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Psychological Distress and Help-seeking Behaviour: Chinese International Students in New Zealand

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Abstract

With high numbers of Chinese international tertiary students worldwide, it is important that institutions understand how best to establish environments that support positive mental health in this student group. This study used a mixed methods approach via an online survey to explore levels of psychological distress, help-seeking preferences, and engagement with counselling among Chinese international students at a New Zealand university. Findings support existing literature showing that Chinese international tertiary students experience high levels of distress and under-utilise counselling and other campus services, while the relationship between students and family is an important consideration to assist in mitigating psychological distress. Culturally appropriate interventions are needed to improve the wellbeing, and aid the integration, of Chinese students to their host country and educational environment.

Keywords

Chinese, Culture, International students, Mental health, Psychological distress, Help-seeking, Stress, Support services, Support, Tertiary education, University

Introduction

Tertiary study has consistently been associated with elevated levels of psychological distress in students at significantly higher levels than that observed in the general population (Larcombe et al., 2016; Stallman, 2010). International students, known to face additional stressors including differences in language, culture, and the loss of their social and support networks (Chen et al., 2020; Ma, 2020; Yang, 2020), have shown similar levels of psychological distress as their domestic counterparts (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008; Skromanis et al., 2018). Researchers have identified that Chinese international students, with their markedly different sociocultural values and background contexts (Heng, 2020; Rawlings & Sue, 2013), are particularly susceptible to stress and mental health concerns. This is in part due to the challenges they must navigate to acculturate to western countries (Liu, 2009), with many students underestimating the challenges they will face (Liu et al., 2017; Yan & Berliner, 2011).

Chinese-speaking international students in Australia have been reported to have high rates of psychological distress (Lu et al., 2013), while a high prevalence of symptoms of depression (45%) and anxiety (29%) amongst a Chinese international student population in the USA (n=130) has also been reported (Han et al., 2013). A further study comparing levels of stress and anxiety among Chinese international business students (n=103) with local students (n=98) (Redfern, 2014) reported Chinese students experienced significantly higher levels of stress and anxiety than their peers. The research showed academic pressure attributed to the Chinese cultural values of achieving academic success was a particular cause of concern amongst the student group.

The limited available evidence indicates that Chinese international students are particularly susceptible to poor mental health outcomes and are a group that requires attention and intervention due to the potential for poor mental health outcomes. Despite this knowledge, low uptake of mental health services has been noted by Chinese international students, with reported barriers to service use including limited knowledge of available services, the perception that symptoms were not

severe enough to justify treatment, language difficulties, and lack of knowledge of psychological distress symptoms (Chen et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2013; Ma, 2020).

Despite concerns about the mental health of Chinese international students, there is a paucity of literature that assesses the mental health of students while also providing a detailed exploration of support services in the same group of students. Little reporting of either of these issues has been in a New Zealand (NZ) context. In addition, it is not clear whether the barriers to use of support services are globally universal because few studies have addressed this issue. This study sought to provide evidence of a baseline level of psychological distress for Chinese international students at a NZ university, who they turn to when needing help, and their utilisation of counselling and other services. Such information would support the growing body of international literature on this topic, providing international context around psychological distress and help-seeking behaviour of Chinese international students that will support the development of targeted interventions.

Method

A mixed methods design utilising an online (Qualtrics Research Suite, Provo, UT) cross-sectional survey was used for this study. A survey link was sent to all 838 enrolled Chinese international students at Victoria University of Wellington over a 4-week period (31 July 2017–31 August 2017). Eligible participants were those enrolled at the university on a student visa and were residents of mainland China. All study information was provided in English and Mandarin and study completion was anonymous. Research approval was granted by the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee (Ethics Approval: 24430).

Measurement of psychological distress

Psychological distress was assessed using the Kessler 10, otherwise referred to as K10 (Kessler & Mroczek, 1992). This 10-item scale provides a measure of non-specific psychological distress in the anxiety-depression spectrum (Kessler et al., 2002). The K10 has previously been used in studies assessing the psychological distress of international students (Leahy et al., 2010; Stallman, 2008; Stallman & Shochet, 2009), and has been translated into Mandarin and validated for use with Chinese study participants (Huang et al., 2009). The measure has been validated with Chinese international student populations internationally showing excellent internal consistency with Cronbach alpha scores of α=0.91 (Wang, 2013) and α= 0.94 (Lu et al., 2013), respectively. A K-10 score between 10–15 indicates no to low psychological distress; scores between 16–21 indicate moderate distress; scores between 22–29 indicate high distress, and scores above 30 indicate very high distress.

Support preferences

Participants were asked to select their top three preferred and top three least preferred support preferences when seeking help, from a list of predetermined options, with a free text option for "other" responses. They were also asked a free-text question exploring what they would do differently to reduce their stress during their transition to the University, if they could repeat the experience.

Use of university counselling services

A question on accessing the university's Student Counselling service was included. For participants who had not used the service, a predetermined list of barriers was provided, and participants were asked to identify as many options as were relevant. A free text option for "other" responses was provided. Participants were then asked what could make Student Counselling more accessible to Chinese students.

Analysis of quantitative data

Demographic responses and descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were calculated for each variable. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS (IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows 25, IBM Corp., Armonk, NY) software. An error in the development of the online survey resulted in the omission of the sixth K10 question: During the last 30 days, about how often did you feel restless or fidgety? Validity of the generated data from the study was confirmed by the remaining nine questions of the adjusted K10 (K10*) scale being assessed to have a high level of internal consistency as determined by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.906. K10* scores ranged from 9–39, the adjusted mean score was 23.33, and standard deviation 6.97. The commonly used cut-off points for the K10 psychological distress categories (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012) were adjusted to compensate for the absent question in the K10* and were adjusted to: 9–14 = "no to low distress", 15–18 = "moderate distress", 19–25 = "high distress", and 26–45 = "very high distress".

The relationship between the K10* mean and the variables of age, gender, and length of time participants had lived in NZ were tested using an independent samples t-test ($p<0.05$), as was comparison of K10* means (using adjusted mean) between these data and previously published studies. Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variance was used to test the assumption of homogeneity of variance. A quantile-quantile plot (QQ plot) and box plot were used to assess if residuals were evenly distributed, followed by a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to determine if there was a difference in the K10* mean dependent on the length of time participants had lived in NZ, and to determine if there was a difference in K10* mean dependent on age or gender ($p<0.05$). T-tests were used to assess the relationship between the K10* mean and the variables of age, gender, and whether participants had siblings. Descriptive analysis was used with the frequency and percentage of participants' selections calculated for questions related to participants' stress, help seeking, and services.

Analysis of qualitative data

Qualitative text was analysed using NVivo Pro software (Version 11, QRS International, Melbourne, Australia). Responses from qualitative questions and free-text responses from "other" options were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. Familiarity with the data was generated through repeated reading, making notes of initial ideas or repeated patterns that emerged. Codes were identified that may be related to the research questions. The codes and data were then examined to identify preliminary themes, then themes were reviewed by checking them against the data to ensure they were answering the research questions. A more detailed analysis of the themes was then conducted to generate robust definitions and names. This phase involved developing a comprehensive analysis of each theme and its contribution to the understanding of the data.

Results

Participant demographics

As shown in Table 1, there were 205 respondents (response rate 24.5%, from 838 Chinese international students on the Victoria University of Wellington database, with the mean age of participants being 22.5 years. Females made up 61.5% of respondents, with 38% male, and one participant who identified as gender neutral. The majority of participants (60%) were studying at undergraduate level, while 27% were postgraduates and the remainder were studying an English language programme or a study abroad/exchange programme. Over three quarters (75.6%) of participants were from one-child families. The majority (62.4%) had lived in NZ for greater than one year. The majority (64%) had also lived in private accommodation. The variables of gender, age, and level of study of the sample were found to be representative of the total population of

Chinese international students at the Victoria University of Wellington; the remaining variables were not able to be compared to a baseline as this data was not recorded in university systems.

Table 1: Demographics of the study sample of Chinese international students at Victoria University of Wellington

Variable	*n*	%
Gender		
Male	78	38
Female	126	61.5
Gender neutral	1	0.005
Age		
17 and under	1	0.5
18	6	2.9
19	11	5.3
20	31	15
21	37	18
22	24	11.7
23	23	11.2
24	15	7.3
25	18	8.7
26 and over	39	18.9
Current level of study		
English proficiency programme	25	12.2
Undergraduate	122	59.5
Study abroad/exchange	3	1.5
Postgraduate	42	20.5
PhD	13	6.3
Marital status		
Single	124	60.5
In a relationship	66	32.2
Married	14	6.8
Prefer not to say	1	0.45
Siblings		
No	155	75.6
Yes	50	24.4
Time in NZ		
Less than 3 months	26	12.7
3–6 months	22	10.7
6 months–1 year	29	14.1
Greater than 1 year	128	62.4
Accommodation		
University hall	56	27.3
University homestay	17	8.3
Private flat/board	132	64.3

Measurement of psychological distress

Results from completed K10* surveys showed that 14% of participants were likely to have no to low psychological distress (*n*=29); 26% were likely to have moderate psychological distress (*n*=54); 32% were likely to have high psychological distress (*n*=67); and 27% were likely to have very high psychological distress (*n*=55).

Psychological distress levels did not differ significantly as a function of age (categorised into 18–25 years old and above 26 years old) ($t(3) = 0.843$, $p=0.16$), gender ($t(202) = 0.512$, $p=0.61$) or whether participants had siblings or not ($t(173) = -1.551$, $p=0.123$). A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine if the K10* mean was different depending on the length of time participants had lived in NZ, with no statistically significant difference between groups ($p=0.157$).

The K10* mean was compared to K10 means of other studies (independent t-tests), showing no significant difference in mean scores when compared with Chinese students in Australia ($p=0.4629$ when compared to Lu et al., 2014; $p=0.4629$) and China ($p=0.7314$ when compared to Li et al., 2017; $p=0.5171$ when compared to Zhang et al., 2018).

Support preferences

In allocating responses to the top three preferred and top three least preferred support preferences from a list of predetermined options, participants indicated their parents as their most preferred support option (*n*=118). Different categories of friends were also very popular as preferred support options, with Chinese friends in NZ *(n*=106), NZ friends (*n*=61), international friends in NZ (*n*=59), and overseas friends (*n*=54) all polling highly. Amongst the least preferred sources of support, academic staff were rated the least preferred (*n*=87), with other family members (*n*=78), parents (*n*=74) and the internet (*n*=74) also not preferred as support options. Some 28 students ranked their parents as a source they would *and* would not turn to for help.

Decreasing stress on transition

Participants were asked to think about their arrival to study at Victoria University of Wellington and if they would do anything differently to decrease stress if they had their time again. A total of 118 responses were provided, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Major themes from free-text responses to the question, "If I was attending this university again for the first time, this is what I would do to decrease stress," from Chinese international students at Victoria University of Wellington

Response theme	Number of responses
Get involved	43
Focus on study	17
Improve English	10
Time management	9
Use of supports	8

Getting involved in university and community activities was suggested by participants as a method of decreasing their transition stress on arrival at Victoria University of Wellington. They noted their lack of knowledge about opportunities to get involved on arrival and needing to make an effort to meet new friends:

> *I will try to get involved from the beginning. Go to student learning to participate workshops. Attend [words removed for purposes of author anonymity] plus programme. So many of these I did not really know when I came here [sic].*
>
> *Go out and social have more friends, meet new people. Friends can make you feel less lonely.*

Respondents indicated that they would have done more planning and studied harder if they had their time again:

> *Studying harder and harder.*
>
> *Doing some preparation for every classes [sic].*

Participants commented on their perceived lack of ability and confidence in speaking English. For one student, the decision to take a particular class, requiring speaking in a group setting, was challenging:

> *I would not take a class that requires the attendance of discussion group every week. That made me really nervous and uncomfortable. I wasn't good at English, I hope the coordinator or someone else have warned me about that [sic].*
>
> *I guess as for not a native speaker, English speaking is always the first challenge [sic].*

Use of university counselling services

Participants were asked if there were barriers that had stopped them from using Student Counselling since they had been at Victoria University of Wellington. As shown in Table 3, many students (*n*=82) responded they had not needed to use Student Counselling or had not heard of the service, while more than a third of respondents reported needing to be very unwell, not knowing how to contact Student Counselling, and not speaking English confidently as barriers for using the service. Some students (*n*=26, 12.3% of respondents) had used Student Counselling.

Table 3: Student counselling use and barriers for Chinese international students at Victoria University of Wellington

Student responses — Counselling use	***n***	**%**
I have had no need to use Student Counselling	82	38.9
I have not heard of Student Counselling	55	26.1
I would need to be very unwell to use Student Counselling	44	20.9
I do not know how to contact Student Counselling	38	18
I would not because I'm not confident in my ability to speak English	35	16.6
I have used Student Counselling	26	12.3
Culturally, I would not be comfortable speaking with a counsellor	18	8.5
Other	11	5.2

Note: Participants could select multiple responses.

Improving access to Student Counselling

Participants were asked what would make Student Counselling at Victoria University of Wellington more accessible to them and what would make them more likely to use this service. A total of 50 responses were provided to this question, with major themes and number of responses being better promotion of the service (*n*=18), Mandarin-speaking therapists (*n*=18), and improving anonymity for attendees (*n*=5).

Participants (*n*=18) recommended various methods of promotion to ensure students have more awareness of the service:

> *I don't know there is a option for students, I guess if I could easily get the information about it, I would be happy to join it [sic].*

> *More advertisement and send emails to students from time to time.*

Participants commented on the differences between western Student Counselling staff and Chinese culture:

> *I have only met with two psychologist, one is a westerner who doesn't understand my thoughts and feelings and that increased my illness, I don't blame her because we have different life experiences and backgrounds, but at the same time it's not fault to be ill [sic].*

> *Local people but can speak fluent Chinese, understand both cultures and better had same situation before, and know how to through the difficulty of study and life [sic].*

Discussion

Chinese international students at Victoria University of Wellington experience high levels of distress, consistent with reports of Chinese students in the United States of America (USA), Australia, and China. When seeking help, parents were the most commonly preferred support over academic staff and student services, highlighting the potential influence of the relationship Chinese students have with their parents and a lack of engagement with formal, university-based support services. Counselling was accessed infrequently with cultural and practical concerns the most commonly cited barriers. Better promotion and culturally and linguistically appropriate counsellors were recommended to support Chinese students in accessing the service.

Measurement of psychological distress

With previous research identifying tertiary study as being consistently associated with elevated levels of psychological distress (Larcombe et al., 2016; Stallman, 2010), results from the current study show concerning levels of psychological distress among Chinese international students at Victoria University of Wellington. In the four weeks prior to responding to the survey, over half (59%) of respondents reported experiencing high or very high levels of distress (mean K10* score = 23.33). This result is consistent with research on Chinese international students in Australia (Lu et al., 2013) and studies of Chinese students in China (Li et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2018). The lack of significant difference between mean K10 scores of these studies indicates that elevated psychological distress is a common feature of the Chinese tertiary student experience, regardless of where they study. However, this hypothesis needs to be interpreted with caution due to the small number of studies that have focused on this specific topic. Interestingly, there was no difference between the length of time a student had been in NZ, their gender, or age, and reported distress level, indicating that students may not just "get better" or have a less stressful time over subsequent years of study and immersion at a foreign institution. It also suggests that institutions should not seek to specifically target one gender or demographic (e.g., "first year students only") to provide support services, and that further investigation of those factors influencing stress are required to identify when and how psychological distress may manifest or ease for Chinese international students.

Why do Chinese students seem to be susceptible to psychological distress in a tertiary education environment? Consideration perhaps needs to be given to the consistent pressures on Chinese tertiary students and the common experiences they share, independent of where they study. It is possible that these experiences—most notably, Chinese cultural values and upbringing, living away from family, and the known challenges of studying at tertiary level—may be more impactful than whether a student is living abroad or in their home country. Studies of Chinese students studying in their home country indicate they are considered to be at high risk of developing mental illness and have low rates of help seeking which have been attributed to their cultural beliefs (Lei, 2016). Further studies have shown a high proportion of Chinese university students experience moderate to serious psychological distress (Li et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2018), with higher levels of psychological distress leading to more negative attitudes towards seeking help (Li et al., 2017). It is possible that this high risk of developing mental illness is due, in part, to the impact of Chinese culture. Similar results were reported in a survey of university students (n=1128) in Shandong Province (Li et al., 2017), where higher levels of psychological distress led to more negative attitudes towards seeking help. However, they noted that the encouragement of family had a positive impact on the willingness of an individual to engage with professional support services, despite the individual retaining a negative attitude to help seeking. This observation on the positive effects of family support is relevant to the findings of this study, which showed high numbers of students preferred family support over formal support. Encouraging Chinese students to seek support from family may be worth exploring as a support strategy.

Chinese cultural values and mental health

The reporting of high psychological distress levels and generally lower levels of mental health amongst Chinese tertiary students, wherever they study (Han et al., 2013; Li et al., 2017; Lu et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2018), is consistently linked to Chinese culture. Chinese culture and philosophies are fundamental within Chinese society, where they encourage collective harmony, the restraint of emotion, and perseverance to achieve happiness. Amongst these cultural influences, collectivism (including fundamental elements of Confucianism), Taoism, and *mianzi* are among the most significant, impacting both the mental health and help-seeking behaviours of Chinese people.

Collectivism

Characterised as highly collectivist, Chinese culture has the underlying belief that those in the same group are interconnected and a group effort is required for their wellbeing, harmony, and prosperity (Leung, 2010). The belief is deeply rooted in Confucian heritage (Heng, 2020), the most fundamental belief in Chinese society. Confucius believed that harmony would occur if each member of society complied with the values of humanity and morality and understood and performed their rank in society (Huang & Charter, 1996). The long traditions of these hierarchical relationships remain significant for Chinese people with courtesy, good relationships, and communication considered vital to maintaining a healthy mind and beneficial emotions (Kolstad & Gjesvik, 2014). Within collectivist societies, the highly valued principle of *filial piety* refers to the obligation, respect, and duty a child has to their parents (Liu, 2009), which is repaid through academic excellence and avoiding bringing disgrace to the family (Chow & Chu, 2007). The importance of filial piety is described in the Chinese proverb "of all virtues, filial piety is the first". To maintain harmony, Confucius encouraged the restraint of emotion and the avoidance of conflict (Yip, 2005), influencing the way stress is managed in an individual's life (Yue, 1993) and in the subsequent choices made when seeking help. Psychological problems are believed to be rooted in a lack of self-discipline or weakness of character, the result of a lack of harmony in relationships (Liu, 2018), or through not practising the true principles (Chen-Kuendig, 2016).

Taoism

The aim of Taoism, another significant influence in China, is to be at peace with whatever life brings through the avoidance of impulsivity or actions against an individual's best interests (Yan, 2017). Taoism encourages people to live a life free from troubles, caring without taking advantage of others, not showing off mental capacity (Chen-Kuendig, 2016), and existing in a state of "nothingness" in order to achieve absolute happiness or to be mentally healthy (Yip, 2005). Those with mental illness are considered powerless to change or improve their situation (Chen-Kuendig, 2016) and must endure, maintaining a state of nothingness, to return to their mentally healthy state (Yip, 2005).

Mianzi

The concept of *face* is a core social value within Chinese culture, emphasising the importance of avoiding shame or embarrassment. The saving of face is considered particularly significant within an individual's immediate family, ensuring the preservation of the family and the family name (Yan, 2017), bringing honour through academic or career success (Li & Lin, 2014; Tseng & Wu, 1985), and preventing reputational damage. Often considered the most fundamental to Chinese culture, the value of family is seen as the underlying unit of society (Tseng & Wu, 1985). To prevent shame and to save face, Chinese students will avoid direct confrontations (Wang & Greenwood, 2015), repress feelings rather than speaking out, and turn to their family and close friends for emotional support, rather than more formal sources (Yan, 2017). Guilt and shame are common indicators of psychological distress and are often considered symptoms of mental illness (Hsiao et al., 2006).

The combined impact of these Chinese cultural beliefs remains highly influential in the lives of Chinese students (Wang, 2016), encouraging collective harmony, the restraint of emotion, and perseverance to achieve happiness. However, while aiming to maintain a well-functioning society through emotional restraint and harmonious relationships, cultural beliefs often negatively impact their mental health and wellbeing through not sharing concerns or seeking help (Chen & Mak, 2008) and placing them under great pressure to achieve and persevere (Wang, 2016).

Support preferences

Traditional cultural values are likely a strong influence on the help-seeking behaviours of Chinese international students, requiring the management of hardship without complaint and the maintenance of harmony by keeping concerns private or within the family (Shea & Yeh, 2008). The present findings replicate the results of previous studies (Hsu & Alden, 2008; Lu et al., 2013) reporting that Chinese-speaking international students prefer informal sources of help, particularly that of their parents and friends, over professional help.

Most survey respondents in the current study (75%) were from one-child families where the dependence on parental guidance is reported to be more pronounced and children have higher psychological attachment to their parents for guidance and direction (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2011). Given the cultural obligations and close bond Chinese children have with their parents, the high levels of reliance on parents for support and advice in the current study was consistent with international literature (Lu, 2013); high numbers of participants (n=118) identified their parents as a source to which they would turn for support when stressed. It has previously been noted (Li et al., 2017) that the encouragement of family had a positive impact on the willingness of an individual to engage with professional support services, despite the individual retaining a negative attitude toward help seeking. This observation of the positive effects of family support is noteworthy in regard to the findings of this study, with high numbers of students preferring family support over that of formal support services and academic staff. Encouraging Chinese students to seek support from family and friends is worth exploring as a support strategy in tandem with the provision of local support options.

However, a significant number (n=74) of students reported their parents as their least preferred support option. This may demonstrate the impact of filial piety through the avoidance of shaming or bringing disgrace to their parents through sharing of stressors or negative reports on their international experiences. Young (2017) identified that students may prefer not to speak truthfully about the challenges they face to show respect to their parents through filial piety and to avoid worrying them with their concerns, which may bring shame on themselves or their family. In addition, Chinese students in NZ have previously reported that they believed their parents had little understanding of the problems their child faced in NZ and were reluctant to discuss concerns with them (Ho et al., 2007). This highlights the importance of students being able to communicate effectively and openly with their parents about their personal and life circumstances when they are studying in a foreign country. This factor should be considered in formal support services within tertiary institutions when dealing with this cohort of international students. Identifying preferred support options for Chinese international students appears nuanced, and the results show that the preferred support from parents and friends—local Chinese friends, local international friends, or overseas friends—should be considered when options for support are being discussed with students.

Students also provided fertile information about what they would do differently if they had their time again as a new student arriving at Victoria University of Wellington. Key themes include reference to English language, in both the difficulty faced by this construct and the obvious necessity to practise and improve; socialising more to decrease loneliness; and study focused elements such as “working harder” or “preparing more”. Other responses referred to wanting further information and knowledge about options for classes and socialising. Many of the responses

highlight a necessity to explore how communication between Victoria University of Wellington and new Chinese international students could be enhanced. By scaffolding social adjustment and enhancing the visibility of opportunities to identify new friends, Chinese international students can make social connections and improve language capabilities (Ma, 2020) in a way that remains cognisant of the challenges this specific cohort of students is facing (Rawlings & Sue, 2013). Such approaches would build communities of shared experience and provide exposure to local perspectives (Ma, 2020; Yang, 2020) in a manner where emotional and social support could be provided to ensure student mental health was not compromised.

Use of university counselling services

Consistent with international research, Chinese international students at Victoria University of Wellington under-utilised the university's counselling service with only a small number of participants in this study (12.3%) reporting having used the service. A lack of awareness of counselling services has been identified as a common barrier amongst Chinese international students internationally (Chen et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2013; Yan, 2017), with research emphasising the urgent need to develop innovative approaches to improve knowledge of, and access to, counselling support (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2011; Li et al., 2017; Lu et al., 2013). Over one quarter of participants in this study reported that they had not heard of Student Counselling at Victoria University of Wellington with 18% noting that they did not know how to contact the service. Qualitative data corroborate these findings with participants acknowledging they did not know of the service or were unsure how to make contact despite being at Victoria University of Wellington for many years:

> *I have been here for 5–6 years, I don't know there is a student counselling [sic].*

> *Student counsellor service can be more transparent because a lot of course mates have not idea about it and don't know how to approach, therefore there could be more open and variety ways of contacting methods, via internet or phone [sic].*

Participants identified specific areas where the university could improve the promotion of counselling, particularly through better publicising services at international orientation:

> *Maybe email the students or make some posters or flyers that let students notice what Student Counselling can help [sic].*

Despite the many measures the university takes to promote student services, including Student Counselling, this study suggests that Chinese students are not receiving or retaining the information about supports available to them, and that more effective awareness campaigns are needed to ensure information is being received and understood (Chen et al., 2020). Such support has been identified as being useful for groups immersed in other cultures, such as USA students studying in China (Yang, 2020). This could be via information provided in their native language by a senior student or counselling staff during orientation, or promotion of Student Counselling throughout the year as a way to decrease stress and to lessen the impact of stress on academic grades.

Limitations

The ability of K10 data to be compared across studies can be problematic; cut-off scores for different versions of the K10 differ, with no universally agreed groupings currently in practice (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). However, the cut-off scores utilised in the current study were the same as those used in the 2007–2008 Australian Health Surveys (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012) and enabled statistical comparisons to be made with related international studies (Cvetkovski et al., 2012; Lu et al., 2013). There are also difficulties in defining "stress" as a concept to a heterogeneous group of individuals, or even trying to identify whether a source of participants' stress was academic, personal, cultural, or financial. Rather, the question was kept deliberately broad allowing participants to interpret stress as they saw fit. Data suggest that developing further understanding of the impact of culture on levels of psychological distress and help seeking amongst the Chinese international student population is required.

Conclusion

The prevalence of psychological distress and help-seeking preferences among Chinese international tertiary students have been examined internationally, however there is limited research examining these topics in concert in the same student group. Results on psychological stress levels were similar to other international studies; many Chinese international students were identified as suffering psychological distress, with stressed individuals not differing significantly by age, gender, or the length of time they had lived in NZ. Findings support the growing body of evidence that Chinese students in tertiary study are a high-risk population for psychological distress, and that they prefer to turn to informal sources of support when stressed, particularly their parents and friends. However, somewhat worryingly, many do not prefer to utilise formal support services while many others are not generally aware of their existence. This information indicates this cohort of students require targeted institutional support, suggesting the need for better strategies to familiarise students with services. Support services in tertiary institutions, therefore, need to be carefully crafted and strategically implemented to account for the subtle nuances of both Chinese culture and student behaviour, enabling services to facilitate effective and useful support for this cohort. Finally, making connections on arrival at university, studying harder, and improving English language competency were noted as ways students would ameliorate stress if they could relive their arrival at a foreign university again.

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