Exploring factors affecting first-year students' learning experiences: A case study of a private university in Taiwan

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Abstract

Taiwan's low birth rate and declining demand for higher education among the country's high school graduates has led to vigorous competition between Taiwanese universities to attract and retain students. Increasing international student enrolment can help alleviate these existing pressures. However, the transition from high school to university life and the need to study in a degree program with English as the primary medium of instruction, can present challenges for first-year students. We aimed to investigate First Year (FY) Taiwanese and non-Taiwanese students' learning experiences and the barriers they face at a private university. The key research findings are based on factors affecting FY students' learning experiences such as interactive teaching techniques, peer support, program attributes, social integration, and the international learning environment. We argue that for higher education institutions (HEIs) to stand out in a highly competitive environment, university management should optimise their resources and services to meet local and international students' needs.

This article has been peer reviewed and accepted for publication in *Student Success.* Please see the Editorial Policies under the 'About' section of the Journal website for further information.

Student Success: *A journal exploring the experiences of students in tertiary education*

Introduction

Transitioning from high school to university life and learning in an English-medium degree program[1] can be quite challenging for first-year (FY) students. During their first year, students face many psychological challenges (Pittman & Richmond, 2008). If students' first-year experiences do not meet their expectations, then there is a high chance of FY student attrition from a university program, causing a decrease in student numbers. This dropout of FY students may lead to a transfer to other universities. Currently, growing competition among higher education institutes is becoming vigorous. It is, therefore, essential for higher education institutions (HEIs), especially private universities, to ensure students' learning environments match their expectations, if institutions are to prosper in a competitive environment (Asaduzzaman, Hossain & Rahman, 2013).

A satisfactory learning experience is significant for FY students when pursuing their higher education. It is a critical factor impacting either the completion or termination of their higher education programs (van der Meer, 2012; Yorke & Vaughan, 2013). Key areas that determine a satisfactory learning experience are varied, and can include, class size, interacting with lecturers and student peers, curriculums, assessment and feedback, quality of lecturers, lifestyle, and university environment (Bautista, 2016; Carragher & McGaughey, 2016; Diniz et al., 2016; Kane, Chalcraft & Volpe, 2014). By recognising and understanding the factors that contribute to FY students' learning experiences, universities can better improve the quality of higher education for their students. An understanding of these factors can also help FY students to better adapt to the university environment.

Scholars have conducted FY studies internationally such as Australia (Chester, Burton, Xenos, Elgar, & Denny, 2013; Jenkins, Lyons, Bridgstock, & Carr, 2012); New Zealand (van der Meer, 2012); the U.S. (Saunders, 2015; Yan & Sendall, 2016;); the UK (Busse, 2013; Yorke & Vaughan, 2013); Ireland (Surgenor, 2013); Spain (Bautista, 2016; Diniz et al., 2016); and Portugal (Diniz et al., 2016). However, studies into FY students' learning experiences in Asia, especially in Taiwan, are limited. Our study, therefore, aimed to explore the FY students' learning experiences in an international academic program in Taiwan and to shed light on the internationalisation of Taiwan's HEI system. This study investigated potential factors that affect the experiences of FY students and their expectations within higher education institutions. Research findings from focus-group interview data at a private university were analysed and categorised in order to identify influential factors impacting the learning experiences of FY students at this university.

Vigorous competition among Taiwanese Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the coming two decades

Taiwan is striving to adjust to the pressures of economic globalisation which has accelerated competition among universities globally. As a result, the Taiwanese government has launched a series of large scale projects, such as the First-class University Development Scheme and Southbound Talent Development Program, both of which place heavy emphasis on the internationalisation of higher education policy (Ministry of Education, 2006, 2017a; Song & Tai, 2007). Internationalisation is viewed as a means to enhance institutional competitiveness and to improve the quality of higher education. This internationalisation policy has created opportunities for inbound mobility among international students, primarily from Asia,

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[1] The term English-medium program refers to a program in which English is used as the sole medium of instruction.

such as Hong Kong, Macau, Malaysia, Vietnam and mainland China.

Since 1971, the massification of the higher education sector has resulted in the rapid expansion of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Taiwan. The Taiwan Ministry of Education (MOE) decided to promote vocational education and encourage the setup of technical institutes in 1991, and further allow technical institutes with good academic and research performances to upgrade their status to a full university in 1999 (National Academy for Educational Research, 2014). Within a decade, the number of HEIs increased by 25 per cent from 123 in 1991, to 154 in 2001, reaching a record high of 164 institutions in 2007 (Figure 1). However, since 2009, this number of HEIs had decreased gradually and dropped to 158 in 2015. This was caused by a significant drop in the number of high school students, a result of the decreasing birth rate.

According to the MOE, the total number of high school graduates will drop from around 271,000 in 2012 to 158,000 in 2028, leading to a decline in approximately half the student population (National Development Council,

2016). By excluding high school graduates who have no intention to undertake further studies, the total undergraduate program admission quota will exceed the number of high school graduates. Figure 2 illustrates the number of high school graduates from 2013 to 2031, and the university admission quota from 2013 to 2017. The MOE has been reducing the admission quota since 2014. By comparing the number of high school graduates versus the university admission quota in 2016, the data indicates that the student-quota ratio has already reached 85 per cent.

The declining birth rate has been an ongoing challenge and has major implications for the government's higher education policy. The MOE is responding to this challenge by proposing either a merger or closure of some of the nation's universities. It has been estimated by the MOE that eight to 12 of the 51 public universities and 20 to 40 of the 101 private universities will be either be merged or closed by the year 2023.
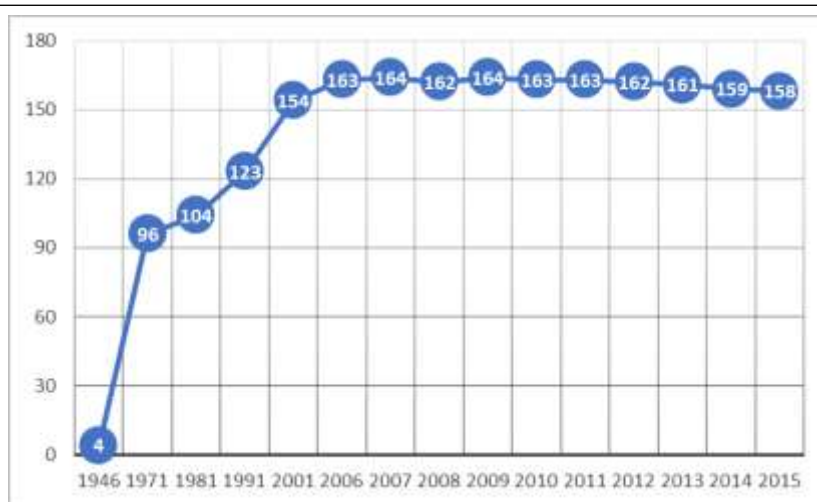

Figure 1. **Number of Universities in Taiwan 1946 – 2015 (National Statistics ROC, 2017)**
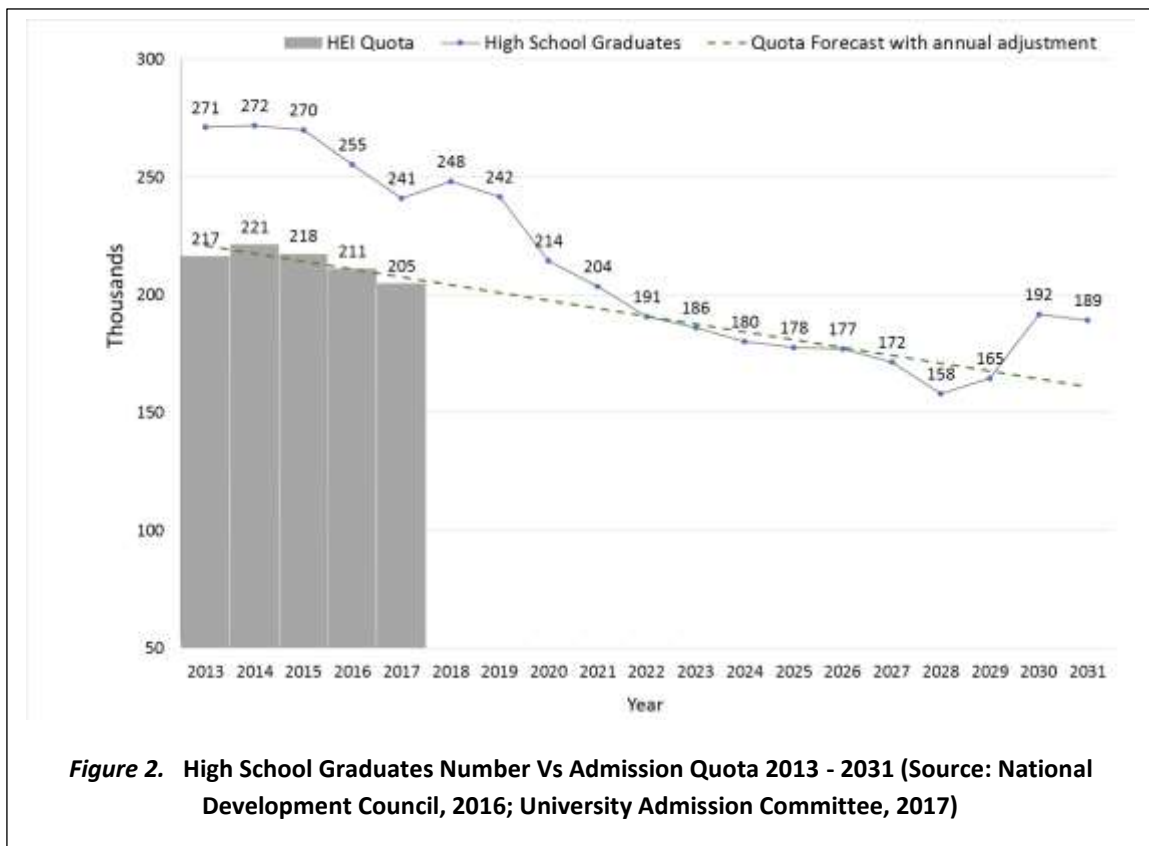
Figure 2. **High School Graduates Number Vs Admission Quota 2013 - 2031 (Source: National Development Council, 2016; University Admission Committee, 2017)**

Consequently, this has placed tremendous pressure on many universities to deal with tight budget allocations and cuts to enrolment quotas, while, at the same time, fulfilling the Ministry's educational standards (MOE, 2006). The Taipei Times (2016) indicated that 23 out of 158 universities had an enrolment shortfall in 2016, with MOE officials having outlined plans to merge or close down up to 52 of these HEIs in the near future (MOE, 2015).

The number of international students studying in Taiwan has increased dramatically since 2011. This increase has come mainly from two regions. First, the reformation of the education system in Hong Kong in 2006 reduced the period of secondary study from seven years to six years (Education Bureau, 2009). To cope with this change, the MOE cancelled the

university admission exam, so that students are only required to present their Hong Kong exam results to apply for universities in Taiwan. Second, since 2011, the improved political relationship between Taiwan and China has also boosted the number of Mainland Chinese students studying in Taiwan. As a result, the number of international students studying undergraduate degree programs in Taiwan has tripled in the past decade (Table 1).

Table 1

Non-Taiwanese students enrolled in degree programs from 2007–2016

	Foreign Student	Overseas Chinese (Include HK & Macau)	Mainland Chinese	Total
2007	5,259	10,936	-	16,195
2008	6,258	11,500	-	17,758
2009	7,764	12,912	-	20,676
2010	8,801	13,637	-	22,438
2011	10,059	14,120	928	25,107
2012	11,554	15,278	1,864	28,696
2013	12,597	17,135	3,554	33,286
2014	14,063	20,134	5,881	40,078
2015	15,792	22,865	7,813	46,470
2016	17,788	24,626	9,327	51,741

(Source: MOE, 2017b)

Key literature on first-year students' learning experiences

International scholars have investigated the first year experience of students in higher education. These include: the development of the generic skills (Bautista, 2016; McLean, Murdoch-Eaton & Shaban, 2013); student perceptions of their courses and attitudes toward career prospects (Bennett, Kapoor, Rajinder, & Maynard 2015; van der Meer, 2012); students engagement in the learning process through curriculum design (Bovill, Bulley & Morss, 2011); decreased motivation of students during their first year at university (Busse, 2013); peer mentoring (Carragher & McGaughey, 2016; Chester et al., 2013); the differences between foreign and local lecturers on student learning experiences (Chang, Bai & Wang, 2014); student expectations (Diniz et al., 2016; Surgenor, 2013; Yorke & Vaughan, 2013); gender and ethnic differences on learning experiences (D'Lima, Winsler & Kitsantas, 2014); the impacts of social media (Jenkins et al., 2012); sense of belonging to the university environment (Kane, Chalcraft & Volpe, 2014); intercultural learning (Lee, Williams, Shaw, & Jie, 2014); the impact of lecturers' feedback

(Robinson, Pope & Holyoak, 2013); and the role of induction courses (Yan & Sendall, 2016). Based on the studies above, there are two key themes underpinning the learning experiences of FY students: enhancements and obstacles.

Enhancing the learning experience of FY students

Two key sub-themes for enhancing FY students' learning experiences have been identified: (1) active learning activities (Bautista, 2016; Bovill et al., 2011; Levy & Petrulis, 2012; Yan & Sendall, 2016); and, (2) peer mentoring (Carragher & McGaughey, 2016; Chester et al., 2013). First, Bautista (2016) points out that lecturers should provide active learning activities; for example, a problem-solving session which includes learning methods such as building teamwork, self-responsibility, and planning. These active learning methods help to improve the generic skills of students to better prepare them for their future careers. Bovill et al. (2011) also suggest that active learning is a critical means to engage and empower FY students in the learning process. Empowerment is another way for students to improve their

learning and can be achieved through greater independence, autonomy, and critical thinking.

Peer mentoring has also emerged as a key driver to enhance the learning experiences of FY students (Carragher & McGaughey, 2016; Chester et al., 2013; Yan & Sendall, 2016). An experienced student supports a less experienced student by providing useful knowledge and information which can help FY students in transitioning to the university environment (Carragher & McGaughey, 2016). Peer mentoring can also support FY students in their psychosocial transition. A model such as 'The Transition In, Transition Out', is an example of a peer mentoring approach (Chester et al., 2013). This model is designed to support both FY students who are transitioning into a new program and final-year students transitioning out of a program. In this model, final-year students are recruited to be mentors for their junior FY peers.

Obstacles in the learning experience of FY students

There are three key obstacles in the learning experience for FY students. These encompass: (1) lack of knowledge about program attributes (Bennett et al., 2015; Robinson et al., 2013; Surgenor, 2013; van der Meer, 2012; Yorke & Vaughan, 2013); (2) cultural and educational background differences (Bennett et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2014; McLean et al., 2013); and (3) lack of social integration (Kane et al., 2014; Yan & Sendall, 2016). First, program attributes include objective, purpose, rationale of the courses, teaching formats, and learning activities. When students are unclear about the attributes of the program, they do not know what to learn or what to expect from the program (van der Meer, 2012). This lack of understanding can lead students to become less motivated and less committed to the completion of a program, adversely impacting a students' future career prospects. Interestingly, Yan and Sendall (2016) point out that many international students choose their course

majors based on pressure from their parents. This could explain the low motivation of students who are compelled to pursue studies in areas that are of little interest to them.

Differences in cultural and educational backgrounds are also a key factor influencing the learning experience of students. International and domestic students have different perspectives on the nature of the courses they study (Bennett et al., 2015). The difficulties that influence international students' learning include culture, language, education system, social environment, loss of support, and homesickness (Bennett et al., 2015; Yan & Sendall, 2016). This is also in line with the study by McLean, Murdoch-Eaton and Shaban (2013), which points out that poor language skills can affect the classroom interaction between learners and teachers. Higher education institutes should consider these obstacles when designing FY curriculum. In addition, promoting intercultural understanding among students can enhance the learning process (Lee et al., 2014; Yan & Sendall, 2016). When students have better intercultural awareness, a positive classroom learning environment can be achieved.

Lack of social integration is another critical factor impacting FY students' decision to leave university (Kane et al., 2014; Yan & Sendall, 2016). Some FY students cannot develop a sense of belonging to the university environment and decide to drop out from university altogether (van der Meer, 2012). Key strategies to help students settle down at university include providing an induction program and extracurricular activities (Kane et al., 2014; Yorke & Vaughan, 2013). The induction program plays an important part in reducing the gap between students' expectations and experiences and topics covered can range from academic skills, to wellness and stress management (Yan & Sendall, 2016).
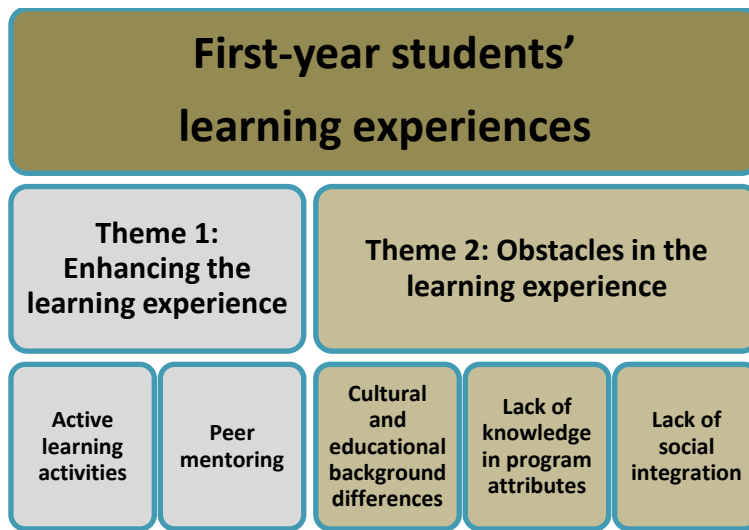
Figure 3. The conceptual framework for first-year students' learning experiences

This program is also significant for students adapting to the university environment, especially for international students, and can assist them to understand the host culture and language. These strategies help to foster within students a sense of belonging to the university environment and improve the psychosocial transition of FY students. Figure 3 demonstrates the conceptual framework for first-year students' learning experiences.

Research method

This research is based on a qualitative research approach, which provides an in-depth understanding of human experiences or social problems (Robson, 2011; Swanborn, 2010). In qualitative research, data is collected and analysed to answer the research questions by producing a written document (Creswell, 2007). We used a key research method: a focus group interview. This approach allowed "flexibility and the discovery of meaning, rather than standardisation, or a concern to compare through constraining replies to a set interview schedule" and is consistent with the qualitative

emphasis of this research project (May, 1997, p.113). Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were used as a form of data collection in order to make interviewees feel that they are informants rather than respondents (Burn, 1997). Particular attention was given to 'follow-up questions' during the interviews to not only elicit richer responses but also to search for and explore new issues and ideas that would help with testing and modifying emerging research themes (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

We adopted a thematic analysis to identify and analyse themes from the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi, 2011). Thematic analysis is an analysis method that reflects and discloses the reality of the study, and a theme represents an important concept in the data, related to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes in thematic analysis can be divided into two types, inductive and deductive approaches. The inductive approach is a data-driven analysis process; themes are categorised from raw data itself. Therefore, themes are not as influenced by previous studies which may lead to a narrower analysis.

The researchers choose to conduct the literature review in the later stages of their research project (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the deductive approach, Braun and Clarke (2006) state that a researcher may need to be involved in the literature before the analysis process in order to enhance the data analysis. Themes are identified from theory or previous research. This research applies deductive approach in analysing and identifying themes. Figure 3 demonstrates the two key themes and five sub-themes categorised from previous research studies on factors affecting FY students' learning experiences.

Background of the participating university and the interviewees

The participating university was a private university located in Kaohsiung, Taiwan. Courses in the university's international degree program include a business management-related course offered to both local Taiwanese and international students and taught by an international faculty.

There were 64 FY students enrolled in the Department of International Tourism and Hospitality (ITH), and all students commenced their program in September 2015. A focus group invitation message was sent out to all FY students (64 students). There were 11 FY students who volunteered to participate in this focus group interview. Table 2 shows the demographic summary of the interviewees. None of these students' mother language is English. Among all 11 students, only one student from Hong Kong SAR and one student from Malaysia were from English-medium high schools. Other students were from Chinese-medium high schools.

Findings

In this section, key comments from student interviews indicating their experiences and perceptions through a dynamic learning environment of FY at university are discussed.

Table 2

Interviewees' Demographic Details

ID	Country	Gender	Spoken Language
Student A	Taiwan	Female	Mandarin, English
Student B	Taiwan	Female	Mandarin, English
Student C	Taiwan	Female	Mandarin, English
Student D	Hong Kong SAR	Male	Cantonese, Mandarin, English
Student E	Hong Kong SAR	Male	Cantonese, Mandarin, English
Student F	Taiwan	Female	Mandarin, English
Student G	Hong Kong SAR	Female	Cantonese, Mandarin, English
Student H	Indonesia	Female	Indonesian, English
Student J	Malaysia	Male	Malay, Mandarin, English
Student K	Taiwan	Male	Mandarin, English
Student L	Vietnam	Female	Vietnamese, English

Reasons for choosing the International Program

The interview started with an open question: *Why did you choose to study this international degree program?* The main reasons were: better international networking and environment (all students), opportunities to use English (students A, D & K), and limited choices of tourism and hospitality disciplines in English in Taiwan (student K), respectively. Comments from the international students also included: similar study environment to the study culture back home (students D & E), acquiring scholarships (student L), and difficulties assessing higher education in home countries (student J). For international students especially the Chinese-Malaysian students, the difficulty in entering universities in their home countries served as a push factor; while the pull factors included a similar culture with their home country (students D, E, G & J), short distance from home country (students D, E, G, H, J & L), and scholarship opportunities (students H & L). It was also interesting to note that having an opportunity to network with fellow international students and international faculty members in an international environment was overwhelmingly considered as the most preferred situation for FY students.

University's learning facilities

Regarding facilities such as the library, classrooms, dormitory, and clubs, most interviewees stated that they have yet to visit the library despite being already six-months into their studies. Interviewees felt it was not necessary to use the library for their learning. There were only three interviewees (students E, H & L) who had been to the library so far, but not to study; they went to watch movies or to familiarise themselves with the location. Student E stated that the library should be located in an independent building (Note: at this university, the library is located in the same building as the classrooms). For classroom

facilities, in general, interviewees stated that this university has more modern furniture in comparison with other Taiwanese universities (student C). Student D stated that, apart from the limited number of lecture spaces, lectures should be run in a 'lecture theatre' as it would feel more prestigious and would create a more 'university' feeling. In addition, student E complained about the printing facilities being inefficient and impractical. He expected the printers to be more mobile/digital friendly so that students can print files directly from their smart phones.

Socialising—dormitory life and joining clubs

We asked about dormitory facilities because all FY students must live in the dormitory, according to the university's regulations. Most of the interviewees complained about dormitory life because of issues such as: limited and restricted access time for using the air conditioner in their room (student J); conflicts with roommates due to personality clashes (students G & H), different attitudes, cleaning roasters, or financial issues. In addition, student L stated that all notices and communication messages were written or printed in Chinese, causing feelings of exclusion and ostracism. She further expressed that even when it came to join social clubs, the application forms were in Chinese, making it difficult for international students to sign up, thereby discouraging participation. Overall, most students agreed that there were no difficulties with socialising at the university. They could easily make friends with people they had recently met when they were in the same study building or same dormitory.

Teaching and learning environment

In terms of teaching and learning environments, a few interviewees commented that in the classroom, students from the same country always sat together so they could speak their

own language (students E, G, J & L). This behaviour in class has discouraged the use of English as the primary mode of communication. Students occasionally speak English in class when necessary, such as when answering their lecturers' questions or participating in class discussions. Students explained that they do not use English often because they believe their English is not good enough to communicate, so they feel uncomfortable to speak it in front of their classmates (students B, C, D & L). In addition, the university's emails were mainly sent in Chinese so they had no way of practicing their English (student L). This has been perceived as a form discouragement against improving English in their everyday university lives. Some students indicated that, at university, their general English usage was around 20 per cent (students E, J, K & L).

Most interviewees commented that classes were not interactive enough or at all. Some lecturers just read from the PowerPoint slides which had already been uploaded to the Moodle system (on-line learning platform) rather than encouraging more discussions in class (students D & J). Some students also complained about an imbalance in the use of teaching materials. For example, some lecturers relied more on textbooks rather than other teaching materials such as videos (students A, B & G). Other comments included the content of lectures being too overwhelming and difficult to handle (students C & F). According to the interviewees, the teaching style at the university was not as internationalised as they had expected. They considered the teaching style as being more Taiwanese than international. The interviewees stated further that some local lecturers even tried using the Chinese language to communicate with international students (students E, F & K).

From the interviewees' perspective, an 'international program' means a program that uses only English to teach students, and with 'international systems' such as a curriculum with a syllabus that offers an appropriate language context for both local and international students. Some classes contained more than 80 per cent Taiwanese students so that communication among students was mainly in Chinese. Other comments were that an international program should offer flexibility in choice of courses and cater to students who learn at different paces (student E); internship opportunities (students E & J), similar to other such programs offered around the world, should also be present within an international program (student A).

Peer support

In this university, a peer mentoring system exists. However, this system is based on mentoring sessions between lecturers and students rather than student to student. Interviewees agreed that it was important to speak to someone they could trust (student D). In general, the interviewees approached their mentors no more than five times per semester. Based on the interviews, the students had no negative opinions about the peer support system that was in place. However, three interviewees stated that they had no idea who their mentors were (students C, G & K). This answer demonstrated that the interviewees did not have negative opinions because they had never met their mentors. This could be the nonverbal indicator for a gap in this peer support system between lecturers and students of this university.

Overall feedback

The majority of interviewees stated that they would drop the courses they had selected and re-select other courses. A few interviewees mentioned that their current courses and programs did not meet their expectations (students F & H) and others noted there were too many management-related core courses that were not really tourism-specific (students A, B, F & L). These interviewees did not see the benefits of studying such courses. This outcome may have been the result of the core courses

being pre-assigned by the time-tabling system so that FY students could not pick their own courses and study at their own pace. Some students had considered quitting or transferring to other departments as their learning experience was not what they had expected (student F). All respondents shared their experiences of routine activities, but conversations became tenser when participants complained about the management and administration of their programs.

Figure 4 summarises the findings of the interview, illustrating both satisfied and dissatisfied comments of FY students' learning experiences in this university, including neutral comments.

Discussion

The research findings discussed in this section were interpreted and categorised into various themes aimed at specifying the most influential factors that affect FY students' learning experiences. These various themes are presented in Figure 5.

Interactive teaching techniques

Our research findings suggest that interactive teaching techniques should be improved to enhance students' overall learning experiences. During the interview, participants have pointed out that traditional teaching methods such as one-way lecturing cannot meet the expectations for the international program. Lecturers should prepare interactive learning activities in the class to improve the learning atmosphere. Most students from East Asian and South East Asian backgrounds are stereotyped by many Western academics as 'passive learners'. This perception stems from observations of 'Asian' classroom practice by Western educators who complain that Chinese students are not trained to criticise and are likely to keep quiet in class (Hsu & Huang, 2017). Based on in-class observations, most students were noticed as having passive learner characteristics such as being quiet and inactive in class. Hence, active learning activities such as class discussions should be encouraged to stimulate students' critical thinking skills. Other active learning activities such as a pedagogical group work assignment

Figure 4. Findings of FY students' learning experiences at a private university in Taiwan
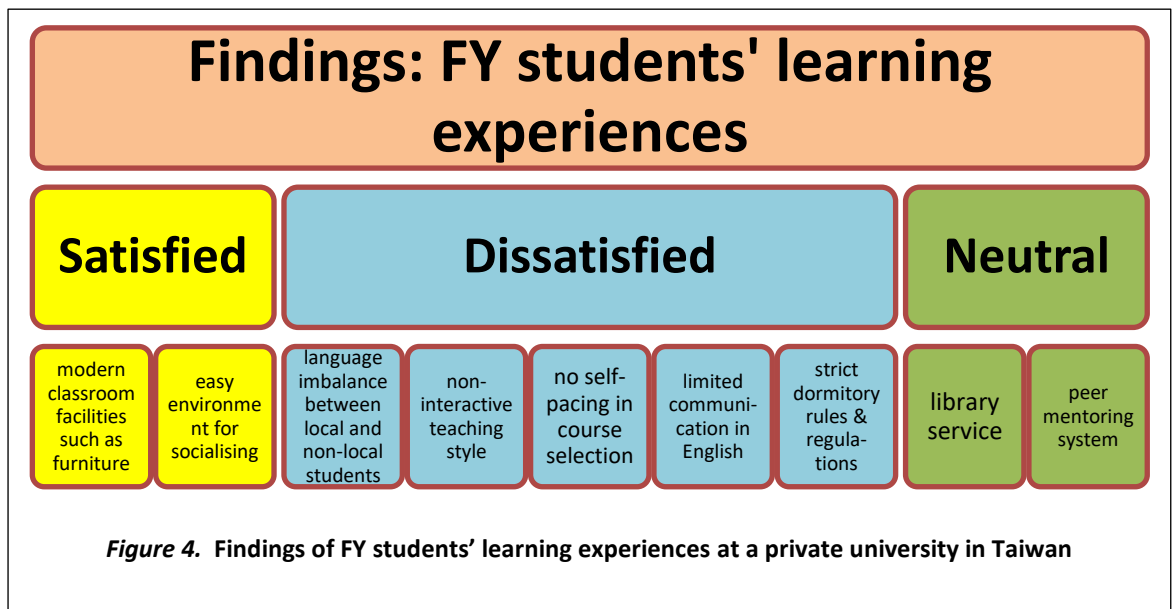
can help create a more interesting learning environment and build stronger teamwork skills among the students.

Effective peer mentoring

Our findings show neutral feedback for the university's peer mentoring system. Interestingly, some mentioned they did not realise the importance of mentoring or did not know that this service existed. Students mentioned that whenever they had problems, they usually asked for help or advice from friends rather than approaching their mentors. This finding demonstrates an obstacle for the lecturer-student peer mentoring system, potentially the age difference. In order to fill this gap, the university should provide other peer mentoring approaches such as senior-junior student mentor programs. This senior-junior student mentoring approach could bridge the age-gap that exists in the current lecturer-student mentoring system.

Encouraging social integration

Based on the findings, FY students in this university did not face any obstacles in making new friends at the university. For international students, issues relating to cultural differences were not raised. Cultural similarity plays an important part in social integration. International students interviewed in this study were of East Asian and South-East Asian ethnicity, therefore, able to adjust fairly well to Taiwanese culture. Some of them can speak and understand basic Chinese Mandarin which is an advantage for cultural assimilation. However, in order to enhance the cultural impacts on social integration, international students from other continents such as Europe, Africa, South and North America should be included in the future study. In addition, the findings revealed that there were negative issues among these FY students with their roommates. However, we agree that the policy requiring FY students to live in shared dormitories can ease social integration among FY students. The FY students

can learn about interpersonal communication; living in a dormitory can help improve soft skills important for their future such as problem solving, communication, and team work skills.

Providing knowledge of program attributes

Comments from interviewees demonstrated a lack of knowledge in the program design and attributes. Students complained that management-related subjects were impractical and irrelevant to the tourism and hospitality industry, and many courses were not discipline-specific. These issues may be addressed by applying educational tools such as curriculum redesign aimed at addressing the perceived disconnect between the subjects. In addition, to reduce the chances of misinterpretation, the department should provide additional information prior to the commencement of the program to ensure all FY students understand the rationale of the curriculum design and explain the necessity of studying management-related courses. This can reduce the confusion and dissatisfaction towards courses they learn. FY students need to be informed about the details of their course choices so that their decisions fit with their own needs and aspirations and are useful in their future careers.

The university also does not provide flexibility for students to design their own course and study at their own pace. The university has pre-assigned core courses for each academic year and, as a result, students' registration records automatically contain all of these pre-assigned courses. The only flexibility is a free choice of elective courses within the university. Based on the findings, most of the FY students were not satisfied with this arrangement. Therefore, the university should consider allowing students to design a course that enables them to study at their own pace, as well as enrol in core courses that are consistent with their needs.

Encouraging an international learning environment

As it is an international program, an international atmosphere on campus should be provided. Indeed, the presence of English-speaking international students is expected by the local students. English-speaking international students can help to facilitate a peer-based learning environment in class and outside class through English-speaking activities. Therefore, the university should strive to balance the ratio between local and international students. With the increased number of international students, the university's emails containing administrative information, and other announcements, should be either in English or bilingual, to reduce the stress faced by non-Chinese speaking international students. Moreover, supporting facilities such as the library and dormitory should also provide bilingual services.

Figure 5 shows the factors influencing FY students' learning experiences at this university.

Conclusion

The first year is a very important transition from high school to university. Based on the analysis, there are factors such as interactive teaching techniques, effective peer mentoring, providing knowledge of program attributes, encouraging social integration, and encouraging an international learning environment as displayed in Figure 5 that influence FY students' learning experiences. These factors confirm the conceptual framework (Figure 3) derived from previous studies. Significantly, we found that culture correlates to social integration. International students from similar cultural background can integrate themselves well into university environment in Taiwan. In addition, we also found that an international learning environment is very important for encouraging students in international degree programs. The internationalisation of higher education could be the solution that can help Taiwanese HEIs overcome with the declining number of university enrolments. On one hand, such programs can attract more international students to study in Taiwan, and, on the other

Figure 5. Factors influencing FY students' learning experiences
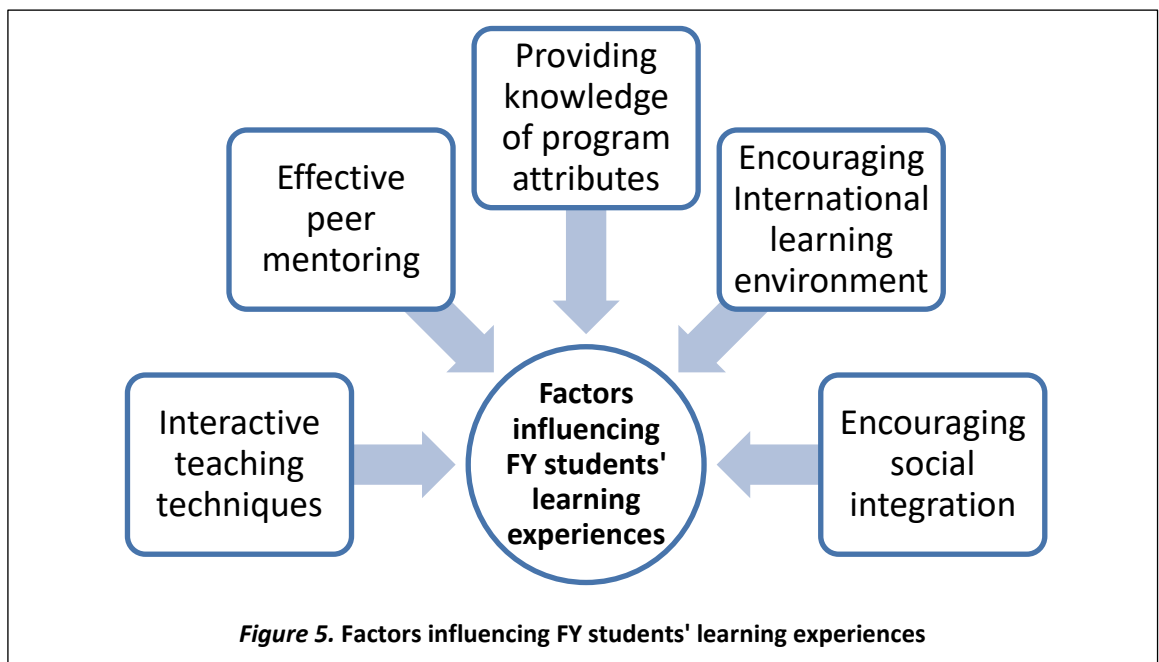
hand, local students can study in an international environment and enhance their work skill competitiveness. We propose our findings can be used as a guideline for universities in Taiwan that are interested in offering international programs.

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