

Exploring Support for Chinese Students in UCL's Faculty of Engineering

A Changemakers funded project led by
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Executive summary reading time: 2 minutes

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Executive summary

This project is a first attempt at a comprehensive approach to the wellbeing issues that many international students from mainland China face at UCL, and specifically in the Faculty of Engineering. It is clear that many Chinese students who are struggling with difficulties around wellbeing may not be accessing appropriate support from UCL – whether centrally or from their department -- for a variety of reasons that we unpack below. The project arose from witnessing some of these students at the end of the academic insufficiency or disengagement processes presenting with negative signs of wellbeing that did not seem to have been picked up along the way and with an inability to comprehend the situation and its severity.

Cultural nuances exist that strongly suggest a tailored approach to supporting this cohort is needed. Our findings have relevance for faculties across UCL with a large Chinese student cohort, and indeed may be useful to consider and adapt for any department looking at wellbeing of a specific race- or ethnic-based cohort.

After surveying nearly 400 Chinese students at UCL, and interviewing over 40 staff members and students individually, issues around belonging, language, cultural stigma, and transition to a university in the UK stood out. Structural cultural incompetency on UCL’s part may exacerbate this. Our light touch ‘pulse’ student survey results showed 36% of responders felt ‘severely stressed’ and 29% felt ‘severely depressed’ – numbers that rightfully shocked when we presented initial findings to the Engineering Leadership Forum. While our intent was never to conduct a full, academically rigorous examination – having neither the credentials nor the capacity within our project to do so – we think that, as a temperature check, these figures are nevertheless concerning. In addition, research indicates that international students reported more negative wellbeing and psychological symptoms than home students.¹

¹ Jones C, Lodder A, Papadopoulos C. Do predictors of mental health differ between home and international students studying in the UK? *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*. (2019) 11:2, pp. 224-234. doi.org/10.1108/JARHE-03-2018-0040; Sümer S, Poyrazli S, Grahame K. Predictors of depression and anxiety among international students. *J Couns Dev*. (2008) 86:429–37. doi: 10.1002/j.1556-6678.2008.tb00531.x.

Our recommendations broadly emphasise the need for bespoke support, from translation of wellbeing information into Mandarin to specific induction sessions geared towards Chinese students to cultural competency education and toolkits for staff. We were fortunate to be able to work with an undergraduate student in Engineering who felt similarly and had, of his own volition, initiated a project on tailored induction events for Chinese students. Together, we piloted these sessions in the autumn term of 2021.

Our project was limited in scope due to funding and capacity, but there is significant work that could be done to continue addressing the issues we sought to examine, likely beginning with a 'deep-dive' audit of current support provided and work to connect the disparate pockets of related UCL activity, perhaps through nominated departmental people and central UCL student services.

At the time of this project, we were unable to find any similar work being carried out at UK universities with large Chinese student cohorts. We believe that 'London's global university' can and should do more to lead on and improve the experience and wellbeing of Chinese students, and for cohorts of other backgrounds as well, ensuring UCL's duty of care is sufficiently carried out and encouraging other universities to do the same.

Project overview

This project, supported by Changemakers funding, takes an introductory look at the complex issues facing Chinese students – defined as overseas students from mainland China throughout – in UCL's Faculty of Engineering, in terms of support, belonging, and wellbeing. They are the largest overseas cohort in our Faculty and, for most of this project, we were both members of Professional Services staff in the Engineering Faculty Office.

The issues are complex and interconnected; this report presents our observations and research so far, as well as recommendations to continue exploring the problems and potentially work to alleviate them. These are all far from comprehensive and our intention throughout is not to assume or make sweeping general statements based on our findings. With this in mind, we would be delighted to liaise with others on all and more of the topics set out in this report, whether views are agreeing or contradicting.

Need for project

This project originated when one of us observed that a number of Chinese students were called to meetings with the Faculty Tutor for prolonged disengagement and/or academic insufficiency – often presenting with signs of poor wellbeing, as well as significant language difficulties. We wondered why the support and intervention measures provided by departments, the Faculty, and UCL as a whole did not seem to be usefully reaching these students in a timely manner.

Several questions arose:

- Why did some students get to the point of termination of studies, presenting with, sometimes significant, signs of negative wellbeing that did not seem to have been addressed appropriately?
- Why was there such a disparity in number of disengagement and academic insufficiency reports across departments?
- Why did departments' previous attempts to engage with Chinese students as a cohort have limited success?
- What was stopping the students from seeking and using support?
- What interventions were successful and needed to be increased?
- What systematic changes and improvements needed to be made?

Covid only intensified these issues, with many students citing difficulties with online learning as a significant source of stress. However, as acknowledged by Engineering's Faculty Tutor and several other of our senior staff interviewees, these problems pre-date the pandemic, and in fact this project was inspired by incidents before Covid.

Outline of issue

Chinese students face a combination of issues including academic pressure, isolation stemming from not feeling like they belong at UCL, culture shock and misunderstanding, linguistic difficulties, unsuitable support mechanisms and, now more than ever, anti-Asian hate and discrimination. These issues are at times exacerbated by insufficient staff cultural competency in dealing with Chinese students.

Procedure

Meetings with CSSA

As a first step, we reached out to the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA) – the main student society run by and for Chinese students at UCL. Several of the society’s officers joined our initial meeting (which, unbeknownst to us when we suggested the time, was at 11pm for most of them – but still not their latest meeting or lesson!). They expressed gratitude – and, it felt like, astonishment – that UCL staff had invited them to discuss specific problems faced by Chinese students. In fact, the president of the society used the word “heart-warming” to describe us taking a noticeable interest in their specific cohort.

They confirmed what we had already surmised and researched: that stress and a lack of belonging were common problems among Chinese students.² In addition to the language barriers, they corroborated the idea that the more self-directed style of learning in UK universities was vastly different from what they were used to, and a difficult transition to make independently or even with the current assistance on offer. They suggested support to acclimatise could most usefully extend beyond induction and indeed through the first year of study as a minimum.

Some Chinese students view students in the UK as "not very talkative", or at least not very talkative to them – a factor playing into the latter's sense of not belonging at UCL. We want to be clear throughout that the issues around belonging have roots in all sides. While communication with Chinese students may be more difficult – or perceived by staff and other students as more difficult – which may account for some reluctance to engage with Chinese students, realistically we also expect that a certain level of bias, conscious or unconscious, is potentially a factor. We have seen East Asians, and people of Chinese heritage in particular, increasingly targeted for hate crime following the Covid outbreak. Given the government policy of creating a ‘hostile environment’ (Home Office hostile environment policy, 2012) for migrants and would-be migrants, it is reasonable to suppose that these attitudes have seeped throughout UK society. We are aware, for example, of EU staff in the Faculty who received negative comments from other staff members in the wake of the Brexit referendum. Given the increase in hate crime and harassment over the past few years and what we know about racism at UCL (currently being

² Quinton W. So close and yet so far? Predictors of international students’ socialization with host nationals. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*. (2020) 74, pp.7-16. doi: 10.1016/j.ijintrel.2019.10.003.

explored under initiatives such as ‘Report Support’s Let’s Talk About Race Campaign’) it does not seem impossible that racism could play a role.³

Surveying the ‘low response cohort’

Next, we decided to conduct a survey among Chinese students across UCL; the questions were designed in consultation with the CSSA officers to whom we spoke. We decided not, at this point, to limit it to Engineering, as we suspected many of the issues would be similar across UCL. Also, as part of the justification of this project we hoped that any good practice could be replicated across college, and so widening participation seemed sensible and beneficial.

We were adamant that the survey needed to be available in both English and Mandarin, meaning all questions were to be translated and the option to respond in either language made clear. Given the sensitivity, complexity, and cultural specificity of issues relating to mental health and wellbeing, to say nothing of the specialised vocabulary often used to discuss it, we thought it was vital students were not excluded or hampered in expressing themselves by language barriers.

We also advertised the survey through the UCL WeChat and Weibo accounts, rather than just UK centric social media pages; the post figures showed high engagement with viewings in the tens of thousands, though not all of these would be from current UCL students.

Several staff members had warned us that Chinese students were traditionally a ‘low response cohort’ in terms of UCL surveys and data gatherings. We were amazed then to get almost 400 responses across college in under two weeks. Our survey comprised of a mix of question styles – ‘drop down’ and optional ‘free text’ responses. Of the 392 completed surveys, only 41 responders did not add any notes in the optional ‘free text’ boxes when asked to go into more detail about what makes them feel stressed or depressed. So, it seems clear that this cohort indeed has much to say, if only they feel comfortable and equipped to respond.

We employed a translator to translate the survey results, as approximately half of them were in Mandarin. The responses echoed the issues we had already suspected would be rife: 36% recorded

³ Hate crime linked to race is on the rise, data by Victim Support reveals, 23 April 2021 (<https://www.victimsupport.org.uk/hate-crime-linked-to-race-is-on-the-rise-data-by-victim-support-reveals/>); Did the vote for Brexit lead to a rise in hate crime?, 25 February 2021 (<https://www.economicsobservatory.com/did-the-vote-for-brexit-lead-to-a-rise-in-hate-crime/>); Report-support.ucl.ac.uk. 2022. Let's talk about Race - Report + Support - University College London. [online] Available at: <<https://report-support.ucl.ac.uk/campaigns/lets-talk-about-race>> [Accessed 13 January 2022]; Ucl.ac.uk. 2022. [online] Available at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/equality-diversity-inclusion/sites/equality_diversity_inclusion/files/ucl-rec-submission-2020.pdf> [Accessed 13 January 2022].

being ‘so stressed it is severely affecting my life and studies’, and 29% said they were ‘so depressed it is severely affecting my life and studies’. This work should also be linked up with work happening concurrently in the Faculty on students with disabilities. There are low rates of reporting disabilities, including depression and other psychological illnesses, amongst Chinese students. It would be especially useful to unpick the reasons behind this, noted in the points ‘for further exploration’ near the end of the report.

We are not qualified to clinically assess people for depression. To reiterate, our aim was not to conduct a scientifically rigorous survey – impossible given the capacity and funding for this initial foray into the topic -- but simply to conduct a ‘pulse checker’ in hopes this would flag up issues that could then be more deeply investigated. We think it is important to highlight our use of the term ‘depressed’ as distinct from ‘stressed’, which was often used in relation to academic pressure by the cohort. We were told by some UCL staff and students that our Chinese students may shy away from wording like ‘depressed’ and we did find, in our conversations with students, that it often took some time and rapport-building before any of this language emerged. Almost a third of students themselves felt it appropriate to choose the option worded ‘depressed’, indicating a widespread and alarming trend.

5) ‘so stressed it is severely affecting my life and studies’	142 (36.22%)
4) ‘stress is affecting my life and studies’	212 (54.08%)
3) ‘manageable stress/pressure’	31 (7.91%)
2) ‘little pressure’	5 (1.28%)
1) ‘no pressure at all’	2 (0.51%)

1

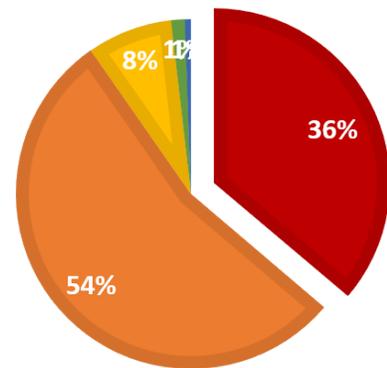


Table and Figure 1: ‘In general, how stressed do you feel?’ – of 392 survey responses

5) ‘so depressed it is severely affecting my life and studies’	114 (29.08%)
4) ‘depression is affecting my life and studies’	175 (44.64%)

3)'some manageable feelings of depression'	66 (16.83%)
2)'rarely feel depressed'	24 (6.12%)
1)'no feelings of depression'	13 (3.32%)

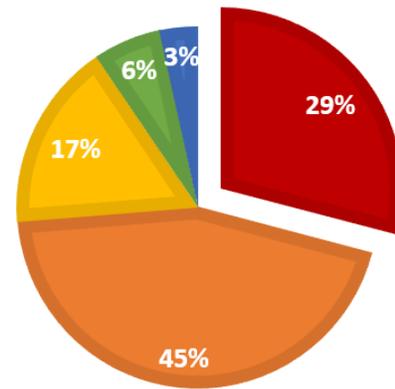


Table and Figure 2: 'In general, how depressed do you feel?' – of 392 survey responses

Free-text responses tended to highlight the same issues; a sample of the comments received follows (some are slightly paraphrased to further ensure anonymity but without losing meaning). Note that almost all responses also mentioned academics as a major cause of stress and/or negative wellbeing.

- "I had a breakdown last night, and the staff from my hall knocked on the door at 2am saying I was crying too loudly and disturbing others"
- "Problems for me are language, loneliness" and "language disability"
- "My health is suffering" due to staying up late for synchronous lectures while living in China
- New student, on teaching support and lack of face-to-face contact: "very confused about how to study properly"
- On groupwork: "I have social fears but am forced to endure it", "group communication does not run smoothly" and a suggestion to "reduce group work in this environment"
- There are "cultural differences... some teaching models and learning models are not suitable"
- Several students reporting "no-one to talk to/turn to" "no friends" or similar
- "I cannot tell my parents" and "I feel like I am wasting my parent's money"
- Lack of "good" or "encouraging study atmosphere" and "there is no environment for study, hard to get help from teacher and student"
- "The balance between study and life is not good"
- "I cannot seek help for my issues – who would want to hire a depressed graduate?"

Student interviews

We also interviewed several students from Engineering individually. Our original intent was to run multiple focus groups, but it became apparent that this was unlikely to go ahead. Despite strong initial interest, students seemed hesitant to speak to us about mental health in general, understandable given the sensitive subject and insufficient time to build relationships with them.

The Welfare Officer for CSSA suggested that approaching people she knew directly and arranging for them to either have an individual interview, or a small group interview only with friends they chose, would be an effective way forward. However, even after completing the meeting poll, most students ceased to respond further – potentially due to the barrier of having to complete a lengthy and technical participant consent form (good practice, but also a Changemakers requirement). We did include in a later email, in Mandarin, that we could assist them in completing the form and that they should not consider that a barrier to participation; however, the lack of response persisted.

Interestingly, we received responses from multiple incoming students, clearly invested in ensuring their upcoming university experience is a good one, and perhaps also trying to introduce themselves as committed, initiative-taking students. Should we have capacity to continue developing this project, it is likely that we will seek to interview these students.

Near the end of our report write up, we saw the new Student Welcome and Induction team's notes on their student insight interviews. A sizeable portion of the feedback – mostly relating to how easy it is to do certain tasks and find information online seemed more positive than we had been hearing from Chinese students. If no Chinese students were involved with the interviews previously, we would suggest some are specifically recruited for the next round – particularly some who indicate that English language comprehension can be a source of stress for them. Later discussion with the Student Welcome and Induction team's Senior Communications Officer suggested that their exchanges with Chinese students specifically on 'Welcome Week 2021' had, in fact, been hindered by language comprehension issues.

Meetings with staff

Most of our meetings with staff took place in the preliminary stages of the project, while we were designing and deploying the survey. We consulted with over 40 staff in the following roles:

- Faculty Tutor

- Cultural Consultation Service
- Race Equality Steering Group Member
- Pro Vice Provost Student Experience
- Pro Vice Provost East Asia
- Teaching & Learning Staff
- Academic Tutor
- Leadership Development & Change Manager
- PGR Manager
- Student Partnerships Team (Director, Manager, Associate)
- Student Experience and Wellbeing Officer
- Head of Student Support and Wellbeing
- Programme Director
- Faculty and Department Student Representatives
- Researchers (PALS)
- Student Welcome and Induction Senior Communications Officer
- Chinese Social Media Communications Officer
- External Consultants (including a Chinese-born law society president, a Chinese-born politician and a Chinese-born non-medical doctor and education consultant)

Additionally, we presented our work in progress in the following venues:

- Talk given to senior management in Engineering Leadership Forum
- ‘Pecha Kucha’ style talk given at the UCL Education Conference 2021 (approximately 30 attendees)

One thing that was immediately apparent was that the staff we spoke to had recognised, and were concerned by, issues relating to the welfare of Chinese students. This contrasted with the impression of CSSA officers, who showed relief and surprise to find staff taking an interest. There may be several reasons for this: like with most things at UCL, staff often work in siloes – we, for example, only discovered different pockets of related activity once we began networking around it. Visibility and communication were thus clearly an issue and the work and concern of individual staff not coming through to Chinese students.

It did seem clear that little work had been conducted previously with CSSA directly, or perhaps even in consultation with Chinese students generally. We found it vital in the initial stages of the project to get the CSSA officers on board, due to their strong visibility and influence among the Chinese student cohort. Our project would likely not have had even the limited sense of trust and support that it had without this peer stamp of approval.

And finally, we suspect that translating information into Mandarin was key. One project co-lead also has a Chinese family background and speaks Mandarin – again, this was crucial to gaining trust and rapport with CSSA and with Chinese students in general. It seems that without this commonality, the work would have been much harder and would not have translated across to the students themselves either.

Issues raised

Language barriers

Difficulty with English was raised both by Chinese students and by UCL staff as a source of stress for Chinese students. As mentioned, the genesis of this project came from seeing Chinese students in meetings about disengagement and/or academic insufficiency who appeared to struggle with the language so much they were unable to comprehend what was happening. Not being comfortable communicating with other students in English was raised not only as an issue impeding their learning but also their sense of belonging at UCL.

There is a difference, of course, between language in the context of support versus academic work. We recognise that we must work to remove all barriers to accessing and understanding appropriate support, especially given that language and cognitive skills in general are impaired in times of stress, anxiety, and lowness. In an academic context, we have also heard that there is support for academic writing and communication in English available and work being done to improve it – are Chinese students proportionately taking up these opportunities and what might be useful in encouraging them to do so if not?

Being unable to understand or express themselves properly was also cited several times in the survey as a reason a Chinese student might not seek support for counselling sessions in English or at UCL. Conversely, when told that Student Support and Wellbeing can refer students to a Chinese-speaking counselling service in Camden, several students told us that they would fear a lack of confidentiality: that information might be leaked to the Chinese community in London and to their

families at home. This cultural difference around confidentiality was also mentioned as a sticking point when speaking to a Chinese staff member and other Chinese external consultants. One student also mentioned tensions between UK Chinese populations and Chinese immigrants and felt that it would be hard for a Chinese counsellor born in the UK, or even one who had lived here for many years, to relate to a Chinese student. We reached out to the service – the Chinese Mental Health Association – but did not receive a response. This conundrum - the language barrier combined with a reluctance to confide in Chinese sources of support - clearly needs further examination to unpick and should be considered in a wider strategy to increase understanding of wellbeing support for Chinese students.

Over the Covid period, students attending remotely from China mentioned both firewalls and poor internet connections as being factors impacting their ability to engage with lectures and other academic engagements, and socially. The latter was affected, for example, by difficulties using WhatsApp and Facebook in China – Chinese students predominantly use the platforms WeChat and Weibo – which also meant exclusion from student social groups using the non-Chinese apps.

Lack of belonging

Struggling with a sense of belonging to the UCL and wider UK community came up repeatedly during our project. Almost all teaching staff noticed that Chinese students would tend to ‘buddy up’ with other Chinese students when it came to groupwork. CSSA talked about the “disconnect” between UCL’s “Western” and Chinese students. As mentioned previously, they found UK home students to be “non-talkative”, at least to Chinese students. One student talked about attempts to connect with his non-Chinese peers being sadly rebuffed on several occasions.

It seems that the causes of this lack of belonging feed upon each other – Chinese students sense hostility or disinterest from other students, so combined with their nervousness about socialising in English, they tend to cluster with their Chinese cohort as a result. Non-Chinese students then view Chinese students as cliquish and then are even less likely to attempt to reach out – a vicious cycle that can leave Chinese students increasingly isolated.

A member of senior leadership proposed encouraging Chinese students to take on more UCL-related opportunities, such as leading on an event or forum, to empower them to proactively search for ways that work for them to feel more belonging at UCL. While this is a useful suggestion, we caution that, given the differences between learning styles and what being a student means and consists of, elaborated elsewhere in this report, as well as lack of confidence in English, the idea may not land effectively with Chinese students themselves.

Difficulties accessing support

Though most staff agree that UCL support is well sign-posted and accessible, survey responses showed that not all Chinese students were aware of the support available, such as SSW, and fewer still would consider them accessible and appropriate. Of all survey responses, almost 30% of responders had not heard of SSW before, just over 30% left the question entirely blank, and only a tiny minority had ever used or would consider using their services. This could be down the advert placement; for example, if they are on campus or on UK(/Western) social media, Chinese students are less likely to come across them.

If the students did know about the services, there were then a number of reasons why they would not want to use them: concerns around confidentiality, language barriers, and shame of talking about your 'personal' problems, particularly to your place of learning. Fewer than 8% of survey responders said they would discuss matters concerning wellbeing or belonging with UCL staff such as tutors, teachers, and supervisors.

Confidentiality

As mentioned above, Chinese students were not confident that mental health concerns brought to a Chinese counsellor would be kept confidential; we were told that for many, this concern extended to any counselling service, including online services.

One member of staff noted that in China, doctors might consult parents and exclude the student directly from any dialogue about their own health. It did seem, from the survey and interviews, that students had some concerns about keeping any issues away from their parents. Reasons for this included culturally specific pressures and family shame.

We did speak to one external Chinese stakeholder, also a parent, who urged us to consult with Chinese parents for our project. However, it seemed paramount to focus on the students themselves, their experiences and what they wanted, and to keep stressing the differences around confidentiality culture at UK universities.

Perceptions of role of academic staff

It can be quite a culture shock for students who are used to a school lifetime of memorising and repeating their teacher's work to suddenly be asked to think critically and challenge what their

university lecturers are saying. This may explain their reticence to speak up and/or to make it apparent that they do not understand the topic until it is too late.

One member of staff relayed to us a comment they had heard in a staff meeting: that Chinese students can be very demanding to academic members of staff. Repeatedly mentioned in our meetings was a difference in how academic staff are viewed in China versus in the UK – that they are consulted more often – and this may be the reason UK university staff find Chinese students' emails and requests above the usual.

Interestingly, we often heard the opposite from both staff and students as well: that Chinese students are reluctant to reach out to lecturers and the like. Motivations behind these behaviours seemed to include not wanting to be a cause of annoyance or draw attention to themselves, fear that repeated questions would show them to be a poor student, and not wanting to feed into the stereotypes around their English language ability.

Stigma and other beliefs around mental health

The stigma around mental health in China was mentioned many times during the project by Chinese staff and students – to be seen to be suffering mentally can have an extremely negative effect on an individual's life and career. One of the most impactful statements we took from the survey was “I cannot seek help for my issues – who would want to hire a depressed graduate?”. To support this theory, around a quarter of all survey responses said they had no-one to speak to or would not speak to anyone about their problems – where other responders gave answers including parents, friends, family, university support (rarely) and even unknown 'netizens' (a user of the internet; a term often used in China).

For Chinese students, university can be seen as a place to dedicate entirely to work; the benefits of positive wellbeing and mental health, and having an enjoyable time in general, are not always seen as important in the overall university experience. This could explain why it appears that Chinese students do not seek help for intense academic stress, low mood, and other symptoms of negative wellbeing – is it not just part of university?

In addition, during our conversations with Chinese students and external consultants, we heard that struggling with stress or mental health can be seen as a product of some internal deficiency rather than external pressures, not something to therefore express externally. One member of staff also said that Chinese students stereotypically tended toward more internal coping mechanisms, such as gambling, overspending, or social withdrawal, rather than the more external rebellion they felt they saw

in UK students. Given this difference, Chinese students struggling with their mental health may not be as immediately visible to potential sources of support.

Finally, these students can be under immense pressure to succeed at university, aware of the significant amount of money, time, and effort their families have devoted to sending them to UCL. This intensifies the pressure to not ask for help, to not be seen to be struggling, to not fail. Shame – avoiding it – is an extraordinarily strong motivator. A member of senior Engineering staff working closely with these students noted that often the Chinese student, due to the stigma of mental health in China, would not engage with support at the point needed, leading to underperformance and failure. However, the stigma of failure was ultimately considered worse, and it would not be until this point that support would be sought, often then too late to put in place any useful measures to address the original, often academic, issue.

Cultural understandings in transition

Group work

Small group work, as practiced in a UK university context, takes some adjusting to for Chinese students. We were told that Chinese students would expect the group to meet, the work to be divided up, and everyone to work on their section independently. This contrasts with the more discussion-based, collaborative style that is encouraged for group work, and indeed expected by many students in the UK.

Socialising

Many Chinese students also raised socialising as a source of stress and confusion. While some students invoked the stereotype of engineers not being very socially adept to explain this, others said that they felt ill-equipped to engage with non-Chinese students socially. How to do a self-introduction when meeting someone in the UK, as well as the social benefit of joining mixed nationality student societies, were raised as points where Chinese students might need some guidance.

Recommendations

Extended induction for Chinese students

In another classic UCL example of multiple people working on an issue and being unaware of each other, a few months into our project we were contacted by a second-year Chinese student in Engineering, who, on his own initiative, had created a Changemakers proposal to work on a special induction for

Chinese students. This was based on his own experience and observations as to what Chinese students would find most challenging about starting university in the UK and how best to remedy this. We began collaborating with him on this extended induction, piloted in the autumn term of 2021. The sessions included talks from current staff and Chinese students, activities on communication skills (such as how to introduce yourself, make small talk and facilitate group discussion), and understanding the UK lesson plan/style and how outcomes are assessed.

We heard several times by Chinese students about Chinese students that they will go to sessions that are mandatory, but feel comfortable skipping optional sessions, especially given the time needed for academics. Thus, we intended to repurpose some of the vouchers we put aside for focus group participants, and the concomitant funds for interpretation, as prize draws for these sessions in hopes of increasing participation. In the end, these were not used and is perhaps a lesson learned for next time. Still, the initial uptake for his sessions was high, which the student speculated was due to first year students being interested in all kinds of welcome activities.

Three sessions ran as part of this extended induction. The student who initiated this 'China Induction 2021' project ran the sessions along with another Chinese student in the Institute of Education. The content of the sessions was discussed with us and with their staff partner.

In hindsight, we would perhaps consider being more 'hands-on' during the actual sessions as the project lead gave feedback that having a facilitator had a strong positive effect on the programme and student experience. Note however that this facilitator was a dual or multi linguist and switched between English and Mandarin during the event, which was also noted as having a positive effect on attendance, engagement, and comprehension.

For the pilot though, we were wary of imposing too strong views on how we thought the sessions should run. We thought it should be, and it was, a student-led initiative.

If the project were to run again, we should perhaps:

- Lower barriers for new students to join group discussions, perhaps by having more presenters for the first and second day and more audience interaction by the late second and early third day,
- Measure the success more qualitatively and quantitatively of the event using surveys and other data gathering techniques. This should show what students found useful, less so, would like to see next time, and improve the programme overall if run again, and

- Consider further the reasons behind the needs for an extended induction for Chinese students so that sessions may be more specific and targeted. We hope that this report may answer some of these questions for next time.

As part of another annual induction, we would also look to include specific sessions such as guidance on how to balance academic work, socialising and housework. It is quite common for Chinese families to cook and clean for their children so they can dedicate all of their own time to study. When those students arrive at UCL, they have professed difficulty in completing all of their tasks, often resorting to takeaway food regularly, for example.

Guidance for staff

We want to be clear that we are not assigning the entirety of the responsibility to change and adapt to incoming Chinese students. Staff, too, need to be aware of relevant cultural aspects in order to better serve Chinese students, and general receptiveness to this so far has been strong. Staff have told us that training for personal tutors and other staff with student-facing roles is inconsistent regarding matters such as cultural awareness and mental health in general, and there does not appear to be a specific training on Chinese culture.

Useful further work should include a toolkit for staff and/or bespoke training. Cultural awareness is something staff should be well-versed in regardless. Though we suspect there are individual examples of good practice cases throughout UCL already, more work should be done to ensure staff consider student experiences in terms of cultural nuance and cultural barriers – it may not be so clear to these students why, for example, group work is beneficial to the course and to future careers, and this could be made clearer. This will improve general inclusivity – something we are working toward in any case. It may be that other student cohorts could similarly benefit from staff training focused on their needs; it is hoped that if this is piloted in relation to Chinese culture and shown to be helpful, it could be expanded and diversified.

We also know there is a wider issue in the Faculty regarding the levels of pastoral support expected from tutors: this varies between and within departments. There is work to be done here on clarifying expectations, increasing resources, upskilling staff to provide this support, and communicating this to students – again, this will help all students and not just Chinese students. In the case of Chinese students, however, who have so far shown a preference to distancing academic from pastoral support, perhaps the upskilling of Professional Services staff or staff unrelated to the student's discipline to provide the latter may be beneficial.

Tailored wellbeing guidance

As noted, some students feel unwilling or incapable of accessing support services in either English or Mandarin. We believe, however, that a considerable proportion of Chinese students are effectively blocked from even making that choice, as they are not aware that these services exist or do not fully understand what they are and what they offer. Whilst we know that they are advertised to students via email multiple times, we suspect that having the information available in Mandarin would increase awareness of the services offered. In addition, we know now that there is a member of staff working directly on Chinese social media platforms who could distribute more usefully.

Employing Chinese counsellors with comprehensive linguistic and cultural understanding could also benefit these students. A campaign in Chinese through Chinese social media platforms could roll out introducing the students to these counsellors with clear wording around confidentiality. Perhaps these staff could speak to the cohort in Welcome Week, making who they are and what they offer obvious to build trust from the outset. The benefits of these staff could be usefully measured by uptake in services and feedback forms.

Also, a tailored campaign that emphasises the varied ways to seek support at UCL, that these interventions can be immensely beneficial to the whole university experience and outcome, and that confidentiality is assured, could help break down some of these barriers to accessing help. Student Support and Wellbeing reported that they would not, for example, hold support groups for Chinese students because they understand that culturally, these are very unlikely to be successful. This adapted campaign could tap into a culturally specific ‘holistic’ view of the university experience – that the mind and body must work together and in harmony to achieve the best results – these ideas have roots in Confucianism and Taoism, for example. Also, the use of Chinese social media and posts and posters in Chinese throughout their degrees could be used to demystify and destigmatise mental health overall.

SSW also mentioned that EFL students, not just Chinese students, tend to use “high threshold language to describe low-level feelings”. In hindsight, we wondered what cultural and linguistic factors might be coming into play here and how had it been decided externally that the language used was inappropriate for the students’ levels of feelings internally. We felt that several of the survey quotes given in our report section titled ‘Surveying the ‘low response cohort’ spoke for themselves with little nuance or room for interpretation, such as “my health is suffering” and “I had a breakdown last night, and the staff from my hall knocked on the door at 2am saying I was crying too loudly and disturbing others”. We personally perceived a mismatch in cultural styles of communication was at fault here –

that the students were presenting the language they felt was most appropriate but were being subsequently misunderstood. Nevertheless, it is interesting and necessary to look into this more and explore how that might affect the language we use in offering the students support, as well as how that might affect the reception they receive from staff when using this language.

Confidentiality

Our student interviewees and survey responders reported confidentiality worries as a barrier to accessing support and that often they preferred to work on themselves when they perceive they are struggling. We could assuage some of these worries with clear and regular information, given before, within and beyond a tailored induction, about how seriously a person's right to confidentiality in the UK is taken and the extremely limited situations in which it can be breached. UK universities, for example, will have very little, if any, contact with students' parents throughout their degree and only ever in exceptional circumstances; this should be made unmistakable.

We could emphasise more self-directed ways of improving wellbeing; this suits Chinese students but is also beneficial for any student cohort and indeed any person. These methods could include general ways to wellbeing such as exercise, charity, and rest, for example, but also cohort specific examples such as tai chi, acupuncture, tea drinking. These initiatives could usefully be introduced to home and other international students in sessions to widen socialisation groups, increase feelings of belonging, and create bonds and cultural understanding between diverse groups.

Previous research, not specific to Chinese students, found that 'increasing mental health literacy and normalizing seeking care from mental health professionals when indicated' was 'one of the most effective approaches... to provide a public mental health program'.⁴ The self-directed techniques above would also include teaching to improve understanding and literacy for mental health, including moving away from the idea that negative mental health is a result of some internal deficiency, potential ways to alleviate negative feelings, and helping students to realise themselves when it is time to escalate and ask for help, and how to do so.

⁴ Yap M, Reavley N, Jorm A. Associations between awareness of beyondblue and mental health literacy in Australian youth: Results from a national survey. *Aust New Z J Psychiatry* (2012) 46:541–52. doi: 10.1177/0004867411435288

Staff role models

One Chinese member of staff we spoke to suggested that having visible Chinese and non-Chinese role models, successful in their field but also open about challenges they have faced, including mental health, could be useful in starting to erode the stigma around mental illness. This could also demonstrate that mental illness is not something that students need to suffer with on their own – that getting support does not mean your studies or your career are derailed. This could be integrated into the wellbeing campaign suggested above. There are a number of senior academics in Engineering who are already onboard with this suggestion as potential role models, as well as some high-profile external Chinese-born professionals.

Social integration measures

Chinese students told us repeatedly that they found it difficult to connect with non-Chinese students. This is exacerbated by the lack of confidence some contend with when speaking English. A ‘buddy’ scheme, perhaps similar to the Transition Mentors scheme which has received generally favourable feedback, might help alleviate this. It could potentially need a good amount of staff support to ensure it is not merely a box ticking exercise, but if conducted properly could generate good outcomes.

Similarly, a tailored volunteering opportunity – perhaps with UCL’s Mandarin Excellence Programme (<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2021/aug/ucl-led-mandarin-language-programme-schools-continue-further-three-years>) could provide experience socialising with English speakers, as well as a sense of purpose, value and belonging as mentioned in an above section. UCL’s TRANSACT peer mental health support scheme (<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2021/aug/student-mental-health-focus-new-peer-support-programme>) might be another useful opportunity.

We could look to offer (more) roles as Year Two and higher Chinese student advisors, creating an enticing position with dedicated training, resource, and support, emphasising its benefit on later CVs and career searches, for example through the responsibility held and liaison with senior leadership. This would also benefit the lower years who could see experienced role models and mentors from China in positions of responsibility outside of pure academia. They would have valuable and practical tips on culture shock and adapting to the UK style of study, for example, having gone through it themselves recently.

Audit of services

As this project demonstrated, a common pitfall at UCL is being unaware of staff across college who have interests and work in a particular issue. Similarly, we feel that awareness of the full scope of services and pastoral care available – both at departmental level and centrally – is poor among Chinese students and is also uneven among staff. A ‘deep-dive’ into these services, mapping out what is available, could provide further insights on how to improve provision; such an exercise could also potentially be converted to publicity materials highlighting these resources. One example would be to look into the current support for academic writing and communication in English available – are Chinese students fully taking up these opportunities and what might be useful in encouraging them to do so if not? Another would be looking into numbers of Chinese students who contact and regularly utilise the services of SSW. We would be happy to speak to anyone considering an audit of this type.

SSW offers longer appointments or the opportunity to connect via email for those who speak English as a foreign language and may need more time to communicate. While this seems like a positive step, we suspect firstly that many Chinese students are not aware of this, and secondly that it may not result in a significant uptake from Chinese students for the reasons mentioned above and throughout this report. Further research on what would appeal to Chinese students and make them feel safe accessing support should be conducted.

Implementation and accountability

As part of the audit, each department should appoint a key person who ensures implementation of, and accountability for, these recommendations, and the welfare and wellbeing of the Chinese student cohort as a whole. As a group, these staff members should liaise with our Faculty EDI coordinator and project co-lead, Johanna Novales, who would in turn feed back to the Vice-Dean EDI and Dean of the Faculty. This group would also benefit from the participation of CSSA or other nominated Chinese students in the Faculty. A panel of Chinese student advisors would involve them in important processes, such as selecting Chinese counsellors and choosing wording for mental health and confidentiality campaigns. Having this voice and position of responsibility may also satisfy some familial and internal pressures to succeed. It may also be important to involve more members of the Chinese community in Higher Education in these group meetings.

Student welcome and induction liaison

As part of the above point, we must work closely with the newly formed Student Welcome and Induction team to ensure recommendations are rolled out centrally and in line with other student initiatives. We also suggest that the team, if not already, recruit Chinese students for work on student insight interviews, reporting how easy it is to do certain tasks and find information online, particularly those who indicate that English language comprehension can be a source of stress for them.

English classes

Like the wellbeing and/or enhanced induction campaigns, we could offer classes that extend throughout the first term, at least, to improve confidence with the English language. We do note there are some classes fitting the description already hosted at UCL, including pre-sessional English courses and 'summer camp' type courses. We could perhaps alleviate the resources needed for this recommendation by holding them more informally and even making them student led – informal conversation circles are a common tool used in adult language learning, providing both practice and social interaction.

For further exploration

Obviously, there are a great many related topics that we have not considered in our project but that did come up during the process. Though we did not have the resources this time, they are nevertheless important and should be explored soon:

- How does being at UCL affect Chinese students' wellbeing? Are those with mental ill health arriving in London living with this, or is it triggered by their experience here? The answer is likely to be mixed among the cohort but will shape what interventions might be helpful.
- How does the wellbeing of Chinese students compare with non-Chinese students? It may be that support initiatives need to be increased or further adjusted for students as a whole, or, as previously mentioned as a potential outcome for this project, looked at for other discrete student cohorts.

- We have seen more Chinese students and parents questioning the worth of attending UK university. It can be extremely expensive and the question of ‘is it being (mis)recognised as a place of distinction?’ has been cropping up in both social and academic circles.⁵
- It would be useful to leverage the leads’ existing networks with the Chinese Embassy and other notable institutions to increase project understanding, engagement, and legitimacy within the Chinese community in the UK.
- Several staff mentioned Chinese students in connection with plagiarism: the misunderstanding of severity of some plagiarism cases and the use of agents to fulfil the entry criteria. One of our external consultants, a high-profile UK Chinese lawyer dealing with some of these cases, also expressed concerns around this matter and a willingness to have more in-depth discussions with our specific cohort.
- Some staff and students thought lack of communication and engagement was purely owing to being unconfident speaking English when sometimes the student just does not understand the course material and needs to be flagged up as requiring extra academic support.
- Most of our project was directed at undergraduate students – how do the recommendations need to change to fit postgraduates? For example, one staff member told us that East Asian PhD students are often paired with East Asian supervisors which leads to a culturally distinct teacher/student relationship than the UK and the building up of siloes. Another said that Chinese postgraduate students were more likely to ‘drop out’ than ask for significant extra assistance.
- Though we endeavoured to follow good examples of culturally specific support from other UK universities, we were unable to find what we were looking for during our initial work. If this project were to be expanded, we would reach out more and start a network to discuss how other institutions manage similar situations and share best practice.
- Would it be possible to train up staff, like Study Abroad Advisers, to offer similar services as our outgoing students receive? This is perhaps a big ask, but as both groups are UCL students going through similar experiences in new environments, it would not be unreasonable to assume both should have similar attention and support. Could, for example, students be met at the airport and their welcome and induction effectively start from there?

⁵ Liu Y, Shen W. Building Halos: how do Chinese elites seek distinction through (mis) recognising studying abroad? Virtual talk given Tuesday 19th October 2021.

- Chinese students bring an incredible amount of money to UK universities as a cohort; is this reflected in the quality of their student experience? Do universities expect too little from Chinese students in terms of English language proficiency on arrival, lest they stem the flow?
- How do other aspects of identity – such as gender, disability, or sexual orientation – intersect with the difficulties many Chinese students face? We know from other work being done in the Faculty that there is a disproportionately small number of disability reports (including depression) and SORAs from Chinese students, for example. This needs urgent unpicking, and the dominant reasons are likely noted in this report.
- The student lead of the extended Chinese induction of 2021 noted differences in university experience between ‘rural’ and ‘metropolitan’ students. Barriers to help-seeking remain more unclear here; further research is required.
- The ‘Student Health and Wellbeing’ Communities of Practice are running several sessions in 2022 focussing on topics such as mental health, support from staff, belonging and being a good friend. These relate heavily to our recommendations, and it will be interesting to see whether they have considered cultural aspects in these sessions.

Lessons learned: a brief summary

Importance of providing translation

We were often told by staff that English language difficulties should not be catered for, as students are required to have a certain level of English to enrol. We would argue, however, that the level of English needed for admission, if it is indeed sufficient for learning STEM subjects, arguable in itself, may not be sufficient when speaking about complex, personal, and highly culturally specific matters such as mental health. And again, students who have a level of English sufficient for lectures may find it quite another matter to socialise, especially in, for example, a noisy pub with a group speaking in a variety of regional English accents.

This latter point is especially crucial for second-year students who spent their first year as a UCL student learning remotely. They will not have had a year of practicing their English in daily settings, and it is vital that this group is offered additional support around non-academic language.

Importance of leveraging student networks (CSSA)

As mentioned earlier, our project received considerable support and momentum once we made connections with the officers of CSSA. It is crucial to involve students themselves in this work, and also important to liaise with student groups that have considerable trust, reach, and visibility among Chinese students. They provided important insights, assistance, platforms, and advice to us, and we are incredibly grateful for their support.

Timelines for student participation

Working with students can take longer, for a variety of reasons, most notably their university work – that is, after all, their first priority. We also realised that finding students to interview took longer than anticipated because students would express interest and then not respond to follow-up; this could be due to social anxieties. It also took longer because students who are not confident with English may take longer to process and reply to emails, especially when a lengthy consent form is involved.

Cultural differences in translation

We prepared introductory text for the CSSA officers to distribute along with the link to our survey. However, in a good-faith effort to prompt more responses, they circulated the survey with slightly tweaked text that referred to it as an official UCL survey. In fairness, for many students, anything carried out by UCL staff is probably viewed as ‘official’ – and framing the survey in this way also potentially gave it more weight and prestige, encouraging students to reply. We were advised by Changemakers staff of UCL guidance on surveying students (something they had only become recently aware of themselves) and asked to have the students issue a correction which was done promptly. We attempted to reassure the CSSA officers that they had done nothing wrong, but this still had the potential to damage our beneficial working relationship and we approached the matter with caution.

Conclusion and next steps

As we have showed, the issues facing Chinese students are complex and thus the potential solutions presented too. We have found issues to range from belonging and isolation to language and cultural barriers and differences. It seems clear that there is a gap to be bridged in cultural understanding: that we sometimes misunderstand this cohort’s needs and offer them information and support in an incomprehensible or unbeneficial format.

There is much collaborative, connected work to be done, particularly in light of Covid fuelled racism. We are hopeful that this attempt at shedding some light on the problem will be an important first step in helping not only the Faculty of Engineering, but UCL as a whole, examine how it supports Chinese students - and indeed, any cohort of students that might benefit from more culturally tailored assistance.

Following the distribution of our report, we hope to meet with designated Engineering staff and start 'deep-dive' audits of specific departmental issues and services offered, related to Chinese student support, with a view to piloting an extended induction programme with tailored wellbeing and social integration measures, paired with training or a 'handbook' for staff, and other support processes.

We hope to assess again where we are in a year's time and amend our approaches and objectives where appropriate. Finally, this project is vast and has only just begun; we would be delighted to speak to anyone who has appropriate thoughts and experiences on the matters set throughout this report and elsewhere where related.

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