own beliefs and considering other ways of constructing knowledge (Mezirow, 1978).

Another example is Greg, as he engaged in a form of self-critical reflection when he pointed out that initially he viewed China through his 'Western' frame of reference which left him with a negative perception:

“[W]e should not have the right to criticise what China is like because we are not perfect in ourselves. We have so many things wrong in our society. Even though

China is hugely oppressive, they are doing stuff like completely wrong [...] with Uyghur Muslims and Myanmar is totally unacceptable but at the same time I am not a fan of our country either, so I do not feel like people have the right to criticize China in itself [...]. We should try and make ourselves better before we think we have the right to judge other countries.”

Greg has identified a double standard in terms of how a country like China is perceived and he pointed out that no one has the right to criticise other nations before criticising their own. Nevertheless, Greg felt that it is necessary to point out that China is ‘hugely oppressive’ and ‘wrong’. Rather than questioning the potential underlying reasons for China’s prominent position in the mainstream media, Greg seemed to accept the mainstream media’s reporting at face value but preferred that Western citizens focus on issues closer to home.

Larson and Fay (2016) suggest that this could be because individuals in such situations can fall back on their existing frames of reference to make sense of new and foreign experiences. This demonstrates, to some extent, a degree of ideological and cultural hegemony wherein participants are not able to disregard their existing understanding despite identifying flaws. As a result, it becomes difficult to challenge existing frames of references and interpretations molded by their social, cultural, education and political norms (Fenwick, 2003).

Tristan, who went to the United States for a year, also pointed out that his experience led him to reflect on the preponderance of ‘Western culture’, which is often viewed as the default from which other cultures deviate to varying degrees (Phillipson, 1992). His experience abroad intensified his desire to learn from people who are categorised by the West as the non-Western ‘other’, while also displaying a degree of self-critical reflection through the use of ‘we’ as the subject pronoun:

“[W]e would tend to think [...] Western culture is [...] the freest, most advanced, best people. You know, you can't just be best of everything [...] and that was kind of the American perspective, which is like, you know, America is the greatest country in the world, we're the best [...]. But you know, there are places around the world [that] do things better, there are cultures around the world [...] where people are happier.”

Tristan reported being surrounded by individuals from different groups who he believed were socially and politically aware. It seems that engaging with others during his time aboard encouraged him to activate alternative ways of thinking and existing thus developing a more analytical and critical thinking pattern which centres social consciousness and understanding (Brookfield, 2005).

For some of these participants, the SIMPs seemed to have stretched their frames of reference and enabled them to incorporate other perspectives and interpretations of the world. SIMPs seem to have encouraged a degree of critical reflection and examination as some of the participants are forced to consider the origins of their previously held beliefs. The cognitive dissonance produced through the clash between their original perceptions and their own experiences allowed them to rearticulate beliefs and views, which resulted in the development of new perspectives and stretching frames of reference. This highlights Brookfield's (2000) claims that as individuals progress their critical thinking abilities, they are paving the way to rethink their position through incorporating new information and perspectives that have not previously been considered.

An important point to consider here is, to be a 'global citizen', universities often encourage students to become more involved internationally and 'vocal' about different global issues. Drerup's (2020) views on this matter demonstrate the negative impact of such education on students in HEIs as it risks perpetuating 'power hierarchies' and the dominance of a neoliberal and Western centric ideology (Drerup, 2020; Andreotti, 2006), thus potentially limiting participants' ability to interpret their experiences beyond the frames of references that were constructed from their socio-economic and political contexts.

3. Identity and Consciousness

Greg, before his teaching experience in China, volunteered in a summer programme in Bangladesh at the age of 18 which impacted how he views others. He stated that his experiences abroad taught him to:

“[J]ust to be more tolerant, be more cognizant, be more aware... and to accept them and to accept that there's a face behind every culture [...]. People just are encouraged to maybe... coerced to think, in particular ways like we are in our society.”

Greg's experiences in both China and Bangladesh seemed to have facilitated a chance to rearticulate his perceptions and worldview, showcasing a new way of perceiving others with an awareness of the wider social and contextual influence that perhaps direct individuals' thinking and behaviour (Graham & Crawford, 2012).

Exhibiting this awareness suggests that Greg potentially developed a deeper understanding of the dynamics that often guide individuals' behaviours, as well as the filters through which individuals interpret their experiences, which could potentially indicate TL (Cranton, 2006; Taylor, 1998). This awareness seemed to have allowed him to critically reflect on his position in relation to others, acknowledging that perhaps in the same way that he is 'coerced' to understanding the world in a particular way, others are too. This is demonstrated in this statement where Greg states that “people have a face behind [...] their skin, people and all people are ultimately the same if you try to unravel that face”.

Tristan's experience also gave him the time and space to explore both his own identity and how he views others. Engaging in self-reflection, he pointed out that that he grew up perceiving himself as “a Northern Irish person” based on the “culture”, rather than “the bits that make up” his identity. Upon his return, he elaborated that, “I've come back with more of an idea of, you know, who I am, where I want to go, and that's now removed from where I am”.

Bodycott (2015) claims a strong association between the identities and values individuals hold and how their experiences are lived and interpreted through the lens of that identity. Indeed, individuals possess multiple identities that are constructed and influenced by different factors in their lives. Becoming aware of these identities and critically scrutinising

them can result in the “development of a personal independent value system connected with a personal worldview, lifestyle, and equality of people” (Korostelina's, 2007, p.111).

Rizvi (2009) states that experiencing an environment which is different from one's usual context can aid in a deeper understanding of one's own identity. The SIMPs arguably have encouraged TL through raising the students' consciousness, and to some degree, their ability to recognise external factors that inform their beliefs and behaviour, just as they inform other's beliefs and behaviours. This could have encouraged the participants to learn about the complexities of themselves and others, peoples' respective positions in the world, and the factors that shape their own and other's existence. The newly realised consciousness can potentially facilitate stronger relationships with others in a manner that is conducive to social justice (Hoggan, 2016; Bryant, Johnston and Usher, 2005; Dirkx, 1998).

Another example that could potentially shed more light on this discussion, is Naomi's experience in the US. Her initial instinct was to develop friendships with domestic students in the United States or other European students. To her surprise, she ended up befriending an international student from Japan. She stated:

“Like, once you meet other people, and they're exactly like you. It's bizarre. [...] But literally, we were the same people person, like I was Irish and she was Japanese.”

Naomi initially seemed to have believed that due to her identity, she would not have been able to connect with someone from a different background. This was not the case, as despite sharing a broad group identity with other European students, personality differences led Naomi to develop friendships with Japanese students instead of American or European students.

These relationships led Naomi to recognise that ‘Asian’ students are not a monolithic ‘other’, but rather unique individuals with personalities similar to her own. Brewer (2000) explains that sharing identities with members of out-groups (cross-cutting) can “make social

categorization more complex and reduce the magnitude of ingroup-outgroup distinctions” (p.170). Graham and Crawford (2012), also suggest that cultural encounters, such as those in SIMPs, offer individuals an opportunity to gain a better understanding of ‘others’, and the world through facilitating experiences through which individuals can form real relationships with others.

In addition, Naomi reported being exposed to different groups and gaining insight into how their identities impacted their experiences. For example, Naomi, discovering that a close friend (African American and her Japanese friends) faced racial discrimination in the United States, encouraged her to reflect on issues faced by other groups, that would not necessarily impact her directly, but nonetheless became important to her.

Brown and Hewstone's (2005) work on intergroup contact theory posits that developing “close relationships are likely to facilitate the acquisition of individuating information [distinguishing members of out-groups from the rest]”, which is believed to “result in a more sophisticated view of one out-group member’s experience” (p.285). The SIMPs did seem to aid with this change through introducing participants to more diverse communities which participants did not have access to, or did not attempt to engage with, in their home country. Through dialogue and incorporating the perspectives of others, it seems that those participants were able to develop an understanding of the issues other groups face (Intolubbe-Chmil et al., 2012; Mezirow, 1991).

Similarly, Rachel’s friendship with an Aboriginal student during her time in Australia helped her gain a better understanding of the role of identities and how they impact individuals. She states:

“One of the guys that I became friends with, he was Aboriginal... And it was heart-breaking to see how other people kind of reacted around him sometimes when he said where he was from, because he was different.”

Rachel considered the role of British colonialism in shaping modern Australia after taking a course about the history of Australia. She stated:

“It is really horrible because it was the British people that did it. [...] but it was just really heart breaking to hear everything that happened and like the kids got taken away. [...] thankfully, like he doesn't really have any of these issues now [...] They're quite high up in their community and whatnot. So, I suppose he has a bit a different experience now than what they had.”

This could possibly be interpreted through neoliberal hegemony, in which social issues are understood through individuals. Here, Rachel empathises with her friend, and seems to some extent satisfied that his family's economic situation has improved. However, she does not seem to highlight that this might not be the case of all indigenous communities in present-day Australia.

It is arguable that a hegemonic belief could be that the eras of colonialism and imperialism have ended. This means that while certain identities have been disadvantaged in the past, they are now being allowed to "catch-up" in the era of liberal democracy. Racism thus, seems to be understood through the lens of prejudice which impacts interpersonal relationships with little critique of the structural aspect of racism and what this means for ethnic minorities and indigenous people in Australia.

Similar discussions were made by Jay, who witnessed that some of his Afro-British friends were subjected to racism during their experience in China. Jay commented in his interview that in China:

“They would have some racist attitudes especially among like older generation in China. Like a girl I work with told me, she's an African American, and her friend at university wanted to take her to her home and her parents just refused, like they wouldn't let her stay at their house or anything, for some reason. [...] I think like when

your white over there, it's definitely easier I think [...] I think like younger people, like everywhere like younger people are more liberal and stuff like that. So that, like they're not really... they don't have racist attitudes and stuff.”

Jay's discussion demonstrates an awareness of his identity, being a white British male, and the advantages of holding such an identity while abroad. Jay also discussed two important themes, the first being that other nations consider 'white' Europeans to be superior in a way. Jay states:

“I think they criticise colonialism, but they still seem to have like, attitude, the same attitudes to white people and sort of like, just like accepting them, and they always think they're like, more skilled and stuff like that, so it is kind of weird.”

Jay, however, did not attempt to consider the global power relations that led to such beliefs being entrenched and adopted globally. The other aspect from his discussion showed that perhaps to an extent, Jay believed that liberal values and beliefs are always positive and those who hold such beliefs 'cannot' be racist. Generally, the use of the term 'liberal' seems to carry a positive connotation, and encourages the adoption of 'liberal' beliefs without acknowledging that liberalism can take a form detached from material reality, and may not be conducive to understanding structural problems (Eagleton, 2011).

Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that in order for individuals to develop critical thinking, they must demonstrate a critical understanding of “hegemonic assumptions” and how to overcome them (Brookfield, 1999 as cited in Illeris, 2009, p.97). A critical point for TL is therefore the ability to understand and analyse the underlying factors, such as socio-economic factors, class, politics, ethnicity and nationality, that influence how 'others' are viewed and how these views contribute to the social injustice and inequality. One way of achieving this, as Lazarus (2018) suggests, is through deconstructing “social positionality in power relations and explore ways to address the oppression, privilege and inequality” (p.121).

The discussions could also indicate that being from the dominant group/culture (Western, white British, white Irish) might have discouraged participants from exploring and engaging with alternative worldviews within their home context, to critically reflect on their identities, what these identities means in terms of how they are perceived, and how they perceive others. Education, being demoted to outcome-based learning, could be a factor that influenced participants' ability to understand the complexity of the inter-connected global world, and the implications of this interconnectedness on their understanding of the world.

Further, the responses highlight that education, being situated within a Western neoliberal framework, only seems to encourage challenges to existing education practices, power hierarchies, and social injustice, as long as those challenges accept the neoliberal framework as a starting point (Drerup, 2020). Participants thus had to have an impactful experience in order to stimulate them to explore their identities. These experiences however, were not always enough to facilitate a deeper understanding of the manifestations of the Western neoliberal influences on their existing frames of reference (Fenton, 2018).

While it is important to acknowledge the role SIMPs played, in terms of providing students with a platform where this could be achieved, it is up to the students how they engage with their experiences. Participants' discussions show that it is certainly not enough to simply be exposed to other perspectives, as this does not necessarily lead to the incorporation of these experiences into meaning schemes, nor to re-defined thinking processes and behaviour.

Discussion

The participants felt that the international experience had a significant impact on their lives. This study's findings therefore demonstrate the wide range of potential benefits that could be accessed through SIMPs, while also highlighting limitations in that the full potential

is not being achieved. The analysis results conclude, in line with previous studies conducted by Killick (2015), Unlu (2015), Fombona, Rodríguez and Sevillano (2013), Intolubbe-Chmil, Spreen and Swap (2012), and Strange (2012), that the stimuli provided by SIMPs undoubtedly affect participants in a number of ways, and as expected, the extent of the impact varies from one participant to another.

This is evident through the changes in participants' frames of reference, worldviews, thinking processes, and the development of a deeper and more critical understanding of the world, which in some cases led to changes in behaviour that conform with the cognitive changes. The SIMPs have seemingly played a role in encouraging a sense of curiosity and a willingness to engage in further travel, subsequent experiences and inter-personal relationships, all of which could lead to further shifts in the participants' frames of reference and worldviews. Conducting research with participants who chose to take part in further experiences could generate more relevant data about TL and the impact of SIMPs.

Some of the cognitive and behavioural changes reported by participants demonstrate a degree of social consciousness and a critical attitude towards social injustice, both in their home contexts and on a global scale. More specifically, this was reflected in participants' discussions in terms of racism, attitudes towards migrants in the UK, and reflection on society's role in producing certain beliefs and values.

Conversely, it is important to not overstate the extent of TL exhibited by the participants' responses. Although they recognised a range of social issues and injustices, there is a general belief that these issues are specific to certain contexts. For example, some responses suggest that racism is not necessarily a major social issue in the Global North due to the justice system of liberal democratic states. As such, the participants' beliefs and values about other groups and nations continue to be filtered through a Western framework, while blind spots in relation to their home contexts persist. A main theme, therefore, which highlights the limitation of SIMPs and the potential of TL within this framework, is that the participants largely did not articulate a deeper analysis of the power dynamics within the

globalised world that necessarily impacted how they experienced and understood their SIMPs.

This limitation could be a result of the influence of neoliberalism on teaching and learning in HE, as the universal application of knowledge and information across distinct social and cultural contexts could lead to the misinterpretation, and an abstract, one dimensional understanding of social issues (Gornitzka & Stølen, 2021). These discussions further highlight suggestions made by Abrahams and Brooks (2019), who show that students' education and understanding of the world are influenced and becoming more aligned with those of HEIs. The de-politicisation of education in HEIs could therefore be argued to restrict students' ability to critically consider global issues, beyond the understandings being promoted in HEIs which conform to neoliberal beliefs and values. Additionally, HE's promotion of the identity of 'global citizens' demonstrate the importance of considering claims made by Pais and Costa (2020). That is, although the GC identity was originally developed to challenge existing frameworks, it has gradually been co-opted in a manner which conceals, and thus reinforces, unequal power relations (Andreotti, 2006).

The findings of this research corroborate the existing understanding of TL and supports Choi, Slaubaugh and Kim (2012), and Perry, Stoner and Tarrant (2012), in identifying the potential for international experiences within HE to serve as a platform through which TL could take place. Moreover, this study confirms Mezirow's (1978) suggestion that encounters and experiences which challenge an individual's existing frames of reference can promote critical self-reflection associated with TL, while remaining in homogenous groups increases the likelihood of the entrenchment of certain beliefs and frames of references as they remain undetected and unquestioned.

Accordingly, despite some positive indications of TL, the social advantages of SIMPs do not seem to occur to the same extent that HEIs may claim or expect.

Limitations

TL is a life-long process, and the timeline can differ according to the individual's circumstances. For this research, only one interview was conducted with each participant, meaning some aspects of the experiences were not fully explored. If time had permitted, a second interview may have been beneficial to further investigate the changes described by the participants.

There was a significant asymmetry in the number of participants recruited from the two institutions. However, the research was mainly focused on understanding the impact SIMPs have on participating students and identifying the potential factors and conditions that promoted TL. The results of this research, therefore, are not representative of the two institutions, rather are demonstrative of how mobility programme are offered and experienced by participants.

Fifteen of the seventeen participations identified as White Irish, White British or White European. One of the participants identified as African/NI and one identified as Asian (see table 3). The homogeneity of the sample allowed a level of interpretability and increased the validity of the results. On the other hand, including another group, although a small number, allowed the emergence of another perspective that provided a comparable element to the research results which aimed to understand how international experiences could impact students' understanding of themselves, and others.

It is also necessary to acknowledge a potential bias in the sampling, which may have influenced the data collected and the overall results of the study. Eleven of the participants recruited for this research were 'global ambassadors' from institution A who had positive experiences and may have felt the need to represent their experiences positively, thus influencing the result of the study in terms of emphasising the benefits of SIMPs.

Recommendations

The research results suggest that although international experiences inevitably impact the participating students, the full potential for truly transformative experiences is not being achieved. Consequently, it could be argued that the full extent of social outcomes are not achieved either. This raises the question, do the institutions intend to direct these programs towards social issues? Or as institutions of a neoliberal state, do they use the language of social advancement while prioritising economic factors? On a structural level, is there a willingness, or capacity, to re-orient these programmes towards social goals? Although the culture and logic of neoliberalism dominates from a national level all the way down to the individual students, there is nevertheless a degree of resistance. Informed by both participants' discussions and literature around HE and TL theory, the following recommendations have been drawn:

1. There should be a 'comprehensive' plan for what the experience abroad will entail and aim to accomplish on a social level (Lewin, 2010), and streamlined systems in place to help students efficiently deal with bureaucracy ahead of their experiences. This is because some participants did not have time to effectively prepare for their experiences, taking valuable time away from their interpersonal relationships.
2. Universities should provide a platform for domestic-international students and international-international students interactions to take place. Due to the variety of unique perspectives available, it would be ideal for students to form both participant-international student and participant-domestic student relationships. Informed by the research results, students who had access to all groups,
3. Outcomes of SIMPs may be enhanced by offering mobility programmes to students as early as possible. This would mean that, upon returning, participants would have further

opportunities to interact within a diverse environment (where international students are present) and be more willing to take advantage of other opportunities offered to them.

4. HEIs should clearly state the objectives of the international experiences and have a detailed framework of how these objectives are incorporated to the overall objectives of the university and how they are expected to be achieved. These objectives must be clearly communicated to students who choose to take part of these experiences.

Appendix: Research Population Demographics:

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Host country	International Experience	Duration	Degree	Accommodation	Languages Spoken (various proficiencies)	Institution
Adam	Over 26	Mixed-race (African and NI)	Finland	Erasmus	Six months	School of Communication and Media	Campus accommodation	English / Finnish	Institution B
Amira	21-23	Malay	France	Erasmus	Six months	School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics	Private accommodation	Malay / English / Spanish / French	Institution A
Anna	21-23	White British	London and India	Internship /A Taste of India	One year /Two weeks	School of Architecture and the Built Environment	Private accommodation	English / French	Institution B
Billie	21-23	White British	Germany	Internship	One year	School of Biological Sciences	Private accommodation	English / French / German	Institution A
Greg	18-20	White British	China	Gotco China	One month	School of History, Anthropology,	Campus accommodation	English	Institution A

						Philosophy and Politics			
Jay	21-23	White British	China	Internship	Two months	School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics	N/A	English / Mandarin	Institution A
Jeremy	21-23	White Irish	China	Study China	One month	School of Arts, English and Languages	Campus accommodation	English / French / Mandarin / Korean	Institution A
Julie	Over 26	White British	China	Erasmus International	Six months	BEd + MEd	Campus accommodation	English / French	Institution A
Louise	21-23	White British	Australia	Exchange programme with Australia	One year	School of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering	Private / campus accommodation	English	Institution A
Naomi	21-23	White Irish	USA	Study USA	One year	School of Law	Campus accommodation	English / Irish / French	Institution A

Nuala	21-23	White Irish - South African	China	Study China	Three weeks	School of Arts, English and Languages	Campus accommodation	English / Mandarin / Korean	Institution A
Rachel	21-23	White British	Australia	Study Australia	Six months	School of Biomedical Sciences	Campus accommodation	English / Spanish / French / Mandarin	Institution B
Ryan	21-23	White Irish	USA	Camp USA	Four months	School of Arts, English and Languages	Camp accommodation	English / Irish	Institution A
Sean	21-23	White Irish	China	Erasmus International	Six months	School of Law	Campus accommodation	English / French / Mandarin	Institution A
Steven	24-26	White British	Germany	Erasmus	Six months	Masters in Mechatronic Engineering	Private accommodation	English / German	Institution B
Tristan	21-23	White British	USA	Study USA	One year	School of Mathematics and Physics	Campus accommodation	English / French / Mandarin	Institution A
Zoe	21-23	White European	NI	Erasmus	Six months	School of Law	Campus accommodation	Hungarian / English / Russian	Institution A

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