



The Impact of Short-Term Study in China Programs: Voices of Hong Kong University Students

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Received: 25 November 2022 / Accepted: 18 September 2023
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Abstract

Despite the mounting evidence supporting the effectiveness of short-term study abroad programs (such as Service-Learning programs) on university students' development, few studies have been conducted to explore the impact of short-term study in China programs on young people from Hong Kong. This study employed a qualitative design method to examine the impact of three types of short-term study programs in China—summer school, cultural tour, and service-learning—on Hong Kong university students' development and to explore both the facilitators of, and the barriers to, the impact of the programs. A total of 42 students from 17 short-term study in China programs were interviewed individually. Results showed that all three types of short-term study in China programs were perceived by participants as having a positive impact on their intercultural competence as well as their perceptions of, and attitudes toward, the Nation and Chinese people. Participants of service-learning programs also demonstrated enhanced global citizenship. However, these programs did not have any significant impact on their perceived identities as Hong Kong or Chinese citizens. Individual and program factors that facilitated or impeded the student's gains from the programs were identified. These findings provide pioneer evidence for the positive impacts of short-term study in China programs on Hong Kong local university students and for the improvement of the current programs as well as the development of new programs in the future.

Keywords Short-term study abroad program · Service-learning · Hong Kong · University students

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Introduction

The mega-trend of globalization and the ever-increasing interdependence among countries have had a massive impact on higher education worldwide. Educational policies and missions of universities have been reformed to better equip graduates with a diverse set of skills in order to face the great challenges of the global economy (Shin & Harman, 2009). Many higher education institutions consider the development of intercultural competence and global citizenship as an essential component of a “world-class” education (Bourn, 2008). One of the consequences of this is the recent proliferation of short-term study abroad programs in many universities worldwide (Miller & Gonzalez, 2016).

A short-term study abroad program can be defined as a “one-to-eight-week program (or within one term), usually faculty directed and sponsored by a home institution” (Spencer & Harman, 2002, p. xiv). Common types of short-term study abroad programs include a summer semester abroad, international service-learning, international internships, international volunteering, service-learning programs, and student exchange programs (Sachau et al., 2010). These programs aim to improve students’ language abilities, provide them with intercultural experiences, and broaden their horizons. According to the IIE Open Doors (2016), in the 2014-15 academic year, 63.1% of the study abroad experiences of college students in the United States were short-term. Several reasons account for the rising popularity of such short-term programs. First, short-term study abroad programs provide opportunities for students who do not have the time nor money required for long-term overseas study (Chiang, 2014; Ingersoll et al., 2019; Mabingo, 2019; Potts, 2022). Second, for students enrolled in structured academic programs, such as nursing and engineering, a short-term study abroad program would ensure that they do not fall behind in their domestic programs (Donnelly-Smith, 2009). Third, it is much easier for short-term programs to have clear learning goals and ongoing participative reflection (Doerr, 2020; Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005; Morley et al., 2019).

In Hong Kong, short-term study abroad programs have also gained increasing popularity in recent years. Starting from 2017, the University Grants Committee (UGC) has advocated that Hong Kong students shall participate in more diverse short-term offshore programs, such as service-learning, extended internships, and study trips, especially during their post-secondary education. As a result, the number of outgoing exchange students in UGC-funded programs grew from 3,546 in the 2010-11 academic year to 6,320 in the 2015-16 academic year, constituting a 78% increase in five years (UGC, 2017). Taking University A as an example, in the 2017-18 academic year, out of 480 study abroad programs (61.25%) coordinated at the university level—that is, by the International Affairs Office and the China Affairs Office—294 (61.25%) were short-term programs.

A study in China program is considered a special type of study abroad program in the context of Hong Kong since Hong Kong and mainland China have distinctive cultures, socio-political systems, and dialects, which can be read as intercultural (Chee, 2012; Chu, 2009; Fairbrother, 2008). Such programs are usually organized by universities in Hong Kong in collaboration with mainland institutions—usually universities—that allow local Hong Kong students to gain learning experiences in mainland

China. Currently, there are three major types of short-term study in China programs for university students. First, there are summer school programs, which take place between June and August every year and usually span from one to five weeks. These programs offer students the opportunity to participate in summer programs organized by some of the top Chinese mainland universities. These programs are academic in nature and have varying quotas for mainland Chinese students since they involve students from around the world. Second, cultural tour programs introduce students to the cultural and historical aspects in different areas of mainland China during a trip lasting one to two weeks. Students usually travel to cities with a long history and unique culture and participate in organized activities with local people. Third, service-learning programs engage students in local life, usually in less-developed communities in rural China involving implementation of service-learning projects. Students are expected to consolidate academic learning through serving the local community through structured experiential learning activities (American Association of Higher Education, 2009).

At present, all eight UGC-funded universities in Hong Kong have offered short-term study in China programs to their students. With these opportunities, many Hong Kong students have begun their journeys in mainland China. For example, at University B, more than a thousand students participated in short-term study in China programs every year before the pandemic (CMAO, 2020). University C offered 13 China programs in 2019, with hundreds of participants studying in major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen for one to four weeks (GAO, 2020). In addition, three universities have proposed enhanced learning opportunities in mainland China as part of their strategic plans. For instance, University A plans “to provide all students with at least one mainland China and one overseas learning opportunity by 2022” in order to promote “global citizenship and competitiveness” (HKU, 2020, p. 1).

Research shows that short-term study abroad programs can promote participants’ development in multiple domains. First, intercultural competence—the most sought-after education outcome of almost all study abroad programs—has been the most frequently reported learning outcome (Campbell, 2016; Paige et al., 2009). For example, Lumkes et al. (2012) found that a short-term study program for American students taking place in China “profoundly altered the students’ cultural self-awareness and outlook on global political issues” (p. 151). Cubillos et al. (2008) reported that study abroad programs improved participants’ foreign language listening skills and proficiency. According to the Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), intercultural sensitivity develops along a continuum consisting of six stages ranging from denial, defence, and minimization, to acceptance, adaptation, and integration (Bennett, 1993). As one’s familiarity with cultural difference becomes more complex and sophisticated, one’s understanding and behaviours regarding cultural differences and similarities become more complex and mature, changing from a highly ethnocentric mindset to a highly intercultural or ethno-relative mindset (Hammer, 2011). Through study abroad experiences, students also develop skills that enable them to adapt appropriately in intercultural interactions by “observing, listening, and asking those who are from different backgrounds to teach, to share, [and] to enter into dialogue together about relevant needs and issues” (Bok, 2009, p. xiii).

Second, short-term study abroad programs influence participants' attitude towards host countries (Dias et al., 2020; Lumkes et al., 2012; Nyunt, 2022; Pachmayer & Andereck, 2019). According to the Intergroup Contact Theory (Pettigrew et al., 2011), stereotypes stem from social isolation can be undone through personal contact. Therefore, interpersonal contact is considered one of the most effective ways of reducing prejudice between different groups. Based on this model, we assume that having more direct contact with local people during a study in China trip would reduce stereotypical perceptions and would help Hong Kong university students develop more open attitudes towards differences. Such attitudinal changes are also essential for students to enable them further acquire knowledge and skills needed for intercultural communication (Deardorff, 2004). For example, with more respect, empathy, openness, and curiosity, students will be more willing to learn more about the culture, custom, and history different from their origin place.

Third, researchers also found that offshore learning experiences modified students' perceptions of their home place and identity. Walters et al. (2017) examined the effects of short-term study abroad programs through the lens of transformative learning and found that the programs allowed students to critically reflect on their home country since the programs exposed students to a culturally novel environment where the students could analyse their home culture and develop perceptions and ideas from an alternative perspective. Gaia (2015) found that program participants developed a better understanding of their own identity as a member of their nation because of intercultural encounters.

Finally, study abroad programs could help participants develop global citizenship—the awareness and belief that every person is a citizen of the world and has social responsibility to act for the benefit of the world as a whole (Berg & Schwander, 2019). Kishino and Takahashi (2019) reported that study abroad experience challenges students' global citizenship identity and incubates students' concerns for global social problems. In particular, service learning programs have been frequently found to have a positive effect on students' sense of social responsibility and global citizenship development (Chan et al., 2021; Eyler et al., 2001). Such attribute could be further strengthened with more exposure to diversity (Eyler & Giles, 1999) and with explicit elements in the learning and reflective activities on the related attributes (Chan et al., 2022).

As a specific type of short-term study abroad program such as Service-Learning, do study in China programs have a similar impact on their participants? To answer this question, scientific evidence concerning the outcomes and quality of such programs is needed. However, research findings that show the impact of study in China programs on Hong Kong university students' development are scant (Jackson, 2008; Yang et al., 2011). First, the majority of studies adopt the case study method that usually focuses on specific programs in a particular foreign country (for example, Jackson, 2008). Therefore, the findings across these studies are often not comparable. Second, among the different types of short-term study in China programs, service-learning has been a major focus of research (for example, Yu et al., 2019; Chak et al., 2016; Shek et al., 2022b), while the impacts of other types—such as Chinese cultural tours—have rarely been investigated. An in-depth understanding regarding how such programs may contribute to students' development in relation to factors both at the

individual and program level has not been examined. Therefore, it is unclear whether, and if so, how, the current short-term study in China programs can have a meaningful impact on Hong Kong university students' development.

The Present Study

Within this research context, the present study aims to address two questions: first, what is the impact of short-term study in China programs on Hong Kong university students' development in terms of their level of intercultural competence, global citizenship, as well as their attitudes toward and perceptions regarding mainland China and their identities as Hong Kong or Chinese citizens? Second, what are the facilitators of, and barriers to, the impacts of short-term study in China programs on Hong Kong students' development? University students in Hong Kong who participated in different types of short-term study in China programs were recruited to share their learning experiences and perceptions gained from these programs in individual interviews. Factors that facilitated or negatively affected their achievement of their learning outcomes in these programs were further explored.

Method

Sampling and Participating Programs

We employed a purposive sampling method to recruit participants from three major types of short-term study in China programs offered in the 2018-19 academic year in Hong Kong. First, for summer schools, which were usually organized by top universities in mainland China and were open to students from different universities in Hong Kong, eight programs were randomly selected from all available programs that were held in the summer term of the 2018-19 academic year. Through the professional connections of the research team members, participants from five summer school programs were successfully recruited. Second, for cultural tours, which were jointly organized by universities in Hong Kong and mainland China, we first selected four UGC-funded universities. In each university, participants from two cultural tour programs were recruited based on nominations by staff members in the related offices. Participants from a total of nine cultural tours were successfully recruited. Lastly, service-learning programs were sampled from four universities participating in a cross-institutional project on capacity building for service-learning, from which we successfully recruited participants from seven service-learning programs. In sum, participants from a total of 21 short-term study in China programs offered in the 2018-19 academic year were recruited.

Participants and Procedure

Participants of the present study were local undergraduate students in Hong Kong (i.e., those holding a Hong Kong Permanent ID Card) who had successfully enrolled in one of the 21 selected programs. With the help of the program leaders and subject teachers, invitation letters were sent out to all local students participating in these programs. The students who agreed to participate in the study were first asked to sign a written consent form. After obtaining their consent, the students were invited for an individual interview. A total of 42 students agreed to participate in this qualitative study. The participants—21 males and 21 females from Year 2 to Year 5 in various majors—came from 17 out of the 21 selected study in China programs, including eight cultural tour programs, five summer school programs, and four service-learning programs. Table 1 shows the specific information of the participants.

Before the interviews started, the interviewees were invited to fill in an online form to indicate their basic information, such as their year of study, the study in China program they participated in, and their affiliated university, as well as their preferred interview dates and venues. All interviews were conducted in Chinese at the interviewees' home universities (except for one), which was conducted online as the interviewee was not in Hong Kong, by two trained research assistants and the whole session was audio-recorded after securing consent from the participants.

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with the 42 students based on the interview protocol developed by the research team. The students' views about their learning experiences and achievements gained from the short-term study in China programs were elicited by asking questions that fell into two major categories: (1) the students' perceptions of the programs' impact; (2) the facilitators of, and barriers to, their learning from the program.

Data Analysis

All audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, with the length of each interview comprising around 10,000 Chinese characters (Mean=10,359; SD=3,024). An experienced researcher coded and categorized the data from the transcripts into different themes. Specifically, an Excel sheet was first developed to contain all key information from the transcripts that were organized according to the interview questions. This arrangement allowed comparisons to be made between the participants regarding their answers to each interview question. Next, open coding (Bryman, 2016) was conducted to identify themes—or facilitators or barriers—that corresponded to each research question. This process yielded dozens of themes—or facilitators or barriers—such as communication with local mainland Chinese people, accommodation, and the time spent with local people, which were then combined into summative ones through constant comparisons, such as through axial coding (Bryman, 2016). For example, various minor themes surrounding language were combined into major themes, such as the students' Putonghua proficiency, which was one of the programs' impacts. Facilitators and barriers were found to be on both individual and program levels. Program specifications gleaned from the internet pro-

Table 1 Characteristics of the short-term study in China programs that the interviewees participated in

Program	Location of the visit	Program duration	Organizer/offering unit	No. of interviewees	Major of the interviewees
Cultural Tour 01	Guangdong	10 days	University A (Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan Affairs Office)	1	• Journalism and Communication (n=1)
Cultural Tour 02	Yunnan	2 weeks	University B (Chinese Mainland Affairs Office) and University C (Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan Affairs Office)	3	• Social Work (n=3)
Cultural Tour 03	Beijing	2 weeks	University D (Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan Affairs Office and College of Advanced Chinese Training)	3	• Chinese Educations (n=1) • General Studies (n=1) • N.A. (n=1)
Cultural Tour 04	Liaoning	2 weeks	University E (International Exchange and Cooperation Office)	2	• N.A. (n=2)
Cultural Tour 05	Chongqing	2 weeks	University F (Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan Affairs Office)	1	• N.A. (n=1)
Cultural Tour 08	Heilongjiang	10 days	University G (Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan Affairs Office)	2	• Psychology (n=1) • Education (n=1)
Cultural Tour 09	Gansu	2 weeks	University H (Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan Affairs Office)	1	• Chinese Education (n=1)
Cultural Tour 10	Gansu	2 weeks	University H (Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan Affairs Office)	2	• N.A. (n=2)
Summer School 02	Beijing	3 weeks	University I (Office of International Relations)	5	• Chinese (n=1) • Mathematics (n=1) • China Studies (n=1) • Business (n=1)
Summer School 03	Shanghai	4 weeks	University J (Office of Hong Kong Macao and Taiwan)	2	• N.A. (n=2)
Summer School 04	Shaanxi	2 weeks	University K (Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan Affairs Office)	2	• Humanities (n=1) • N.A. (n=2)
Summer School 05	Shanghai	4 weeks	University L	4	• Accounting (n=1) • Civil Engineering (n=1)

Table 1 (continued)

Program	Location of the visit	Program duration	Organizer/offering unit	No. of interviewees	Major of the interviewees
Summer School 06	Zhejiang	2 weeks	University M (Management School), University B (Business School), and University N (Graduate Institute of Technology, Innovation & Intellectual Property Management)	1	• Business (n=1)
Service-Learning 04	Sichuan	10 days	University B (Department of Applied Social Sciences)	4	• Physiotherapy (n=1) • Radiology (n=1) • N.A. (n=2)
Service-Learning 05	Zhejiang	10 days	University B (Department of Applied Social Sciences)	4	• Social Work (n=2) • Sciences (n=1) • N.A. (n=1)
Service-Learning 07	Shaanxi	2 weeks	University B (Department of Applied Social Sciences)	4	• Fashion Design (n=1) • N.A. (n=1)
Service-Learning 08	Yunnan	10 days	University O	1	• N.A. (n=1)

Note: N.A. = Not Available

vided insights into program-level facilitators and barriers, which triangulated with the students' views.

Results

The findings are presented in two major sections below. They address the impacts of the programs on participants and the facilitators of, and barriers to, the students' effective learning from the programs, respectively (see Table 2). In the following section, the following abbreviations will be used: SSP represents the summer school program; CTP represents the cultural tour program; and SLP represents the service-learning program.

Impact of the Programs on Participants

Students' perceived impacts of the programs can be categorized into three domains, with eight subthemes being identified. These included: (1) intercultural competence, including "improved language proficiency", "enhanced interpersonal skills", and "the development of intercultural communication"; (2) academic development; (3) perceptions of mainland China and Chinese people—including "a deeper understanding of Chinese lifestyle", "the rapid economic and social development of mainland China", "warm-hearted and tolerant Chinese people", and "open-minded university

Table 2 Themes, subthemes, and occurrence of quotations from different types of short-term study abroad program

Themes	Subthemes	Quotations from different types of programs		
		Summer school program	Cultural tour program	Service-learning program
Impact of the Programs on Participants				
Intercultural Competence	Subtheme 1: Improved Language Proficiency	2	0	1
	Subtheme 2: Enhanced Interpersonal Skills	1	1	1
	Subtheme 3: Development of Intercultural Communication	1	3	0
Academic Development	Subtheme 4: Academic Development	0	1	1
Perceptions of Mainland China and Chinese People	Subtheme 5: A Deeper Understanding of Chinese Lifestyles	2	0	1
	Subtheme 6: Rapid Economic and Social Development of Mainland China	2	1	0
	Subtheme 7: Warm-Hearted and Tolerant Chinese People	1	0	2
	Subtheme 8: Open-Minded University Students in Mainland China	1	2	0
Global Citizenship	Subtheme 9: Enhanced Social Responsibility and Civic Engagement	0	0	3
Facilitators of and Barriers to Effective Learning				
Individual Level Facilitators	Subtheme 1: Strong Internal Motivation	2	0	0
	Subtheme 2: High Level of Openness to Diversity and Willingness to Communicate	0	1	2
Individual-Level Barriers	Subtheme 3: Passive Learning Attitudes	2	0	0
	Subtheme 4: A Lack of Openness and Willingness to Communicate	0	2	0
Program-Level Facilitators	Subtheme 5: Supportive Peer Relationships	1	0	2
	Subtheme 6: Highly Motivated Students as Role Models	1	1	0
	Subtheme 7: Teachers' Passion and Dedication	1	0	1
	Subtheme 8: Teachers' Familiarity with the Local Context and Knowledge of Chinese Culture	0	2	0
	Subtheme 9: Teachers' Responsiveness and Care	1	0	2
Program-Level Barriers	Subtheme 10: Appropriate Schedules and Well-Organized Cultural Activities with Interactive and Practical Elements	2	0	2
	Subtheme 11: Negative Learning Atmosphere	1	1	0

Table 2 (continued)

Themes	Subthemes	Quotations from different types of programs		
		Summer school program	Cultural tour program	Service-learning program
	Subtheme 12: Interpersonal Conflict among Team Member	0	0	2
	Subtheme 13: Insufficient Interaction with Program Leaders	1	1	0
	Subtheme 14: Inadequate Opportunities for Intercultural Interaction	2	0	0
	Subtheme 15: Unexpected Changes to Scheduled Activities	0	2	0

students in mainland China”; and (4) global citizenship. The subthemes and related students’ narratives are illustrated below.

Intercultural Competence

Subtheme 1: Improved Language Proficiency. One notable learning outcome reported by students was their improved language proficiency. Students said that their ability to speak Mandarin had greatly improved and that they could now convey their ideas in Mandarin more effectively. In other words, students’ messaging skills had been enhanced by the programs. Service-learning program participants also reported that they felt more relaxed and comfortable when communicating with others in Mandarin. This suggests an improvement in interaction relaxation, which is an important component of intercultural competence. The following narratives illustrate these improvements:

- “Previously in Hong Kong, I rarely had opportunities to speak Putonghua, but now I can communicate in Putonghua more fluently and understand better...” (Student 10 in SSP02).
- “I think my Putonghua has improved a lot, and I also learnt some Internet jargon often used in China’s social media”. (Student 07 in SSP04)
- “I found that communicating with Mainland people became quite simple... I can freely express my opinion without feeling embarrassed”. (Student 22 in SLP04)

Subtheme 2: Enhanced Interpersonal Skills. Students shared that they had developed good interpersonal relationships with people from different backgrounds. In making friends with peers from different cultures, students became more socially competent and served as a bridge between different cultures—known as cultural mediation. Some students revealed that they maintained these friendships and forms of communication even after the program had ended. These learning outcomes are demonstrated in the narratives below:

- *“The greatest gain was that I met different friends from Hong Kong, Chinese mainland, and overseas. Even now we still keep in touch with each other, and we hang out for meals when we are in Hong Kong”.* (Student 32 in SSP02)
- *“Students in the host university in mainland China were very hospitable. We had a lot of conversations and we experienced many things together, such as participating in group activities, playing games, and even ordering takeaways in the hotel. I really treasured our friendship”.* (Student 20 in CTP07)

Students also reported that they had become more able to collaborate with people from different cultures and had learned more ways to resolve conflicts; these abilities correlate with skills in intercultural interaction management. Specifically, one student shared that her listening skills had improved through teamwork activities:

- *“I never worked well in a team in the past, but in this program, we handled the tasks together with the mindset of helping each other. Even though we had disagreements sometimes, we listened to each other and found out solutions. I learned that things could go better if I could listen to others’ opinions and tried not to be too stubborn”.* (Student 19 in SLP07)

Subtheme 3: Development of Intercultural Communication. Students described having had various opportunities to interact with people from other backgrounds through the programs. Throughout this process, students were able to adapt their behaviours more easily and were better able to distinguish appropriate behaviours from inappropriate ones as well as adapt to specific situations. One student observed that local people tended to express their opinions in a more straightforward way than did Hong Kong people and so quickly adapted to this style in his interactions with them. Another student expressed his appreciation for cultural diversity through observing the cultural differences between people in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Students had in-depth communication with local university students in mainland China, which enabled each of them to learn more about the other’s culture. The following narratives demonstrate this improvement in communication:

- *“People in mainland China were quite straightforward when expressing their ideas, and I wasn’t very used to it at the beginning. But quickly, I adapted my own way of speaking to follow their style in our communication...and we got along well with each other”.* (Student 28 in CTP03)
- *“I learned how to communicate with people from diverse backgrounds. I think that people from different places have various personalities. For instance, as compared with Hong Kong people like me, people from Taiwan were more patient and seemed to be happier. I could feel their optimism when we were interacting, and I think we should learn from them”.* (Student 33 in CTP10)
- *“The greatest learning gain was that I learned so much more about mainland China. I had in-depth conversations with students from Yunnan University, during which we shared our life stories and discussed the situation in Hong Kong and in China. The students there also helped me to know more about rural areas in mainland China”.* (Student 05 in CTP02)

- *“We loved to explore the city by ourselves, to visit the local stores and to talk to local people. I think this is another important aspect of cross-cultural communication. We once met an elderly couple who spoke in their dialect, which we could not understand at all. Although we could not fully understand each other, we kept on trying and using body language, and they finally knew what we meant. This was a very interesting experience”. (Student 08 in SSP04)*

Academic Development

Subtheme 4: Academic Development. Some students perceived the programs as beneficial for their academic development. One student majoring in Social Work reflected that his direct observation of the local community and the knowledge gained from interactions with local people had deepened his understanding of the reasons behind different social service practices in mainland China and Hong Kong, contributing to his professional competence. Another student taking part in a service-learning program also reported that she gained a better understanding of the differences in how children in Hong Kong and mainland China behave following an immersive teaching experience in a mainland school. Their reflections are as follows:

- *“For me as a Social Work student, the greatest learning gain was the experience of getting along with local children in mainland China. Our profession requires us to learn how to communicate effectively with clients at different ages. Previously, I only had interactions with Hong Kong children through private tutoring. Through the teaching practice in this program, I discovered that the behaviours and development of children in mainland and Hong Kong children were very different in some respects, and I shall consider these characteristics when I interact with them”. (Student 17 in SLP05)*
- *“It’s commonly regarded that the system and culture in Hong Kong are very different from those in mainland China. As a student majoring in social work, the program provided me with a good opportunity to know about rural areas in mainland China. After I had visited the community, and talked with local people, I understood the unique way of social work practice in Chinese rural areas, which is totally different from what we do in Hong Kong ... For example, social services could be easily conducted at community level in rural areas of the Mainland because there were strong connections among villagers. However, in Hong Kong, social services are mainly provided at group or individual levels because social ties are not that strong. Overall, I learned a lot from the practices of local NGOs”. (Student 04 in CTP02)*

Perceptions of Mainland China and Chinese People

Subtheme 5: A Deeper Understanding of Chinese Lifestyles. Many students shared that their observations of cultural differences in the lifestyles of people from the mainland had made them reflect on their own culture and lifestyle. They were also

more able to view things from a culturally different perspective and to be more tolerant of such differences; that is, they displayed a higher degree of cultural empathy. These learning outcomes are illustrated in the following narratives:

- *“Unlike the rapid pace of life in Hong Kong, the lifestyle in Xi’an was more relaxed. People looked happy and satisfied, even the middle-aged working class. They seemed to have little stress The atmosphere there was more relaxing and pleasant than in Hong Kong. This is the way of living I have been longing for”.* (Student 07 in SSP04)
- *“I observed that in mainland China, people often stand quite close to each other when queueing in lines, which is considered inappropriate in Hong Kong. But later on, I realised that they did so because they didn’t want to provide space for other people to jump the queue”.* (Student 13 in SSP05)
- *“I liked to chat with the coach driver during the program and I was able to find out more about the life stories of people in mainland China through our conversations. I enjoy listening to these stories and found them not only interesting but inspiring”.* (Student 20 in SLP04)

Subtheme 6: Rapid Economic and Social Development of Mainland China. The rapid development of the economy and e-commerce in mainland China, as observed by the students, had a significant impact on their views about the nation. This was also one of the most frequent observations made in the interviews. Students identified gaps between their preconceptions of China and the reality of Chinese society. The following narratives illustrate these shifts:

- *“Before attending the summer school, I had heard of the popularity of Alipay and WeChat Pay in mainland China, but I was concerned about whether such practices would cause inconvenience to me. But when I arrived there, I found that mobile payment was very easy to use ... I also learned to order take-away food on my mobile phone. I did find the technological development in mainland China more advanced than that of Hong Kong, which was out of my expectations”.* (Student 08 in SSP04)
- *“I found that general prices in mainland China were almost the same as that of Hong Kong, and they were much higher than I had expected”.* (Student 10 in SSP02)
- *“The society is more harmonious and civilized than I had perceived in the past... One thing that impressed me was that there were female-only subway cars, which we don’t have in Hong Kong”.* (Student 25 in CTP01)

Subtheme 7: Warm-Hearted and Tolerant Chinese People. Through the programs, students also changed their perceptions of the people of mainland China; they came to view these people as warm-hearted, tolerant, and kind. Students spoke of the help they had received from the Chinese people they had encountered during their trip. Local people and children had always been willing to trust and help them, even though they did not know each other. This also made the students reflect on Hong Kong society and its cultural differences, as shown in the following examples:

- *“When we were visiting the Summer Palace in Beijing, a warm-hearted uncle came to us and said he was very familiar with the surroundings. He then showed us around and gave us suggestions on places worth visiting. It was a pleasant experience and I appreciated his help”. (Student 09 in SSP02)*
- *“Although we were strangers to the local villagers, they completely believed in us, without suspecting our motives to teach their children. This deeply impressed me and led me to reflect on our society, where we hardly trust others and tend to have concerns when being treated very well by others. I thus highly treasured the trust I received from the local people. I would say that people in Hong Kong would consider it dangerous if a stranger wanted to visit their homes, but in that village, all the parents accepted us to conduct home visits. I wish there could be more such kind of trust in our lives”. (Student 42 in SLP08)*
- *“I think children in mainland China were very passionate. They were very interested in knowing about us and learning to speak Cantonese. Although they knew that our visit to the summer camp only lasted for a few days, they still participated actively in our classes and took notes carefully. I really appreciated their learning attitude”. (Student 16 in SLP05)*

Subtheme 8: Open-Minded University Students in Mainland China. Hong Kong undergraduate students’ attitudes toward their compatriots in mainland China also changed for the better as a result of frequent communication. Students in the programs expressed that they no longer subscribed to the common stereotype of mainland students as reticent, uncompromising, and conservative. Instead, they came to view them as very friendly, open-minded, and knowledgeable. The following narratives demonstrate these attitudinal changes through their experiences during the programs:

- *“I changed my views about university students in mainland China. Their university was international and the students I met were very hospitable and easy-going. Originally, I thought they would only make friends with their own people, but they were actually very open-minded and tolerant. I also learned a lot from them during our group discussions. My groupmates from mainland China majored in international relations, but they also had good knowledge in other disciplines such as economics and philosophy. I found many of them were versatile and I could learn from them”. (Student 12 in SSP02)*
- *“Before joining this program, I thought the students in the Mainland and Hong Kong were totally different in terms of culture and ideology. However, through the interactions with students in Yunnan University, I found that we actually shared many things in common. They were very open to diversity and willing to share”. (Student 05 in CTP02)*
- *“The local university students we interacted with were very passionate and open-minded; we didn’t feel that there was a gap between us”. (Student 25 in CTP01)*

Global Citizenship

Subtheme 9: Enhanced Social Responsibility and Civic Engagement. In conjunction with the above-mentioned sub-themes, this subtheme emerged specifically from the interviews with participants of service-learning programs. Students of SLPs observed the needs of the local community, the active participation of their service recipients, and the positive changes they made to the community, which together nurtures a sense of social responsibility among the students. Students shared that the service-learning experiences help them better understand the meaning of volunteering. They came to realize their capability in contributing to the society and developed stronger motivation to help people in need, as illustrated in the following narratives.

- *“We provided service in a local primary school in mainland China. When we were teaching in the class, these primary school students listened to us so attentively and they wouldn’t miss any single word we said...they really considered us as their role models. I feel a strong sense of responsibility and I want to do more and do better for them.” (Student 19 in SLP07).*
- *“The greatest learning gain from the program is that I have now understood the real meaning of volunteering to myself. Helping others gives me a sense of purpose...and it makes me feel fulfilled and empowered. (Student 01 in SLP05)*
- *“When I see the changes in the migrant children (the service target)...their increased curiosity to knowledge...their bigger dreams about future... after the summer camp, I just cannot help to think, if I have the ability to help them, why not? I have set up a personal goal for myself from now on—to join this kind of voluntary teaching or service at least once a year for underprivileged populations.” (Student 01 in SLP05).*

Facilitators of and Barriers to Effective Learning

Students’ perceived facilitators of as well as barriers to effective learning from the programs can be further categorized into both individual and program levels. A total of 16 subthemes were identified from the interviews with students.

Individual Level Facilitators

Subtheme 1: Strong Internal Motivation. Students saw their own inner motivation and passion to explore a new culture as factors that facilitated their learning from the programs. They showed a strong interest in the programs and were curious about Chinese culture. They also took the initiative to explore places that were not included in the program schedule—such as those that were recommended by local students—and reported receiving unique learning benefits from such experiences. Two students participating in summer school programs shared their reflections as follows:

- *“I think I am very curious about Chinese culture. I wanted to explore different places in Xi’an. Instead of looking at the photos online, I wanted to visit there*

and see/feel what they were like. Whenever local students recommended a place to me, I was very interested in going there. I think this attitude helped me gain a more in-depth understanding of the features of Xi'an". (Student 07 in SSP04)

- "I had high expectations about the program, and I love visiting new places and experiencing new cultures. I spent time to explore locations other than famous tourist attractions to experience the authenticity of the city. During the program, we went to a variety of local stores and chatted with the owners. I consider it a special way of experiencing culture". (Student 08 in SSP04)

Subtheme 2: High Level of Openness to Diversity and Willingness to Communicate. Students with a high level of openness and a strong willingness to communicate with local people reported to have personally benefited substantially from the programs. They described being interested in hearing local people's life stories and perceived these stories as influential in their own lives. Students also reported having gained a deeper understanding of the local context and people as a result of having proactively interacted with teachers and students at the local Chinese university. In addition, some highlighted the importance of not holding negative preconceptions when observing cultural differences. The following narratives illustrate their opinions:

- "I am always willing to talk and open myself up to others. I try not to be affected by stereotypes. This greatly facilitated my understanding of mainland China during the program. I wouldn't have gained such in-depth knowledge if I viewed the differences between Hong Kong and mainland from a negative and biased viewpoint". (Student 16 in SLP05)
- "I love to interact with different people and listen to their life stories. In this program, I was deeply impressed by the experience of surviving an earthquake and recovering from the trauma shared by local people. It has had a positive impact on me". (Student 06 in CTP02)
- "I love to learn different things and I want to have more cultural exchange experiences in my university life. Therefore, I proactively talked to the local students and teacher, through which I learned a lot more about their cultures and lives". (Student 20 in SLP04)

Individual-Level Barriers

Subtheme 3: Passive Learning Attitudes. Some students mentioned that passive attitudes toward classroom learning had affected the effectiveness of their learning. Several students who had joined summer school programs reported that they had not been fully engaged in learning, which was partly because the program was not credit-bearing:

- "I couldn't pay attention during lectures. We were not taking a credit-bearing subject. I think sometimes I missed what the teachers were lecturing..." (Student 08 in SSP04).

- *“I don't like to sit there and listen to the lectures, particularly the theoretically based ones. Some students from mainland China and from Taiwan were more serious than us because they can earn credit from the program”. (Student 07 in SSP04)*

Subtheme 4: A Lack of Openness and Willingness to Communicate. Similarly, some students described themselves as having low motivation to take part in intercultural interactions. They explained that they would rather hang around with people from the same background than interact with students from other cultural backgrounds, as illustrated by the following examples; this suggests that a lack of openness among the students presented a barrier to their learning.

- *“We didn't proactively seek opportunities to interact with Mainland students. We spoke Cantonese whenever possible and only used Putonghua when necessary”. (Student 03 in CTP03)*
- *“I was silent in class, just like a very typical student in Hong Kong. I did not like to answer questions and preferred to listen. I felt more comfortable when my groupmates were all students from Hong Kong”. (Student 16 in CTP05)*

Program-Level Facilitators

Subtheme 5: Supportive Peer Relationships. Supportive peer relationships were regarded as an important facilitator of the students' learning. Having peers who cared about each other and were willing to help had had a positive impact on the whole group's learning, as reflected in the following narratives:

- *“My group consisted of six members and we supported each other. One member was fluent in Putonghua, so he assisted the program leader in coordinating the arrangement. This facilitated our learning in the local university”. (Student 18 in SLP05)*
- *“One member of my group was very good at time management and helped us set deadlines for each project. We were then able to finish the project efficiently and smoothly”. (Student 08 in SSP04)*
- *“I learned a lot from my group because we each had different personal traits and strengths. For example, some members were very considerate and cared about others' feelings. Other members were realistic and would work in an efficient way”. (Student 19 in SLP07)*

Subtheme 6: Highly Motivated Students as Role Models. Students also regarded their highly motivated peers, who were passionate and actively participated in program activities, as role models that were promoting others' learning:

- *“We had some very active members in the program. They were passionate and always wanted to experience new things. Their positive energy also affected us*

in a good way. Together we integrated into the local culture well". (Student 10 in SSP02)

- *"There was a student from Macao in my group who was very proactive in participating in activities. He also performed in our evening show, which was very brave. I learned this positive attitude from him". (Student 29 in CTP07)*

Subtheme 7: Teachers' Passion and Dedication. Teachers' passion for, and dedication to, the programs were perceived by students as a strong facilitator of their learning. They described how dedicated teachers had created different opportunities for them to experience the local culture and to engage more frequently in intercultural communication. As the narratives below illustrate, the students greatly valued the companionship and timely feedback provided by the teachers:

- *"The teacher often had meals with us and used the time to chat with us. He found a student from Xi'an Jiaotong University to serve as our tourist guide showing us around the campus. We were then able to visit different libraries, canteens, and student halls, to experience the real life of university students in mainland China. We also had many in-depth communications with local university students on such informal occasions, which enabled us to know more about each other". (Student 08 in SSP04)*
- *"I think the teacher was very dedicated. She shared a lot of her past experiences in the city and in leading the program. Her passion also motivated me to explore this city". (Student 19 in SLP 07)*

Subtheme 8: Teachers' Familiarity with the Local Context and Knowledge of Chinese Culture. As reflected in the narratives below, students of cultural tour programs mentioned that the program teachers were very familiar with the local society and had provided them with many useful tips, which helped them to become more acquainted with the local culture:

- *"We had a teacher who was a local to Yunnan and he was very familiar with the local community. He recommended us a few places with unique cultural characteristics. Besides, he gave us many tips on traveling in the local area and on safety issues". (Student 06 in CTP02)*
- *"The teachers led us to different visiting spots and provided us with useful information on local food and transportation". (Student 27 in CTP05)*

Subtheme 9: Teachers' Responsiveness and Care. Many students said that their teachers' responsiveness and willingness to help was one of the most important facilitators of their learning. Students had benefited the most when they were fully informed of the program arrangements by the teacher and when their questions were answered in a timely manner. They also appreciated it when teachers cared about their lives and made the effort to provide continuous and constructive feedback on their performance throughout the program. This last point is highlighted by the participants as follows:

- *“When I was providing service in the local primary school, my teacher sat in my class to observe. She gave me very comprehensive feedback on how to improve. These timely suggestions were useful and I could immediately adopt them in my next class. I appreciate my teacher’s help”. (Student 01 in SLP05)*
- *“The teacher in my program was very caring and always willing to help me. I knew that I could seek help from her whenever I encountered difficulties in my study or in my life”. (Student 35 in SLP04)*
- *“I frequently came to my teachers to ask questions and the teachers were always available. This helped a lot in my learning. In Hong Kong, I used to write emails to my professors when I have questions, which was not so efficient”. (Student 10 in SSP02)*

Subtheme 10: Appropriate Schedules and Well-Organized Cultural Activities with Interactive and Practical Elements. Students reported that they had enjoyed the programs that had clear objectives, appropriate scheduling, and carefully designed activities. In particular, many of them felt that they had benefitted the most out of programs where the schedules had been appropriately arranged and where the activities had exposed them to different parts of the culture. For example, the following summer school participants reported that the programs had provided them with a good balance of experiential activities and free time to explore the city, which had enabled them to maximise their learning opportunities:

- *“This program lasted for two weeks and I think the length is just right. We also had enough time to visit different new places and try local cuisines”. (Student 08 in SSP04)*
- *“I think the arrangement was quite good. I not only attended classes but also joined sessions about introducing Beijing University, took campus tours, visited the museum, and experienced a local citizen’s life”. (Student 10 in SSP02)*

Students of the service-learning program also said they had been provided with a variety of learning activities; the service component in particular had given them the time and opportunity to interact with local people as well as to apply classroom knowledge to real-life situations:

- *“I appreciated the amount of opportunities we were given to interact with local students. We attended lectures and ate meals together afterwards. We also took a small trip to the museum. This design enabled us to have some in-depth communication”. (Student 01 in SLP05)*
- *“One thing I liked about the program design was the integration of knowledge and practice. In my home university, I did not know how to apply the knowledge into real-life situations. But in this program, I was able to use what I had just learned to teach the children, which was an effective learning process”. (Student 16 in SLP05)*

Program-Level Barriers

Subtheme 11: Negative Learning Atmosphere. Being in a peer group who had little motivation to learn created a negative learning atmosphere that hindered the individual student's ability to learn effectively. For instance, some students mentioned having been disturbed by classmates who watched videos and played games during lectures. Some students had gradually lost their motivation to practice Mandarin due to the influence of their peers' passive attitudes towards learning:

- *“To be honest, the Hong Kong students in my group did not behave well. When we were having lectures in the classroom, they were watching video clips and playing computer games. This was quite annoying and affected my own learning”. (Student 07 in SSP04)*
- *“Initially, I wanted to grab the opportunity to practice my Putonghua because I was going to take the Putonghua proficiency test. However, my groupmates thought that traveling in Beijing was more important than the test, as we would pass it anyway. They also persuaded me to spend more time playing. My intention to practice Putonghua was therefore greatly weakened”. (Student 24 in CTP06)*

Subtheme 12: Interpersonal Conflict among Team Members. Together with the passive attitudes of some students, some also reported that ineffective group leaders and interpersonal conflicts among team members had also reduced their motivation to work together and to learn. If the group was unable to resolve conflicts or disagreements among peers, then the whole team's working alliance and morale was undermined:

- *“One of our group members served as the group leader to communicate with our teacher, but he often neglected our feedback and suggestions. We could do nothing about it because he was the person in charge”. (Student 17 in SLP05)*
- *“There were some conflicts during our discussion process and some quarrels among team members, which were not handled well. Sometimes we just stopped our discussions and our group leader also kept silent. These conflicts negatively influenced the whole team's spirit and our group work”. (Student 21 in SLP04)*

Subtheme 13: Insufficient Interaction with Program Leaders. A few students reported that their lack of interaction with the program staff or teachers—particularly those from the partner universities—was a barrier to their learning. As the following narratives illustrate, some program leaders had only performed the minimum amount of work—such as fulfilling the daily requirements—and showed little desire to communicate with the other students:

- *“I didn't talk to the local teacher very often. Usually he just informed us of the schedules in our group chat. We felt that he was distant and unapproachable. There was one time that a pre-scheduled visit was cancelled but we didn't know at all. The local teacher changed the activity without notifying us in advance which was a frustrating experience”. (Student 09 in SSP02)*

- *“The teacher in the local university just took us to different visiting spots but rarely interacted with us. The atmosphere was not so good. It would have been helpful if he could have shared with us more about the local culture or history behind the visiting spots”. (Student 25 in CTP01)*

Subtheme 14: Inadequate Opportunities for Intercultural Interaction. Some students felt that they had not been given enough chance to interact with local students, which hampered their ability to gain intercultural competence. The examples below illustrate how these students’ expectations of being able to get to know and socialise with local students had not been met:

- *“More opportunities should be given for us to interact with students in mainland China, not just with the program leaders/coordinators”. (Student 11 in SSP02)*
- *“We had few chances to get along with local students in leisure time. Some students from mainland China left after class. There were not enough time and opportunities for us to know more about each other. Future programs may consider an increase in such opportunities”. (Student 12 in SSP02)*

Subtheme 15: Unexpected Changes to Scheduled Activities. Some unexpected changes to the program schedule were also reported by some students; these changes had negatively affected their morale and motivation, as the following comments demonstrate:

- *“We went to a tourist spot as part of the scheduled activities, and when we got there it was already closed. We were very unhappy because nobody informed us of this arrangement”. (Student 33 in CTP10)*
- *“Although the schedule was full, the implementation process was not ideal. The first day was a mess and in the second day we ran out of time. Sometimes the instructions were not clear enough and resulted in chaos”. (Student 02 in CTP03)*

General Discussion

In the present study, we focused on three types of short-term study in China programs for Hong Kong university students, including the summer school program, the cultural tour program, and the service-learning program. Based on in-depth individual interviews with the program participants, we explored the impacts of these programs on the students’ development as well as the facilitators of, and barriers to, their effective learning.

Our findings suggested that, in general, all three types of short-term study in China programs were perceived by participants as having a positive impact on their level of intercultural competence, academic development, their perceptions of the nation, and their attitudes towards the people of mainland China. At the individual student level, having strong internal motivation, proactive attitudes, and openness were identified as critical factors that contributed to effective learning from the programs, while students with low motivation to learn and passive attitudes received limited benefits

from the program. At the program level, peers' positive influence, team spirit, the teachers' dedication, knowledge, responsiveness and care about the students, as well as the quality of the program in terms of its arrangements, intercultural components, and practical elements were perceived by students as important facilitators. On the other hand, the negative learning atmosphere, interpersonal conflict, the lack of interaction with teachers, and the inadequate intercultural interactions in program activities were considered to impede students' effective learning.

These findings provide important evidence that support the effectiveness of short-term study in China programs in promoting Hong Kong local university students' development. Students perceived the programs as having improved their level of intercultural competence through providing them with substantial exposure to Chinese culture as well as providing them with opportunities to interact directly with people from other cultural backgrounds. Students reported the following benefits: improved language proficiency, particularly in Putonghua; improved intercultural communication skills; and an increased capacity to develop interpersonal relationships across cultures. Many shared that they had become more open-minded and respectful of diverse cultures. Their experiences had also enabled them to bridge the cultures of Hong Kong and mainland China; that is, to better engage in cultural mediation. This result is consistent with findings on the impact of short-term study abroad experiences on students' development (Campbell, 2016).

The most obvious changes in students, as shared by the interviewees, were in their perceptions and attitudes towards mainland China and Chinese people. After witnessing the economic growth and social development of the mainland, students formed more positive and compassionate views about China, which contrasted with their previous beliefs and perceptions. Students shared that the study in China experiences had broadened their horizons and enabled them to become more receptive and adaptable to Chinese culture. Some students had even started to consider developing their career in mainland China after graduating. These findings concur with intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew et al., 2011), which finds that in-depth cross-group interactions and discussions allow prejudices and stereotypes to diminish over time. The transformation in the students' attitudes and perceptions may further enhance their motivations to learn more about the nation and interact with its people (Cushner et al., 2012), which could promote subsequent cultural and educational exchanges. Such changes are important in view of the negative views of young people in Hong Kong towards China (Shek, 2020).

The majority of students interviewed did not report experiencing any significant changes in their identity as a Hong Kong or Chinese citizen, suggesting that short-term study in China programs alone may not have much impact on the students' national identity. Researchers have proposed that "cultural identity as a manifestation of social attributes of human beings is also an important medium affecting the identity of individuals and national identity" (Liu & Turner, 2018, p. 1080). While cultural identity development was not investigated in the present study, the improvements in participants' attitudes and perceptions concerning mainland China are likely to foster a sense of Chinese cultural identity among the participants, which may be channelled into one's constructed national identity. To develop young people's identification with the nation, more efforts could focus on promoting the shared historical

and cultural traditions, moral values, and beliefs of both mainland China and Hong Kong with the aim of constructing a national identity centred on inclusivity. For example, more courses on history and programs that introduce Chinese cultural heritage could be offered to university students.

Students who participated in service-learning programs specifically reported their enhanced sense of social responsibility and civic engagement after their study-in-China experiences, indicating that service-learning may be a more effective approach to promoting students' global citizenship development, as compared to cultural tours and summer schools. The positive impact of service-learning in mainland China on students' global citizenship development is consistent with previous findings of international service-learning (Chan et al., 2022). The intended service elements and guided reflective activities embedded in service-learning program provide students with opportunities to directly engage with people in need and to understand the local social problems in relation to one's own role as a global citizen (Dubinsky, 2006; Moderez & Fonseca, 2018). As stated by Slimbach (2012, p. 8), "merely learning *about* the world is not enough. Global learning must be not only *in* the world but also *for* the world". To develop students' global citizenship, study in China service-learning program could be further promoted.

Factors at both the individual and program levels that affect students' learning outcomes from short-term study in China programs were identified. For policy-makers and program leaders or teachers, these factors should be taken into account when designing short-term study abroad programs in the future. These findings also shed light on how to improve the current study in China programs and maximize the benefits of these programs for students. Specifically, both the students and their peers having a high motivation to learn and a proactive attitude towards the program significantly enhanced the programs' impact. Therefore, more creative strategies should be developed to inspire students to play an active role at an early stage of the program implementation. For example, orientation workshops or other interactive pre-trip activities can be led by outstanding students who have previously completed the program to positively influence new students and to better prepare them. At the program level, high program quality in terms of both the program leader or teacher and the design and implementation of the program was found to play a fundamental role in determining students' perceived learning outcomes and satisfaction. This is consistent with the findings of previous studies on service-learning programs among Chinese undergraduates (Shek et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2023). One possible strategy may be to identify existing high-quality programs as examples of best practices; these programs can then serve as guides and benchmarks for other similar programs.

With particular reference to service-learning, there are several observations deserving attention. First, the present findings are in line with the previous findings that service-learning activities in China are conducive to the positive development of students (Lin et al., 2022; Shek et al., 2022a; Yu et al., 2019). Second, identification of facilitators can help to improve students' learning experience. Notably, as qualities of teachers were regarded as important, the finding underscores the importance of teacher training. Besides, building supportive peer relationship and shaping role models would be helpful. In a study of predictors of student learning in service-learning, Lo et al. (2022) showed that interest and learning experience were

two significant predictors of student effective learning. Third, concerning barriers to learning, student motivation cannot be overlooked. Fortunately, Chan et al. (2020) reported that participation in service-learning would transform the students' perspectives toward mandatory service-learning subjects. Furthermore, peer relationships and interaction with the teachers are vital to a successful learning experience. Looking into the future, in conjunction with other works, we can argue that there is a need to demonstrate the value of service-learning (Shek et al., 2020) and step up measures to promote the quality of service-learning programs (Ngai & Shek, 2022).

Conclusions

The present study interviewed 42 Hong Kong university students in three types short-term study abroad programs (i.e., summer school program, cultural tour program, and service-learning program). The study found that these programs had a positive impact on students' intercultural competence, academic performance, perceptions of mainland China and Chinese people, and global citizenship. The study also identified four individual factors that facilitated or impeded the students' gains from the programs: strong internal motivation; high level of openness to diversity and willingness to communicate; passive learning attitudes; and a lack of openness and willingness to communicate. Additionally, eleven program factors were identified as facilitators or impediments: supportive peer relationships; highly motivated students as role models; teachers' passion and dedication; teachers' familiarity with the local context and knowledge of Chinese culture; teachers' responsiveness and care; appropriate schedules and well-organized cultural activities with interactive and practical elements; negative learning atmosphere; interpersonal conflict among team members; insufficient interaction with program leaders; inadequate opportunities for intercultural interaction; and unexpected changes to scheduled activities. These factors highlight the importance of carefully designing and implementing short-term study abroad programs to maximize their benefits for students.

Limitation

It is noteworthy that there are several limitations of the present study which must be acknowledged. First, we did not analyse the heterogeneity of the programs and its influence on the program impact. Our interviewees were recruited from 17 programs that had different learning objectives, sites of visit, and durations, which inevitably affect the participants' learning experiences and perceptions of the program. While the focus of the present study was the impact of short-term study in China programs in general, future studies should investigate the effects of the specific program characteristics on students' learning outcomes. These effects should be examined with further data and analyses. Second, recall bias may exist. Our research findings were generated from interviews that were not conducted immediately after the participants' trip; this may lead to inaccurate recollections of the participants' experiences in terms of the whole learning process. In addition, at the time at which the study was conducted—that is, 2019—national identity remains a sensitive topic in Hong Kong

about which participants may not want to discuss in the interview or provide socially acceptable answers. In future studies, it would be meaningful to examine how the impact of short-term study in China programs on Hong Kong university students' national identity may change over time. Third, participants of the present study were all university students who constitute only a proportion of young people in Hong Kong. Besides, although the number of participants is reasonable high, it would be helpful if we can increase the sample size. Our findings may not be generalized to other youth populations, such as secondary school students or out-of-school youth. Exploring how short-term study in China programs may contribute to these young people's development requires more research.

Despite these limitations, the present study is pioneering and significant because the findings provide important evidence that supports the positive impact of short-term study in China programs on Hong Kong university students' development in multiple areas, which suggests that such programs could be a promising way to promote students' levels of intercultural competence and their attitudes towards, and perceptions of, the nation. These developments are essential to both the flourishing of young people and the development of Hong Kong. The identified factors associated with the programs' impacts could inform the improvement of the current programs as well as the development of new programs in the future.

Funding This research and the manuscript preparation was supported by the Public Policy Research Funding Scheme from the Policy Innovation and Co-ordination Office of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government (Project No.: 2018.A6.113.18 C), and the Internal Research Fund from Department of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (Project No.: P0041161).

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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