

## Making Small Talk: Support for Chinese Graduate Students

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### Abstract

This article examines the level of support provided to assist international graduate students with the use of small talk to facilitate their social interaction and integration, with a specific focus on the gap between the help they need and the help they get. It is based on a larger phenomenological inquiry which examined the challenges faced by Chinese graduate students in Canada when making small talk in English as an additional language. In that study, ten participants were interviewed about their small talk experiences, including the support they expected and received from peers, faculty members, and institutions. The study was theoretically informed by the concept of community of practice, which describes how newcomers learn in naturally occurring established communities. It was found that all participants expected and wanted institutional and peer support, but their level of satisfaction with what they received varied. All four universities attended by the research participants offered services designed to help international students, but uptake was a problem. It is recommended that institutions put more effort into developing, promoting, and monitoring programs designed to support international students.

*Keywords:* small talk, community of practice, Chinese graduate students, support



## Making Small Talk: Support for Chinese Graduate Students

The number of international students in Canada, including those from China, has been increasing in the past several years. In 2020, statistics from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) indicated there were 530,540 international students at all levels of study in Canada, an increase of 135% since 2010. Of this population, almost 117,000 students, or 22% of the total, were from China, which ranked second only to India in the number pursuing an education in Canada (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2021). In the first eight months of 2022, more than 452,000 study permit applications and more than 135,000 study permit extensions were processed (IRCC, 2022). These statistics show that there is, and will continue to be, a large and growing number of international students in Canada.

To welcome and support these international students, it is important to examine factors which impact their academic and social success in a new learning environment. Many studies have been conducted in terms of academic, linguistic, social, and cultural challenges, as well as relevant support these students need (e.g., Aydinol, 2013; Nelson, 2018; Zhou & Zhang, 2014). Research indicates that student achievement is heavily influenced by social and academic integration (Thomas, 2012; Tinto, 1975). Social integration is generally realized through informal conversations with peers and faculty (Thomas, 2012), attending extracurricular activities (Zhou & Zhang, 2014), and interactions with members of the local community. Many international students, especially those from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, find social engagement with locals to be a challenge (Xing et al., 2020; Zhang & Beck, 2014; Zhou & Zhang, 2014).

Small talk, as a form of engagement, is a social lubricant which helps build rapport (Holmes, 2000), facilitate conversation (Laver, 1975), and make connections (Bernstein, 2013). It can serve as a critical tool enabling individuals to “break the ice” (Hargie, 2011, p. 307) and play an important role in building interpersonal connections and enabling social adjustment. For some international students, the inability to take part in spontaneous small talk is a significant social barrier.

This article explores the support services designed to assist international students when they engage in small talk in English as an additional language, with a specific focus on the gap between the help they need and the help they get. It is based on data from a study examining the challenges faced by Chinese graduate students in Canada. Ten participants were interviewed about their small talk experiences, including questions related to the support they expected and received from peers, faculty members, and institutions.

### Literature Review

This review includes literature related to the definition, role, and key studies on small talk, as well as research on support for social interaction of international students. The theoretical framework, the concept of community of practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991), is also introduced.

### Small Talk

#### *Definition*

The concept of *small talk* was first introduced by Malinowski (1923), who referred to it as “phatic communion” (p. 315). It was defined as “a type of speech in which ties of union are created by mere exchanges of words”, which “serves to establish bonds of personal union between people brought together by the mere need of companionship and does not serve any purpose of communicating ideas” (Malinowski, 1923, pp. 315-316). In this article, based on the views of

Holmes (2000) and Manzo (2014), small talk is defined as a discourse mechanism which extends from ritualized exchanges of greeting or departing, to social conversation about general issues, and to business or work-related communication during the transition to different topics, with a primarily phatic and relational function focused on establishing and maintaining social bonds (Xu, 2022).

### ***Role of Small Talk***

Although the term “small talk” may suggest that it is trivial and unimportant, some scholars say it is essential social grease, which can reduce awkwardness, avoid silence, and facilitate the opening, transition, and culmination of conversations (Coupland & Robinson, 1992; Cruz, 2013; Laver, 1975; Schneider, 1988), and part of a ritual that helps us connect with other people in social settings (Bernstein, 2013). Small talk is important in a whole range of social, commercial, and professional settings as it weaves the social fabric, and enacts and reinforces social roles (Roberts, 2019). The power of small talk is that it facilitates the most basic social interactions which can help create rapport between participants in a number of areas.

### ***Studies on Small Talk***

As an important component of social interaction, small talk has been studied in various social contexts. Studies have often focused on the workplace or immigrants but have rarely included international students. This review will first focus on literature related to small talk and social interaction for immigrants and non-native English speakers at workplaces and then introduce one study on international students.

Research shows that the workplace is a potential problem area for small talk among non-native English speakers (Cheng et al., 2021; Cui, 2015; Holmes, 2000, 2005; Yates & Major, 2015). For example, a study by Holmes (2000) on the challenges faced by English as Second Language (ESL) learners when making small talk at work indicates that these speakers need to have a variety of sociolinguistic and pragmatic skills. Native speakers acquire these skills through immersion in their culture and interaction with others in their community. However, ESL learners need time to develop these skills. The study suggested that successful integration for non-native speakers required learning local ways of being sociable and local norms for managing small talk.

Similarly, Yates and Major (2015) conducted a study of immigrants to Australia from non-English-speaking countries to examine their perspectives on small talk and pragmatic needs for social interaction. The most common pragmatic problems identified were the level of informality, the indirectness when giving negative comments, the capacity to understand sociability, the need to be pragmatically flexible, and the prevalence of small talk, which was noted as their greatest challenge. Cheng et al. (2021) studied English language use and communication challenges among newcomers doing entry-level jobs in Canada. The primary challenges identified were related to unfamiliar topics, problems with language, a lack of communication strategies, and personal attributes.

China has a distinctive culture from that of English-speaking countries. As a result, Chinese ESL users can have considerable problems making small talk in an English-speaking context. Cui (2015) examined the underlying sociocultural reasons for challenges faced by Chinese immigrants in Australia when making small talk with their non-immigrant colleagues at work and found that these immigrants were not well equipped to make small talk in English in the workplace. The major causes of problems were discrepancies in beliefs and values about the nature of personal

identity and interpersonal relationships, as well as how relationships beyond the intimate circle should best be managed.

In addition to the studies on small talk at workplaces and about immigrants, Xu (2022) investigated the challenges faced by Chinese graduate students when making small talk at Canadian universities. Her study affirmed that all study participants encountered challenges in their first years in Canada. While some quickly overcame many of the challenges, others continued to struggle after several years. Results showed that the most challenging issues were related to comprehension, participation, initiative, confidence, social connections, and propriety. There were many direct or indirect causes for these challenges, but most were related to language proficiency, cultural differences, and personal attributes.

In summary, studies on small talk among immigrants, ESL learners, and international students in workplaces and universities indicate it is an imperative part of social communication, interaction, and integration. Making small talk is especially difficult for those who do not speak English as their first language because it is influenced by various factors, including but not limited to language proficiency levels, different cultural norms, personal attributes, familiarity with topical knowledge, and common ground.

### **Social Interactions of International Students**

International students encounter many challenges related to social interaction and integration, especially in the first years of their studies. The major issues include language proficiency, cultural differences, availability of opportunities for interaction, and an inability to make social connections with local people (e.g., Aydinol, 2013; Nelson, 2018; Xu, 2022; Zhou & Zhang, 2014). Zhou and Zhang (2014) claimed that first-year international students had problems with social integration due to a lack of meaningful interaction and relationships with local students or instructors. Correspondingly, Aydinol (2013) found it was challenging for international students to make friends and maintain relationships in a new learning environment and culture due to their substandard English skills and confusion about cultural and social norms. Elturki et al. (2019) also noted that international students had trouble making friends and interacting with domestic students due to language and cultural barriers. As a result, closer relationships were developed with people from their own culture or with other international students because they shared more commonalities.

Chinese international students also face significant challenges with social interaction. Zhang and Zhou (2010) investigated the perspectives, expectations, and experiences of Chinese international students at a Canadian university and explored the possible causes of challenges they confronted. The findings indicated that friendship with native English speakers was positively correlated with both their satisfaction with the learning experience and their confidence in completing the program successfully. The study also determined that language, their English-speaking skill in particular, was a major cause of the challenges they faced, and developing close friendships with local and other international students was difficult because common topics of conversation were hard to find due to different cultural backgrounds. Similarly, a study in the UK conducted by Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2006) also indicated that social interaction with British locals was challenging for Chinese international students because of different values and a lack of common ground. As a result, they only built social networks with co-national friends who they believed could provide more emotional support and practical help.

To sum up, research on Chinese international students shows that problems with social interaction and integration are caused by issues such as language and a lack of cultural and social awareness, especially in their early years of study (Zhang & Beck, 2014; Zhang & Zhou, 2010). Although international students can make substantial efforts to integrate within their new communities, these problems make it difficult to develop and maintain close friendships with people from the host countries. It is evident from current research that support is needed for international students to have satisfying educational experiences.

### **Social Support for International Students**

International students encounter many academic and social challenges. For some, social challenges are a greater concern than academic difficulties, or at least have a similar impact on their adaptation to the new learning environment (Bartram, 2007; Nelson, 2018; Wilcox et al., 2005; Xu, 2023). Therefore, it is important for host institutions to provide support for students, especially for new international students, in response to these challenges. Some studies on social support for international students indicated it was as important as academic support for these students (Kojima, 2020; Wilcox et al., 2005).

Social support for international students has been addressed in several studies. Jabeen et al. (2019) reviewed 87 empirical studies from 2008 to 2018 on international students in English-medium universities and developed three major themes: academic engagement, academic socialization, and social integration. With respect to social integration, social networks and social support are the main factors influencing the acculturation and academic success of these students.

Studies have identified various types of social support for international students based on different functions or purposes. Le's (2023) research identified four types of support that could help relieve stress associated with acculturation: esteem, instrumental, informational, and social companionship support from faculty members and peers. Chavajay (2013) examined the perceived social support for international students at a US university and found that international students mainly received instrumental support from local Americans and socio-emotional support from other international students. Ong and Ward (2005) also found that international students and workers mainly sought emotional, spiritual, and psychological support from family or friends in their home countries while obtaining instrumental and informational support from local residents in the host country.

Peer support for international students has been found to be especially important and has been investigated by a number of scholars. A systemic review by Lorenzetti et al. (2019) of 45 articles on peer mentoring programs for graduate students published from 1988 to 2016 identified four domains of learning related to these programs: academic, psychological, social, and career. Most studies of the social domain were positive about the effect of peer mentoring as a way for graduate students to expand professional networks, improve interpersonal skills, and develop a sense of community or shared purpose. In a typical study, Grant-Vallone and Ensher (2000) examined peer mentoring programs for graduate students and made suggestions to ensure better support for international students, including mentor-mentee matching strategies, early orientation sessions, regular activities, and training and rewards for mentors.

Studies have also been conducted to explore how institutions can provide other forms of support. For example, Nelson's (2018) action research project focused on institutional support for international students in a Canadian college in Saskatchewan. The research found that international students were more concerned with social opportunities than academics; they believed making

friends and establishing social connections could reduce homesickness and promote cultural adaptation. The study made several recommendations: increase communication with these students, promote participation in orientation, improve communication and community-building through social media, create more opportunities for international and domestic students to socialize, and provide language support.

To conclude, studies on social support have primarily focused on the help international students receive to adapt socially to their new learning environment. Support can come from peers and members of the local community, institutions, and others from their home countries. Many forms of support were instrumental or informational, such as orientations and language support programs, while others have more comprehensive functions, such as peer support and mentorship programs. No literature has been found regarding specific support to help with small talk.

### Theoretical Framework

This study is theoretically informed by the concept of *community of practice* (CoP) proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991), which is defined as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 4). The concept of a CoP is an application of Vygotsky’s theories related to learning and action; the focus is on how a group shapes the practices of an individual through various formal and informal situations (Swain et al., 2015). Lave and Wenger (1991) used this concept to describe how novices learn in naturally occurring, established communities of experts; for example, someone learning a skill or trade through apprenticeship.

Wenger (1998) noted that “learning is a fundamentally social phenomenon” (p. 3) and suggested one should “place learning in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world” (p. 3). Participation of the learners is seen as the process of becoming active members in “the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities” (p. 4). In these communities, newcomers may encounter certain barriers on their way to full acceptance, especially when they interact with longer-term members of the group, and find they need assistance or guidance to help them integrate.

The concept of CoP has developed greatly since its inception. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2017) claimed that there were three phases in its development, and the focus has expanded from participation in practice for meaningful learning, to learning partnerships, and then to learning within and across boundaries of practices and communities. In their view, learning happens at any time, anywhere, and in any practice; therefore, there are many communities and practices “in which we cannot claim membership or competence” (p. viii). Based on this understanding, CoPs can be defined as any communities where members participate in and contribute to the evolution of a shared practice. They can take various forms; some are formally organized, but others are informal and even invisible (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

In an article studying communication among construction workers in New Zealand, Holmes and Woodhams (2013) found that to be accepted as members of a CoP, an individual must understand and respond appropriately to various discursive and linguistic elements and comprehend the more nuanced and subtle interaction norms, such as acceptable topics, and quantities and depth of small talk. When international students first attend universities in Canada, they face unfamiliar social and cultural environments and have many uncertainties about social behaviour. By participating in and forming their own CoPs, they can identify cultural differences

and learn proper protocols for social and academic interaction (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). In an article on the role of peer assisted study sessions in a UK based educational institution, Chivers (2016) used the basic themes of CoP - community, practice, and participation, to study peer support for international students and found that these support sessions formed intermediary CoPs, providing transition to larger CoPs related to academic courses and university community.

### **Methodology**

This research project used phenomenology as its methodological approach. Phenomenology is a qualitative methodology “in search of the essence of lived experience” (Patton, 2014, p.190), which can be used to grasp “the very nature of the thing” (van Manen, 1990, p. 177) from the viewpoints of those who have experienced the phenomenon. The best problems for this approach are those that require an understanding of the shared experiences of a phenomenon by several individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A phenomenological design was appropriate for this study because it explored the lived experiences of Chinese students making small talk with peers, instructors, and other individuals in Canadian communities; specifically, how these individuals “perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it” (Patton, 2014, p. 190).

Ten participants were interviewed and asked about their experiences making small talk and establishing social connections, and about the support they received and expected from their academic institutions and elsewhere. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview transcripts and develop categories and themes related to the support expected and received.

### **Recruitment**

After research ethics approval was obtained, a recruitment poster was distributed through various *WeChat* groups (a messaging application popular among Chinese international students) in different universities in Canada to attract potential interview participants. Interested individuals were asked to contact the researcher and those who met the requirements of the study, and provided signed consent, were invited to take part. In total, ten interview participants from four universities in Canada were recruited.

### **Participants**

Chinese graduate students in Canadian universities were the target population for participants in this project. This population included both international graduate students (born and educated in China, and in Canada with a study permit) and immigrant graduate students (also born and educated in China, and in Canada as permanent residents) (Zang, 2007). These students were selected as the research cohort because they were required to demonstrate their language proficiency before admission to graduate school. In addition, graduate students are usually mature enough to have the interpersonal skills and competence to make small talk with classmates, instructors, and others in the wider community.

The original requirements for participants were as follows: self-identified as a Chinese international or immigrant graduate student; received their K-12 and/or undergraduate education in China; currently enrolled in a graduate program at a Canadian university. During the data collection process, it became apparent that, due to COVID-19 restrictions, almost all students enrolled in 2020 had classes online, and many had never been to Canada. As a result, the data lacked input from students with in-person classroom experiences. Therefore, when two recent graduates showed interest, the recruitment criteria were expanded to include those who had

completed a graduate program within the past year. Table 1 shows participant program information and time in Canada.

**Table 1**

*Information about Participants*

Participants	Program	Year in the Program	Year Coming to Canada
1	Master's	1st	2013
2	PhD	3rd	2016
3	Master's	1st	2021
4	PhD	2nd	2020
5	Master's	1st	2016
6	Master's	Graduated	2018
7	Master's	2nd	2019
8	PhD	2nd	2016
9	Master's	Graduated	2019
10	PhD	4th	2017

**Data Collection**

Effective data collection instruments for phenomenological studies on social communication and interaction include in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (Orbe, 1998). Patton (2014) indicates that a variety of data collection methods can reveal different aspects of empirical reality and social perception, and combinations of interviews, observations, and document analysis are expected in most fieldwork.

In this project, data were collected from semi-structured individual interviews with the selected Chinese students conducted through Zoom meetings. Semi-structured interviews were utilized because they provide the necessary flexibility for capturing voices and experiences (Rabionet, 2011). One-on-one interviews allow participants to focus on their own experiences, and free them from the influence of others, as personal experiences can contain information that people may withhold in a more public context (Morgan et al., 2013).

During the interviews, individuals were asked general questions about their experiences as graduate students; the focus was on their feelings and ideas, and successful and unsuccessful experiences, related to engaging in small talk with native English speakers. Some examples of interview questions were: Could you please describe some situations when you had problems making small talk with native English-speaking people at your university? What strategies do you think can help those who have problems making small talk with native English speakers? Have you received any support in terms of social interaction or small talk from others? With permission, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then sent back to each participant to review and confirm.

**Data Analysis**

Based on the work of Moustakas (1994) and others, Creswell and Poth (2018) state that phenomenological data analysis will “generate themes from the analysis of significant statements” (p. 79). The data analysis steps are: first, “go through the data and highlight significant statements,



sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon” (p. 79); this process is called horizontalization as every horizon or statement relevant to the topic and question is regarded as having equal value (Moustakas, 1994). Second, use clusters of meaning from these significant statements to form relevant themes.

The interview transcripts were imported to *NVivo*, a qualitative data analysis software package, and scrutinized to locate words, phrases, and sentences related to expected or received support. These quotes were then highlighted and classified using thematic analysis to develop relevant themes.

## **Findings**

The analysis identified themes regarding the support offered by the universities and the support expected and received by the participants.

### **Support Offered by the Universities**

All four universities attended by the study participants provide services to help international students, such as orientations, extracurricular activities, mentor-mentee and buddy programs, conversational circles, graduate student gatherings, and other events organized by student clubs. A review of websites targeting international students at these universities reveals many of these programs, as well as cultural awareness training, counselling services, and so forth. These programs were intended to improve oral English, create opportunities for social contact, provide individualized help, promote intercultural communicative skills, and offer professional aid when mental or other issues arise.

### **Support Expected by the Participants**

All participants expected institutional and peer support, but their level of satisfaction with the provided support varied. They all felt that social engagement with those more experienced and familiar with the community could help them gain comfort and confidence when taking part in social interactions.

One participant (P 3) noted, “I know I was cared [for] by the faculty, the community, the school, but I feel like [I was] not that connected to them. I know they are caring about me but I just [felt] kind of lost” (Transcript from P 3). This participant wished for opportunities in which international students could connect and develop a sense of belonging:

I talked to people, they also feel like they they're kind of lost, especially international students. So, I feel ... the faculty... can tie us together. [We] don't have to be the community that big ... but just feel like we belong somewhere. It's really important for me... [to have] a sense of belonging ... people can share their similar feelings. (Transcript from P 3)

This participant expected organized activities or regular meetings for the students, so those who shared similar academic experiences and backgrounds could build a community which would help to reduce loneliness and feelings of isolation.

P 3 also felt there should be a clear statement of responsibilities for those providing a service. With respect to the group mentorship program:

[when there are] more people in a similar position, people tend to not be super responsible... if I'm the only mentor responsible for these two, if I'm not reaching out to

them ... we will lose the connection. But when some other people are with me doing a similar job... I will consider, like, if I'm not doing it, someone else will do it. (Transcript from P 3)

The suggestion was that there should be more supervision over these programs. "I feel like probably some of the administration or school board in the faculty and the university need someone to manage the mentorship to ensure that it really is ongoing" (Transcript from P 3).

Another participant (P 2) emphasized the importance of learning communicative skills and suggested ESL programs offered by Canadian universities should incorporate content on social integration and other social skills, including how to make small talk with locals. One possible teaching method could be to create some simulated situations and invite international and local students to act them out:

I feel the ESL program here in Canada ... should have a course about social integration or something about social skills, like how to make small talk with local people...I definitely think that component is essential to international students. They create some sort of like drama classes, they can create a situation and ask international students to act, they can invite some local students to create that sort of situation, the setting, and act in that situation and how you interact with that person when you are waiting for the elevator. Teachers can even tape the whole conversation and then replay the video and evaluate. The teacher may say 'Here, notice that? She is not interested. Look at her eyes, look at her facial expressions.' You can catch that part. (Transcript from P 2)

This program, as suggested by P 2, could help students recognize the subtle nuances that may make a difference in their ability to communicate effectively.

### **Support Received by the Participants**

Although the universities all offer services to help international students, study participants indicated that uptake was a problem. Several said they seldom participated in order to avoid unnecessary distractions from their studies, and some were too nervous to put themselves in a position where they might have to make small talk with others. For example, Participant 7 said the following:

Sometimes I go to those events, not very often, I am always busy with my assignments ... Every time when we have classes or any activities, I will go there right on time, just to avoid social interaction, because it really made me very embarrassed, I don't know what to say when other people are talking around...I don't even want to participate in any extracurricular activities because of this problem. (Transcript from P 7)

Although a variety of events and services were offered, experiences varied greatly, ranging from very beneficial to not helpful at all. Experiences with the mentor-mentee or buddy system provide an example.

In all four universities, new students are paired with peers who are in their second or third year of study. One participant (P 8) said this was really wonderful. In this particular case, the mentor and mentee had biweekly meetings online for more than one year and they eventually became good friends. The mentor provided meaningful support and was a trusted insider whenever the mentee had problems:

I should be thankful that I signed up for the mentor and mentee program when I first started, so I am still having this biweekly meeting with my mentor. [If] not for her, I will have zero [opportunities for small talk in English with local Canadians] ... With my mentor, we talked about so many things. ... So I have no problems making small talk with my mentor. That is actually a rare case, because you see we have known each other for over a year now and we meet regularly, and that's the basis for friendship and all kinds of closer relationships, right? And I just get more comfortable talking with her. (Transcript from P 8).

Other participants, however, did not find the program helpful. They only had one or two email exchanges or meetings and then forgot about each other. P 3 did not have a positive support experience:

I know we have [a] mentor, but I feel like they are not working positively or they're not working frequently. I guess I do have a mentor, but I only have one one-on-one talk. And that is all...She asked if I need any help, but I think sometimes ...as a stranger ... not every person wants to say that they need help. (Transcript from P 3)

This participant had hoped that the mentor could reach out to mentees to build personal connections and preferred not to impose on strangers when there were problems. P 3 felt that frequent meetings were a must to develop the feeling that the person really cares. "If I would be the mentor, I think I will organize, like frequent meetings, some ice-breaking games or sharing, probably just 30 minutes a month and I think it will just feel like you were cared [for] by the real person" (Transcript from P 3).

P 6 was also not too optimistic about the positive role of the mentor-mentee system:

You can pair international students with a mentor, like pair a student with a more mature student who has more experience, probably an assistant role in the school or just a senior student... But I don't think the program works so well...I guess people may see a positive result ... not everyone can benefit from that. (Transcript from P 6)

Although there are some positive comments, it is clear that not everyone was able to benefit from a program of this nature, especially if the institution does not seem to take an active role in supervision.

In short, these five participants all expected specific supports tied to their needs and hoped that the institutions would reach out to make information and support programs more accessible. Although varying levels of support designed to help with social interaction were provided, the effectiveness and uptake of the services varied.

## **Discussion**

This section will outline the findings in relation to the theoretical framework and previous literature and list some implications for institutions regarding student support programs. In addition, suggestions for future research will be provided, and the significance and limitations of the current study will be considered.

### **Community of Practice**

Wenger (1998) notes that "learning is a fundamentally social phenomenon" and suggests one should "place learning in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world" (p. 3). The participation of the learners is seen as the process of becoming active members in "the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities" (p.

4). Montgomery and McDowell (2009) state that the social groups formed by international students resembled CoPs as both have shared aims and interests. Several participants highlighted the importance of community during their interviews when talking about how they developed or could have developed confidence and comfort in making small talk with others. The interviews also revealed that many challenges related to cultural differences and the use of language in real-life situations could be resolved by ongoing exposure to social interaction; participants suggested or implied that Chinese students can improve their ability to make small talk by participating in CoPs.

Some participants benefited from forming or becoming members of various CoPs. Several gave examples where they or their friends joined religious groups, sports organizations, and writing clubs, or took part in other leisure activities such as hiking and dancing. In these groups, newcomers get two kinds of help from old-timers: they learn skills related to the chosen activity, and they benefit from personal interaction. There is no evidence of existing CoPs which specifically focus on the topic of small talk. Although taking part in certain activities and groups can be regarded as joining pre-existing CoPs, within these formal communities, participants are also learning how to communicate and socialize from others, and in this sense it can be said they are developing informal or emerging CoPs. This is consistent with Chilvers (2016), who outlined the importance of peer support sessions as CoPs to facilitate social integration, establish friendships, and increase the sense of belonging to the new learning community for international students.

However, some participants, who felt they lacked these experiences, expressed their expectation that institutions should create CoPs for students to feel a part of. If, as Holmes and Woodhams (2013) indicate, one needs to be able to understand social norms and respond appropriately to nuanced interactions to be accepted as a CoP member, one wonders when these subtle rules can be learned. Kojima (2020) and Nagao (2018) suggest establishing CoP-like classrooms or communities to help international students increase their sense of belonging and inclusion. Therefore, the results of this research suggest that international students who find themselves challenged by casual social interaction with locals should turn to various CoPs as a viable solution.

### **Implications for Institutions**

Based on these findings, the following recommendations for institutions and student service centers in universities are proposed:

First, institutions should do more to promote and publicize services offered to international students and make it easier to access information about programs, events, and other activities. Some participants, who focused mainly on their studies, said that they would like to attend these events, but they were often not aware of their existence. As one participant mentioned, students are often overwhelmed with course work and assignments, so they may not have time to look for these events, but if they know they are available, they would like to take part.

Second, more opportunities should be created for frequent social contact among all students. The literature shows that making connections with members of the local community has been an ongoing challenge for international students (Nelson, 2018). Many participants indicated they rarely had occasion to interact socially with others outside their immediate circle. Without opportunities for contact and shared experiences, it is difficult to make friends, so organized activities that can attract students from all backgrounds with common interests can lead to personal connections.

Third, there should be ongoing guidance and supervision for those providing the support services to international students. Volunteers in these programs do so with good intentions, but they may not be aware of the problems faced by international students and, as a result, do not know how they can really help. Training should be provided so that appropriate levels of support are available, and there must be regulations or guidelines about what they can and cannot do.

Finally, courses or workshops covering cross-cultural awareness and communication skills can help international students learn more about the social, political, and cultural aspects of Canada, and help local students learn more about some of the social challenges which confront international students.

### **Limitations and Areas for Future Research**

Although every participant made mention of the social support that they received or desired, it was not the focus of the broader study. In a study more directly related to support for international students, specific questions could be used to gather details about the support they need in response to the challenges they face. It would also be helpful to explore how specific support programs offered by institutions are perceived and received by international students, and how effective the programs are at enhancing comfort and confidence with communication and with providing opportunities to make connections in the community.

In addition, most social support programs expect international students to proactively take advantage of available resources. However, the evidence in this study revealed that some participants were not comfortable asking for help because they lacked the confidence to use English, and some tried to avoid all interactions because they could not manage small talk. Therefore, further research could examine ways that support programs can reach and engage students who have low English language proficiency and who hesitate to engage socially.

Finally, this article discusses the issue of support from the perspectives of ten Chinese graduate students. To have a more comprehensive understanding of the issue, it would also be important to interview relevant coordinators and administrators of the various institutions.

### **Significance**

It is hoped that the findings of this small study will provide useful information about available support for non-English-speaking students who are planning to attend or are currently enrolled in universities in Canada. Educational institutions can also benefit from learning more about student expectations and from feedback on services provided. Finally, perhaps this brief report will encourage further research on the effectiveness of social support programs for international students and immigrants, who are becoming a growing segment of the population in this country.

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