ISSUES AND STRATEGIES OF INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN CHINA: THE PERSPECTIVE OF LEADERS

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ABSTRACT

Students and learning issues are two unavoidable terms in the world of education. It is more critical if involving internationall students. Thus, this study examined the issue of international university students in China and their resolutions. To achieve the objectives, interview data were collected among six university leaders. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis methods. Furthermore, this study found the main issue of international university students in China is cultural factors. The solutions implemented by the university are in the aspect of regulation, collaboration with university comuniteis and cross -cultural activities. This study is able to raise awareness of education stakeholders, especially the university communities, to identify issues and resolve them collaboratively so that university students' learning performance increases.

Keywords: Issue, Strategy, International University Student

INTRODUCTION

The internationalization policy of an educational institution, especially an institution of higher education, causes the institution to strive to improve its institutional quality. Improving the quality of education of an institution can be seen from the increase in the number of international students. The views of Wu, Garza, and Guzman (2018) suggest that the decision to attend that institution reflect their confidence in the quality of that institution.

Therefore, most students chose certain developed countries to further their higher education. Zhong Jianfeng (2016) gives examples of international student focus countries, namely the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and several other countries in continental Europe such as Germany. Sandhu (2019) stated that the country was selected by international students because the quality of education and educational opportunities of the chosen country are better in their home countries and there is cultural diversity. Learning options in the selected countries can contribute to the economic development of the students 'home countries (Yeh & Inose, 2019).

In fact, China is no exception to this trend. Johan Nylander (2020) describes the reasons why China has become one of the countries of choice for international students. This is because China has some of the best universities in the world and has relatively low tuition costs compared to Western countries and offers programs equivalent to great Western universities. Sen Gong and Yanfeng Ge (2020, p. 10) describe China's efforts as follows.

> "Higher education in China is a mechanism that is often improved. Most universities in China are introducing new programs and courses, increasing the quantity and improving the quality of universities, especially facilities and admitting students to study in relatively large quantities each year… "

The implication is that there is an increase in the number of international students in Chinese universities. Figure 1 illustrates this statement.
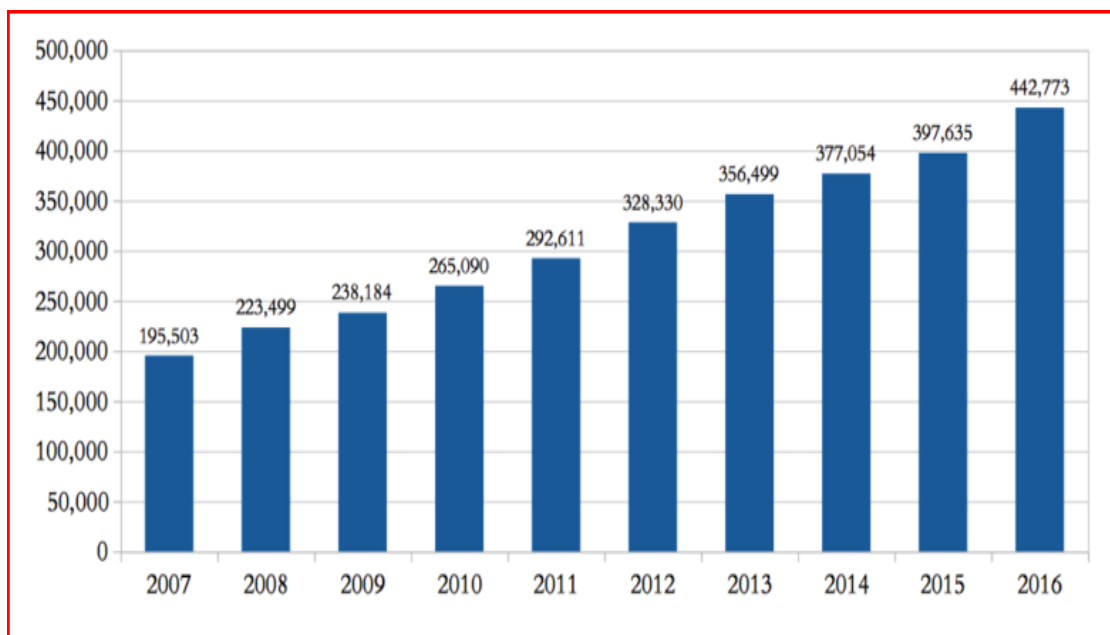

Figure 1. International Student Registration at Chinese Universities
Source. Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China
https://www.chinasource.org/blog/posts/international-students-in-china-an-unreached-diaspora

Figure 1 shows the registration of international students from 2007 to 2016. There was an increase of 11.4 percent from 2015 to 2016. According to the report of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2020), China is the third largest destination after the United States and the United Kingdom for international students who are continuing their higher education. In China, Beijing is the first destination of international students with an average of 77,000 students, followed by Shanghai with 14 per cent of 442,773 total students and Jiangsu (7%) (Zhong Jianfeng, 2016).

The increase in the number of international students in China has changed the demographics of the student population in most universities and challenged the education authorities to review all aspects of education such, as the period of study at the tertiary level. Sen Gong and Yanfeng Ge (2020) describe the quality of education at the tertiary level of Chinese universities through the analysis of graduate students in China, the United States, and Europe.

Table 1
Analysis of Graduate Students in China, USA, and Europe

Year	China	USA	Europe
2000	495,624	1,254,518	1,077,459
2005	1,465,786	1,456,401	1,264,903
2010	2,590,535	1,668,227	No Information

Source: United Nations Development Programme. (2016). https://chinapower.csis.org/education-in-china
Note. * = Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain

Table 1 describes the number of students graduating in Science and Engineering for the three areas in the ten years starting in 2000. Beginning in 2005, China led the world in producing a skilled workforce in Science and Engineering to meet world market demand. This production represents 46.4 percent of the 6.4 million skilled workers in the field, compared to the European countries with 11.5 percent and the United States (9.2%).

The above analysis shows that universities in China find it difficult to accept applicants for study but that it is easy for them to graduate. The views of Qiang Li and Zhigang Yuan (2020) are in line with the statement that the sharp increase in Chinese university graduates in Science and Engineering is based on the phenomenon of supply of skilled manpower in the market compared to the quality of education, especially the duration of study programs and courses offered by universities. Compared to South Korea, their graduates face competition for career opportunities in reputable organizations due to the study duration and course of the program (Chen, 2019).

A collaborative study between Qinghua University and Fudan on the phenomenon reported that western areas or provinces of China experienced a shortage of manpower in the fields of Research and Development and of Capital Operations (Zhong Jianfeng, 2016). At the same time, the eastern part of China suffers from a shortage of manpower in the Technical field (Sen Gong & Yanfeng Ge, 2020). In fact, skilled manpower is concentrated in cities having superior facilities (Johan Nylander, 2020). The implications are that, starting in 2013, the following phenomena have occurred (a) Chinese institutions of higher learning have supplied excess manpower compared to market demand, and (b) new graduates are unemployed more than three times the national standard level (Albert Park, 2017).

In the micro aspect of student self-study, studying abroad is a meaningful experience for individuals. Wang, Brislin, Wang and Chao (2019) agree with this, saying that if an individual moves to a new country, he or she will learn different knowledge, skills and language and meet new friends.

However, some individuals think that moving to a new country is not an easy undertaking. Arkoudis (2016) agrees with this view by stating that international students in China often face   in changing their culture. He adds that the contributing factors to the challenge include their diversity in the following areas: views, culture and language. Similarly Xia, Nuan and Wei (2018)   find   that international students face relatively serious stress in their learning due to language factors, relatively high university expectations, lack of social support and loss of family contact.

 The above discussion illustrates the challenges faced by some international students at some Chinese universities. Lin and Yi (2019) support this view by stating that the findings of this study are able to change the existing government policy, especially on the intake of international students.

However, most studies on international students at Chinese universities are more about identifying the phenomena they face than on solution strategies. For example, Hong Hong's (2017) study entitled "The research of the problems of cross-culture of international students in China", Jiongmei and Fan Zukui (2018) (Causes of cultural conflict in Central Asia and China of foreign students) and Jenkins and Galloway (2019) (The adjustment problems faced by International and overseas Chinese students studying in Taiwan universities: A comparison of student and faculty / staff perceptions).

Thus, there is a need to study solution strategies for the phenomenon, especially with regard to the perspective of policy practitioners such as leaders of a higher education institution. To meet these needs, this study was conducted to explore leaders' perspectives on international student phenomenon and its resolution strategies. Furthermore, the findings of this study can serve as a guide for universities to improve the quality of university graduates in China.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study is to explore the views of university leaders on strategies to solve issues of international university students in China.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section discusses the following aspects.

International Students Versus Foreign Students

UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2018) provides the definition of international students as individuals who move away from their home country or territory for the purpose of study. OECD (2016) supports the definition given above by presenting the distinction between "international students" and "foreign students". According to   the report, the difference   is in the aspect of movement across borders with a specific purpose.

Furthermore, in early 2019, OECD and UIS   collectively defined the term. Both bodies have agreed to define "international students" as students who move across borders with the specific purpose of studying. On the other hand, "foreign students" are non-citizen students who register at an educational institution located outside their home country. "Foreign students" also do not necessarily cross the borders of their country to study.

Based on a European Statistical System (2019) report in mid-2019, the OECD, UIS and the European Statistical System have collectively given a clearer definition of "international students" through the following features.

a)   Permanent residents: international students are recognized for moving across the borders of their country if they are not permanent residents of the country of study; and
b)   Early education: international students are recognized for moving across the borders of their country if they qualify to enter the country of study.

In summary, the terms international students and foreign students have different definitions. They are distinguished in terms of movement from the country of origin and the purpose of the movement.

Global International Student Issues

This section discusses the following aspects.

(a)   Malaysia

The number of international students in Malaysia is increasing every year. A Ministry of Higher Education (2018) report states that in 2018, 170,000 international students enrolled in Malaysian higher education institutions, compared to 30,000 in 2003 and 70,000 in 2010. In percentage form, the data is shown by an increase of 14 percent in 1980 and to 44 percent in 2016. The distribution of these international student countries is Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Africa.

Chen (2019) reported that the medium of instruction for higher education institutions in Malaysia is English and Bahasa Malaysia. He added that for postgraduate studies, English and Arabic have been used and depend on the educational needs of an institution. Issues arise for international students if they are less proficient in English. Yusliza and Chelliah (2016) describe the impact of this phenomenon as follows: (i) failure of students to be actively involved in the teaching and learning process, (ii) failure to discuss effectively with classmates, staff and university lecturers and (iii) the need to modify the English dialect according to the Malaysian context to make it easier to understand.

In addition, the delivery of teaching in Bahasa Malaysia is implemented if local students are the majority in a class, especially   at the undergraduate level (Al-Zubaidi & Rechards, 2019). Thus, the low level of proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia makes it difficult for international students to communicate with local students, resolve issues related to their place of residence and learn local culture (Yusliza, 2017). More worrying   the educational institutions, they experience cultural shock due to lack of support from the community because they lack communication and understanding of the culture of the local community (Chen, 2019). The implication is that international students fail to adapt to their new environment, resulting in their experiencing psychological symptoms such as lack of self-confidence, excessive anger, homesickness, declining motivation, and confusion with self-identity (Hassan, 2016). In conclusion, the issue of international students in Malaysia involves language and cultural differences as well as communication.

(b)   United States

Being a resident in a foreign country is not an easy task. In fact, the situation becomes more complex if an individual becomes a student and at the same time has the status of a foreign resident in the country.

In the context of the United States, thousands of students go there every year to   seek out quality educational institutions, opportunities and space to work. Thus, each of them faces new life experiences. Kuo (2016) lists the main issues of international students studying in the United States: (i) Missing home and cultural shocks. Muramatsu and Harmer (2015) assert that longing for home and cultural shock are issues often faced by international students world-wide. International students in the United States are no exception to this. The reason is that living away from family is painful (Smith & Khawaja, 2017). In fact, such situations force students to adapt to new environments (Krislov, 2019), (ii) socialization. Mixing is one of the other major issues that international students in the United States have faced. Muramatsu and Harmer (2015) state that the issue arises because the United States has hosted thousands of inter-ethnic students. Furthermore, some international students are shy and have a closed-minded attitude toward accepting the new environment and culture (OECD, 2016), (iii) new education system. The United States education system is progressive and innovative. Thus, it becomes   complex for individuals who do not have the basics of the system (Smith & Khawaja, 2017), especially in completing the writing of assignments (Krislov, 2019)

and (iv) language barriers. The majority of the United States population speaks in English. Therefore, international students need to speak the language. Thus, the main precondition or requirement for studying in the United States is the need to have a high level of language proficiency. However, the main issue for international students in terms of language is the slang and accents used by the population of the United States are diverse and difficult to understand (Krislov, 2019). Furthermore, native speakers speak so fast that it is difficult for international students to understand the content of speech (Muramatsu and Harmer, 2015).

In conclusion, the issue of international students in the United States is very similar to other countries, namely the Society, education system and language. The implication is, they face issues in communicating.

(c)   China

The challenges faced by international students in China are nothing new. When an individual decides to study abroad in a country like China, this means that they are ready to face the same challenges as local students. Some challenges that they face are similar to those of international students in other countries.

Among the challenges faced by international students in China are: (i) choosing a university that suits their field. Chen (2019) states that the main challenge faced by international students in China is to choose the right university and one that is to suitable for the field of students 'interests. Chen (2019) adds that this challenge exists because China is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. Therefore, the Chinese government has provided higher education in in a large number of various higher institutions (Hong, 2010). This can confuse students, especially international students, in choosing a university that suits their field (OECD, 2016), (ii) Language factors. Jiongmei and Fan Zukui (2018) state that the language factor is a challenge that is faced by almost every student who plans to study in China. This is because Chinese is a very difficult language to learn for individuals who are outside of China. This situation causes international students to have difficulty communicating with local students, learning effectively in the classroom and managing daily life (Hong, 2010), (iii) cultural factors. Each culture is different based on local factors. China has a diverse culture due to its large population (Lin & Yi, 2019). The implication is that international students have to learn some aspects of this culture to make it easier for them to communicate in daily life (Fan Zukui, 2018) and (iv) Living and accommodation. Among the challenges for international students is choosing a place of residence that suits their culture. Lin and Yi (2019) explain that the majority of international students in China are from the eastern contingent, especially countries where the majority of the population is Muslim. In other words, the choice of residence is more related to religious factors (Hong, 2010). In general, the challenge of international students in China has similarities with international students in other countries especially language and cultural factors.

RESEARCH METHOD

This section describes the following aspects.

Research Design

Research design involves a systematic plan with an inquiry strategy that describes   how research is supposed to be carried out based on certain underpinning assumptions (i.e. paradigms of social research) leading up to the data collection. In other words, research design is the logic through which a researcher addresses the research questions (Creswell, 2017), and gains data for the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2016). Therefore, the research design aims to understand the processes and not the product of scientific inquiry (Cohen & Manion, 2014).

This study applied qualitative method involving interview activities. Creswell (2017) agrees with the implementation of qualitative methods for this study because they are   able to explore an issue faced by an individual or a group of individuals. In fact, critical social issues viewed from various angles are able to be identified by researchers (Punch,

1998). In addition, qualitative study could provide extensive and deep information which can not be obtained through quantitative research. In the context of this study, the researcher was able to conduct fieldwork at a university in order to interview participants who held positions of leadership. In addition, the participants were dealing directly with international students. To support the interview data, the researcher also conducted observation sessions on the behaviour of international students**.**

Sampling

This study applied purposeful sampling. According to Given (2016), this type of sampling is suitable for case studies because the selected sample coincides with the specific case. Given added that the findings of this type of research are not to be generalized but are appropriate to the study of a particular situation only.

This research is about exploring perceptions of university administrators and lecturers or faculties. There are the ones who are considered as the leaders in universities and could provide the best information on the topics investigated. Therefore, it is appropriate to apply snowball sampling. Snowball sampling was also employed by asking respondents to point out other members of their population whom they know. Using this method, the respondents were selected through suggestion from other respondents or investigation about their qualifications such as experience in communication with international students. The respondents were four university administrators and two faculty members. This sample size matches with Creswell's (2015) recommendation that a case study's sample size should be 3 to 5 respondents per case study.

The features of respondent selection were as follow: (i) earned at least bachelor degree, (ii) experience of at least 5 years with international students and (iii) volunteering to involve in this research. Table 2 shows the respondent profile.

Table 2
Qualitative Respondent Profile

Number	Position	Years of Services	Academic Qualification
1.	International Center Associate Director	8	Master
2.	International Center Associate Director	20	Master
3.	International Center Officer	5	Master
4.	International Center Officer	5	Master
5.	Associate Professor	14	PhD
6.	Associate Professor	11	PhD

Table 2 indicates that the majority of respondents had qualifications of at least a master's degree with service to the organization of more than 2 years.

Instrument

An Instrument is a device that is used to collect, measure and analyze data related to the subject. An Instrument helps to distinguish between instrument and instrumentation, considering that the instrument is the device and instrumentation is the course of action i.e. the process of developing, testing, and using the device (Ary, Jacobs & Razavieh, 2014). Instruments fall into two broad categories, researcher-completed and subjectcompleted,

distinguished by those instruments that researchers administer versus those that are completed by participants (Yin, 2015). Researchers chose which type of instrument, or instruments, to use based on the research question.

In this study, the qualitative instrument was used by developing it based on the research questions. Its sections are explained as follow: (i) opening question is to know respondents, more particularly their career and academic backgrounds. This is to build a good relationship between the researcher and respondents in order to make respondents comfortable providing inputs, (ii) introductory questions focus more on introducing the research to respondents such as the purpose and objectives of the research, as well as the research methods (iii) key questions focus on the research objectives in order to get input from answering them, and (iv) end question is to maintain a good relationship between the researcher and respondents in order to get more inputs in future.

Pilot Test

A pilot study was conducted to test the research instruments' validity and reliability. Therefore, the ambiguities and unclear questions could be identified and necessary modifications made (Ary, Jacobs & Razavieh, 2014). This means that the researcher will be assisted in modifying the instrument before carrying out the field work. Silverman (2004, p. 283) states as follows.

> *"Validity and reliability are two important concepts to keep in mind when doing research, because in them the objectivity and credibility of research are at stake."*

To produce reliable and valid knowledge in an ethical manner, a researcher must consider multiple methods to collect, analyze and interpret data. Validity is more important and comprehensive than reliability, as it is harder to evaluate or measure (Ary et al., 2014). The application of validity and reliability is explained as follows.

(i)   Validity

The instrument validity refers to the truth of the propositions generated by research. This means that the researcher and respondents agree about the description or composition of events, especially the meanings of these events (Mason, 2017; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001; Mills, 2003). Validity is a test of whether the collected data accurately gauge what is being measured (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 2002; Mason, 2002; Mills, 2003). Table 3 indicates the interview sessions dates.

Table 3
Dates of Interview Session

Respondent	Interview Date	Review Transcript Return Date
1	November 07, 2018	November 10, 2018
2	November 07, 2018	November 11, 2018
3	November 07, 2018	November 10, 2018
4	November 07, 2018	November 11, 2018
5	November 07, 2018	November 12, 2018
6	November 12, 2018	November 12, 2018

In this context, the instrument validity was done through the following activities.

- **Expert Reviewing:** the instrument was reviewed by three professors from the language and education fields. They are from the United States and Australia. Their inputs were used to improve the instrument;
- **Data recording**: the data were recorded for the purpose of preparing the transcript. Prior to recording the interview data, permission was obtained from the respondents;
- **Respondent review:** the respondents were informed their rights to review the transcripts. Therefore, they were allowed to make amendment to the transcripts. The respondent also used Cohen's Kappa. Cohen's kappa coefficient is a statistic which measures inter-rater agreement for qualitative (categorical) items. It is generally thought to be a more robust measure than simple percent agreement calculation, as κ takes into account the possibility of the agreement occurring by chance; and
- **Respondent language; verbatim accounts**: the conversation of interview sessions was recorded and thoroughly listened to again in preparing transcripts for data analysis.

(ii)   Reliability

The instrument reliability refers to the degree of error that exists when obtaining a measure of a variable. No measure or instrument is perfect; each will contain some degree of error. The error may be because of human factors such as having general skills, negative attitudes or motivation or because of the way the instrument is designed and administered (McMillan & Wergin, 2002).

In this context, instrument reliability was carried out through the following activities.

- **Involvement Agreement:** the respondents were informed were informed of some conditions regarding their rights as informants;
- **University Permission:** Prior to starting the interview sessions, permission had been requested from university administration with regard to international center administrative personnel and faculty members:
- **Replication logic:** the research involved different respondents from various positions;
- **Data analysis**: the data were analyzed using thematic analysis in which the respondents become familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and writing-up; and
- **Position Declaration:** prior to the start of the session, the researcher provided clear information about the respondents' roles in which they have the right to be informed about this research starting from research objectives to findings.

Data Analysis

Analysis refers to breaking a whole into its separate components for individual examination. Data analysis is a process for obtaining raw data and converting it into information useful for decision-making. Data is collected and analyzed to answer questions, test hypotheses or disprove theories (Charles & Gary, 1989).

The qualitative data analysis includes thematic analysis. It is explained as follows. Thematic analysis is one of the most common forms of analysis in qualitative research (Guest, 2012). It emphasizes pinpointing, examining, and recording patterns (or "themes") within data (Braun & Victoria Clarke, 2006). Themes are patterns across data sets that are important to the description of a phenomenon and are associated to a specific research question (Daly & Gliksman (1997).

The producers to analyze the qualitative data   using thematic analysis are as follow.

- **Collecting Data**: Data were gathered from the interview sessions that involved four university management members and two faculty members. Their conversations on audiotape were transcribed;

- **Coding Data**: The researcher coded the data manually. Typically, the researcher coded every two or three lines of text with handles that identify key words, concepts, images and reflections. Coding is an explicit and iterative process in which the researcher will alter and modify the analysis as reflected by the data and as ideas emerge (Heading & Traynor, 2005);

- **Code Validation**: To ensure the integrity of the codes, that they have not been misinterpreted and are free of researcher bias, they were developed and reviewed by more than one individual who is expert in qualitative research. The researcher read and re-read the data, double-checking the codes for consistency and validation. The integration of the codes from the data becomes the codebook from which themes emerge;

- **Themes/Frameworks Identification**: From the codebook, the researcher identified themes and sub-themes, patterns that have emerged from the coded data. Themes can emerge from patterns, such as conversation topics and vocabulary. Other factors could include the frequency of occurrence, occurrence only when certain factors are present, and time of the day, week or month. The researcher is able to define each theme sufficiently so that it is clear to others exactly what the theme is; and

- **Information consolidation, finalize theme names** – The researcher finalized the name of each theme, wrote its description and illustrated it with a few quotations from the original text to help communicate its meaning to the readers.

FINDINGS

Based on the thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews with the university leaders, the challenges encountered by the university students were identified and categorized according to the following subthemes: teaching and learning; regulation and policy; and students' attitude. Likewise, the solutions described by the interviewees were grouped according to the following subthemes: regulation; university communities' collaboration; and cross culture. The aforementioned themes and subthemes will be presented in the following subsections.

Challenges Encountered by International University Students in China

Culture-related issues were highlighted by the interviewees in describing the challenges encountered by the international students in this case university in China. Evidently, most international students were new to the Chinese beliefs, regulations, norms, and values. A university leader reported:

> *"I think for the international students, that is the culture shock. I think this is for all the international students anywhere, they have this kind of feelings about culture shock because it just occurs to me just last year I played with my son in the background and there was an international student, he is a guy and about he's 20 I think so, he just stared at us and smiling but I could feel a little bit about loneliness."* (R5)

Likewise, adjustment to this new culture poses difficulties for new students according to one respondent:

> *"It takes times for students to get familiar with China, who come here with their own culture."* (R2)

Because of differences in culture, international students had a hard time employing diplomatic ways in solving or addressing academic challenges:

"They don't talk with teacher more, they talked to the leader of the teachers. Maybe in China, the first step is talk to teacher , if the teacher cannot solve it, and then talk to leaders, but one student from Italy, he said, maybe I told the leader is better and I can get good results earlier." (R2)

Adapting to the culture and regulations of the university was also described by one respondent as a cultural challenge faced by students:

"Because different universities have different situations, and for us, we also have our own regulations, how to management, how to recruit." (R2)

In relation to culture, language and communication problems emanate from having zero knowledge and skills in Mandarin and less exposure to communication norms in China. For instance, the importance of being exposed to the language was highlighted by one interviewee:

"Language is the most important thing. The program will be taught in English some students, they came to China, can't speak Chinese." (R1)

Consequently, international students could not converse with the local people, especially in terms of practical conversations:

"During or leaving our campus, I'm not sure that everyone can speak English to them, maybe when they go to supermarket buy something the people cannot speak English." (R2)

Furthermore, language barrier impeded students' access to information on university website, which were written in Chinese. An interviewee shared:

"I mean like the names are English and Chinese, but if you go deep like the website, especially for a working system, it's all in Chinese even I don't know things changed or not, because I heard about two years ago that the international student, they cannot see, like the courses online because there's no English version of such kind of system, so I think for the factors to overcome those challenges I think it's just from the whole country level and whole university level, individual level." (R5)

In addition to culture-related problems, the interview respondents reported that challenges with respect to teaching and learning mainly revolved around class participation, learning collaboration, and program registration. With respect to participating in class, one of the interviewees noted that international university students hardly participated in class discussions due to communication issues since "they don't know how to communicate with teachers" (R2). In addition, international students hardly engage in collaborative learning with their colleagues since it is "hard for Chinese students to study together with them" (R2). Moreover, some international students usually made errors in their program enrolment as reported by one of the interviewees:

"For undergraduate students, they may have lots of difficulties during their study in China, especially some students they choose Chinese taught program, and they study together with Chinese students." (R3)

Aside from teaching and learning issues, there was a different admission regulation for local and international students. One respondent explained:

"You know, for Chinese students, they are very hard to come study in BIT, they have very high score to enroll as a BIT student. But for more international students, their foundation is not solid, or strong compared to Chinese student." (R3)

Furthermore, international student admission requirements are not as strict as those for local students. A university leader elaborated:

> *"So I think so far a lot of details, I mean the technological issues or at the university level, for example, the enrollment, of course there is a so-called HSK, that's for the language. There is a kind of examination, and the scores are also included into the enrollment criteria, but the student needn't to study Chinese, so they needn't to take HSK examination."* (R5)

The leniency of the admission requirements for international students was further described by the university leader:

> *"My colleague in school of mathematics told me that nearly all the international students cannot pass the exam. So they have to make up their scores otherwise they cannot pass." (R5)*

Other than system-related issues, students' attitude towards studying could be regarded as another concern from the perspective of the university leaders. Based on the observation of one of the interviewees, there were cases in which the students' vision and aspirations were not aligned with academic goals:

> *"There are also some students and these students are not immigrants I believe, came to China to get a status of students are actually doing business here." (R5)*

On the other hand, the interviewee added how the institutional landscape and goals affected students' attitude:

> *"Of course BIT has changed the situation a few years ago, because BIT is one of the top university in China, the enrollment criteria is quite now strict, so it means the quality of newly-enroll student is good, but just go back to about 10 years ago, this is also there such phenomenon even in BIT, some students came here not for study, they just would like to have a kind of like student visa status to stay here, to do business or just stay in China. I think this is another challenge." (R5)*

Solutions in Response to Challenges Faced by International University Students in China

In response to the reported challenges encountered by international university students in China, the university administrators explained various solutions in terms of creating and implementing regulations, advocating collaboration among university communities, and embracing cross-culture acceptance.

Regulations

Under the regulations employed by the university to help international students, the university leaders highlighted the existence of strict national policies in recruiting only outstanding students from other countries. According to an administrator:

> *"Chinese government and Chinese universities are just making policies and also the teaching methodology to introduce the most outstanding students, I mean talented people to this country, just like abroad a few decades ago, all the talents from the Europe and Asia went to the states." (R5)*

Although the implementation of this policy remains in question, the university administrator expressed his optimism:

> *"And the second is about the real action, so the universities and the offices and schools, teachers whether they fulfill those policies and regulations, this is the second one." (R5)*

Once the students got admitted into the university, clear guidelines were expected to be communicated to the students with the use of a handbook that contained university and national policies:

"It covers every aspect, like how regulations about their dorm, the academic performance, visa. It is according to the government policy and we have our own regulations. They will have the handbook when they enroll the BIT, the regulations they need to know and they can check and we also explain everything." (R3)

In order to address culturally related concerns, an orientation week was regularly conducted for international students to know more about the culture of the university and communities in China as explained by one interviewee:

"For culture shock, we solve this problem during orientation weeks, and we have a lot of lectures about the culture shock to tell students what difference between the Chinese culture and your own culture." (R2)

With respect to language and communication challenges, the university clearly stipulated that English is the medium of instruction for international students.

"We also have English taught program, fully English in class. Most international students are taught in English, some students choose Chinese taught program." (R2)

On the other hand, the university encouraged the use of Mandarin by making sure that international students attended Mandarin courses for daily usage as explained by the university leader:

"So even for English taught program student, we have Chinese language courses for them to study for at least one year. So they can talk some Chinese in their study and daily life." (R2)

Collaboration with University Communities

The university in this case study was reported to have an international center with activities to aid incoming and current international students. Mostly extra-curricular and support activities, the programs offered by the international center were designed to enrich students' experience as explained by an administrator:

"I think it heavily rely on course in the university, so I think in BIT our office for international students have a lot of work. The students' academic experience is connected with the academic school. But just in the extracurricular time they offered for international students organized a lot of activities, I believe my colleagues have introduced a lot like badminton like sports games like a calligraphy learning like Chinese martial arts and also, they have different clubs societies to organize international students together. They have like to Gala festival, just make students feel at home." (R5)

Another perspective from an interviewee described how the academicians from this university assisted students with culture problems by giving "lots of lectures to help them know more about this [culture]." (R2) Likewise, volunteer senior students were also invited to assist international students as explained by another interviewee:

"Sometimes we will have student-volunteer group, for the new student have some problem, and we will ask them who can help them and make friends with them." (R3)

Cross Culture Initiatives

Since the challenges encountered by international students generally revolved around cultural and behavioral concerns, the university administrators believe in institutionalizing cross-cultural programs and policies:

> *"First one is the whole environment which is made up of the policies and people's real actions and also the capacity of the whole society to accept people from outside, so I mean the whole environment including the policies, regulations, this is the one." (R5)*

As such, social acceptance was deemed necessary in order to help International university students adjust not only in life in their campus, but also in their larger community as expressed by one of the interviewees:

> *"The third one is about the capacity of the society to accept international students, because you know China is very different, we are not immigrants country. Although we are a country of multi ethnics, we do not receive a lot of people from outside of the country so and even the whole countries regulation is behind the development." (R5)*

DISCUSSION

The responses from the interviews with administrators from a university in China revealed the current challenges faced by international students and the solutions that the university had in place to address the students' concerns. As shown in Figure 3, the challenges described in this study revolved around culture, language, communication, teaching and learning, regulation and policy, and students' attitude. These problems, primarily characterized by differences in cultures and by the lack of capacity to adjust in cross-cultural situations, could be addressed by regulations, collaboration with university communities, and initiatives embracing diversity.
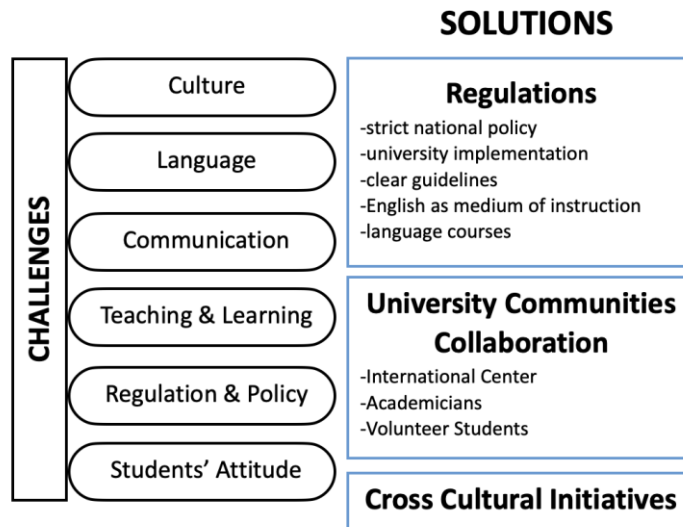

Figure 2. A synthesis of the challenges faced by international students and solutions

Particularly with respect to culture, the challenges faced by international students in universities in China are also experienced in different parts of the world where the population of international students has been steadily increasing. Experiencing culture shock in a new environment seems to be a universal phenomenon experienced by international students due to lack of cognitive and behavioral preparations (Chen, 2019; Krislov, 2019; Li & Yi, 2019).

The inability of international students to adjust in a different culture affects the way they use language and socialize in a culturally different environment, which also negatively affects their attitude towards the people around them and the society in general (Muramatsu & Harmer, 2015; Yusliza, 2017).

On the other hand, specific difficulties in adjusting to the teaching and learning processes, as well as the regulations and policies, reflect the setting and situation of the international university students in China. Given that international students in Chinese universities find it difficult to participate in class discussion because they cannot communicate well with their instructors and their classmates, the learning dynamics get disrupted and hinder students to perform well in their studies (Jiongmei & Fan Zukui, 2018). This could be attributed to the notion that Mandarin is a highly complex language for foreign students to learn, which prevents them from expressing themselves during class discussions and in casual interactions outside of their classroom (Chen, 2019; Hong, 2010). Likewise, the differences in the regulations and policies of the universities in China and in other parts of the world could be attributed to ideological and bureaucratic factors that divide global perspectives. For instance, since students from the United States grew up in a democratic, liberal environment with regulations and policies advocating free speech, adjusting to a restricting and communal society could be hard for them to embrace (Krislov, 2019).

From the solutions presented by the university administrators in this study, certain measures could be adopted by students, university personnel, and institutions in order to minimize the difficulties faced by prospective and current international university students. Using a top-down approach, institutions should carefully craft and consistently implement programs and policies that embrace cultural diversity, which forms the tenet of universities as an international community. In this manner, adjusting to their new environment will be easier and smoother for foreign students with institutionalized programs in place to guide students and personnel to achieve cross-cultural aspirations. Moreover, specific programs or workshops intended for university personnel could help develop the capabilities of lecturers or support staff to interact productively with students from different cultures. Though the university in this study has activities like orientation week and student volunteer groups, incoming international students should develop the proper mindset before moving to their new environment, in order to prepare themselves for the cultural differences and accept a reality different from what they used to.

CONCLUSION

In the case of international university students in China, studying in a new environment comes with a wide array of academic and personal challenges stemming from cultural and behavioral differences. Being aware of these issues, universities have laid down solutions to ensure the smooth transition of international students in the Chinese society and to minimize the stressors students deal with in and out of the campus. Although this study has reported the current challenges of international university students in China, alongside the solutions from the perspective of the university administrators, it would be helpful to look at the situation of international students in other universities in China and in other countries by using a comparative approach. In this manner, incoming university students from different parts of the world could be well-informed of the challenges they may face and the solutions they could partake in order to have a meaningful, worry-free university life. More importantly, given the trajectory of the influx of international university students in China, academic and societal institutions should continue to provide the necessary support to international students through cross-cultural programs and policies, designed and implemented with the needs of the students and the socio-cultural trends in mind.

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