Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Chinese Higher Education: A Reflection upon International Student Support

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed overwhelming challenges to higher education around the world. It has significantly affected the internationalization of Chinese higher education. The University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC), as the first Sino-foreign cooperative university in the country, has witnessed a growing number of international students from 70 countries and regions in recent years. In response to the pandemic, the University has developed a series of strategies to support international students on campus and overseas. Through a case study approach, we explore the significant problems encountered by international students during this challenging time and the services and support provided by the University to help them cope with such challenges. It proceeds to reflect upon effective measures implemented so far and lessons learned. We aim to provide useful experience and advice for higher education professionals responding to issues pertaining to international student management and services in times of crisis.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, higher education, international students, student affairs, University of Nottingham Ningbo China

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a prolonged impact on the worldwide higher education system. It has changed the entire setting for universities' teaching and learning and comprehensively influenced students' campus life. Being an

essential part of support to students' lives on campus, the UNNC student affairs team faced significant challenges during the pandemic, especially when in-person interactions were completely restrained and avoided.

The University of Nottingham Ningbo China, the first Sino-foreign cooperative university in China established in 2004, has set up an accessible example during the pandemic. International students, accounting for 10% of the entire student population at UNNC, have faced unprecedented challenges during the pandemic. In addition to acculturative stress, they also encountered restrictions for epidemic prevention and a general atmosphere of global uncertainty. A series of policies and strategies were established to support international students' mental and physical well-being in responding to the situation. This article examines attainable practices that UNNC has taken to help international students cope with challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. The scenarios were selected as they were significant issues faced by the University and the particular student groups, which at that time required prompt intervention in a professional context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The predictable increase in the international student population, attributed to a general trend of internationalization in higher education since the twenty-first century, led to an unprecedented issue for higher education institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. International students' impediments during such a global health crisis are characteristic of pandemic-era circumstances and need additional attention, especially compared to local students (Chen, Li, Wu, & Tong, 2020). Recent studies, which focused on international students' living and learning experience during the pandemic, have emphasized the significance of recognizing the potentiality of the population facing mental health issues, severe financial conditions, academic workload, and passive attitudes (de Velde, Buffel, & Bracke, 2021). Further, international students in China experienced a period of great anxiety, uncertainty and stress, and their experiences provide fertile ground for research. Current studies of international students in China reported a similar trend of the population living under a struggling condition. According to a survey conducted by Wang, Hujjaree, and Wang (2020), 59.4% of international students in Changsha, China reported depressed, and 37.8% reported anxiety. Also, Xu (2020) emphasized that the distressing isolation encountered by international students in China could be ameliorated by formal social support. Therefore, by noticing the critical circumstance that international students faced during the COVID-19 in China, the practical experience that UNNC has had are worth discussing and reviewing; while potential suggestions and guidance that this reflection can provide might be helpful for peer institutions to formulate applicable mechanisms in supporting international students in times of crisis.

DISCUSSION

Four main challenges encountered by international students at UNNC were raised in this section, with all scenarios, solutions, and reflections provided in detail.

Although strategies to cope with such issues can be exclusive to UNNC, reflections on these cases are worth sharing with industry counterparts worldwide.

UNNC under the COVID-19 pandemic

Being the first Sino-foreign university in China, UNNC had many international students and staff before the pandemic: there were over 800 international students who represented circa 10% of the total registered student population. Due to the COVID-19, almost 75% of international students were stuck overseas with online learning, while the remainder stayed on campus and went through a complete lockdown since January 2020. Both groups of students underwent a time of anxiety and uncertainty when the University and even the world have little experience in facing such a challenging situation. UNNC has nevertheless explored practical ways to assist international students in academic learning, campus life and social activities during the pandemic.

Major Issues 1: How to establish a stable connection with international students during the pandemic?

Scenario: Given that almost 75% of UNNC international students went back to their home countries before the national lockdown, it was difficult to form connections with these overseas students after the University officially resumed on-site teaching and learning. On the one hand, UNNC needed to commit itself to ensuring a safe environment for students living on campus; on the other hand, the outbreak of COVID-19 cases in overseas students' home countries has seriously disrupted their normal life, making cross-border communication more challenging than ever. Moreover, some of the countries encountered devastating situations where even daily essentials like medical supplies and electricity could not be secured.

Solution: Email was the first approach to reach out to students in China and overseas. Students were requested to fill out forms providing their most updated contact information, including current location, most recent phone number, social media account (if applicable), and emergency contact number. According to the information provided, students were then contacted via phone calls to check their health condition and if they had any specific needs. Students were invited to a WeChat group based on their preferences. The aforementioned processes were handled by Student Support Advisors (SSAs) in the Department of Campus Life, who provided day-to-day support to all students, including international students, during the regular operation of the University.

Reflection: The changing of communication is one of the biggest challenges during the pandemic. Communicating with students via email could deal with students' daily inquiries in most situations; however, the pandemic greatly increased both the frequency and the quantity of inquiries. How the University should keep connections with overseas international students at a higher frequency and not affect their privacy and comfort under such difficult conditions required profound deliberation. Students' needs during the pandemic also varied,

which tested the SSAs' intercultural communication skills, appreciation, and patience.

Major issue 2: How should international students' learning be supported during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Scenario: The lockdown of cities and temporary closure of universities under the epidemic situation have interrupted the conventional teaching and learning activities in the majority of the higher education institutions worldwide. UNNC encountered the same issue when many international students were stuck in their home countries and should inevitably choose to move their learning online. While the University made extra efforts to ensure its onsite teaching and learning, it received a lot of concerns and inquiries from international students overseas regarding plans for remote learning.

Solution: A number of classrooms were renovated with new IT technologies to facilitate online and offline teaching activities during the epidemic period. Distance learning was used to enable online students, particularly international students, to join the class in real time. Course recordings were uploaded to online learning platforms for those who were in different time zones. The University also developed an advanced "cloud invigilation" technology to ensure that every assessment was timely delivered and as fair as possible.

Reflection: Solutions to online teaching and learning activities with digital tools provided a more convenient choice for international students overseas so that they could access real-time lessons from home. This helped international students receive interactive teaching even if they could not physically join the classes. The use of technology also guaranteed international students' learning experience even after the University resumed its onsite teaching and lessened their concerns of being disadvantaged in teaching and learning.

Major Issues 3: How to accommodate on-campus international students' daily living needs during the most challenging lockdown time?

Scenario: The local society went through a challenging time during February 2020, which affected the university's operation in various ways, including campus access and catering services. UNNC made contingency plans to ensure necessary food supply on campus; however, it was difficult to meet the demand of international students with special diets. The limited food choices in canteens became an influential factor that might exacerbate students' negative feelings while being restrained in one area without further instructions. In addition, many international students were used to cooking for themselves, but they could not purchase groceries from outside due to the restrictions on entering and leaving the campus.

Solution: Student Support Advisors (SSAs) from the Department of Campus Life reached out to all on-campus international students and called for interest in setting up a volunteer team for daily support. Five international students formed the volunteer team; they were responsible for collecting students' dietary needs and assisted the canteen staff in daily preparation. Considering the cooking needs of some international students, the team also offered assistance in purchasing groceries off-campus weekly. The volunteer team served for over two months until UNNC resumed its on-site teaching and learning.

Reflection: Forming volunteer teams was an effective approach to support international students on campus under such unpredictable circumstance. International students, who joined this volunteering team, provided more accurate assistance through peer-support mechanism since these volunteers obtained better insights than most local staff into real needs of international students and could act as a bridge to facilitate communications between the University and student groups. These volunteers also perceived in-depth understandings of the University's operation through frontline services, which helped them develop confidence in UNNC and even the country's epidemic prevention arrangement. The inclination of sharing positive messages about the university's support and arrangement, therefore, greatly relieved the fear and uncertainty of international students living on campus.

Major Issues 4: How to provide on-campus activities for international students while still complying with social-distancing policies against COVID-19?

Scenario: The University's epidemic prevention and control policies were updated regularly as a response to the constant change of the COVID-19 situation. These arrangements included both quarantine and restrictions on outings and gatherings, which substantially restricted the possibilities of holding social activities for students remaining on-campus. However, considering the inability of on-campus international students to return home or travel in China, the onsite activities become a magnificent alternative for releasing pressure. The design of activities nevertheless needed remodeling. The purposes and goals of on-campus activities thus changed to provide international students more opportunities to have in-person interactions.

Solution: Providing online sessions and forums and forming WeChat groups were the first approach that was adopted when physical gatherings were not permitted or strongly discouraged by the government. International students found this quite useful from the inception, and the platform also turned out to be a channel for expressing suggestions and concerns. After the restrictions were lifted slightly, the University aimed to restart small group activities for students. These activities were designed for only around ten students and included subjects like group discussions, Chinese traditional culture workshops, reading salons, and other small-scale activities. International students, therefore, had chances to enjoy in-person interactions after an extended campus shutdown. Off-campus activities, such as day trips, museum visits, and city tours, were later reintroduced to this group of students after physical gatherings and short-distance travel were permitted.

Reflection: Whether these activities could be held for on-campus international students was fully dependent on the campus COVID-19 arrangements and policies. However, the delivery methods of activities and the contents could be varied and sometimes altered based on the needs of the changing situation. The pandemic has fundamentally changed the way people communicate and interact, and catalyzed the need to innovate in how we deliver social activities. While online teaching and learning will inevitably become a new trend in international higher education, student activities also need change and innovation under such critical circumstances.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has produced unprecedented challenges to international students globally. Much of the emerging literature on this topic identifies international students as a demographic in particular need of support from their institutions in a time of crisis. Student affairs professionals across the higher education sector have greatly supported international students from various perspectives during the pandemic. Being a global university that holds many international students, UNNC was thus appropriate in providing case examples and relevant experience for other institutions as references. The four scenarios presented are intended to display specific challenges encountered by international students, including fear and uncertainty, online teaching and learning, restriction on-campus access and facilities, and limitation of social activities, and how UNNC intervened to assist in essential services such as connecting and communicating with students, supporting students' academic and social life, and enriching their campus experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, it is important that universities and colleges should retain and optimize their services and support to international students including but not limited to teaching and learning support, wellbeing support, social support, and if possible, employability support which is not mentioned hereby in face of global crisis as COVID-19 pandemic, because these students can always share with their peers about issues they have encountered and a full range of support they have received based on their direct experience. This really counts towards the long-term success and reputation of a university.

FUNDING

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