Chinese international students in Australia: An insight into their help and information seeking manners

Cao Ling
Gansu Lianhe University: *ling.cao.cathy@outlook.com*

Ly Thi Tran
Deakin University: *ly.tran@deakin.edu.au*

Understanding the ways that international students seek information and help in the host country is essential for improving academic, social, cultural, and welfare support for this student cohort. However, there is a dearth of literature that documents how international students in the vocational education and training (VET) sector do so. This paper aims to fill this gap. Based on in-depth interviews with 30 Chinese international students undertaking diploma and associate degree programs in Australia, this research shows that the ways in which Chinese international students seek help prior to their departure and after their arrival at the host country, largely depends on the nature of the issues they confront. The data also reveals that students' use of education agents is not limited to the pre-departure stage, as is indicated in the existing literature, but throughout their journey in the host country. Notably, the role of agents has become increasingly important in Chinese international students' decision-making processes during their transition from diploma to associate degree and higher education programs.

Keywords: international students; Chinese students, vocational education; diploma, help seeking; information seeking.

INTRODUCTION

Academic and social support from host institutions along with international students' help and information-seeking mechanisms significantly affect their overseas study experiences and welfare. In spite of many studies on academic adaptation and the challenges international students encounter, little has been documented about the ways international students seek and use information related to their courses (Chang, Alzougool, Berry, Gomes, & Smith, 2012). There are insufficient literature concerning the formal and informal help-seeking sources and networks upon which international students rely when dealing with issues related to their study, government departments, accommodation and employment, finance, visa and health insurance.

This paper reports the findings from a study that aimed to investigate the information-seeking and help-seeking behaviours of Chinese international students in vocational education and training (VET) programs. In Australia, tertiary education involves two sectors: higher education (HE) and VET. Public VET colleges are often referred to as technical and further education (TAFE) institutes. Currently, there are more international students enrolled in the Australian HE sector than the VET sector. Most studies on international students' experiences tend to focus exclusively on the HE sector (Tran, 2013, 2013a; Tran & Nguyen, 2013). Nevertheless, in July 2014, there were 118,388 international student enrolments in the VET sector (Australian Education International, 2014).

The study draws on in-depth interviews with 30 Chinese international students. In terms of the formality of help-seeking resources, the research indicates that agents, teachers and course coordinators appear to be the formal sources that this cohort of students turns to for consultation. Peers from the same national background, parents and relatives act as the informal and private help-seeking sources. The existing literature highlights the role of agents as providing advice to students at, mainly, the pre-departure stage of their overseas study (Chang et al., 2012; Dempsey, 2010; Yang, 2007; Zhang & Hagedorn, 2011). This research reveals that agents are, actually, a common source of information and advice for Chinese international students in vocational education not only during their pre-departure stage but also throughout their study journey in the host country.

This paper begins with a discussion of the literature relating to the common approaches that international students use when seeking information and help during their pre-departure and study stages in the host country. It then discusses the methodology used in this research before addressing the main themes emerging from this research. The themes include the role of agents, parents and relatives, teachers, course coordinators and friends. The paper concludes by highlighting the need for better recognition of the extent to which international students turn to agents for information and help at both the pre-departure stage and at critical periods of their study in the host country.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' APPROACHES TO SEEKING INFORMATION AND HELP

Despite significant efforts of host institutions to provide information for international students to support their study and life in a new culture, little is known about how the students search for, access or use such information (Chang et al, 2012, p. 2). Recent studies have highlighted the significance of acknowledging the role of social networks of international students in shaping their information-seeking and use behaviours (Chang et al., 2012; Kashima & Loh, 2006; Sakurai, McCall-Wolf, & Kasima, 2010). Chang et al.'s (2012) research, in particular, calls for an examination of international students' ways of accessing, using and sharing information based on the classification of their social network groupings rather than the traditional way based on their national identity. The authors argue, "international students are complex individuals with differing identities and information needs that are not solely located in the country/region where they are born in" (p. 1). Chang et al.'s study showed that international students–regardless of country of origin–whose social networks are dominated by those from their own home countries and by a mixed group of students obtain information about prospective courses and institutions prior to their pre-departure from agents, family and websites for overseas studies in their home country. However, international students whose social networks are dominated by those from various countries and by Australian domestic students relied mainly on agents and relatives–in the same way as the previous group–but also relied upon their institutions' websites and home country embassies (p. 9). Importantly, students from all social network groupings draw on international websites for information and turn to staff within their department for support to deal with academic issues.

Personal recommendations or word-of-mouth referrals of former alumni, peers, and relatives have been identified as key sources of information for international students when making decisions about their study destinations (Chen, 2006; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Prugsamatz, Pentecost, & Ofstad, 2006). Prugsamatz et al.'s (2006) finding revealed that word-of-mouth is an important source of information for students to when choosing international education providers. Pre-departure word-of-mouth information is also sought by international students to help them become more informed about how to effectively adjust to the new environment. Chen's (2006) study identifies three common types of word-of-mouth messages of shared by international students:

service information, personal experience, and personal advice. Notably, the nature and role of word-of-mouth as an influential source of information for prospective and existing international students may change due to international students' increasing engagement with social media, especially Facebook, in recent years.

The important role of agents in providing information for international students prior to their departure has been addressed in recent literature (Chang et al., 2012; Dempsey, 2010; Yang, 2007). In a report titled *Best practice in education agent management*, Dempsey (2010, p. 15) indicated that agents–categorized as providing basics services–are expected to offer the following to prospective students:

- Easily accessible promotional materials
- Basic information about market features
- Course counselling
- Advice on student educational application processes
- Assistance with visa applications
- Pre-departure orientation
- Evidence that the institution is reciprocally represented by the agent.

These are pre-departure stage services; agents are not expected to provide assistance and counselling beyond this stage (Dempsey, 2010; Yang, 2007).

Peers, staff and family appear to be important sources of help and support for international students in the host culture. A survey (Fallon, 2006) of 314 international students from Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Hong Kong and mainland China in a pre-tertiary program in Australia shows that 157 out of 284 students who needed help and sought further information about their study relied on their friends (55.3%), college professionals (23.2%) and family (18.3%). The finding from this study indicates that universities need to develop peer networks and student mentoring to enable newly arrived international students to quickly establish friendship with enrolled students.

In a study of international students at a Queensland university Hambrecht (2006) also found that all participants turned to friends and relatives for support and those who were studying in Australia for the first time were unaware of welfare, student equity, financial and counselling support services The majority of students were aware of accommodation, employment and health-support services, but were less willing to draw on face-to-face support services due to the embarrassment and anxiety associated with their identity not being kept anonymous.

In terms of seeking psychological help, some American studies indicate that Asian and Latino international students' underutilisation of professional mental help seems to result from common practices and traditional beliefs in their cultures (White, 1982; Wilton & Constantine, 2003). International students who did use counselling tended to give up midway rather than relied on the service to their full treatment (Mori, 2000). Several Chinese and Japanese international students in a study by Flum (1998) reported they were unfamiliar with mental health counselling, which is an underdeveloped service in their home countries. The association of shame with need for support with emotional and personal problems is often cited as the major reason for international students' negative attitudes towards relying on professional help (Flum, 1998; Zhang & Dixon, 2003). Other related beliefs, which may explain students' avoidance of formal mental health resources, include the assumption that it is individual's responsibility to deal with those problems on one's own (Yoo & Skovholt, 2001).

In dealing with academic aspects, Asian international students have been portrayed as passive learners and, thus, hesitant to seek help with academic concerns (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Samuelowicz, 1987). Yet, studies by Tran (2008), and Prescott and Hellstén (2005) offer a different lens on this aspect by elaborating on international students' initiatives in seeking help from their lecturers and other sources. These studies also reveal that the ways academics respond to international students' initial attempts play an important role in making students feel invited or reluctant to seek further support. Based on case studies of Chinese international students in Management and Education at an Australian University, Tran (2008) identified common methods used by students for seeking help and unpacking disciplinary requirements. These include interaction with academics and utilisation of support services at different institutional levels. In particular, Chinese international students in Tran's study appear to be capable of adopting self-help strategies along with seeking help through interaction and dialogue with their lecturers through face-to-face consultation with the lecturers, emails to the lecturers, and discussion with the lecturers in class.

While Tran's (2008) participants showed their willingness to seek further help when in need because their efforts were positively met by the academics, Prescott and Hellstén (2005) reported that newly-enrolled international students felt discouraged in approaching their lecturers for help to deal with their study issues after an embarrassing encounter with their lecturers. For instance, one respondent described her experience:

The thing is they know that I'm struggling because obviously I go to them for help. But in the way they answer my questions or in the way they put it, it just makes me feel like, oh I shouldn't ask them again . . . So basically, even if I am struggling I know I'm not going to go there again because I embarrassed myself one time and I don't want to embarrass myself again. (p. 82)

Another international student in the Prescott and Hellstén study recalled how he lost his confidence in raising his concerns and asking the academics for help when one of his lecturers responded to his request after class by "holds the bag and goes quickly out of the classroom" (p. 82). Remarkably, as indicated in the Prescott and Hellstén's study, the notion of "independent learning" in Western institutions can be misunderstood by newly-enrolled Asian international students and linked to the need to learn by one self rather than asking questions and relying on the teacher and peers for help. So, misunderstanding of "independent learning" may lead to the tendency by international students to avoid seeking help when in need.

The discussion above reveals that there is a significant body of literature that examines the varied help-seeking and information-seeking mechanisms international students, particularly Asian international students, utilise in the higher education setting. However, the manners in which Chinese international students in the vocational education context–with their different aspirations and concerns–seek help and information regarding their distinct educational pathways seem to be overlooked. This study is an attempt to address this gap in the literature.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The qualitative study reported on in this paper draws on data gained from semi-structured, open-ended (Merriam, 1998), in-depth interviews with 30 Chinese international students studying at three TAFE schools located in a dual-sector University. Students studied for Business, Design or Engineering qualifications. The TAFEs were chosen because of the large number of Chinese international students enrolled in them.

Table 1 shows that of the 30 participants, 12 were female and 18 are male; and 27 of the participants were between 18 and 22 years old–only one student was under 18 and two above 22. Ten of the 30 participants have been in Australia for more than two years; 17 for one to two years; two for less than one year, and one for less than one month.

Table 1: Demographic data of the participants

Data	No of participants	Data	No of participants
Age		**Discipline**	
Under 18	1	Business	9
18 to 22	27	Design	7
Above 22	2	Engineering	14
Time in Australia		**Level of study**	
Less than 1 month	1	Associate Degree	11
Less than 12months	2	Advanced Diploma	5
12 to 24 months	17	Diploma	12
24 to 48 months	10	Certificate IV	2

Table 2 shows that two study participants were undertaking Certificate IV studies, 12 were engaged in diploma studies, five in advanced diploma studies and 11 in associate degree studies.

Table 2: Demographic profile of each student and their courses

No.	Gender	Course	Level
		School of Business	
1	F	Accounting	Certificate IV
2	M	Commerce	Diploma
3	M	Commerce	Diploma
4	M	Commerce	Diploma
5	F	International Business	Diploma
6	M	International Business	Diploma
7	F	Commerce	Diploma
8	M	International Business	Advanced Diploma
9	M	Accounting	Diploma
		School of Design	
10	F	Design	Diploma
11	F	Interior Design	Diploma
12	M	Design	Diploma
13	F	Design and Interior decoration	Advanced Diploma
14	F	Design and Interior decoration	Advanced Diploma
15	F	Certificate IV	Certificate IV
16	F	Design	Diploma

		School of Engineering	
17	F	Engineering	Diploma
18	M	Electronics Engineering	Advanced Diploma
19	M	Civil Engineering	Associate Degree
20	M	Electronics Engineering	Associate Degree
21	M	Electronics Engineering	Associate Degree
22	M	Electronics Engineering	Associate Degree
23	M	Electronics Engineering	Associate Degree
24	M	Mecanical Engineering	Associate Degree
25	M	Mecanical Engineering	Associate Degree
26	F	Mechanical Engineering	Associate Degree
27	M	Mechanical Engineering	Associate Degree
28	M	Civil Engineering	Associate Degree
29	M	Civil Engineering	Associate Degree
30	*F*	Electronics Engineering	Advanced Diploma
Total	**30**		

The interview topic was centred on Chinese international VET students' views on their study aims, their help seeking behaviours and their transitional pathways. Key interview questions were: Where do you seek for information prior to your departure and during your study in Australia? What kind of information and help do you seek? Does the different sources provide relevant information? How different sources influence your application process?

Ethics approval was gained prior to data collection. The recruitment of Chinese international students to participate in the research was assisted by the international student coordinators of the TAFE schools. Participants were requested to sign a Consent Form and read the interview questions before the interview. Participants' names are kept anonymous in order to protect their identity. Data collected from interviews with Chinese international students were translated from Chinese to English–most Chinese students preferred to conduct the interviews in their mother tongue (which was also the native language of the first author) because it made them feel more free and comfortable to express their views.

All the collected data was in the form of anonymously notes taken throughout each interview. The analysis was inductive and aimed to identify emergent themes and patterns (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The researchers read the interview transcripts several times and then coded interview data, linking the themes to the relevant issues suggested in the literature. The researchers then located these factors in the broader context of international VET in Australia.

The emergent themes show that Chinese international students in vocational education and associate degree programs seek help and information from diverse sources. The following discussion is ordered according to frequency of sources of help mentioned by respondents.

EDUCATION AGENT AS THE MAIN SOURCE OF INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

Education agents appear to be the main source of information and support for Chinese international students enrolled in VET and associate degree programs throughout their overseas study journey. Twenty of the 30 participants shared their experiences of relying on agents for information about the study destination, program selection, and transition.

Prior to their departure, students turned to agents for general information pertaining to the destination countries, reputation of the institutions, entry requirements, and tuition fees. Most often, agents first evaluate individual student's academic transcripts, language competency, and personal information. Based on their evaluation of these factors, agents then suggested different options to accommodate students' needs. After deciding upon their study plans, Chinese international students rely on agents for assistance with the application process. For example:

When I decided to study in Australia, education agent assessed my overall performance in high school and advised me to study foundation courses first then apply for university. (Female, Associate Degree in Mechanical Engineering)

I came to Australia without finishing high school. The agent suggested and helped me to study foundation courses for one year. (Male, Diploma of commerce)

I studied foundation course in Chengdu, China before I came to study TAFE courses in Australia because the agent told me to (study foundation course). (Male, Previously studied Advanced Diploma in Electronics Engineering)

Agents often recommend that a student studies a foundation course when they believe a student is not ready for tertiary education or not qualified to gain a direct entry to a program in Australian tertiary education; for example, students who have not finished secondary school and those who intend studying programs with high requirements in mathematics. Students' interview accounts indicate that course counselling based on assessment of students' academic records is regarded as one of the major services that education agents offer for international students. This echoes Dempsey's (2010) finding concerning the role of agents at the pre-departure stage.

Students are most concerned with how to engage in study for a degree and will seek advice on the path for achieving this aim. If students' initial purpose of applying for degree study cannot be achieved, the agent often recommends a vocational or associate degree program as an alternative pathway. The articulated path influences their choice of the country of education and institution.

Yes, I applied with the help of agent . . . I am studying Certificate IV now. The agent helps me apply because there are some changes in Australia's international study policies, students under eighteen cannot apply for bachelor degree directly . . . I don't want to spend time studying English. The agent advised me to apply for certificate first, then . . . Diploma, then transfer to bachelor study . . . I think it's easier to transfer from TAFE to Bachelor study in the same Uni. (Female, Certificate IV in Accounting)

I have been studying Diploma of Interior Design in this university for one-and-a-half years. Next year I will begin my study for a bachelor degree . . . I came to study in TAFE of this university because the agent–I mean the overseas study agent–they advised me to take this pathway in Australia . . . It will only take me three years to get a bachelor degree in the same university. I can get two internationally recognized certificates from this Uni when I graduate. (Female, Diploma in Interior Design).

The above excerpts reveal that agents keep Chinese international students informed of the program duration and transitional process. The student in the first excerpt, for example, graduated from a secondary school in China and the agent explained to her that she could not apply for degree study directly because she was under eighteen years old. The agent suggested that she should study VET courses first and then transfer to degree study to avoid delay. Students welcomed the recommendation for pathways in a relevant discipline to be undertaken in the same institution as well as the ability to attain two internationally recognized certificates.

After their arrival, students gradually become accustomed to life and study in Australia. Compared with their peers who started directly in degree studies, VET students start at a relatively lower standard in terms of academic requirements and often have to undertake more transitional steps. While they seek information from multiple sources, they still trust agents for advice on the transitional process and options and study plans. For example:

The agent helps me plan my study in Australia, I was told the duration of each program. It will take me six months to finish (certificate IV), then I can study Diploma course for another one year, then I can transit to HE to study for a bachelor degree in another one and half years. So it takes me three years to get a bachelor degree. (Female, Certificate IV in Accounting)

I study information technology in this university, it's a bachelor program . . . No, I studied in foundation courses first then Diploma. The agent helped me to study foundation courses first. After that, the agent advised me to study a Diploma first then another two years for a bachelor degree. (Female, Previously studied Diploma in Engineering)

After foundation course, they (agent) advised me to study associate degree then Bachelor. The agent will help arrange my transition. (Male, Associate Degree in Mechanical Engineering)

Interview data in this research reveals that students seek advice from agents to help formulate their study plans and transitional issues. This contrasts with Zhang and Hagedorn's (2011) research findings, which indicate that agents' support in transitional periods is rare in the US. However, it supports their findings that agents play an important role in assisting Chinese international undergraduate students to apply to US higher education institutions. Chinese international students undertaking VET studies tend to rely more on agents for their transitional issues than their counterparts in the HE sector. They feel comfortable with communicating with agents who speak their language and are familiar with individual cases. Notably, agents provided advice throughout students' learning journey in Australia, particularly in relation to the transition from VET to HE. The finding of this study challenges the commonly-held assumption in the literature about the role of agents which is centred on the provision of assistance and counselling concerning the selection of institution and course, visa application and orientation, which occurs predominantly during international students' the pre-departure stages (Yang, 2007; Dempsey, 2010; Chang et al., 2012).

This finding differs from the previous study by Yang (2007), which found that education agents' recommendations and consultation are the least important for students in the higher education sector. Zhang and Hagedorn (2011) indicate that students who are younger and rank lower in senior secondary school are less prepared for academic study, especially overseas study. Since international students in VET programs at dual sector Universities are less prepared for undertaking degree study straightforward, they seek help from education agents to deal with the complexity of and the transitional pathways in the host country. The findings from this study confirm Chang et al.'s (2012) findings that education agents are an important source of pre-arrival information and for help with applications for universities. This study complements Chang et al.'s research and adds to the existing literature about the role of agents in influencing international students' decision-making about their study destinations and courses throughout their learning journey. The finding of this study shows that agents indeed provide services for international students beyond the pre-departure stage. That is, Chinese international students in vocational education also turn to agents for advice about transitional issues and study plans during their study in the host country. Notably, they turn to agents for different kinds of service and counselling at different stages of their journey.

PARENTS AND RELATIVES AS IMPORTANT SOURCES OF ADVICE AND INFORMATION

The concept of family in Chinese traditional Confucian culture is different from Western culture. In an extended family with parents, children and other relatives, such as grandparents, aunts and uncles, collective information is offered by members of the big family. Bodycott (2009) discusses the concept of filial piety in mainland Chinese parent-child relationships. Parents are often the first source students use to seek advice and discuss their intention to study abroad. If the chance to undertake a degree study through passing the competitive university-entrance examination in China is slim for secondary school graduates, parents will expect their children to obtain a University

education abroad. The initial idea of studying abroad often arises from an interaction between parents and children. Parents are often concerned about quality of education in the destination country and of immigration opportunity. For example, a student expresses her parents' view:

My parents want me to get bachelor degree in Australia. You know, if I only get an Associate Degree, there's no equivalent one in China, how can I explain to my parents. Associate Degree is like a college Diploma in China, it's not a university degree. I want to get a degree, so I prefer to study in university. (Female, Associate Degree in Mechanical Engineering)

Influenced by Confucian thought and the one-child policy, most Chinese parents expect their children to create a good future for themselves by obtaining a good education; a degree-oriented education is always favoured by both students and their parents. This desire motivates students who initially cannot meet the requirements for enrolment in a higher education course to seek education in an institution that can provide a path from VET courses to higher education.

Immigration opportunities rank as an important factor motivating Chinese international students to study in Australia (Yang, 2007). Interviews in this study further support other studies that indicate seeking immigration opportunities in the host country is also a common expectation from parents of international students (Tran & Nyland, 2011). However, parents are not well informed regarding immigration requirements and policies. Their desire is not always satisfied. For example, the following student reveals:

My family wants me to immigrate after finishing my study. They think it's better to immigrate to Australia. They wanted me to study in Australia, so . . . But I think it's not easy to immigrate with only Diploma. And design is not an immigration occupation, but I like it, so I study it. I hope I can get a degree then decide. (Female, Diploma in Interior Design)

The discussion and interaction between students and their parents can help students better understand their desires and clarify their long-term plans. However, sometimes, due to inadequate information, parents have a high expectation for their children to migrate to Australia after their study there. They often regard the study plan and financial support of their children as parental responsibility and a good investment for their children's future. However, not all programs align with immigration opportunities. Students often pay more attention to the internationally recognised quality of the program and the institution when making their study decisions in the host country. In the above excerpt, the student who is studying a Diploma in Design expresses her understanding of the recent change to the immigration policy and the skilled occupation list (SOL). She has the intention of undertaking her course to better prepare herself for her future. Therefore, students' future plans do not always agree with parents' expectations. Echoing previous research by Bodycott (2009), the finding of this study indicates that improved employment and immigration prospects are the most important push factors for parents to decide their children's overseas study while students tend to be more concerned with educational quality and international experience.

Relatives living or studying overseas also often provide word-of-mouth information related to life and study in the host country, the reputation of host institutions and job prospects.

I have a relative living nearby, I prefer to study and live near him. My relative suggests that this University is in the city center; it's very convenient to study in a University that is not far from his house. (Male, Associate Degree in Civil Engineering)

Because my sister studied in this University, now she has graduated and works in China. I learned some information about this university from her. It's a highly internationally recognized university. She told me that I could study TAFE courses then in University. (Female, Certificate IV in Accounting)

As these students expressed, recommendations from relatives act as word-of-mouth referrals and influence their choice of the study destination and institution. For international students who have

not had previous overseas living and studying experience, information and advice from reliable people around them is often important. Others' positive attitudes and experiences with host institutions will enhance international students' possibility of choosing a certain host city and institution. Parents, siblings and relatives graduating from a particular institution are likely to recommend it to their children, other family members or friends. This finding matches that of Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) that personal recommendations or word-of-mouth referrals of former alumni is one of the key sources of information on the reputation of the host country and its institutions. Additionally, pre-departure word-of-mouth information helps to ease international students' anxiety about adjusting to the new environment. This is consistent with Prugsamatz et al.'s (2006) finding that word-of-mouth is an influential source of information for students pursuing international education.

TEACHERS AND COURSE COORDINATORS AS A SOURCE OF SUPPORT AND ADVICE

Senior secondary school teachers in China often help students increase their knowledge of studying abroad. However, the role of secondary school teachers in shaping students' expectations and plans for international education has not been addressed in the related literature. In interviews for this study, some students mentioned that they sought help from their teachers, mainly during their transitional period from either their foundation course to VET study or from VET to associate degree study. A student, for example, revealed that her secondary school teacher helped her with the application for studying in Australia:

Before coming to Australia, my senior secondary school teacher helped me to apply for study here. I am not quite clear. He (the teacher) said that I could study step by step in this university. I just finished studying work education–it's a certificate. Now I begin the study of diploma in commerce. (Male, Diploma in Commerce)

After settling down in their new learning environment, course teachers and coordinators are the direct sources of help with academic problems, assessment, and transitional issues. Chinese international students in this study share their experiences when turning to their teachers and coordinators for assistance:

Usually our course teacher in foundation class will introduce something about the study. You know, the steps, yeah, the pathways to University (HE). But now in the Diploma course, teachers don't say too much. If we have any questions about transitional pathways, we can contact course coordinator for help. Course teacher will also introduce some information in class. (Female, Diploma in Interior design)

I studied half year in an Australian secondary school and studied foundation courses for one year. Then the teacher (of foundation courses) advised me to apply for associate degree study first. So long as your score can meet the requirement, you can talk to course-coordinator and the person will tell you the pathway from associate degree to bachelor degree and arrange the application process. (Male, Associate Degree in Civil Engineering)

After my studying of foundation, the teacher advised me to study associate degree first because my English was merely above the requirement. Of course I can study for bachelor degree directly, but the teacher said it would be a little harder for students without a rather solid foundation and the courses in bachelor study will be more difficult than associate degree. It's better to start from an easier one. (Female, Associate Degree in Mechanical Engineering)

The excerpts reveal that foundation course teachers often provide more information about transitional steps to tertiary education than VET and Associate Degree teachers. On the one hand, this reflects the fact that students in foundation programs are usually newcomers in Australia and need more help and expect more information about existing academic requirements and pathways within their institutions. Thus, course teachers are a handy source for them to consult. On the other hand, since foundation courses act as the stepping stone for students who want to apply for tertiary

education, it is natural that foundation course teachers are ready to provide more information compared with those teaching VET programs.

Five students expressed concern about the course review, assessment, and transitional duration, which is common at commencing and transitional periods. For example, one student in only the third week of her study of certificate IV in accounting is worried about the assessment:

The class began in 2 July, but I missed two weeks . . .If the course teachers can tell us more about the instructions and format of exam, you know, about quiz by email, it will be better. Or which part should we prepare before the exam. I think it will be better for some new students. (Female, Certificate IV in Accounting)

As a newcomer in Australian tertiary education, this student is particularly in need of learning support. However, she is worried because she could not get support from the course teacher.

The findings from this study support the findings by Prescott and Hellstén (2005) and Tran (2008) that students often seek help from course teachers and course coordinators on academic and transition-related issues once they feel comfortable with and have good interactions with their teachers.

PEER INFLUENCE AND SUPPORT

In their daily lives, students often exchange information on academic issues as well as transitional plans with their peers. Observations in three classes and interviews with nine students show that they prefer to talk with, share information and seek advice from students from the same cultural background. For example:

The classmates are all friendly; some of them are from China and other Asian countries. A few locals are rather older than me, looks like in their 30s or 40's. Usually I have more chat with peer classmates. Only when I cannot understand what the teachers said, I always asked for their (local students') help. You know, their listening and speaking are better. (Female, Certificate IV in Accounting)

Yes we are a group (of three). We feel free to chat with Chinese classmates. It seems that Australian classmates don't like to talk with us; we don't want to talk with them too. (Male, Associate Degree in Mechanical Engineering)

In an in-class interview, the first-named author observed that there were only three Chinese international students in that class and they sat together all the time. Even during the break time, they still preferred to mainly communicate with each other. This phenomenon may indicate their lack of confidence to socialise with peers outside their network or from another country. They had the feeling of being isolated from their Australian peers and did not want to exchange and share information with domestic students. They appear to feel more comfortable to discuss their transitional plans with friends from the same cultural background. This finding supports the view that universities need to develop peer networks and student mentoring to better help international students integrate into the class and institutional community (Fallon, 2006).

The preference to associate with peers from the same background is also quite common among other Chinese international students, as the first-named author observed in other VET courses. This may be partly because of Chinese international students' English communicative skills and the collectivism tradition in Confucius culture. Matthews (1996, p. 6, cited in Kenway & Bullen, 2003, p. 17) refers to the tendency for international students to socialise among themselves and fellows from the same home country as "a pragmatic, practical survival strategy" in the foreign country. Although international student communities are diverse, international residential colleges, international student-targeted curricula, associations and services as "contact zone" of comfort create spaces for shared trust, mutual cognition and "a temporary protection from the legacies of outsider status" for international students (Kenway & Bullen, 2003, p. 17).

Peer influence is also reflected in students' plans for future study. Degree-inclination is a common topic for Chinese international students in their daily communication. For example, students expressed this preference:

Yes, I will continue my study to get a degree. I think this is quite common among Chinese international students. If possible, most of my classmates from China want to get bachelor degree before going back to China. (Diploma in International Business)

In my opinion, the purpose of Chinese international students studying Diploma of design is transferring to HE later. Because our scores cannot meet the requirement of degree study, we chose to study Diplomas first. For me, if my score is good enough when I finish the Diploma study, I think I will possibly study for a degree. My classmates and I all have been approved of a 4 to 5 years' student visa. You know, this program is not in the immigrating lists, and the tuition is rather high, usually we want to get a degree before going back to China. (Diploma in Interior Design)

Like one of the significant groups of international students in Chang et al.'s (2012) research, this cohort of Chinese international students in VET prefer to socialise with international students from mainland China. They are more willing to discuss and consult with each other rather than with domestic students on academic and future transition issues. Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) suggest that while some internationals are more likely to become involved in and have a positive intercultural experience with domestic students and the host institution, others may feel negative and become distant with domestic students and the host culture. Apart from communication skill and the influence of the collective culture, perhaps the aspiration and concern regarding the transitional pathway (Cao & Tran, 2014) is the common grounding for international students from mainland China to share and seek one another's advice as "insiders" in the transition process. Transferring from diploma study to higher education is a common choice for most of Chinese international students in VET and associate degree study.

CONCLUSION

The manners in which Chinese international students in diploma and associate degree programs seek information and support are varied prior to their departure and after their arrival in Australia. Education agents' services are not limited to the pre-departure stage for this cohort of students, but used throughout students' overseas study journeys. For Chinese international students, the role of agents has become increasingly important during their transition from vocational education to associate degree and higher education programs. This study, thus, indicates that there should be a better recognition of the extent to which international students may turn to agents for information and help during this critical period of their study in a host country. This increasing dependence of international students on agents also raises the critical question of how the international education sector and related bodies implement effective measures of quality assurance for agents as well as institutions in partnership with agents.This study highlights key support and information resources for Chinese international students in vocational education, such as family members, word-of-mouth recommendations from relatives and friends, Chinese high school teachers' advice and Australian teachers' suggestions. Enhancing our understanding of how Chinese international students in vocational and associate degree studies seek information and help is essential to enable vocational institutions to effectively cater for students' study needs.

The finding of this study also indicates the need for VET institutions to acknowledge that international students need advice, assistance, and information to make important study decisions, and to facilitate their adaptation prior to their departure, at the beginning of their studies, at transition from foundation to diploma study, or from vocational study to associate degree or HE programs. In addition, given the increasingly influential role of the education agents at different stages of international students' overseas study, there is a critical need for VET institutions to

develop closer partnership with the agents and to work towards a coherent, coordinated approach to provide support and consultancy services to international students beyond the pre-departure stage.

This study provides important insights into the help-seeking manners of Chinese international students in vocational education. Yet the scope of this study is limited to 30 Chinese international students in an Australian dual sector University. It would be valuable to conduct more research into the help-seeking mechanisms of international students in different educational sectors in different stages of their study, including pre-departure, arrival and settling in and during their overseas study. More research into how gender, age, and length of stay in the host countries may influence international students' help-seeking behaviours compared to those of domestic students are also needed. Finally, international students' perceived barriers to seeking assistance and approaches to helping them overcome those barriers would also be a useful topic for further research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

REFERENCES

Australian Education International. (2013, October). *Monthly summary of international students.* https://aei.gov.au/research/International-Student Data/Documents /Monthly%20summaries%20of%20international%20student%20enrolment%20data%2020 13/10_October_2013_MonthlySummary.pdf. Retrieved 25 November, 2013.

Ballard, B., & Clanchy, J. (1991). *Teaching students from overseas: A brief guide for lecturers and supervisors.* Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.

Bodycott, P. (2009). Choosing a higher education study abroad destination—What mainland Chinese parents and students rate as important. *Journal of Research in International Education, 8*(3), 349–373.

Boldero, J., & Fallon, B. (1995). Adolecent help-seeking: What do they get help for and from whom? *Journal of Adolescence, 18,* 193-209.

Cao, L. & Tran, L. T. (2014). Pathways from vocational education and associate degree to higher education: Chinese students in Australia. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education.* doi: 10.1080/02188791.2014.881318

Chang, S., Alzougool, B., Berry, M., Gomes, C. & Smith, S. (2012, October. *International students in the digital age: Do you know where your students go to for information?* Paper presented at the AIEC conference, Melbourne. http://www.aiec.idp.com/pdf/2012_chang_Fri_1235_212_paper.pdf

Chen, C. (2006). *Word-of-mouth information gathering: An exploratory study of Asian international students searching for Australian higher education services.* (Masters by Research thesis, Queensland University of Technology).

Dempsey, K. (2010). *Best practice in education agent management: A guide for education providers.* Melbourne: Victoria TAFE International.

http://www.vti.edu.au/images/stories/pdfs/VTI-Best-Practice-in-Education-Agent-Management.pdf. Retrieved 10 December, 2012.

Fallon, F. (2006, December. *Young, worried and in a foreign culture: Factors involved in the help-seeking behaviour of international students in Australia.* Paper presented at the ISANA Conference, Sydney.

Flum, M. E. (1998). *Attitudes toward mental and help-seeking preferences of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean international college students.* Unpublished PhD Thesis, Ohio UniversityHambrecht, F. (2006, October. *Help seeking behaviour of international students: Does culture have an impact?* Paper presented at the Australian International Education Conference, Perth.

Kashima, E. M. & Loh, E. (2006). International students' acculturation: Effects of international, conational and local ties and need for closure. *International Journal of Cultural Relations*, *30*(4), 417-485.

Kenway, J., & Bullen, E. (2003). Self-representations of International Women Postgraduate Students in the Global University "Contact Zone". *Gender & Education, 15*(1), 5.

Mazzarol, T. & Soutar, G. N. (2002). "Push-pull" factors influencing international student destination choice. *International Journal of Educational Management*, *16*(2), 82-90.

Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mori, S. (2000). Addressing the mental health concerns of international students. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 78*(2), 137-144.

Poyrazli, S., & Grahame, K. M. (2007). Barriers to adjustment: Needs of international students within a semi-urban campus community. *Journal of Instructional Psychology, 34*(1), 28-45.

Prescott, P., & Hellstén, M. (2005). Hanging together even with non-native speakers: The international student transition experience. In P. Ninnes & M. Hellsten (Eds.), *Internationalizing higher education: Critical explorations of pedagogy and policy* (pp. 75-95). Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Centre, HKU.

Prugsamatz, S., Pentecost, R. & Ofstad, L. (2006). The influence of explicit and implicit service promises on Chinese students' expectations of overseas universities. *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics, 18*(2), 129-145.

Rai, G. S. (2002). Meeting the educational needs of international students: A perspective from US schools. *International Social Work, 45*(1), 21-34.

Rosenthal, D. A., Russell, V. J., & Thomson, G. D. (2006). *A growing experience: The health and well-being of international students at the University of Melbourne*. Melbourne: The University of Melbourne.

Samuelowicz, K. (1987). Learning problems of overseas students: Two sides of a story. *Higher Education Research and Development, 16*(2), 121-132.

Sakurai, T., McCall-Wolf, F., & Kasima, E. S. (2010). Building intercultural links: The impact of a multicultual intevention program on social ties of international students in Australia. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 34*(2), 176-185.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Tran, T. L. (2008). Unpacking disciplinary requirements: International students in the management and education disciplines in Australian higher education. *Higher Education Research and Development, 27*(1), 245-256.

Tran, L. T. (2013). *Teaching international students in vocational education and training: New pedagogical approaches.* Camberwell: ACER Press.

Tran, L. T. (2013a). Internationalisation of vocational education and training: A learning curve for teachers and learners. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 17*(4), 492-507.

Tran, L. T. & Nyland, C. (2011). International vocational education and training - The migration and learning mix. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning. 51*(1), 8-31.

Tran, L. T. & Nguyen, N. T. (2013). Mediating teacher professional identity: The emergence of humanness and ethical identity. *International Journal of Training Research. 11*(3), 119-212.

White, G. M. (1982). The role of cultural explanations in `somatization' and `psychologization'. *Social Science & Medicine, 16*(16), 1519-1530.

Wilton, L., & Constantine, M. G. (2003). Length of residence, cultural adjustment difficulties, and psychological distress symptoms in Asian and Latin American international college students. *Journal of College Counseling, 6*(2), 177-186.

Yang, M. (2007). What attracts mainland Chinese students to Australian higher education? *Studies in Learning, Evaluation Innovation and Development. 4*(2), 1-12.

Zhang, N., & Dixon, D. N. (2003). Acculturation and attitudes of Asian international students toward seeking psychological help. *Multicultural Counseling and Development, 31*(3), 205-222.

Zhang, Yi (Leaf) & Hagedorn, L.S. (2011). College application with or without assistance of an education gent: Experience of international Chinese undergraduates in the US. *Journal of College Admission, 212* (summer)*,* 6-16.