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Article abstract

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Support Services at a Francophone University in Quebec: Contrasting Viewpoints of Chinese International Students and University Professionals

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study showcases the viewpoints of Chinese international students and university professionals about the services offered at a francophone university in Montreal regarding “welcoming” and “integration.” Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 participants, of which 14 were students and 8 university professionals. Using the concept of care, we conducted a thematic analysis. According to the analysis, students point to the lack of effective support, while

university professionals discuss the support offered and its pitfalls. In terms of recommendations, we stress the importance of tackling current structural issues rather than putting the responsibility for the quality of the experience on students' shoulders. We also emphasize that professionals who provide services directly to students must be given proper training and resources through universities to enable them to change the current paradigm and offer services that reflect the concept of student care.

Introduction

Chinese international students constitute the second-largest group among all international students in Canada, comprising 10% of the population, following India (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2024). In Quebec, Chinese international students also rank second after students from France, making up 12.2% of the international student population (Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur, 2021). Despite this representation, on the one hand, these students have to deal with issues related to learning the local language (Xing et al., 2020), sociocultural adaptation (Dong & Aubin, 2012) and racism (Grayson, 2014; Houshmand et al., 2014). On the other hand, universities, including those located in Montreal, provide services to all students on campus, as well as services specifically dedicated to international students—services aimed at welcoming and integrating them, that is, services that aim to support their arrival and their “integration” to the university, for example: linguistic and academic writing support services, information on procedures to follow before their arrival in Canada and during their stay concerning immigration procedures, medical insurance and life in the city of Montreal. Considering the structural issues faced by these students mentioned above in terms of language, race, etc. and the services provided by universities to attempt and respond to these issues, we ask: what do the students think of these services? And what are the viewpoints of university professionals working on these services about the services provided? These questions allow us to better understand the students' experience and the view of the institution on the subject to be able to improve students' experience in universities in Canada. Against this background,

this qualitative study features the viewpoints of Chinese international students and university professionals about the services offered at a francophone university in Montreal. Semi-structured interviews were conducted among 22 participants, of which 14 were students and 8 university professionals. We then carried out a thematic analysis of the recurring themes using the concepts of care (Banda et al., 2020) and deficit thinking (Davis & Museus, 2019).

Challenges Faced by Chinese International Students

Research into the experiences of international students at universities reveals a variety of challenges (Banjong, 2015). Adapting to a new context requires support services (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007), highlighting the importance of targeted support to manage obstacles of a linguistic (Hughes, 2005; Onabule & Boes, 2013), academic (Arthur, 2017), and financial nature (Onabule & Boes, 2013) as well as barriers to well-being (Ellis-Bosold & Thornton-Orr, 2013).

Among international students, those from China face challenges abroad, particularly in Western countries, including Canada. Their path is marked by a series of obstacles, affecting various aspects of their integration (Cao et al., 2021; Chen & Zhou, 2019). The language barrier proves to be the first major challenge, leading to more difficulties for them to follow the course lecture in class, participate in discussions, and communicate effectively (He & Hutson, 2018; Yu & Moskal, 2019). In Quebec, a lack of fluency in the French language leads to difficulties and a feeling of being excluded from the province's French-speaking majority in daily life (Soares et al., 2023). Culturally, Chinese international students undergo acculturation, a process involving the adaptation to different customs, norms, and values of the host country. This cultural adjustment requires considerable effort and can impact their psychological well-being (Cheng et al., 2020). Separated from their families and familiar environments, these students often experience loneliness, isolation and anxiety (Tu, 2016). At the same time, adapting to a new education system that values active engagement in the classroom

marks a significant change from the approach in Chinese education, leading to study-related stress (Ross & Chen, 2015; Zhang & Zhou, 2010). The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified feelings of isolation and introduced additional layers of discrimination and xenophobia (Guo & Guo, 2021; Magnan et al., 2022). This heightened scrutiny has made social integration more difficult, leading to further marginalization. These issues faced by Chinese International Students show the importance to better support them, including through university services.

Chinese International Students' Experience of University Services

When it comes to services available to international students, most studies have focused on a single service, be it health-related (mental health) services (Han et al., 2013; Li et al., 2021), library services, writing assistance (Liu & Winn, 2009; Zhou et al., 2017) or career counselling services (R. Huang & Turner, 2018; Li et al., 2021). Research carried out in Western countries on the usefulness of these services reveals that they are underutilized by Chinese international students (Ellis-Bosold & Thornton-Orr, 2013). This is often attributed in academic literature to cultural differences, concerns about confidentiality of consultations, and anxiety over language and cultural barriers (Jarrahi, 2004).

As far as resources are concerned, Chinese international students do not seem to be aware of the existence of a wide range of services (Liu & Winn, 2009). The studies also point out that Chinese international students are more likely to turn to their Chinese relatives, peers and friends for help, rather than using university services (Cao et al., 2021; Lian et al., 2020).

In any case, research into the use of university services by Chinese international students is limited in Canada, with a notable absence in Quebec. Current literature highlights the students' perspective, emphasizing the need to understand their experiences and the need to recognize the challenges they face (L. Huang et al., 2020). Nevertheless, when it comes to the underutilization of university services,

the angle of analysis adopted often tends to explore the challenges lived by students, such as a lack of fluency in the language of schooling, so-called cultural differences, or a lack of knowledge, rather than questioning the possible pitfalls of the services offered by universities. As a result, the university professionals' viewpoints are virtually absent from Canadian research. It is important to know their viewpoints because these professionals are the ones in direct contact with the students, they provide services to the students. For example, studies conducted outside Canada have shown differences between the perceptions of Chinese international students and those of university professionals regarding the quality of university services (Zhu & Sharp, 2022). In fact, according to Zhu and Sharp (2022), university professionals tend to have a more positive perception of the services offered than the students.

In Canada, and more specifically in Quebec, the consideration of diverse voices — those of students and professionals — is crucial for a detailed understanding of service effectiveness and, ultimately, for the transformation of services and practices in place. The objective of this qualitative study is therefore to showcase and compare the viewpoints of Chinese international students and university professionals regarding current services at a francophone university in Montreal. It is important to compare these two viewpoints because students and university professionals might have different views on the services provided by universities. In fact, it is important for university professionals to be aware of possible limitations of the services provided to adapt if needed. Comparing viewpoints can help identify gaps, which then allows for thinking differently about services in order to improve them. This can generate critical reflexivity among university professionals and decision-makers, and it allows for a dialogue between the different parties involved, that is, the beneficiaries of the services and those who provide them.

Theoretical Framework

We base our analyses on the concept of care (Banda et al., 2020). We have chosen this concept to carry out a critical analysis of welcoming and integration services offered to students. In education, the concept of care is used to advocate changes in teacher–student interactions (Banda et al., 2020). However, we use it here to reflect on the relationship between university professionals and students, and more specifically in our case, Chinese international students.

Care does not simply mean meeting institutional standards; it concerns the closeness between the care provider and the students who are cared for (Noddings, 2008). However, care is relational; there is therefore not just one way of providing care. It is built up through interaction, to enable the necessary adaptation to each young person (Dempsey, 1994). Critical researchers have also pointed out that power relationships and social categories influence how individuals interpret the concept of care (Thompson, 1998). In this sense, when considering systems of oppression such as racism, critical researchers stress the point that care cannot be performative (Valenzuela, 1999). In fact, to make social transformation possible, it is important for care to create possibilities for countering systems of oppression, such as capitalism, based on the political commitment of professionals providing services in favour of social justice (Darder, 2002; Nash, 2011).

The aim would be to move away from a deficit thinking approach. Deficit thinking refers to a way of thinking in which historically oppressed populations are seen in terms of their “shortcomings” and “deficiencies,” which are linked to individual or cultural traits. This way of thinking does not allow us to focus on the structural inequalities generated by institutions and policies (Davis & Museus, 2019). Through deficit thinking, it is the values of majority groups that guide the identification of these “gaps” in historically oppressed populations, and shape the political discourses and practices valued in education (Davis & Museus, 2019). In this sense,

a number of discourses on the welcoming and integration of young people from oppressed groups may echo the deficit thinking approach, particularly when it is argued that it is up to individuals to adapt to educational institutions, rather than the other way around (Soares, 2024).

Methodology

Based on critical epistemology and methodology (Cohen et al., 2017), we conducted semi-structured interviews (Barbot, 2012) lasting about an hour on Zoom with Chinese international students and professionals providing student support services. To allow for the comparison of their discourses, we conducted a case study, that is, a detailed study of a specific subject, in this case, the focus on a single francophone university in Montreal (Roy, 2021). We do not identify this university to protect the anonymity of the participants. For recruitment purposes, we used the Facebook platform and the snowball technique. Interviews were conducted in French or English (according to the participant's choice)¹. For Chinese international students, the criteria for participation were to be a Chinese international student enrolled in a university program at the chosen university. A total of 14 respondents were interviewed, including 4 bachelor's, 8 master's and 2 doctoral students. We have chosen to include students from different academic levels because they can face different issues as international students. We chose a heterogeneous corpus in terms of academic levels of study and duration of studies in order to detail multiple aspects of the student experience (e.g. at the bachelor's level, the master's level and the doctorate level). The students chose a variety of study programs. At the time of the interview, they had already been in their study

¹ The study has methodological limitations. Even though language is a barrier for this community, we were unable to conduct the interviews in Chinese due to budgetary constraints for the transcription and coding of the data. We did not have a budget for the subsequent translation of the data, as the majority of team members were not native Chinese speakers.

program for varying lengths of time, some for less than a year and others for several years, which makes their experience complementary for the data analysed. We use pseudonyms when quoting students in the article. As for university professionals, the criteria for participation were that they provide services to students at the chosen university. A total of 8 respondents were interviewed. We have chosen not to divulge their socio-demographic and professional data to preserve the confidentiality of their testimonials, but we can disclose that they have different and complementary jobs, some are in direct contact with the students and some work in management positions concerning the services provided. We have also chosen to use numbers rather than pseudonyms to refer to them, so as not to allow them to be identified. We chose not to run the risk of associating social attributes with pseudonyms, e.g., first names linked to gender, country of origin, etc. The research was approved by the Université de Montréal's *Comité plurifacultaire d'éthique de la recherche* (Multi-faculty Board on Research Ethics).

We took an inductive analysis, that is, we selected the theoretical framework after collecting the data to ensure it was relevant for our analysis. More precisely, we conducted a thematic analysis to identify recurring themes (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2021). The research was carried out in two stages: 1) interviews with Chinese international students and subsequent analysis of their interviews; 2) interviews with university professionals, who were asked to respond to our analysis of the student interviews. We asked the professionals general questions about international students before specifically addressing their experiences with Chinese international students, because Chinese students can experience similar issues to other international students.

Results

From the perspective of the Chinese international students, the data highlighted the lack of effective support and, from the perspective of the university professionals, we found a focus on student welcoming and integration services,



including their pitfalls. Regarding the students' viewpoints on the lack of effective support, we have identified the following three sub-themes: 1) lack of services or lack of information about services; 2) choice not to use current services due to lack of time; 3) lack of availability of services or dissatisfaction with services received. Regarding welcoming and integration services for students, according to university professionals, we have identified the following two sub-themes concerning their practices: 1) institutional support for welcoming Chinese international students; 2) institutional support for integrating Chinese international students. More precisely, through these sub-themes, they indicate two moments/needs of international students (including Chinese international students), valued by the institution in terms of services: welcoming and integration. Thereafter, we undertake a critical analysis of these themes through the use of concept of care taken from our inductive theoretical framework that we further explore in the analysis section.

Chinese International Students Discourse on the Lack of Effective Support

Students interviewed expressed both satisfaction and dissatisfaction toward university services². We have chosen to focus on their dissatisfaction in this article, with a view to identifying ways in which services can be improved. By highlighting the limitations of services, students point to gaps in the university's care for them.

The students we interviewed pointed to a lack of information about available university services, leading them to seek support elsewhere. Shaohong says: "I

² The students interviewed mentioned both positive and negative experiences in terms of the services provided by the university. However, in this article, we chose to highlight the negative points mentioned by them in order to contribute to the improvement of the services provided, since by emphasizing the shortcomings of the services, students reveal gaps in the university's support for them. Another article will focus on the positive points highlighted by the students.

want to talk to counselors, but I don't know where I can find counselors. So, I talk to my friends to help me overcome my problems." They also mention a lack of services specifically tailored to international students. Shan says: "I think there is like fewer resources paying attention to the international students. That's how I feel. I don't know if that's true, but I just think that I had a hard time asking anyone." Students also mention not using university services due to lack of time. Beichen says: "I was trying [...], but recently I was too busy because I have the final paper I have to do." Thus, we can see in these extracts how being properly informed of services available is essential to students' wellbeing and how the students interviewed believe that there are not enough services specifically aimed at international students' needs. Furthermore, it is important to highlight that due to expectations from universities in terms of study load to succeed, some students emphasize the feeling of not having enough time to actually take advantage of the services provided by the university.

The students interviewed also mention that some services are not always available. Fang says: "The thing about the counselling is that whenever you book, it takes really long. I have to wait for like one or two months to get to see the therapist." Some students find current services unhelpful. Shaohong says: "There are language support classes, but I think that the class, it's not ... it's not suitable for me." Sometimes, they feel that the support offered is not helpful, because the information they receive is not always clear. Tiange points out: "I tried to ask for some help from the secretary of the faculty, but her answer was really confusing, so I think it was useless to me." In these extracts we see how lack of availability of services as well as lack of clarity about the services provided can affect negatively the students' experience in university.

These results corroborate research findings which point to the fact that Chinese international students may not be sufficiently informed about available university services (Liu & Winn, 2009; Yan, 2017) and would prefer to solve their problems without seeking help from the university (Cao et al., 2021; Liu & Winn, 2009). Furthermore, according to other research, Chinese international students cite

either lack of time as a reason for not using university services (E. Yu, 2023), or dissatisfaction with current university services (Onabule & Boes, 2013). As for the lack of university services or lack of availability of current university services, this finding is stated in previous studies reporting on the experiences of international students in general and, specifically, those of Chinese international students (Ang & Liamputtong, 2008; Soares et al., 2023).

University Professionals' Views on the Welcoming and Integration of Students

Universities offer services to students in general and, in some cases, to specific communities. In this article, we focus on what professionals have to say about the services offered to international students and, more specifically, to Chinese international students. In the interviews, they place a great deal of attention on their work concerning the university's aim of welcoming and integration services for students. Their discourse is contradictory, at times based on deficit thinking, responding to the university's expectations (e.g., defending the idea that students must adapt to the university) and at other times reflexive and critical, highlighting the limits of the services offered (e.g., specifying structural issues such as racism).

Institutional Support for Welcoming Chinese International Students

As far as the welcoming of students is concerned, according to the professionals interviewed, international students refer mainly to the professionals they know at the start of their university career for all kinds of needs: "We really are their first point of contact. So, they will often contact us with all kinds of questions" (Participant 1). Participant 1 gave examples of questions frequently asked by international students: "How do I find a place to live in Montreal or what are the immigration formalities? How does health insurance work?" (Participant 1). Some professionals sometimes take actions that can be understood as seeking to care for students, since they say they go beyond what is provided for in their service offer in order to be able to support students:

Even though it is not our department that deals with these aspects, we are the ones who receive these kinds of questions, because we are the ones who started the process with the students. So, they know us, they communicate with us, so we try to answer these questions too (Participant 1).

In fact, according to professionals, international (Chinese) students are not sufficiently aware of the services available: “There’s a lack of awareness of resources available to them” (Participant 2). For this reason, Participant 2 believes that welcoming activities should be mandatory: “There are many activities out there, but we seem to have trouble reaching international students. So that’s why I’ve come up with the idea of having mandatory welcoming activities” (Participant 2).

The university’s website can also serve to inform students, but professionals admit that it is difficult to find information within this space: “Even I have a lot of trouble finding information” (Participant 1). They have difficulty finding even the services they offer themselves: “What I find most difficult is navigating the website [...], I have trouble finding the page for my service” (Participant 3). In these excerpts, we note a reflexive and critical stance on the part of professionals regarding the way students are informed about the services offered.

We can see in these previous extracts what kind of questions international students have and how important it is for the university professionals to properly support them, especially when they first arrive at the university. We also learn about how important the website is in terms of offering information to students, but how it is actually difficult to find the information needed in this space.

Moreover, according to them, the information available may not be sufficient, because international students continue to have questions: “I answer emails, I answer questions, [...] my god. We get so many questions” (Participant 1). Thus, we note that professionals seem to be aware of the lack of information available to students. However, they share a different perspective when it comes to Chinese

international students. According to them, they tend not to ask them many questions, which corroborates the view of the Chinese international students we interviewed: “We get very few questions from these students, which to me means they’re autonomous and resourceful enough to find solutions on their own and understand what’s required of them” (Participant 1). In fact, Participant 1 believes that international students from Asian countries in general would not ask many questions: “Asian people are not necessarily used to asking for help” (Participant 1). She believes they would be therefore less aware of existing services:

They’ll be even less aware of them than other students, because even if other students are unaware that they exist, they might go and ask questions, go and consult different people, so they end up learning that they all exist. But an Asian student will just remain in a state of confusion, won’t consult anyone, and will never know that these services exist. (Participant 1)

According to professionals, Chinese international students also tend to inform themselves in social networks through groups created by them, which can sometimes lead to misinformation: “Chinese students will often create groups on WeChat, for example, and then they’ll often exchange information in that group [...], but we know that sometimes they’ll share the wrong information” (Participant 1). Thus, we note how university professionals expect that students ask them questions about their needs, which does not seem to be typical, according to the professionals interviewed, of some students, including Chinese students.

Participant 3 also reflects on the format of welcoming sessions, about which international students may be unavailable to receive information:

They have welcoming sessions at the university, but [...] at the same time, are students ready to receive the information they’re given at the time they’re given it? You land, then you’re in the middle of moving, then you’re stressed about getting ready for the new school year, then you have a welcoming session. (Participant 3)

In the above excerpt, we note a reflective and critical stance on the services offered. We note that, like the students interviewed, the professionals reflect on the limits of the services offered, especially those aimed at international students. In fact, professionals seem to be aware that services are not always known or available, or are considered unsatisfactory by students:

Sometimes students are unaware of the services available to them. Other times, they make the effort to seek services out, they make the effort to participate, and then they realize that “Ah, it doesn’t really meet my expectations or there are no more spots available or it’s a disappointing experience”. (Participant 1)

This lack of availability is caused by a situation of having more demand than supply, according to professionals: “There is the issue where we are experiencing an increasing number of requests. The cases are increasingly complex, so they require more and more resources, and we do what we can” (Participant 3). There may be insufficient staff to meet current demand: “It would take a really big staff to meet all the demand” (Participant 2). Professionals believe it could also be a budget issue: “I can imagine there must be a budget issue” (Participant 3). These statements could make us wonder why there is more demand than supply, and why this situation persists.

Professionals point to waiting lists for psychological support. In fact, in the professionals’ discourse, the notion of “urgency” is used to determine how to place students into these lists: “Students will be placed on waiting lists according to the level of urgency of their situation” (Participant 2). The analysis of the level of urgency is used to establish the wait time to access this service and, according to professionals, students have to accept this approach: “I think we are still making the services quite accessible to students, but it is certain that students must also understand that we cannot all find ourselves in a state of urgency and then have access to a psychologist” (Participant 3). In this sense, if a student is judged as “functioning” well by professionals, they may have to wait longer: “If you arrive,

and you're functioning well, and you want to do some personal development, it's true that you may wait longer to see a psychologist" (Participant 3). These discussions highlight how services, especially those related to mental health, are built around the logic of urgency. This approach would be at odds with the concept of care, responding to the expectations of the university rather than meeting the needs of the students.

Institutional Support for the Integration of Chinese International Students

In terms of integration, professionals point out that certain services are available to all students but are used more by international students. Some services are more in demand, including those related to decoding the local student craft and access to "psychosocial" support: "They arrive here, they don't yet know how things work academically, sometimes they have psychosocial problems, sometimes they're lonely" (Participant 2). As for the local student craft, according to professionals, Chinese international students encounter plagiarism-related issues: "We understand Chinese students are often over-represented in academic integrity services. They play a major role in plagiarism complaints" (Participant 7). As for loneliness, domestic students would tend to band together and, consequently, so would international students:

The students who have followed each other along the way, who have completed their college studies, who are coming to university, well they're all going to band together. Then there are the international students who will band together. I'd say a full integration is more challenging.
(Participant 3)

We note in these excerpts how professionals seem to be aware of the tendency of domestic students to band together and, therefore, international students as well. According to them, welcoming and integration activities do not appear to solve this problem. Professionals have also reflected on the importance of offering preventive, rather than reactive services: "How can we stay in touch with these

students so that they don't come to our department in distress, and so that we can promote health instead of trying to find a cure?" (Participant 2). For example, Participant 2 suggests offering activities to create links between domestic and international students as well as between international students:

So, the student isn't doing well, and we're going to work to help them feel better, but couldn't we be more preventive, so that as soon as they arrive at the university, we can set up activities and things to encourage bonds between domestic and international students, but also sometimes between international students together? (Participant 2)

In this sense, professionals are calling for improvements to the services offered in terms of welcoming and integrating students: "We're always trying to improve. [...] I really hope that we'll find solutions to better welcome and integrate these students, that they'll feel part of the university and that their experience with us will be a positive one" (Participant 2). We note in their discourse the university's expectations regarding the importance of student participation:

I think there are a lot of international students who manage to get involved, then thrive and integrate through their time at university, so I don't think there's any shortage of opportunities. I think it comes to the challenge of getting people to understand all the benefits that come from getting involved and taking advantage of university to do more than just go to classes, but to experience student life, then community life. (Participant 6)

In the previous excerpt, services seem to be perceived from a deficit thinking approach, since it is implied that students should adapt to local values (e.g., ask questions, try to participate in proposed activities, etc.), which turns out to be at odds with the concept of care. For example, when international students report feeling excluded (a social issue), this problem is redefined by professionals as a problem of isolation (an individual issue), which moves away from the concept of care, since it is suggested that the student has a deficiency (isolation) that should

be addressed, rather than tackling the structural issues affecting the student's university life (social exclusion):

As professionals and service providers, we certainly work on the individual. We can support the student. For example, if the student tells us that they are isolated, then we're going to look at what activities are available on campus to facilitate integration, group activities (Participant 3).

In this excerpt, we can hypothesize that structural issues that transcend the individual are treated as individual issues. In this way, individual actions are put forward (e.g., students should take part in proposed activities so as not to feel isolated, etc.) rather than reflecting on the limits of the experience offered by the university to international students (e.g., issues of exclusion arising from interactions with peers, etc.).

However, some participants, including Participant 3, acknowledge that these are structural issues, while indicating that they feel powerless about them: "I think that the issue that we need to work on is more systemic in nature. I'm not going to intervene in classes and be like 'You have to be friends with the international student who just arrived'" (Participant 3). In fact, this participant believes that domestic students are not adequately prepared by the university to welcome international students: "We welcome a huge number of international students, but we don't necessarily prepare the [domestic] student community to welcome them or to be sensitive to the realities these students face" (Participant 3). In that sense, this participant also believes it is important to understand the reasons behind the "difficulty of integration":

I think there's also something deeper to look at than just the difficulty of integration, which is often the lingering symptom, because behind it lies something else. Sometimes it's that 'I've been through something difficult, and now I'm too stressed to leave home.' It could be: 'I don't have any money, so I can't sign up to any activity' (Participant 3).

In fact, the student is referred to different services according to the analysis of their case:

Is the student isolated, precisely because they have the impression of experiencing racism within the classroom? [...] Is there a gap in their education, do they have the impression that everyone else functions in a certain way, but they function in a different way, and that they have difficulty understanding and integrating at university? (Participant 3)

This participant understands that there is a combination of issues. For example, the need to work and at the same time the need to get good grades so as not to be excluded from the program:

Sometimes, these are students who also need to work [...]. Well, I have to work, but at the same time, [...] I have to maintain good grades. Because I can't afford to be kicked out of my program, otherwise I'll lose my visa. Just in terms of systemic realities, what these students are experiencing is overwhelming (Participant 3).

We note that some professionals seem to be aware of current structural issues but feel they cannot act on them. Furthermore, Participant 3 acknowledges the difficulty of understanding the reality of students, especially when there are racial and cultural differences between professionals and international students: "I try to project myself into the reality of what the student is telling me, for me it's more complex perhaps than for someone from the student's culture" (Participant 3).

We notice an awareness of the limits and obstacles in their interactions. The fact that most professionals may not share the same attributes in terms of race, language, etc. with some international students seem to affect, according to this participant, communication between them and the students and, consequently, the quality of services offered.

Participant 5 also mentions the notion of care. She emphasizes the importance of care when offering services to students in general: “We want to offer a good service to everyone. The fact remains that there are certain services that need to be adapted or targeted, in other words, it is related to what we call caring” (Participant 5). She defines care as the act of taking care of the student’s well-being:

Caring, for example, has to do with the student’s well-being, e.g., their physical and mental health. It can be about social life, it can even be about housing, it can be about all of that, perhaps even about approaching difficulties in terms of rules. [...] It can be about providing support in finding one’s way around the university, so if a student arrives here, and it’s their first time, well, of course, we want to take care of them, that’s what care is all about. So, it means taking care of the student so that they are as comfortable as possible, as happy as possible, as fulfilled as possible within our walls (Participant 5).

In the excerpt above, we can see how the concept of care is rather linked to the individual and not to structural changes. In other words, care with the aim of bringing about their adaptation to the institution and not the other way around. In fact, even though this participant emphasizes the role of the university and professionals in relation to the care of students, she links care to the necessary adaptation of the international student to the university in terms of valued local values:

Some don’t speak the language yet, some don’t know the cultural codes, some don’t necessarily know the academic teaching culture here, the rules. [...] Sometimes it’s about information on how to function in the classroom, the codes of conduct. Therefore, all this ought to be properly communicated to the student upon arrival (Participant 5).

Professionals thus find themselves within a contradictory situation in which, on the one hand, they take up the institutional discourse on the need for the individual

to adapt to the institution and, on the other, they criticize the institution and the way it deploys services to students who encounter institutional and structural obstacles. In this sense, their discourse is sometimes more dissonant with the concept of care (e.g., priority lists according to emergencies), sometimes more in tune with the concept of care (e.g., offer services beyond their mandate, e.g., taking time to answer student questions). The fact remains, however, that there is an expectation that students will adapt to the university, rather than for the university to adapt to the students.

Discussion

From our analysis, we identified two viewpoints among the research participants: Chinese international students emphasizing the lack of effective support, and a contrasting focus of the university professionals on the importance of welcoming and integrating students and the pitfalls of these services. The students interviewed pointed out the limitations of the services offered, as they report a lack of services or a lack of information on the services available. In addition, some choose not to use the services due to lack of time or dissatisfaction with current services and/or their availability. The university professionals we interviewed seem to be aware of the issues Chinese international students face and the limitations of the services provided. Throughout the interviews, these professionals offer reflections on the limits encountered and even refer to the notion of care to refer to the students' well-being. Despite their apparent awareness of structural issues (such as racism), the fact remains that services are offered with a deficit thinking approach, with the implicit expectation that students should adapt to the university and not the other way around (Davis & Museus, 2019; Soares, 2024). This result is also corroborated by other research studies that highlight this expectation on the part of universities (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Soares & Magnan, 2022). Thus, the institution expects students to seek help when needed, and to understand and accept the limitations of current services (e.g., waiting lists). In fact, the institution expects them to adapt to the way the university works in order to succeed in their studies.

Professionals seem to be caught up in the institution, since even when they note limitations, they are bound by the system. Some professionals, in a reflexive posture, criticize current services and try to offer services based on their conception of care. For this reason, it is interesting to reflect on the concept of care proposed by critical researchers (Banda et al., 2020). The notion of care is mentioned by professionals, but their interpretation of this notion and, in particular, its practical application does not necessarily correspond to the definition of the concept of care as defined by critical researchers, since their perspective remains centred on the expectation that students must adapt to the institution (Banda et al., 2020). We therefore note a tendency towards deficit thinking in terms of both welcoming and integration (Davis & Museus, 2019; Soares, 2024). Professionals proposed the implementation of certain practices (e.g., informing domestic students about the reality of international students). Some are also critical and reflexive when they point out that they are part of a staff made up, in particular, of people from the majority group who do not share the same experiences as those of the students they serve, which can limit the possibilities for authentic care (Knight, 2004). Furthermore, despite their apparent awareness, professionals seem to be limited in their work; they feel that the offering of services is restricted by certain elements, notably the lack of sufficient resources (e.g., more demand than supply).

In light of our analyses, we recommend that universities and their social actors act on current structural issues, rather than resorting to a deficit thinking approach that puts the responsibility for the quality of the experience on the shoulders of students (Davis & Museus, 2019; Soares, 2024). However, as the professionals who provide services directly to students also seem to be affected by the system, we propose recommendations not only for these professionals, but also for those in positions of power to make decisions at the institutional and structural levels. For professionals who provide services directly to students, we recommend an authentic care approach (Banda et al., 2020). In this sense, we recommend that they base their services on forging closer relationships between professionals and students to better understand their experience (Banda et al., 2020). In fact, the best

way to support a student may be to inform them about how the system works and the consequences (positive and negative) of adapting to it, but from a reflective and critical stance (e.g., awareness of macrosocial issues) (Sosa-Provencio et al., 2020). As for decision makers, we recommend that they review professional hiring policies (to achieve greater representation of the different groups making up society) and orient their service offerings towards minoritized people to co-construct solutions aimed at social justice (Banda et al., 2020). For these and other measures to be put into practice, the way we think about student services needs to change. University professionals should receive the training and resources they need from the university to be able to change the paradigm and offer student services based on the concept of care. In this sense, a reflection on the university's priorities in terms of management (e.g., budget) must be carried out by the people who make these decisions. Therefore, while care is geared towards bottom-up rather than top-down actions (Ochoa, 2011) (in this case, understanding how university professionals can act in relation to the services offered), top-down actions are also essential.

Conclusion

Considering that the Chinese international students interviewed highlight a lack of effective support given through university services and that the university professionals interviewed present a contradictory discourse on welcoming and integrating students and the limitations of the services offered, our study offers a unique contribution because it compares two sides of a same social situation: the viewpoints of (Chinese international) students and the viewpoints of university professionals on services provided by the university. This comparison allows universities to better understand and respond to this situation. The critiques expressed by the university professionals, such as the comments concerning the budget for services provided, and the views of the international students, can be useful for senior university decision-makers. We take away from this study the importance not only of listening to and taking into account the students'

experiences, but also of actually improving the services provided to students from a caring position rather than a deficit thinking approach.

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