

The Impact of Student Leadership on Chinese International Students' Language Proficiency and Belongingness

Yuehua Zhu^a and Clayton Smith^{a*}

^aUniversity of Windsor, Canada

*Corresponding author (Clayton Smith): Email: Clayton.Smith@uwindsor.ca

Address: University of Windsor, Ontario, Canada

Abstract

International students, especially Chinese international students, are underrepresented in leadership roles in Canadian universities. A review of the related literature indicates that low language proficiency, lack of belongingness, and cultural difference inhibited Chinese international students' leadership opportunities. This study adopted semi-structured, one-on-one interviews to investigate the benefits that five Chinese international student participants perceived, based on leadership roles in which they participated. The results suggest that taking student leadership roles facilitated participants' language development at one Canadian university and enhanced their belongingness to the university. However, their participation in student leadership roles did not contribute to their belongingness to Canadian society.

Keywords: belongingness, Chinese international students, language proficiency, leadership

Introduction

In the 2017-2018 academic year, Chinese students comprised the largest group of international students at Canadian public colleges and universities: 83,011 out of 296,469 international students studying in Canada, and Chinese-origin students accounted for almost one-third (28%) of all international students in Canada attending post-secondary educational institutions (Statistics Canada, 2020). However, their representation in leadership roles within student governments is underwhelmingly disproportionate compared to their actual numbers. In fact, a randomly selected five out of 24 post-secondary universities in Ontario showed that no Chinese international students took on leadership roles in student governments in the 2017-2018 academic year. According to Astin (1984), student involvement in extra-curricular activities, especially taking a leadership role in student government associations, improves students' sense of belonging and reinforces overall self-development. However, previous research mainly illustrated the obstacles that Chinese international students had in their involvement in on-campus activities and their overall social integration. For example,

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low language proficiency, cultural differences, and lack of belongingness are often cited as factors that inhibit school involvement among international students and minimized their confidence when communicating with their domestic peers and instructors. Further, no studies have explored this population's leadership status in Canada, and there is limited research on how to facilitate their English language development and belongingness through an extra-curriculum setting. Moreover, no studies highlight the benefits international Chinese students perceive to be associated with engagement in student leadership roles. This article seeks to advance leadership roles as an important pathway to facilitate Chinese-origin students' social integration and self-development at post-secondary educational institutions.

Literature Review

To frame the current study and understand the importance of conducting this research in the Canadian context, it is important to identify what previous research has been established about Chinese international students and their engagement in leadership roles in Canadian post-secondary institutions. This necessitates an overview of Chinese international students' enrollment in Canadian post-secondary institutions, and an outline of the obstacles they encounter when integrating into Canadian academic and social contexts. Likewise, it is important to identify how the leadership roles they have embraced have facilitated international students' belongingness.

The Enrollment of Chinese International Students in Canada

As of 2020, China was the second top source country after India, for international students in Canada, with 22% of the whole Canadian international student population (CBIE, 2022). For the first time since 2006, China had a decline (0.5%) in the number of students coming to Canada, but it remains firmly in second place, with 116,700 students in 2020 (CBIE, 2022). Due to the Ontario government's announcement of a required 10% reduction in domestic tuition fees for all programs, many universities decided to address the \$10 million shortfall, by expanding the enrollment of international students (Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, 2019). With international student numbers growing by 25% annually, Canada has already surpassed its International Education Strategy, launched under the Harper government in 2011, which aimed to increase international student enrollment to 450,000 by 2022. Chinese students constitute, and are projected to exceed, one-third of Canada's international student population (Luedi, 2019).

Obstacles of Academic and Social Integration

The large enrollment numbers of Chinese international students in Canadian post-secondary institutions do not guarantee their successful integration into the Canadian context. In fact, Chinese international students report many obstacles, in terms of their assimilation and acculturation, low language proficiency, and lacking sense of belonging, which are significant difficulties Chinese students encounter in Canada.

Su and Harrison (2016) found that language emerged as a highly meaningful factor in determining Chinese international students' ability to navigate both academic and social challenges. However, they present overall low English-language competence. Likewise, Jiao (2006) indicates that language deficiency obstructs Chinese international students' integration in daily communication and interactions with other students. For example, one Chinese international student reported that language barriers affected his social networking, which made him feel lonely (Weber, 2011).

Integration and academic success can be impacted by a lack of belonging, cultural and linguistic isolation, and contrasting individual and campus characteristics (Chen, 2018); however, for Chinese international students, the situation is more complicated. For example, while a new sociocultural environment can lead to social isolation (Yan & Sendall,

2016), this population often views themselves as temporary visitors, and therefore are not interested in forming meaningful social bonds in the host country (Yao, 2016). Furthermore, Chen (2017) notes that cultural differences are often regarded as irreconcilable contradictions, which further limits the integration of immigrant students of Chinese-origin. His study illustrates that in the process of integration of Chinese immigrants, Chinese international students must adopt certain aspects of the host culture and abandon certain aspects of Chinese culture. Chinese international students often react by maintaining, and remaining in, a comfort zone, and seeking social support from co-national peers from their native culture (Cao et al., 2017; Du & Wei, 2015), which can exacerbate their status of social disconnection with the host country.

Taking Leadership Roles and Having a Sense of Belonging

Following the influx of international students who have enrolled in North American post-secondary institutions, several recent studies have explored international students' belongingness. For example, a significant amount of research has examined how obstacles impede international students' acculturation and pathways that can enhance their collective sense of belonging (Johnson, 2019; Jones et al., 2018; Van Horne et al., 2018; Yao, 2016). Astin (1999) concluded that involvement in student government can improve their political participation and satisfaction towards friendships, and the peer-group effect generated, which may enhance students' sense of belonging. The impact of academic and social integration on student persistence has also been confirmed by Tinto (2012). Likewise, Glass and Westmont's (2014) quantitative study, which included 1,398 international participants, found that cultural events, leadership programs, and community service collectively enhanced students' collective sense of belongingness. A critical literature review found that Chinese international students experience lack of social and academic integration that contributes to their mental health challenges and attrition from their host institutions (Chen & Zhou, 2019).

Literature Gaps

Though previous studies uncovered some of the barriers to the overall integration and development of students of Chinese-origin in Canada, there are at least four gaps that need to be addressed. Firstly, research has not investigated the leadership roles of students of Chinese-origin at Canadian post-secondary institutions. Secondly, there is an absence of studies on the benefits that international students perceived by taking on leadership roles at their host institutions. Thirdly, previous literature has failed to identify potential links between taking leadership roles and the development of language proficiency. Lastly, there is a research gap regarding the correlations between taking leadership roles and developing a sense of belonging for students of Chinese-origin.

Theoretical Framework

This research is guided by two leading theories: Astin's (1984) input-environment-output (IEO) model of student development theory and Hogg's (2001) social identity theory of leadership. Astin is a prominent student development theorist who advocated for increasing involvement during the student experience at post-secondary educational institutions. The IEO concept first came from Astin's work titled, *Productivity of Undergraduate Institutions* (Astin, 1962). Since then, the IEO model has guided Astin's research and facilitated the development of his theory on student involvement. While there have been refinements over the years, the basic elements have remained the same:

Input refers to the characteristics of the students at the time of initial entry to the institution; environment refers to the various programs, policies, faculty, peers, and educational experiences to which the student is exposed; and outcomes refers to the student's characteristics after exposure to the environment (Astin, 1993, p. 7).

Alternatively, Hogg (2001) suggests that leadership is about how some individuals or micro-social groups, colloquially known as 'cliques,' have disproportionate power and influence to set agendas, define identities, and mobilize people to achieve collective goals. The differential ability of some people to influence or shape attitudes, practices, decisions, and actions is endemic to most social groups (e.g., nations, communities, organizations, committees, cliques, and families). Leaders are people who have disproportionate influence through the possession of prestige and/or power, real or perceived over the attitudes, behaviors, and futures of group members. Hogg (2001) also supports Chemers (2001) and Platow et al. (2015), who suggests that leadership is inherently a group process.

Methodology

According to Yin (2009), whether for the purpose of developing or testing a theory, it is vital to adopt a case study that complements a study's theoretical framework. This study seeks to examine students' experiences through the lens of student development theory, with multiple case studies used for developing a detailed understanding of international and visible minority students' development in Canadian post-secondary universities. As an academic group that often goes unnoticed, the self-development and political involvement of Chinese international students merits further research. Considering that the interviews are active interactions where the role of interviewers involves clarifying or expanding upon questions instead of simply asking and recording, a semi-structured, one-on-one interview was designed to explore participants' experiences. Research was designed into the following steps: signing consent forms, filling in the demographic information sheet, engaging in the ice-breaker phase, answering two sets of specific questions, and ending the interview. The demographic information sheet included questions such as nationality, program of study, level of study, and length of stay in Canada. Each one-on-one interview took about 60-90 minutes. As the study was conducted within the naturalistic inquiry paradigm, researchers took steps to establish credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Participants

The researchers used three approaches when recruiting potential participants: sending interview invitation emails to all international students with the permission of the institutional international student center, sending request-for-help emails to staff and professors who may know potential participants, and snowballing by asking the participants to recommend other eligible students. This was done to ensure that selected participants credibly represented the perspectives of Chinese-origin students attending the university.

Five Chinese international students from a mid-sized, comprehensive, public university in Ontario, Canada were recruited to participate in the research. The number of participants was set, based on Yin's (2009) suggestion that "multiple-case designs may be preferred over single-case designs" (p. 60), and Small's (2009) argument that one case works for in-depth qualitative interview research. This research included one undergraduate student and four graduate students, with their ages ranging from 25 to 44. Their length of stay in Canada ranged from nine months to five years. To protect the students' privacy, each participant was given a pseudonym: Kerry, Charlie, Wayson, Lisa, and Carol. To further preserve their anonymity, the research does not identify their specific leadership position in case they could be easily identified by a bystander. Other than Charlie, all the participants had experience taking leadership roles, or being

Table 1*General Information of Participants*

Item	Participants				
Name	Wayson	Charlie	Kerry	Lisa	Carol
Gender	M	M	M	F	F
Age duration	25-29	25-29	25-29	40-44	24-29
Country of origin	China	China	China PR in Canada	China	China
Level of study	Master's	Under-graduate	Master's	Master's	Master's
Faculty	Science	Engineering	Business	Business	Education
Length of stay in Canada	17 months	5 years	2 years	9 months	2 years
Previous experience with political participation	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Report to (having guidance from)	Staffs of Chinese origin	Staffs of Chinese origin	Instructors, faculty council, program administrator	Student experience coordinator	Director of inter-national student center
Language used while responding to questions in the interview	Mandarin	Mandarin	English	English	Mandarin

student representative, before entering the research site institution, while some of them took multiple leadership positions in one academic year. Table 1 provides demographic details.

Wayson was a leader of a student club, whose members were mostly composed of international Chinese students. His duties were hosting meetings, developing regulations, announcing news, building team cohesion, and cultivating leaders. When he needed guidance or advice, he would turn to two Chinese-origin university staff for help. He mainly used Mandarin as his working language.

Kerry was a class representative, the head of a student society, a leader of a student club, a student representative in the faculty council, and a founder of a mentor program. She also took an active part in social activities and voluntary work. Her duties included scheduling and hosting meetings, organizing student activities, and recruiting volunteers. She used English during her work time.

Charlie was the head of a Chinese-origin student club. He organized student activities, enriched Chinese students' extracurricular life, helped students adapt to their life in university, and addressed students' needs. His working language is Mandarin.

Lisa was the leader of a mentorship program, a coordinator in a conference committee at the university, and a volunteer who helped organize a leadership conference at the university. Her work was to frame the workflow, compose organizational maps, schedule timelines, and support mentor training. She used English as her working language.

Carol was a leader in a learning group, a student representative at the faculty level and a campaign volunteer. She helped to lobby community members to vote for a political campaign. She worked with the local staff, so her working language was English.

Instrumentation

The instrument adopted in this research is a self-designed questionnaire. To guide participants' responses toward specific questions in an economic way, the researchers organized the interview questions using the following themes: participants' experiences with specific leadership positions, participants' perception and self-evaluation of language

proficiency, participants' perception of belongingness, peer review of language proficiency, and participants' suggestions regarding social integration.

Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, data is more contextual and descriptive since it is primarily about individual experiences. Based on the interview instructions, in accordance with the regulations set in the consent form and the confirmation from the researchers' research ethics board, all participants' interview transcripts were eligible and used in the data analysis.

Creswell (2015) suggests researchers should interpret information provided by each participant of the research during, or immediately after, data collection. Thus, the interviews were translated and transcribed verbatim within one day after the interview to create thick descriptions and an audit trail to guide the thematic analysis. Bowling (2005) suggests that the mode of questionnaire administration has serious effects on data quality. As a result, designing the questionnaire with themes helped the researchers to seek the heterogeneous or homogeneous responses of participants towards specific questions, and some unexpected descriptions of their experiences. Researchers used triangulation to compare comments made by research participants. They also conducted member checks to ensure that interview transcripts were consistent with participant understandings of interview discussions and engaged in peer debriefing with other members of the research group.

Results

In general, participants experienced the connection between taking leadership and sense of belonging. Taking leadership roles also helped to expand their social networks, their understanding of local norms, and engagement with local communities/people. All the participants reported that they developed management skills and confidence. Overall, they perceived the development of English-language proficiency through their pragmatic practices, while leading activities and organizations. They all admitted that taking leadership roles enhanced their belongingness; however, their belongingness was associated more with the university and student organizations and less with Canadian society. The findings also support the application of Astin's student development theory in the Canadian post-secondary environment.

Leadership Roles and Language Proficiency

According to the participants, English-language barriers, among students of Chinese-origin, prevent students from understanding Canadian culture, local rules, and norms embedded in conversations, due to their low involvement in social life and limited participation in local organizations. The researchers sought to explore, through interview questions, how taking leadership roles improves language proficiency. To obtain the findings on language proficiency, in multi-dimension, the researchers employed modularized reporting processes, including self-evaluation on language proficiency in academic and social usage, confirmation of changes in language development, and direction and mechanism of language development.

Self-Evaluation on Language Proficiency

To determine participants' self-evaluation of their language proficiency in academic learning, as well as in a social context, the researchers consulted the participants about their perceived levels of their language proficiency for academic learning and social usage.

Kerry, Lisa, and Carol all demonstrated confidence in their English language proficiency, both in academic learning and social usage, during their interviews. However, there was something unexpected. Charlie, who has the longest length of stay in Canada and was the only participant at the undergraduate level of study, displayed the lowest self-evaluation in his language proficiency. He initially tried to answer questions in English, but he switched to Mandarin soon after. Charlie's perceptions were like Kerry's. Kerry took his undergraduate program in the United States. When Kerry finished his undergraduate program, he thought his English was insufficient to communicate with local people. With a passion to improve his language proficiency, Kerry forced himself to communicate with local people by taking leadership roles on campus, and engaging in social works in the local community, when he began his master's program in Canada. Wayson reported that his spoken English was relatively weak, which restricted his ability to communicate with local students and international students from outside of China.

Confirmations of the Changes in Language Development

Overall, participants reported that the English-language competence helped them conduct their leadership roles, and they perceived a difference of language proficiency after taking their leadership roles. They, likewise, experienced the social norms/rules that were embedded in the usage of political language. All participants agreed that a leader's language proficiency is vital to conducting a leadership role in a Canadian university; however, the efficiency of using the English language was dependent on the role requirements of the position, and the leader's language ability. Charlie said:

I think good English language proficiency can surely help me to execute work more effectively, but the efficiency/frequency of using English in taking leadership roles still depends on an individual's level. Because my English is not that good, it did not contribute to my president's work.

Kerry believes that language proficiency is everything, and he indicated that language skills impact "the level of communication and the extent of interpersonal interaction in the Canadian context." Carol also offered her thoughts: "If I can't express the learning material clearly, it will be difficult for me to get the outcomes of my teaching practice." However, when asked, Carol said that she perceived a difference of language proficiency after taking her leadership role:

To be honest, there was almost no improvement after taking this leadership role. Mainly, I was using my acquired English skills during the teaching practice. There is less chance that I can learn something new. Thus, I don't think there was progress in my English proficiency.

Directions and Mechanisms of Language Development

The findings on the direction and mechanisms of language development were generated through participants' answers to multiple-choice questions administered by the researchers (outlined in Table 2). In these questions, participants were given several options, and could choose whichever option, or options, applied to them. Participants' responses and explanations provide various perspectives.

About 'direction,' the participants offered different responses. Both Wayson and Carol reported that they perceived "no difference" after taking their leadership roles. Wayson offered an explanation: "If we can recruit Canadian-born Chinese students to our club in the future, then the work in this position may improve my English language by having the opportunity to communicate with them." In contrast, although Carol indicated that there was "almost no" difference in her English-language proficiency after taking the leadership role, her explanations suggested otherwise. She thought the benefits of language proficiency from taking leadership meant being more confident when speaking in public.

Table 2*Directions and Mechanisms of Language Development through Leadership Participation*

Interview questions	What does the difference actually refer to if you perceived a difference of language proficiency after taking a leadership role or being a student representative?	What kind of activities helped to improve your language proficiency in your political experience?
Wayson	None	None
Charlie	Vocabulary expanded, more slang and cultural background understanding	Reading working emails, on-sites presentation/comments, reading working documents, collaborating with peers
Kerry	Vocabulary expanded, more slang and cultural background understanding	Reading working emails, on-sites presentation/comments, writing working emails to convey ideas
Lisa	Vocabulary expanded, more slang and cultural background understanding	Reading working emails, on-sites presentation/comments, writing working emails to convey ideas, collaborating with peers
Carol	Almost none	On-sites presentation/comments

In addition, she noted that she did learn a native expression and developed a better understanding of local English grammar rules through her leadership participation. The remaining three participants all reported that their language proficiency was improved, with respect to expanding their vocabularies, developing a deeper understanding of language context, and understanding the cultural background within a conversation.

Participants chose “on-site presentation/comments” most frequently as a factor that facilitated language development. In addition to “reading working emails,” “on-site presentation comments,” “writing working emails to convey ideas,” and “collaborating with peers,” Lisa and Carol mentioned some other circumstances that also facilitated language development through political participation, which included “the preparation of an organization plan” and “the person [to whom] I report gave [sic] me [a] chance to improve English, since she is a native speaker.”

Leadership Roles and Belongingness

The researchers also investigated how taking on leadership can enhance the sense of belonging. In this section, belongingness is explored in three different dimensions: the exploration of participants’ sense of belonging to the university, their sense of belonging to Canadian society, and the mechanism of enhancing belongingness that they perceived through taking leadership roles.

Belongingness to the University

The findings on the participants’ sense of belonging at the university were quite positive overall. Participants reported that they felt as though they belong at the university and that their leadership roles enhanced their belongingness. Wayson stated that he loves his university very much. He was satisfied with the facilities on campus and with the people he met at this university. Both Wayson and Kerry indicated that even though they will be leaving the university after graduation, they will always see themselves as alumni of the institution. Kerry offered specific details: “I feel [that] my soul and spirit will always be here. It’s about my effort and contribution to this community. Sometimes, you work hard for

something, or getting something [that] makes you part of it.” Charlie added that his length of stay at this university impacted his sense of belonging.

However, Carol expressed a unique perception of her sense of belonging to the university, which was “half, half,” in her original description. She stressed how physically attending and participating impacted her sense of belonging at the university:

When I am taking classes, I feel I belong at this university. When I am participating in university activities, I also think I belong to it. The moment I left the classes or go [sic] off-duty from my on-campus work, I do [sic] not think [that] I have a sense of belonging to the university. This [sic] is demonstrated by the Celebration of Nations. I knew there was such an activity, but since I didn’t participate in it, it made no sense to me. Maybe my graduate program is too short, and my length of stay is not long enough to generate this sense of belonging.

Overall, the interview showed that all five participants agreed that their pragmatic leading practices facilitated their belongingness to the university.

Belongingness to Canadian Society

The findings on the participants’ perceptions of belongingness to Canadian society are more negative, compared to their responses to their belongingness at the university. The most unexpected response came from Charlie’s statement but may represent a general perception from students of Chinese-origin in Canada. Charlie has five-years’ life experience in Ontario. Thus, it would be reasonable to assume that the extent of his acculturation would be relatively more advanced than the other participants, however, he expressed a different sentiment:

If it is me, I will give a negative answer. Whether from the level of my exposure to Canada, my cultural identity, or my circle of life, there are difficulties. Perhaps it’s not just the accumulation of time that makes me feel like I can integrate into the Canadian society: it requires an opportunity...I admire those Chinese people who have stayed here for ten or more years, because their life here is not easy. My sense of belonging and cultural identity in this society is too low. The influence of Chinese people and the reputation of Chinese communities are not proportional, compared with what they have contributed to this society. I feel powerless, actually, despair.

Carol also mentioned feeling helpless:

I also realize that the voices from people of Chinese-origin in Canada are rarely heard...because [the] Chinese group do[es] not participate politically, the government’s decision-making cannot/will not represent their interest in turn. As a result, the government supposes that they can ignore the voice from the Chinese people when they are making decisions. It’s a vicious circle.

Kerry is the only one who indicated a positive attitude about his belongingness to Canadian society. He admits the ID (identity document) paper maintains his belongingness in Canada, but this is largely because he wants to be here. He participates in local communities, and the communities equivalently welcome him to the local society. He suggested that “the Canadian[s] do not really care about where you come from. They care about whether you can make contributions.”

Mechanisms of Enhancing a Sense of Belonging

Since all participants reported that taking leadership roles facilitated their overall sense of belonging, the researchers sought to investigate the mechanisms of leadership that enhanced their belongingness. Carol concluded that leadership facilitated belongingness physically and emotionally. The data collected from the interview questions (outlined in Table 3) suggests that participants acknowledged a physical attachment to a group or an organization which enhanced their belongingness. Moreover, the confidence and familiarity that was generated through their pragmatic leadership practices also facilitated their sense of belonging.

During the last part of the interview, researchers asked participants to provide some suggestions to their Chinese peers, who want to facilitate their social integration in Canada. The phrase “comfort zone” and the word “participate” are highly repeated in their suggestions, and they also gave advice on setting long-term goals.

Participants’ Suggestions

Stepping Outside the Comfort Zone and Participating

Three out of five participants suggested that students of Chinese-origin should step outside their comfort zone, and all participants advised their peers to participate in student groups, or become involved in local communities, to facilitate social integration. For example, Lisa stated that her peers “stay in their comfort zone” and “should stretch themselves out of the comfort zone and force themselves to participate in various events.” Wayson recommends that people of Chinese-origin should participate multidimensionally in Canadian society:

They only live in their social circle and comfort zone...Since they are in Canada, don't be a 'geek.' They'd better move their feet and enjoy the social life in Canada. Participation is a Chinese societal-wide problem but does not exist individually.

With six years of life experience in North America, Kerry experienced self-development by forcing himself to take on challenges:

If you only sit at home with a group from your own origin and always stay in your comfort zone, there is less chance for you to learn new norms or get extra information. If you choose to [get] involve[d] in the local community, you can integrate into this society in a more effective way and have more opportunities. That's my suggestion.

Long-Term Orientation

Except for Lisa, all the participants were born in either 1993 or 1994, which means that they were between the ages of 24 and 26, while participating in this research study. However, they present a psychological maturity, with respect to making a long-term life plan, which is quite like Lisa, who is an experienced professional and homeowner with a family at age 40. They suggest that students of Chinese-origin should not focus on achieving quick results but instead to consider the development of long-term goals before making decisions, specifically, with respect to taking part-time jobs, getting involved in social activities, and engaging in volunteer work.

Carol also indicated that taking a part-time job for a brief period of time might not be that advantageous. She suggested that part-time jobs should meet students' long-term orientation goals or offer chances to work with western peers to facilitate their social integration. Moreover, Wayson noted that, as an international student in Canada, there are

Table 3*Mechanisms Perceived that Improved Sense of Belonging through Student Leadership Roles' Participation*

Interview questions	How does your participation enhance your sense of belonging?	What kind of activities help to improve your sense of belonging in your leadership roles?
Wayson	Physically attached to a group, confidence generated through participation	Attending meetings, name included in the email group, on-site decision voting/making comments
Charlie	Confidence generated through participation	Attending meetings, on-site decision voting/making comments
Kerry	Physically attached to a group, confidence generated through participation	Attending meetings, on-site decision voting/making comments
Lisa	Physically attached to a group, confidence generated through participation	Attending meetings, name included in the email group, on-site decision voting/making comments
Carol	Physically attached to a group, confidence generated through participation	On-site decision voting/making comments

too many norms, rules, and cultural differences to learn. He said that though they may not like it, it is a duty to adapt to the new culture and overcome the challenges associated with it, especially if they want to integrate into Canadian society.

Discussion

The research findings suggest that involvement in extra-curricular activities at one Canadian university leads to student success, which supports Astin's (1999) conclusions. It also demonstrates the assumed theoretical foundation that students' leadership roles benefits students' sense of belonging and social integration. Further, it indicates that taking leadership roles helps international students develop their language proficiency. Here are a few important insights that warrant further discussion.

The Language and Cultural Paradox

The language and cultural paradox refers to the relationship between language and culture when understanding barriers to social integration among Chinese student groups in the Canadian context. Even though Chinese international students learned English at all levels of study in mainland China, and often possess sufficient language competency, they learned the language outside of its cultural context.

Further, the language and cultural barriers are easy to misinterpret in some circumstances. The silent culture is repeatedly illustrated in current research on Chinese international students (Liu, 2002; Xiang, 2017; Zhou et al., 2005). However, Cheng (2000) notes that it is dangerous to over-generalize about East-Asian students' reticence and passivity, while evaluating their engagement or general participation on campus. A study conducted by Wang and Moskal (2019) also illustrated that "silence" is often misinterpreted, and linguistic and cultural factors affected classroom reticence.

The findings of this study display the significance of practicing the English language through involvement in Canada's cultural environments. Proactively using language in specific cultural environments can help overcome language barriers and enhance social integration; however, many students of Chinese-origin often overlook the value of this practice, which is reflected in their limited participation in various on- and off-campus activities.

Sense of Belonging and Social Integration

Sense of belonging is a construct which influences students' success in post-secondary education. When relating sense of belonging, it always comes with social integration. But does being socially integrated equal with having a sense of belonging? Yao (2019) raised an issue that seeking to increase students' sense of belonging is more important than their integration to campus. She holds the view that integration may result in the dominant peer group wielding the highest level and bring pressure on international students.

In this study, most of the participants reported that taking leadership roles can help them learn the social norms and rules embedded in the language people used, leadership roles facilitated both student development and social integration. The findings are consistent with the study's theoretical framework. It also demonstrates the premise of Habermas' theory of social integration (Habermas, 1981). According to Møller (2002), Habermas' theory of social integration regards people's ability to secure cultural meanings, solidarity, social norms, and personal identities as an accomplishment of social integration.

As a result, taking leadership roles is an ideal way for international students to both gain a sense of belonging and acculturate themselves to the new environment without feeling stressed. However, it is also salient for institutions to understand the nuances of belongingness of students from different cultural backgrounds.

Implications and Conclusion

Leadership roles, as a pathway to facilitate Chinese-origin students' social integration and self-development is effective. However, to achieve students' development, students of Chinese-origin, the post-secondary institutions, and the local communities should take collaborative actions.

Students' Actions

Based on the resources offered by the university, there are extra pathways that could enhance student development at Canadian universities. This includes participating in president/vice-president elections, running a student government association, taking on- and off-campus part-time jobs with a long-term setting, and making friends with local students, staff, and community members. Moreover, participation in these organizations and activities helps build local networks, which is vital for finding employment after graduation.

Institutional Actions

The post-secondary institutions are recommended to take a leading role in administering the services referring to international students' social integration, due to their long-standing engagement and frequent interaction with the international student population. In addition to adjusting the program settings, there are much more vital actions that post-secondary institutions should take to facilitate student development and social integration. Both micro-level actions and macro-level actions in the post-secondary institutions should be taken. On the micro-level, workshops and learning groups should be considered. On the macro-level, changes to resource allocation and governance structure should be contemplated because it is at the institutional level that the real processes of integration take place.

Local Community's Actions

The role of the local community with respect to facilitating international students' belongingness to Canadian society is vital. However, its efficiency requires collaboration between the local community and post-secondary institutions. The local community includes both local employers and municipal government. The suggestions on facilitating international students' belongingness into local society are centered on an institution and its collaboration with local employers and municipal government.

The findings of this study have several important implications for future practice. Based on the current findings and literature review, the researchers have identified three key shareholders: students of Chinese-origin, post-secondary institutions, and local communities, which includes local employers and municipal government. Students should consider becoming involved in campus politics and communities and look for employment opportunities on- and off-campus. In addition, post-secondary institutions should consider how to support international students by changing resource allocation and governance structures. Lastly, the local community should collaborate and support institutions to build a win-win model of local development.

Future research should aim to perform three key tasks with larger sample sizes: identifying and understanding the experiences of Canadian-born Chinese students, establishing the benefits of and barriers to political participation through quantitative research, and determining the leadership competencies of Canadian-educated employees of Chinese-origin.

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Yuehua Zhu, MEd, is a unit manager in Manulife-Sinochem Shanghai, where she provides leadership in sales and sales team management. She continues to be interested in testing and verifying how leadership operates in the workplace. Her major research interest lies in finding factors and contributions which lead to personal development, especially in taking leadership roles in variable environments. Email: Zhuyuehua924@hotmail.com.

Clayton Smith, EdD, is a professor in the Faculty of Education, University of Windsor. His major research interests include the promising practices for teaching linguistically and culturally diverse international students, sense of belonging for international students attending Canadian secondary schools, and international students' experiences with discrimination, and microaggression while attending North American post-secondary educational institutions. Email: Clayton.Smith@uwindsor.ca.