

Barriers to Integration for Chinese Overseas Students in Canada

with Special Reference to China Science “Two Plus Two” Students in X University, Canada

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Abstract—This paper is a research into the barriers for Chinese students in overseas study which take the China “Two Plus Two” students in School of Science, X University, Canada as a case. On the basis of individual and group interviews, findings show that Chinese students meet obstacles in language, academic study, integration of domestic culture. Compared to the support to the students provided by both X University and its Chinese partner universities, recommendations are also made on how to help the students to adapt better from the perspectives of both Chinese and Canadian Universities and the students themselves.

Keywords—barriers to chinese overseas students; support provided; recommendations

I. INTRODUCTION

With the development of Chinese universities' internationalization and better living standard for Chinese people, more and more Chinese students choose to study in overseas universities. A popular way is “Two Plus Two”, namely, students finish the first two years in Chinese universities and then finish the other half in an overseas university. As Science is the most transferable subject for Chinese universities to overseas counterparts, Chinese universities have much more corporate programs in Science with Canadian universities. Meanwhile, “Two Plus Two” also has the advantages such as lower cost, dual degrees and if failed at overseas universities, students can still come back to their Chinese university to get the rest study done. It is thus very popular among parents and students.

When those China Science “Two Plus Two” students go abroad and study in a cross-cultural surroundings, what barriers will they meet? What improvements should universities on both sides make in the services provided by both sides of universities to help them integrate more? What preparations should Chinese students do to meet those challenges?

This research aims to answer the above questions. The respondents of this research are faculty members and China “Two Plus Two” students at School of Science, X University,

Canada. The collection of empirical data was in February to June, 2012.

The School of Science, X University starts to recruit China “Two Plus Two” students in Biology, Geology, Physics and Chemistry since 2005. Up to 2012, it has 19 partner Chinese universities, which are all first class universities in China. This “Two Plus Two” program recruited 60 students in 2012 and this number increased to 100 in 2013.

The field study includes interviews of 12 “Two Plus Two” students, group interviews of 5 groups of students, each of which has 4-10 people and group interviews of four groups of faculty (5-12 people).

The findings of the study shows that English level, academic integration, social integration, connection of academic courses between Chinese universities and X university as well as psychological adaptation are barriers to China “Two Plus Two” students during their study at X university.

II. BARRIERS TO CHINESE STUDENTS

A. Language Barrier

All students admitted by China “Two Plus Two” program of Science, X University are students from the X University's partner universities in China. Thus they are among the top Chinese students. Meanwhile, before they are admitted they must pass the College English Test Band Four, and average English results not lower than 75 as well as passing English Examination set by Science, X University. At the same time, students admitted to this program must also attend a compulsory 6-week English training program, including listening comprehension, speaking, reading and writing, with special emphasis on students' practical capability in English academic lectures.

Despite this, when they start academic courses, English is still the biggest barrier to them. The empirical data shows that China “Two Plus Two” students can only understand 40%-60% of the lectures in their first term in Canada. To avoid being left behind, “Two Plus Two” students usually

spend lots of extra time to read relevant books to make up what they should have learned in class. Furthermore, as professors come from all over the world, some of them bear very strong accent, this makes China “Two Plus Two” students more difficult to understand the lectures.

In X University, one of the teaching methods used most frequently is group assignment and presentation. In most cases, the results will be based on overall performance of the group and each student has the same result with the purpose of stressing corporation and team-working spirit. As Chinese students have disadvantages over domestic students, a team with China “Two Plus Two” students is expected to have lower result, thus China students are difficult of find their group partners.

The language barrier also affects China “Two Plus Two” students’ essay writing. As a professor talked in the interview:

“Some Chinese students can write in correct grammar even when they are near their graduation.”

On the other hand, due to their limited English, they are unable to paraphrase when they would like to make references. As a result, in some cases, they have to copy the original English sentences, but this will be taken as “academic misconduct” in Canada universities.

On top of general English, subject vocabulary is also a factor which affects China “Two Plus Two” students’ academic performance. Most Chinese students are able to cope well with daily life with their English, but they learned their academic courses in Chinese and thus they lack subject vocabulary. At academic lecture, students may loss the whole class if they don’t understand one subject term.

The spoken English level of China “Two Plus Two” students is also an obstacle to their integration. As the second language, Chinese students usually learned their English from textbooks. They are difficult to have in-depth communication with domestic Canadians. As a result China “Two Plus Two” students can rarely make Canadian friends.

B. Issues in Academic Study

Due to language barrier, in subjects with more language components, the average score of China “Two Plus Two” students is lower than that of all students, for example, Biology and Geology. In subjects with less language components, China “Two Plus Two” students’ performance is better than the average of all students, such as Physics and Chemistry. In 2012, a “Two Plus Two” student in Physics graduated with the best result in the School with several awards.

The different ways of teaching and assessment are also where the China “Two Plus Two” students need to adapt to. During the 2 years’ study in Canada, Chinese students will usually have their results lower than their fellow students who are still in China. As talked by a group of students, their average score in China is above 85%; but in Canada, they can only get an average result of 75%. The reasons are, as regarded by those interviewed students, firstly, their English

limited their understanding and expression; secondly, due to the difference in academic courses and assessment. When they first come to Canada, they have to take time to be adapted to new methods of teaching and assessment, and this will affect their academic performance.

The lower academic score will also have impacts on their further study. Most China “Two Plus Two” students hope they can enter master program with American universities as the first choice when they finish their undergraduate study. But because their lower score in Canadian university than that in China, they even have less opportunities to reach this goal than their fellow students in China.

Interviews with academic faculty members of X University also indicate that China “Two Plus Two” students are also weak in their experimentation skills, academic paper writing skills and class performance.

Compared to Canadian domestic students, Chinese students lack appropriate experimentation skills. In the lab, Chinese students don’t have the basic security training and skills. Neither do they have the knowledge of experimentation guidelines. After the experimentation, the experimentation report writing is also the weak point of Chinese students. All these shows that the first two years undergraduate study of Chinese universities has much less lab courses than that in Canada.

Compared to their Canadian fellow students, China “Two Plus Two” students also lack academic paper writing skills. One of the reasons, as mentioned above, is their weaker English skills. Apart from that, lack of training in academic paper writing skills may contribute more. Below are key mistakes frequently made by China “Two Plus Two” students:

First, they tend to take others’ views as their own. When they write papers, they directly use others’ views without references.

Second, their arguments lack appropriate supporting data or analysis.

Third, they also have less knowledge of the organization and general component of an academic paper.

All these show that Chinese universities have much less academic paper writing training for their students in the first two years or the ways of writing academic papers between two countries’ universities are very different.

Class performance of China “Two Plus Two” students is also a concern for Canadian professors. Chinese students are very quiet in classes; rarely raise any questions, a contrast with active domestic students. The reasons are contributed to conventional teaching methods in China as well as Chinese English skills—they are unable to raise and answer questions at normal speaking speed.

C. Cultural and Social Integration

Interviews with those China “Two Plus Two” students show that they are difficult to make friends from domestic students. Different from management system in Chinese

universities, Canadian domestic students have no class with fixed fellow students. They select their courses as their own individual requirements. The attachments between students are much weaker in Canada.

Chinese students meet Canadian domestic students in lectures. But domestic students rarely interact with Chinese students. Even Chinese students interact with domestic students first, it is difficult to have deep communication and make friends with them. So do Chinese students in various extra-curriculum activities, even for very active students in sports and other activities. At the same time, as Chinese students are busy at their study and without family and relatives, they rarely participate in community life.

For some China “Two Plus Two” students, they made effort to integrate when they first come. But they are frustrated by setbacks after setbacks and finally give up. An interviewee’s story is a good example. When she first came to Canada, she chose to share a house with other foreign students with the expectation to improve English and integrate with domestic life. But disappointedly, despite her neighbors come from different countries, they did no communication between each other. When she met her neighbors in public space and tried to talk to them, the other part showed no interest in further talking. While other Chinese students live far away from her, she has no one to talk after school. She has to stay in her room for all her leisure time and felt very depressed. Finally, she has to go back to her Chinese students’ community.

D. Issues in Credit Transfer

Credit transfer is a key part of the “Two Plus Two” program. It is not until all credits of the first two years at Chinese universities are transferred to corresponding ones at X University in Canada, do these students start their study in Canada. If this process can’t be completed successfully, there will be problem in course selection. Below are issues in credit transfer which may delay the process or misleading the course selection:

The course title is the same, but with different content. There are 19 Chinese partner universities for X University. Each of them has their own courses, textbooks and different ways of teaching. It often happens that the same course title have different content in different universities. And the same title of course in one Chinese partner university has different content with X University.

One course has the same title in different universities, but with different course hours. Canadian universities have 3 terms one year, while Chinese universities have two terms. So the same course in X University may have only 36 teaching hours, while it may have 72 or 96 teaching hours in Chinese universities. A course of 72 or 96 teaching hours in Chinese universities may cover what is taught in 2 or 3 courses in X University. In this case, if without special indication, one course of 72 or 96 teaching hours in Chinese universities may be transferred to one of 36 teaching hours in X University. As a result, China “Two Plus Two” students may repeat what they have learned in China and waste their time and teaching resources.

The degree of Chinese universities’ corporation is also an important factor. As described above, it is easy to have mismatch of contents if credit transfer is based on course title instead of detailed course description. The best way is to transfer credit on the basis of detailed course description. But if X University has the required detailed course description relies on the corporation of Chinese partner universities. Science, X University asked for the detailed course descriptions several times from Chinese partner universities, but the responses from those universities varied. Only 1/3 of those universities provided course descriptions as required by X University. Science, X University has in turn to ask their “Two Plus Two” students to ask for detailed course description. But only part of the students successfully got the description, partly because those who didn’t don’t care about it, partly because the related universities’ administrative staff were reluctant to provide it.

E. Other Issues in Canadian Life

Due to the difference of health system between Canada and China and lack of social support for the Chinese students, when they are ill, they lack effective treatment, accompany and care. In the interview, 3 students complained about the low efficiency of Canadian medical system. From their point of view, if they are ill in Canada, they cannot get the timely and effective treatment as that in China; and neither can they get the support from the Student Support 1, friends or family members. One of the students interviewed relied on the distance diagnosis of her doctor mother and medication sent from China when she was ill. Her China “Two Plus Two” fellow students took care of her and support her greatly.

China “Two Plus Two” students often feel very helpless when deal with conflicts due to strange environment and culture. One interviewed student had a car accident. The driver left a phone number. When the girl called him to discuss about the issue of compensation, the driver just let the girl to contact the insurance company and then disappeared totally. The girl did not know how to get help and how to negotiate with insurance company. The girl then ended with no compensation at all.

Another group of Chinese students signed a Lease Agreement with a landlord and were forced to pay a deposit of 3 months’ rent. This group of students would like to move to another house, but the landlord would not return the deposit to the students. According to law, the landlord has no right to ask for a deposit. Finally, with the help of the relevant department of the X University, the students’ deposit was paid back.

III. SUPPORT FOR CHINA “TWO PLUS TWO” STUDENTS IN X UNIVERSITY

For China “Two Plus Two” students and other international students, Faculty of Science and X University also provide various supports to help them.

A. Study Buddy

The manager of this program would ask the professors to announce this program to all students. Under this program,

domestic Canadian students would voluntarily become the Buddy of a China “Two Plus Two” student. Study Buddy can share their lecture note and have discussions about any issues in their study.

All interviewed China “Two Plus Two” students comment that this is the most helpful program for them, especially for those newcomers. With the help from the domestic students, China “Two Plus Two” students can understand the lectures more and finish their assignments and prepare their examination much better.

The issue for this program is the difficulty of enlisting volunteer. The number of domestic students volunteer is far less than the Chinese applicants. As a result, even the lucky “Two Plus Two” students who get a Buddy have to wait for a long time. A considerable part of Chinese applicants for this program failed to get a Buddy when graduation.

B. Conversation group

This program is organized by Student Union of X University to help international students. Students volunteer would organize the group to get together regularly-usually it is once two weeks. As the name indicated, the members usually converse to each other with the intention to improve their English and make friends. In addition, the organizer-the volunteer domestic student would also invite the members to have coffee in the downtown and other activities to help those students to be adapted to Canadian culture.

C. University accomodation

X University employs Student Managers to provide services for those who choose to live in University Accommodations. The Managers organize parties regularly, all accommodation residents can participate. They also offer various kinds of help for international students.

Additional help is also provided by Science, X University. The students have a 6-weeks English training before the start of academic study. During this period of time, the Associate Dean of Science in charge of students will have lectures to talk about issues for Chinese students to advise, remind and help China “Two Plus Two” students. Meanwhile, Science set a new post of International Coordinator, the role of which is to help international students, mainly China “Two Plus Two” students. The responsibility of this role includes credit transfer, help students improve their English and other related issues.

IV. SUPPORT FOR CHINA “TWO PLUS TWO” STUDENTS AT CHINESE PARTNER UNIVERSITIES

For those 19 partner universities, the “Two Plus Two” program with X University is only one of the various international corporation programs. The work for those universities usually limited to put a poster on university web and meet visitors from X University without any measures to help those students before 2012. This is changed since the union of a new partner. This university Y is committed to corporation with X University and helping more students to this program.

University Y helps their students in this program to get visa. The staff in charge of this program learns the process of the visa application first and then has several training sessions for the students and sometime one to one instruction. The staff is even in charge of all the rest visa application work except the visa documents preparation. Thus the success rate of students’ visa application is raised significantly. Moreover, the staff analyses and reviews the cases of visa application failures each year. Lessons were learned and used to help the next year students.

University Y also provides English training for their students. It provides free English training for those who intend to apply for “Two Plus Two” program to raise their eligibility. The purpose of the training is to help students to pass the English examination of X University better.

In addition, University Y also has much more promotion of China “Two Plus Two” program compared to other partner universities in China. University Y highly values overseas experience and international vision of their undergraduate students. And because this university is not within the first tier universities in China, it pays great attention to the relationship with X University in order to get more of their students to the “Two Plus Two” program.

Due to the services provided by and importance attached by University Y, the number of its students applying and being admitted by China “Two Plus Two” program has been the most for 3 years among all partner universities in China. In recent two years (2013-2014), the number of China “Two Plus Two” students from this university even accounted for one half of the total number of this program for that year.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHINA “TWO PLUS TWO” PROGRAM

The China “Two Plus Two” program of X University has been in operation for 10 years. Based on the research of this paper, recommendations of improving this program can be made from the perspectives of University X, Chinese partner universities and students.

A. What can university x do?

Measures taken by University X to help students improve their subject vocabulary will have great impacts on students’ academic performance. As discussed above, one of the barriers to those students is their subject vocabulary. In 2012, Science started the project of subject vocabulary. It aims to compile subject vocabulary in related 4 subjects: Physics, Chemistry, Biology and Geology. The International Students Coordinator is in charge of this project led by the Associate Dean. The professors of relevant academic courses will provide subject vocabulary. This project stopped in the middle due to the change of the Associate Dean. But as the interview shows that helping students improve their subject vocabulary can help them understand the lectures more, especially for those newcomers, recommendations are to restart this program.

Expansion of Study Buddy program and better related institution is also a recommendation for X University. As

indicated by the above research, Study Buddy is thought as most helpful for China “Two Plus Two” students. But currently, it is carried out only in limited several courses. Most professors regard this program as an extra burden to their courses and thus no incentive to carry it out. From the domestic students’ view, joining this program means they have to spend extra time. If without any other measures, domestic students have no motivation to join this program. In 2012, the Associate Dean who was in charge of “Two Plus Two” program put forward the plan that University grant the domestic students joining this program credit and award to put more incentives for those students. Due to the same reason as above, this plan was not enforced. Recommendation is to restart this plan to expand this program to help China “Two Plus Two” students more.

Academic Integrity is a concern for China “Two Plus Two” students. Academic Misconduct is more prevalent among China “Two Plus Two” students due to various reasons. Great efforts are also made by Science, X University to reduce academic misconduct. Here are more recommendations in this respect. Firstly, Peer Influence may be the most effective. Students are more likely to be influenced by their peers than by their professors or staff. Thus inviting students in senior year to talk about the issue at the lectures before the start of their academic study is a recommended measure. Similar measures may also be considered as inviting senior students to approach or organize the newcomers to promote academic integrity. Secondly, more communications with the professor are recommended. The intention is to let more professors know that academic misconduct by Chinese students is made mostly unintentionally. So in both the 6-week English training session and the following academic study, professors need to be more patient with those students and instruct them what academic misconduct is in the western sense, rather than directly regard them as violating academic integrity intentionally.

Measures should be taken to help students integrate with Canadian life. A professor interviewed during this research suggested that at the same floor of the university accommodation, the arrangement should be two Chinese students and two Canadian domestic students or other international students. The purpose is to help Chinese students to improve their English and integrate with other group of students by living with Canadian domestic students or other international students; at the same time, they can also have friends from China to relieve their loneliness.

Promote the awareness of domestic Canadian students. Domestic Canadian students are advantaged group in study and life. If their awareness of helping China “Two Plus Two” students and other international student can be promoted, this will help China “Two Plus Two” students enormously. The University and relevant School need to promote the awareness by various ways.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF STUDENTS

The China “Two Plus Two” students should improve their English as much as possible, especially their subject vocabulary.

When being in Canada, the students should actively integrate into Canadian life. This research indicates that those who integrate better showed the following attributes: first, those students work very hard and they have high expectation of themselves. Apart from academic study, they also actively learn the class culture of X University. They work hard in Class Presentation, teamwork and Class Participation, which are traditionally Chinese weak points. In addition, they take every opportunity to communicate with their professors to deepen their understanding of the course and the requirements of the professors. Second, they also actively participate in various university activities in order to integrate more into university culture. Furthermore, they also take the most of the opportunities or resources provided by university, such as Study Buddy, Conversation Group, Intern and part-time jobs, in order to make friends, interact more with professors and make professor know them more.

Chinese partner universities are also recommended to do the following to help their “Two Plus Two” students: to inform the potential students of the issues and problems in Canadian study and life to help students prepared better; to corporate more with X University in matters as credit transfer.

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