Article

Check for updates

Journal of International Students
Volume 16, Issue 15 (2026), pp. 121-140
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
jistudents.org
https://doi.org/10.32674/9va9d022

Learning by Lectures at a Transnational University in China: Integration and Resistance during the Transition from High School to University

Mattia Miani
The University of Nottingham Ningbo, China
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0966-4017

ABSTRACT: *This multiyear study investigates how first-year undergraduates make sense of large content lectures during their transition from domestic high schools to a transnational university in China. Grounded in a view of learning and teaching practices as interactional accomplishments, the data collection included lecture observations, focus groups, and interviews with 34 students across three academic years, as well as an additional interview with departmental leadership. A qualitative content analysis revealed how students positioned lectures as knowledge hubs, spaces for sociality, and objects of resistance. While many students valued lectures for their informative qualities and opportunities for socialization, others actively resisted lectures by leveraging the affordances of technology when they perceived lectures as not contributing to their learning. These patterns are interpreted through the lens of the glocal nature of a transnational site and the interactional nature of lectures, where teachers' and students' practices intersect. The study contributes to scholarship on lecturing and student transition by highlighting the diversity of student experiences in large content lectures and reframing engagement as an alignment between students' and teachers' practices. The study yields practical recommendations for critically rethinking lectures at a transnational site to ensure alignment among all parties involved.*

Keywords: Lectures; student experience; transnational education; Sino-foreign cooperative university; attendance; first-year transition

How to Cite: Miani, M. (2026). Learning by Lectures in a Transnational University in China: Integration and Resistance during the Transition from High School to University. *Journal of International Students, 16*(15), 121-140. https://doi.org/10.32674/9va9d022

INTRODUCTION

Lectures have been a mode of learning in higher education for centuries and remain widespread in universities around the world. While they may be a staple of higher education to the point of often being invisible and unquestioned (Loughlin & Lindberg-Sand, 2023), lectures are new to the first-year cohort, making the transition from high school to university every year. As the first year of transition is critical in forming students' academic identity and dispositions (Jones et al., 2020; Yan & Sendall, 2016), it is important to understand how they structure their learning practices when facing the new experience of attending lectures. This study approached this question by investigating how undergraduates, during their first-year university studies in a transnational university in China, integrated lectures into their learning practices.

The paper first positions the study within the literature on transnational education and lecturing in higher education; then, it discusses the methodological choices that informed the qualitative inquiry. Next, it articulates the findings related to first-year students' perceptions of lectures as a knowledge hub, a space for sociality, and an object of resistance. The conclusion offers specific recommendations and invites rethinking the lecture as an interactional accomplishment of students and teachers where alignment must be sought to navigate the tensions of a transnational site.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Context: Transnational Education

The context of this study is provided by a transnational university in China formed by a foreign and a local partner. Transnational education, broadly defined as the cross-border mobility of educational providers (Knight, 2016), takes collaborative forms in China, where transnational programs require the cooperation of an overseas and a local partner (Luo & Zhang, 2026; Miani & Picucci-Huang, 2023). Cooperation can take place within existing Chinese universities (with the creation of joint institutes or individual programs) or give rise to full-fledged independent universities comanaged by the partners. In this

article, the term Sino-foreign cooperative university (SFCU) is used to refer to the research site to highlight the collaborative nature of the institution (Miani, 2025).

The first year referenced was administered by a unit in the university that will be called the foundation year department. Approximately 2,000 students were enrolled every year, with a majority coming from Chinese high schools after having passed the Gaokao examination (the Chinese national university entry exam). At the time of the study (2022 – 2025), the first year's curriculum spanned two semesters (autumn and spring) and was equally divided between English for academic purposes (EAP) and introductory content courses (including business, economics, math, science, and humanities). EAP courses were mainly taught through seminars with less than 20 students per group, while content courses typically included a weekly lecture delivered to the entire group of students of a pathway (e.g., economics or computer science students) and weekly seminars. Many of these lectures would normally gather several hundred students in tiered lecture halls. The combination of lectures and seminars also characterized the subsequent years of instruction and was inherited by the overseas partner. In contrast, in Chinese universities, learning is still dominated by large lectures.

Ambivalence Toward Lectures

The author of a key monograph on lecturing, Bligh (2000, p. 3), stated that lectures "represent a conception of education in which teachers who know give knowledge to students who do not", which frames lectures as one-directional and asymmetrical events. The foundational link between lectures and an idea of learning as transmission has sparked wide criticism of the format (Laurillard, 2002; Ramsden, 2003). Studies that compare traditional expository lectures with active learning tend to show that the latter produces better learning outcomes and engagement (Freeman et al., 2014; Kozanitis & Nenciovici, 2023).

Reading deeper into these critiques, one cannot escape the sense of ambivalence even among the staunchest critics. In an exemplary case, some educators offered a fierce critique of the lecture method, arguing that lectures are inherently flawed, as they are based on the "information transmission fallacy" (Schmidt et al., 2015, p. 17), which assumes that students will remember what they are told. After offering alternative proposals based on active learning, the authors felt the need to concede that lectures are not completely useless; rather, they are "a good place to tell stories" (p. 17). As a compromise, many authors have advocated lectures that integrate active learning components to increase participation (Barkley & Major, 2018).

Studies on the perception of students lead to similar ambivalence. Students frequently describe lectures as passive and low in interaction, particularly when class sizes are large or content is delivered didactically. In Cash et al. (2017), students reported limited opportunities to ask questions and a sense of anonymity in large lecture halls, although they appreciated occasional humanizing moves such as instructors walking through aisles or learning names. Similarly, Meguid and Collins (2017) found that students perceived didactic lectures as less effective, expressing a clear preference for sessions that embedded interactive

elements. Comparative studies show that although students may value the structure of lectures, they still associate them with limited participation and surface-level learning (Tsang & Harris, 2016). However, even the preference for interactive elements is contested, as sometimes students perceive lectures embedding active learning as less effective than traditional ones (Deslauriers et al., 2019).

Despite these issues, some students continue to value lectures for their clarity, structure, and efficiency in conveying essential information. In El Bialy et al. (2022), most medical and nursing students regarded lectures as an effective and preferred mode of learning, citing exam relevance and lecturer engagement as key motivators for attendance. Even large lectures are perceived as beneficial, as they can provide a space for sociality and opportunities for safe anonymous interactions through technological tools (Ó Cofaigh & Rodgers, 2025). In summary, students and educators alike often critique lectures for passivity yet simultaneously recognize their role in their learning and teaching practices.

Coming to Learning in Transnational Education

The ambivalence toward lectures may be connected to the disparity of the educational contexts of the studies reviewed. Lecturing and its role, as any practice, are inextricably enmeshed with the site (Kemmis et al., 2014). For this reason, it is important to describe some of the issues faced by students entering a transnational university in China during their first year of studies.

Research on these students, typically graduating from Chinese high schools, highlights their challenges in transitioning from teacher-centered to student-centered education (Kaur et al., 2025; Noman et al., 2023), a challenge similarly experienced by Chinese international students abroad (Fox, 2020). These students are effectively international students at home. Language plays a central role in shaping students' experience and academic success, as transnational education is typically delivered in English and framed as an English medium instruction (EMI) environment. Overall, studies show how students develop positive attitudes toward more flexible modes of assessment and interactive lecturing associated with international teachers (Liu et al., 2023). However, when what may be viewed as innovative teaching practices are well received, a considerable minority of the students may still have reasons to resist them or be dissatisfied (Liu et al., 2023; Picucci-Huang et al., 2025). The introduction of well-tested pedagogical resources in transnational universities is not always successful when local cultural norms are not considered (Duffy & Lin, 2026). Overall, the outcome of the first year can vary depending on the specific pedagogical practices that the students experienced prior to joining the SFCU (Zuo et al., 2022).

Students develop specific perceptions of the transnational environment that they enter. In Zhang's study, students reported that "looseness" and "freedom" are the most important characteristics in a transnational setting (Zhang, 2023, p. 9). Their perceptions of teaching and learning practices may be influenced by the way transnational universities promote themselves in the market as world-class educational establishments (Luo & Zhang, 2026; Xu, 2023). In the words of

another author, this imagery may raise "students' expectation for an innovative academic culture and pedagogy different from their previous experiences in the local education system" (Lai & Jung, 2025, p. 6).

Students seem to be aware of some crucial differences between their high school learning and the transnational environment. In a study, an informant expressed how the new transnational university shattered the ideal of reaching a single right answer as the goal of the learning process and fostered the conception of multiple forms of knowledge at play (Lai & Jung, 2025, p. 9). Similar realizations may come when students who grew in traditional textbook and test-oriented assessment culture met more formative approaches to assessment (Dai et al., 2020). Students do not necessarily fully embrace the mode of learning fostered by the faculty, and they have been reported as negotiating the hybridity of the transnational setting in their learning process (Lai & Jung, 2025). Lectures represent this hybridization as a traditional form of teaching in an environment promising interactive pedagogy.

The studies reviewed have looked at the overall experience of students in transnational education, but they offer little insight into their reception of specific teaching methods. This, coupled with the lack of contextualization of the international literature on lectures reviewed in the previous section, creates a need for more site-focused and practice-specific inquiries. This study aims to address this twofold gap by exploring a specific learning format enmeshed with a site, that is, university lectures experienced by first-year students in a transnational university in China.

METHOD

The study was set to understand first-year students' lecture experiences to inform teaching practices within the institution and potentially wider transnational higher education communities. Moving from the gaps identified in the literature, the inquiry revolved around two research questions: 1) how first-year students perceive the role(s) of lectures and 2) what lecture features they perceive as supporting or hindering their learning practices and experiences. This paper is centered on findings answering the first question. The data collection and analysis were informed by an interpretative paradigm and grounded in the pragmatic goal of generating knowledge that could improve teaching and learning practices at the site where the author was embedded as a lecturer (Kemmis et al., 2014).

Data Collection

To gain multiple perspectives, the study was based on focus groups and small-group interviews with students, supplemented by lecture observations and an interview with the head of the foundation year department (see Tables 1 and 2). Purposive sampling was employed to ensure participation from students majoring in all the subject areas of the first year (Business, Humanities, STEM). Students were sent email invitations presenting the research activity as voluntary,

with focus groups intentionally taking place during a week in the semester with no classes scheduled to minimize interference with their studies.

Table 1: Participants overview

Focus Group 1 (09 Nov. 2022)	Duration: 69 minutes		**Focus Group 2** (10 Nov. 2022)	Duration: 66 minutes	
Participants	Reporting codes	Faculties	Participants	Codes	Faculties
Kelly	FG1P1	Business	Troy	FG2P1	Humanities
Victoria	FG1P2	Business	Anna	FG2P2	Business
Molly	FG1P3	Business	Alex	FG2P3	Business
Oscar	FG1P4	Business	Claire	FG2P4	Humanities
Sherry	FG1P5	STEM	Sarah	FG2P5	Business
Tracy	FG1P6	STEM	Alice	FG2P6	Business
Focus Group 3 (12 Apr. 2024)	Duration: 75 minutes		Ella	FG2P7	Business
			Interview 1 (13 Nov. 2024)	Duration: 35 minutes	
Aria	FG3P1	Business	Chloe	Interview1P1	Business
Angela	FG3P2	Business	Peter	Interview1P2	Business
Mark	FG3P3	STEM	**Interview 2** (26 Nov. 2024)	Duration: 23 minutes	
Pai	FG3P4	Humanities	Rafael (international student)	Interview2P1	Business
Tim	FG3P5	STEM	**Interview 3** (19 Dec. 2024)	Duration: 31 minutes	
Roger	FG3P6	STEM	Yvette	Interview3P1	STEM
Bella	FG3P7	Humanities	Coco	Interview3P2	STEM
Paul	FG3P8	STEM	Teddy	Interview3P3	STEM
Adam	FG3P9	Humanities	**Interview 4**	Duration: 19 minutes	

			(19 Dec. 2024)		
Daisy	FG3P10	STEM	Shane	Interview4P1	STEM
Mia	FG3P11	Business	John	Interview4P2	STEM
Amanda	FG3P12	Huma-nities	**Interview 5** (20 Dec. 2024)	Duration: 33 minutes	
			Bob	Interview5P1	STEM
			Interview 6 (9 Sept. 2025)	Duration: 35 minutes	Head of dept.
			Chad	Interview 6	

Table 2: Lecture Observations

Lecture observation (LO)	Date	Student Attendance (estimated by observation)	Timetabled lecture duration	Lecture discipline
LO1	15 Oct. 2024	Over 500	1 hour	STEM
LO2	05 Nov. 2024	500 – 600	90 minutes	Humanities & Business
LO3	24 Nov. 2024	Under 500	90 minutes	Humanities & Business
LO4	28 Nov. 2024	Over 500	1 hour	STEM

In 2022, 27 students responded to the email invitations and were divided into two focus groups, with approximately half attending (6 out of 14 in FG1; 7 out of 13 in FG2). In 2024, 15 students were invited to one focus group, and 12 attended (FG3). Lecture observations and other interviews with students were thus conducted in autumn 2024. The combination of data from different academic years was justified in light of a relatively stable structure of the program during the period.

The preference for the focus group and group interview formats was motivated by the fact that interaction took place primarily in English, which was a second language for all participants, including the researcher. Through group interaction, it was expected that students could support each other linguistically as needed and that they would have more processing time to think about their answers. Additionally, the analysis focused on *what* participants said (content) rather than how it was said (Macnaghten & Myers, 2004), which may have been influenced by the use of a second language. Institutional ethical approval was

granted for all stages of the study, and written consent was obtained from the observed lecturers and all participants in focus groups and interviews. During observations, students were made aware of the observer's presence and provided his email to anyone wishing to opt out. Some institutional nomenclature regarding the site has been altered to preserve its anonymity.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted following the qualitative content analysis (QCA) approach (Schreier, 2012). In the first cycle of coding, a broad coding frame was developed based on the research questions. For RQ1, the responses concerning *what a lecture is* and *if it is still useful/useless* were examined in all transcripts. Alongside this concept-driven structure, sub-dimensions were developed inductively through *In Vivo* codes, which preserved the participants' language and enhanced analytic transparency (Saldaña, 2009). In the text, *In Vivo* codes are italicized. Finally, pattern coding was employed as a second-cycle coding (Saldaña, 2009) to identify overarching dimensions across sub-dimensions and *In Vivo* codes leading to the three main dimensions discussed in the paper.

In the report, students' original language was maintained, with minimal editing aimed at improving readability by eliminating repetition or filler words. The language reflects students' developing academic skills in an EMI environment and should be valued for its expressiveness and its role in creating a bridge between the students' and researcher's worlds. The findings in the next section revolve around three major dimensions: lectures as a knowledge hub, as a place for sociality, and as an object of resistance.

RESULTS: STUDENTS' VIEWS OF LECTURES

Lectures as a Knowledge Hub

Several students made claims pointing to lectures as a space where they could familiarize themselves with *important knowledge* related to their major. They considered them useful and, for some, even *more helpful than a seminar*. These students' views led to conceptualizing a first major dimension in the data, that is, the view of lectures as knowledge hubs, spaces where knowledge can be acquired. Lectures can be places where students gain what was described as the *treasure gold* (key concepts of a major) in the *most efficient way*. In detail, FG3P4 reported:

> FG3P4: I think a lecture helpful, and even I think it's more helpful than a seminar. I kind of get a lot of information, a lot of knowledge from lecture, but during seminar sometimes nobody talks.

This explains why a lecture would be more helpful than a seminar since the former is usually content-rich (*prefer content-based*), while the latter, within the context of the site, tends to be more interactive with space for discussion in small groups. This preference may indicate that some students coming from test-oriented high schools at this stage would see knowledge acquisition rather than

discussion and interaction as the primary goal of learning activities. In other words, lectures emerge as knowledge hubs where students can gain relevant information. This is a central aspect of lecturing criticized by pedagogical literature grounded in active learning; however, for some students, the transmissive function of the lecture is its key attractiveness.

Lectures emerged as interdependent with students' other learning practices. For students, attending lectures was a way to *preview, review* and *understand deeper*. For example, Interview5P1 reflected that experiencing lectures for the first time led him to discover a way of regulating his learning:

> Interview5P1: I will preview the lecture, and before I attended that and I don't know the lecture […] I just go to there and listen. But after that [first experience], I read the lecture [slides] before that lecture and maybe I can have more engagement in that and I can bring my problems to the lecture.

For some students, the lecture can become a space in which to reconfirm their understanding and achieve deeper learning:

> FG1P6: Before the lecture, maybe I will read the textbook and the lecture helped me to make sure that I understand it right or some mistake and it tells me what is more important. And it helped me to understand deeper, more deeply.

These extracts illustrate how students came to integrate lecture attendance in their learning habits by strategically sequencing the use of different resources and cycles of critical engagement with the subject matter (from preview to filtering what is important).

The Sociality of Lectures

In addition to providing knowledge, lectures are regarded as *a teach village* where students can *see friends* and are encouraged to study. When asked about the possibility of replacing live lectures with lecture recordings online, FG1P5 replied "No, no, that's just we have no, no, no encouragement to study", and FG1P3 simultaneously uttered "just click" (the mouse on the video, suggesting the gap between accessing an online lecture and attending one in person). Evidently, the social support provided by seeing friends at a scheduled time cannot be downplayed.

Large lectures foster a community-like atmosphere in that students expect self-discipline from themselves and others. Participants reported that students should not display behaviors that may impact others, such as arriving late. FG2P1 expressed that peers should "show respect for the teacher and take an active part in [the lecture, which] can make a better atmosphere". Other students complained about the practice of occupying seats for friends and demanded that their classmates exercise *self-discipline*. A student noted that when the front seats were occupied by using a personal item: "we can't sit there, I think it is negative"

(FG1P1). Sociality can contribute to students' well-being, but a lack of etiquette can degrade the sense of community.

Sociality can have detrimental effects when classmates attend a lecture but fail to engage and focus on unrelated activities. This form of alienated participation has consequences for peers, as illustrated by Interview1P2, who remarked that "some students in the back seat, they just keep talking, and sometimes it's annoying". The effect was further elaborated by a participant who coined a term to describe those who were affected:

> Interview3P3: I call them the hesitate student. Maybe they had already planned to pay attention to the lecture, but they saw some of their friends have gone. They may hesitate, and they do not dare to stand up to leave, but they are not paying attention to the rest of the lecture.

The "hesitate students" are portrayed as the group of peers that are more sensitive to the effects of disengaged behavior. Their struggle can lead to a form of nominal attendance, as elaborated in the next section.

When Students Resist Lectures

Why Lectures Are Perceived as Not Useful

Despite being perceived as necessary *like trees*, some students found lecture attendance futile for a range of reasons. Relying on educational resources available online, they did not consider lectures as a knowledge hub supporting their learning practices. For example, FG3P5 reported not only personal experience but also what was perceived as a tacit understanding shared among peers:

> FG3P5: Most of them think that the course is useless because actually you cannot learn a lot from it. And so that's why many people don't go to the lecture or just scan the [attendance] QR code. Actually, I just usually don't listen to lecture and I just self-study for it. And it proves that sometimes I have greater grades than the students going to the lecture. So the content is one of the most serious problem in lecture, I think.

The resistance can be linked to a perception of the lecture as offering little added value beyond what students can study in a textbook:

> FG1P4: I think the lecture like [module name redacted] is very meaningless and boring because I can just learn this knowledge from Chinese textbook and the PPT in the module. I don't need to learn [from] the teachers.
>
> FG1P4's comments offer a glimpse into the translanguaging practices of the students. Chinese textbooks are not recommended by this university; however, students sometimes find and prefer the Chinese translation of the same English textbook used in a module. This is a clear indication of

> the students focusing on the content of the module, rather than trying to develop both English language and content-related skills.

Finally, the resistance can arise from the perceived level of the content of an introductory module:

> Interview3P3: There are still some problems. First one is the simplicity of the content right now, especially when it comes [identifying detail omitted], we only remain on the surface of the knowledge.

Students entered the university with varied levels of subject knowledge, and some found the first-semester modules rather elementary, while others experienced difficulties. Students showed these different levels despite entering the university with similar Gaokao results, as it is well established that there are regional differences in the meaning behind these numbers (Hamnett et al., 2019).

These students expressed learning goals partially in contrast with the official narrative. According to the interview with the Head of Department, the first-year transition in this transnational university was designed to prepare students for their undergraduate degrees with a focus on English language, which "means either revision of what they would have done in their final years of high school, but in English as the medium of instruction, and also helping them to cope with what are the expectations in regard to the academic language" (Interview 6). This aligns with the findings, where for example, a student indicated they had "learned (the content) in senior high school and even easier" (FG3P10). This repetition is not appreciated by some students who focus more on the content than the language. Therefore, what may be superficially read as disengagement exposes the ideological tension between the two parties.

Ghost Attendance

During the time of the research, students needed to register their attendance by scanning a QR code displayed by the lecturer. Students received warnings if they began accumulating absences. These regulations differed from those of the campus of the overseas partner and emerged as a glocal compromise between the pedagogical ideals of academic management, the affordances of the technology, and local regulations and culture. According to observations and interviews, the technological affordances generated by the digital recording of attendance ended up creating a practice of scanning and leaving by the students. Students were aware of this situation, as articulated by one participant:

> FG3P6: I noticed that they asked their friends to scan the QR code for them, and some of them maybe they will, the lecture may be in [room number redacted] and there is a backdoor and some people will scan the QR code by backdoor and then left.

Such behavior of leaving immediately after scanning the QR code and being recorded as present in the system could occur either at the beginning or middle of a lecture, depending on when a lecturer displayed the code. One observation note

recorded, for example, that "the teacher shows the QR code for attendance in the middle during the break and at least 20% leave" (LO3). As indicated by FG3P6, some students may even use proxies to record attendance on their behalf. Technology turned attendance into a process of formal compliance.

Some students would stay until the end of a lecture while remaining disengaged throughout. A participant deliberately varied his seating position in different parts of the lecture theater and observed the following:

> FG3P6: At the front, I noticed that almost most of the students are focused on the lecture, and they actively participate in the lecture. But when I sat in the back, I noticed that in the middle of the classroom, some of the students are chatting with friends, playing games, and watching some soap operas, and some people sat at the back door, they are just doing their own things.

When the attendance code is displayed at the end of a lecture, some students may remain while engaging in other activities. These students resemble the aforementioned "hesitate students" (Interview3P3), whose focus dissipates and illustrates how physical presence does not equate to participation. These forms of ghost attendance signal disengagement and need to be read in relation to the findings in the previous sections. Students make decisions on how to engage with lectures depending on their perception of their usefulness, but they are also influenced by classmates' behaviors.

DISCUSSION

Integration and Resistance

Large lectures, with their dense content, limited interaction, and the mass of bodies constrained by the spaces of a lecture theater, for the students interviewed represented the kind of learning situation that could prompt them to activate and sustain regulatory processes to achieve their learning goals (Zimmerman, 2002). The findings have shown that students responded to the new reality of large lectures in their first year of studies by developing different approaches influenced not only by prior knowledge but also by peers' behaviors, as is well documented in more recent studies on self-regulation (Panadero & Järvelä, 2015). Students take a system view of their learning process, putting lectures in relation to other learning activities in a module, and they make intentional choices on how to invest their time.

The self-regulatory process in the findings can lead to a continuum of personal solutions. At one end, some students resist lectures, discounting them as useless, and try to game the attendance system. At the other end, students integrate the lectures into their study routine: lectures can now be a space for reviewing content that they have already learned through self-study or a place where they are motivated to engage with the module content after the lecture.

The process of integration illustrates that despite the disdain of lectures exhibited by some of the advocates of active learning reviewed earlier, lectures

can still support student learning. Within the context of introductory modules such as those examined, the transmissive nature of a lecture event can be meaningful and help students structure engagement with other learning resources. Equally important and possibly unnoticed by some learning designers, lectures are not simply regarded as sources of knowledge. They also play a social function in gathering the students in a place and at a time, providing spaces for interaction beyond their studies. These findings echo similar ideas expressed by students and educators in different settings (French & Kennedy, 2017; Loughlin & Lindberg-Sand, 2023). Going to the lecture becomes part of the experience of being in the community of students at a university (Fulford & Mahon, 2020).

However, the self-regulatory process can also produce resistance when discrepancies emerge between students' and faculty members' views of the overall learning objectives. The findings uncovered a discrepancy between the pedagogical values promoted by the faculty and those embraced by the students. The faculty believed in the first-year curriculum as a transition into an EMI university, and this created the perceived need for reviewing less advanced topics. This approach may have been influenced by the pedagogical structure of foundation years in the country of the overseas partner of the transnational university, where such a program typically helps students cover the gap left by not having completed the necessary A-level qualifications upon graduating from high school (Leech & Hale, 2024). However, according to the findings in the transnational site of the inquiry, some learners begin their studies with a hunger for more advanced content, and this may have contributed to alienation toward attending lectures in some introductory modules. These students then developed locally unique strategies to resist the interlocking effects of technology and policies compelling them to attend.

The practices of integration and resistance reported need to be read alongside the social dimension of lectures. It may be easy to think of the hundreds of students in attendance as atoms, each individually focused on the teacher's performance. The findings show that this is not the case. Students can affect each other with their behaviors even in a large auditorium. Some effects are positive and conducive to well-being; others may lead to a less than satisfactory learning experience. The social dimension of attending a lecture warrants greater consideration by instructional designers and lecturers.

Glocal Tensions

The theory of learning that has inspired this inquiry (Kemmis et al., 2025) frames a practice such as lecturing and the specular practice of attending a lecture as the interactional accomplishment of all the participants. The practices of teaching become the arrangements where the practices of learning can unfold (Kemmis et al., 2020). This conception of learning and teaching may offer a different interpretation of the idea of engagement often used in the literature to measure the effectiveness of a teaching method (Freeman et al., 2014; Kozanitis & Nenciovici, 2023). Observing disengagement in a lecture (or any other single educational event) does not necessarily indicate that students are disengaged from

the learning process. Rather, it suggests that they are disconnected from the teaching practices that they are experiencing. The students showing resistance toward lectures sometimes had plausible reasons and alternative strategies to achieve their learning goals. As the data showed, some even claimed to achieve better marks than those who attended diligently.

Some students accept the learning system that is offered to them and make sense of large lectures by attributing to them a role in the learning process, even though this role is sometimes at odds with the pedagogical ideals of the faculty. Students may appreciate the transmissive nature of the lecture, whereas faculty may seek to steer away from it by promoting active learning. The disconnection in these cases is less visible but still present.

The processes of resistance that were captured in the data should caution against rosier pictures of local students embracing a transnational education environment in their studies as found in the review of the literature (Dai et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2023). A transnational site is a place of tensions between actors coming from different cultures and with different goals; these tensions may remain unresolved and produce shifting arrangements that often can be regarded as creative compromises, but sometimes they may produce unintended consequences (Miani, 2026).

The glocal nature of disengagement resulting from different views of the learning process evidenced by comparing students' and institutional ideals is an example of unresolved tension. From a Western educational perspective, academic English proficiency, critical thinking and active participation in discussion (Yu, 2021) are prioritized while Chinese students are looking for efficiency in their experience, which usually means simple and understandable requirements to pass a module with the desired marks (Taylor, 2026). The search for efficiency may have been an aspect influenced by the larger role attributed to higher education in China as an investment in human capital and development (Zeng, 2023), which is particularly relevant in regard to transnational education providers with higher-than-average tuition fees.

The tension about the meaning of the learning process generated by a transnational space is enacted in the way students approach lectures or specific policies such as attendance. More specifically, the introduction of a technological solution (QR codes) to tackle a pedagogical problem (engagement in learning activities) created the conditions for students to find ways to game the system. By generating forms of proxy participation or attending in person while doing unrelated activities, students provide evidence of agency in navigating the hybridity of the transnational setting. These behaviors cannot be simply filed as a lack of motivation or disengagement.

In conclusion, the practices developed by the students and their view of the lecture format in a transnational university seem to be the result of tensions characterizing the site at the intersection of different cultures, such as EMI ideals and local learning expectations. The development of original self-regulated behaviors shows agency and creativity in the students' approach to learning, with the search for pragmatic ways to accomplish the demands of their courses.

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study was site specific, and most of the participants were likely engaged students (at least to the point of noticing email invitations). They were not necessarily representative of all freshmen of this university. For this reason, the findings need to be framed as glimpses into the learning practices and perceptions of motivated learners. The study collected data across three academic years and covered lectures in several modules. The nature of the data did not allow differentiated reporting that accounted for temporal and subject matter characteristics.

The findings offer hypotheses on how to re-establish alignment between the learning practices of students and teachers in a transnational higher education setting where local students experience a hybrid educational system that makes them international students at home. Through this qualitative account, a misalignment between the disdain of lectures shown by a large proportion of the pedagogical literature reviewed and the creativity by which students can integrate large lectures in their learning seems to be evident. The paradox of pedagogical literature is that while promoting student-centered learning it tends to be teacher-focused. Far from being outdated, lectures can still play a role.

Students' creativity in tackling a new format such as the lecture should not be discounted and could form the basis for more critical use of lectures. This creativity does not happen in a vacuum, as it emerged as connected to the social and regulatory context, where student agency developed its own solutions to glocal tensions arising from different cultures meeting in a transnational site.

The study was motivated by pragmatic reasons, and some recommendations should be shared. First, there is a need to understand students' learning demands. This could lead students and teachers to critically question academic practices such as lecturing and potentially reinvent them together. The data for this paper are drawn from research that subsequently led to professional learning workshops involving students in rethinking lectures on the site. Second, student agency should be emphasized in the design of pedagogical solutions. Treating students as adults and partners means accepting their choices regarding their learning. This also means that there are hardly technological solutions to pedagogical problems. Third, the lecture format should be reassessed in relation to its social dimension, and some basic etiquette training for all participants could help foster an atmosphere consistently conducive to learning. Finally, some of the findings call for reimagining transnational pedagogical practices through a glocal lens. Not all technologies or practices endorsed by international literature are deemed to be well received by students in a transnational environment. Critical engagement with pedagogical practices and understanding the long-term aspirations of the learners remain vital in fostering that feel for the game that can create positive futures for all.

Acknowledgment

The author used AI tools only for proofreading support, including identifying grammatical mistakes and typos. No AI tool was used to generate the study data, analysis, interpretation, or substantive scholarly argument.

REFERENCES

Barkley, E. F., & Major, C. H. (2018). *Interactive lecturing: A handbook for college faculty*. Jossey-Bass.

Bligh, D. A. (2000). *What's the use of lectures?* (1st US ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Cash, C. B., Letargo, J., Graether, S. P., & Jacobs, S. R. (2017). An analysis of the perceptions and resources of large university classes. *CBE Life Sciences Education*, *16*(2). https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.16-01-0004

Dai, K., Matthews, K. E., & Reyes, V. (2020). Chinese students' assessment and learning experiences in a transnational higher education programme. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, *45*(1), 70–81. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2019.1608907

Deslauriers, L., McCarty, L. S., Miller, K., Callaghan, K., & Kestin, G. (2019). Measuring actual learning versus feeling of learning in response to being actively engaged in the classroom. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, *116*(39), 19251–19257. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1821936116

Duffy, L. P., & Lin, B. (2026). "It's easier talking to a machine": Privacy, motivation, and the underuse of English language labs in a Sino-foreign university in China. *Journal of International Students*, *16*(10), 89–104. https://doi.org/10.32674/g5wkva87

El Bialy, S., Jay, M., Hebert, Y., Manhas, N., & Karol, D. (2022). To lecture or not to lecture, that is the question! Modern medical and nursing students' perceptions regarding lectures and lecture attendance at the University of Ottawa. *University of Ottawa Journal of Medicine*, *11*(S5). https://doi.org/10.18192/uojm.v11is5.4986

Fox, J. M. (2020). Chinese students' experiences transitioning from an intensive English program to a U.S. University. *Journal of International Students*, *10*(4), 1064–1086. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i4.1191

Freeman, S., Eddy, S. L., McDonough, M., Smith, M. K., Okoroafor, N., Jordt, H., & Wenderoth, M. P. (2014). Active learning increases student performance in science, engineering, and mathematics. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, *111*(23), 8410–8415. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1319030111

French, S., & Kennedy, G. (2017). Reassessing the value of university lectures. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *22*(6), 639–654. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2016.1273213

Fulford, A., & Mahon, Á. (2020). A philosophical defence of the university lecture. *Oxford Review of Education*, *46*(3), 363–374. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2019.1702013

Hamnett, C., Hua, S., & Bingjie, L. (2019). The reproduction of regional inequality through university access: The Gaokao in China. *Area Development and Policy*, *4*(3), 252–270. https://doi.org/10.1080/23792949.2018.1559703

Jones, J., Fleischer, S., McNair, A., & Masika, R. (2020). The International Foundation Year and first year transition: Building capital, evolving habitus, developing belonging, preparing for success. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *25*(1), 36–51. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2018.1541879

Kaur, A., Noman, M., Zhang, S., & Baafi, M. A. (2025). Examining the psychological constructs for independent learning of undergraduates in Sino-foreign universities in China. *International Journal of Chinese Education*, *14*(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/2212585X251350418

Kemmis, S., Edwards-Groves, C., & Grootenboer, P. (2025). *Reframing learning. Changing practices, sites, histories, lives*. Routledge.

Kemmis, S., Edwards-Groves, C., Jakhelln, R., Choy, S., Wärvik, G. B., Torkildsen, L. G., & Arkenback-Sundström, C. (2020). Teaching as pedagogical praxis. In K. Mahon, C. Edwards-Groves, S. Francisco, M. Kaukko, S. Kemmis, & K. Petrie (Eds.), *Pedagogy, education, and praxis in critical times* (pp. 85–116). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-6926-5_5

Kemmis, S., Wilkinson, J., Edwards-Groves, C., Hardy, I., Grootenboer, P., & Bristol, L. (2014). *Changing practices, changing education*. Springer.

Knight, J. (2016). Transnational education remodeled: Toward a common TNE framework and definitions. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *20*(1), 34–47. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315315602927

Kozanitis, A., & Nenciovici, L. (2023). Effect of active learning versus traditional lecturing on the learning achievement of college students in humanities and social sciences: A meta-analysis. *Higher Education*, *86*(6), 1377–1394. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00977-8

Lai, M., & Jung, J. (2025). Internationalisation with Chinese characteristics: Exploring the paradox in students' experiences at Sino-foreign cooperative universities. *Studies in Higher Education*, *50*(7), 1514–1527. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2024.2386409

Laurillard, D. (2002). *Rethinking university teaching* (2nd ed.). RoutledgeFalmer.

Leech, S., & Hale, S. (Eds.). (2024). *Foundation years and why they matter*. Emerald.

Liu, D., Wimpenny, K., DeWinter, A., & Harrison, P. (2023). Students' perceptions and experiences of teaching and learning in transnational higher education in China: implications of the intercultural dialogue framework. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *28*(7), 1465–1483. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1900817

Loughlin, C., & Lindberg-Sand, Å. (2023). The use of lectures: Effective pedagogy or seeds scattered on the wind? *Higher Education*, *85*(2), 283–299. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00833-9

Luo, P., & Zhang, X. (2026). "Disillusioned expectations": The impact of expectations on university belonging among students in Sino-foreign cooperative education institutions. *Journal of International Students*, *16*(7), 69–90. https://doi.org/10.32674/pjv4qm97

Macnaghten, P., & Myers, G. (2004). Focus groups. In C. Seale, D. Silverman, J. F. Gubrium, & G. Gobo (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice* (pp. 65–79). Sage.

Meguid, E. A., & Collins, M. (2017). Students' perceptions of lecturing approaches: Traditional versus interactive teaching. *Advances in Medical Education and Practice*, *8*, 229–241. https://doi.org/10.2147/AMEP.S131851

Miani, M. (2025). A glocal perspective on Sino-foreign cooperative universities. *International Journal of Chinese Education*, *14*(3), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1177/2212585X251386134

Miani, M. (2026). Glocal tensions in transnational higher education in China: The case of a foundation year in a Sino-foreign cooperative university. *Higher Education Quarterly*, *80*(1). https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.70085

Miani, M., & Picucci-Huang, S.-C. (2023). Collaborative transnational education in China: A scoping review of emerging research trajectories (2016–2023). *Chinese Education & Society*, *56*(5–6), 309–330. https://doi.org/10.1080/10611932.2024.2303913

Noman, M., Kaur, A., Mullick, J., & Ran, L. (2023). Navigating new terrain: First-year Chinese students' transitionary experiences in a Sino-US joint venture university in China. *International Journal of Chinese Education*, *12*(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/2212585X231175167

Ó Cofaigh, É., & Rodgers, O. (2025). Does anyone still want to go to lectures? Student perceptions of the face-to-face lecture in an Irish university. *Irish Educational Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2025.2453737

Panadero, E., & Järvelä, S. (2015). Socially shared regulation of learning: A review. *European Psychologist*, *20*(3), 190–203. https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000226

Picucci-Huang, S.-C., Miani, M., & Smith, R. (2025). Two is better than one? A case study of co-teaching in a transnational university in China. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, *20*(3), 372–396. https://doi.org/10.1177/17454999251343808

Ramsden, P. (2003). *Learning to teach in higher education* (2nd ed.). RoutledgeFalmer.

Saldaña, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage.

Schmidt, H. G., Wagener, S. L., Smeets, G. A. C. M., Keemink, L. M., & Van Der Molen, H. T. (2015). On the use and misuse of lectures in higher education. *Health Professions Education*, *1*(1), 12–18. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hpe.2015.11.010

Schreier, M. (2012). *Qualitative content analysis in practice*. Sage.

Taylor, J. (2026). Adapting practice in Chinese transnational education: Insights from faculty and learners. *Higher Education Quarterly*, *80*(1). https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.70086

Tsang, A., & Harris, D. M. (2016). Faculty and second-year medical student perceptions of active learning in an integrated curriculum. *Advances in Physiology Education*, *40*, 446–453. https://doi.org/10.1152/advan.00079.2016

Xu, Z. (2023). Whiteness as world-class education?: Internationalization as depicted by Western international branch campuses in China. *Higher Education*, *85*(4), 919–936. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00872-2

Yan, Z., & Sendall, P. (2016). First year experience: How we can better assist first-year international students in higher education. *Journal of International Students*, *6*(1), 35–51. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v6i1.395

Yu, J. (2021). Consuming UK transnational higher education in China: A Bourdieusian approach to Chinese students' perceptions and experiences. *Sociological Research Online*, *26*(1), 222–239. https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780420957040

Zeng, X. (2023). Investigating the possibility of change within the transnational higher education in China using a Freirean study of the promise of critical pedagogy. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, *21*(3), 189–226. http://www.jceps.com/archives/16147

Zhang, Y. (2023). Student evaluation of Sino-foreign cooperative universities: From the perspective of internationalization of higher education. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, *43*(4), 1107–1124. https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2021.2008872

Zimmerman, B. J. (2002). Becoming a self-regulated learner: An overview. *Theory into Practice*, *41*(2), 64–70. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip4102_2

Zuo, H., Guo, Y., McDougall, J., & Zhang, W. (2022). Study abroad at home: First-year undergraduates' socialization into the community of practice in a Sino-America cooperative education institute in China. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, *44*(4), 993–1008. https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2022.2056578

Data availability statement

A coding table can be requested from the author.

Author bio

MATTIA MIANI, EdD, has had the privilege of being an international student at several points in his life. He has worked in international and transnational education in Italy, Vietnam, and China in a variety of academic and managerial roles. His research focuses on cross-cultural learning and teaching, transnational education, and pedagogical change. Email: mattiainasia@gmail.com.