

# A STUDY OF CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT DROPOUT: ACCULTURATION EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES IN A PRE-UNIVERSITY ENGLISH LANGUAGE IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

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**ABSTRACT.** With an increasing number of international students coming to Canada for higher education, Canadian universities are offering diverse English language improvement programs (ELIPs) to improve international students' English proficiency. However, some Chinese international students struggle to pass such programs and eventually withdraw. This study examines the living and learning experiences of Chinese international students who dropped out of ELIPs and identifies the factors associated with their decisions to drop out. The findings indicate that Chinese international students dropped out due to academic failure that was related to low learning motivation, lack of time management and self-regulation, and insufficient academic and social integration. Implications for educators in higher education, study support services, and students are presented.

UNE ÉTUDE SUR LE DÉCROCHAGE SCOLAIRE D'ÉTUDIANT INTERNATIONAL CHINOIS : EXPÉRIENCES ET DÉFIS D'ACCULTURATION DANS UN PROGRAMME D'AMÉLIORATION DE LA LANGUE ANGLAISE PRÉUNIVERSITAIRE

**RÉSUMÉ.** Avec un nombre croissant d'étudiants internationaux venant au Canada pour des études supérieures, les universités canadiennes proposent divers programmes d'amélioration de la langue anglaise (ELIP) pour améliorer la maîtrise de l'anglais des étudiants internationaux. Cependant, certains étudiants internationaux chinois ont du mal à réussir de tels programmes et finissent par se retirer. Cette étude examine les expériences de vie et d'apprentissage des étudiants internationaux chinois qui ont abandonné l'ELIP et identifie les facteurs associés à leurs décisions d'abandonner le programme. Les résultats indiquent que les étudiants internationaux chinois ont décroché en raison d'un échec scolaire lié à une faible motivation d'apprentissage, un manque de gestion du temps et d'autorégulation, et une intégration scolaire et sociale insuffisante. Les implications pour les éducateurs de l'enseignement supérieur, les services de soutien aux études et les étudiants sont présentées ci-dessous.

Since 2014, Canadian universities have seen a 34% increase in international students, amounting to 572,415 students in 2018 alone, with Chinese students composing more than 25% of this number (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2019). When Chinese international students study in Canada, they must meet admission requirements set by Canadian universities. Proof of language proficiency is one such requirement, which is demonstrated by passing international large-scale language tests such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). To offer international students adequate education opportunities, universities such as York University and the University of Windsor have also established pre-university English language improvement programs (ELIPs) for students lacking sufficient language proficiency (University of Windsor, 2018; York University, 2018). By providing English language instruction, pre-university ELIPs enable non-native students to improve their academic English abilities and prepare for future university study. Even though some students successfully complete pre-university ELIPs and pursue their studies at Canadian universities, some struggle, resulting in delays in their academic studies and, in some cases, causing them to drop out of school. To date, a dearth of studies addresses the issue of international student retention and pre-university ELIP dropout rates, and even fewer draw on qualitative research methods to try to ascertain the nature of students' experiences. This study addressed this research gap.

The study aimed to understand the living experiences of Chinese international students who studied in a pre-university ELIP and subsequently dropped out and to identify the factors that led to their decision. The study drew upon a case study design to discover why some Chinese students in pre-university ELIPs withdraw from the program and what obstacles and challenges they encountered. By answering this question, stakeholders might adopt strategies and support services to help Chinese international students successfully integrate into the new educational system.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework that grounds this study is Tinto's (1975, 1993) student retention model. Tinto (1975, 1993) stated that if the academic institution is regarded as a social system with its own values and social structures, dropping out from an educational institution is analogous to suicide in the wider society. Insufficient integration into the social system, which here is the educational institution, causes low commitment to that social system and eventually results in the individual leaving the school or pursuing alternative activities. Since colleges have both academic and social components, students' social and academic integration influences their performance in colleges. Students who failed either of these two modes of integration were more likely to drop out. Academic withdrawal can take place as the result of voluntary or forced withdrawal. Vol-

untary withdrawal is similar to Tinto's notion of social suicide, whereas forced withdrawal arises from insufficient levels of academic performance or improper academic and social behaviours.

Tinto viewed the process of academic withdrawal as a longitudinal process, one that depends on interactions between the individual, the academic institution, and the individual's social system. Factors that could influence students' dropout behaviours include: pre-entry attributes (family background, skills and abilities, prior schooling), goals and commitments (intention, goals, institutional commitments, external commitments), institutional experiences (formal and informal interaction with the academic/social system), and academic/social integration (coping abilities, received support). According to Tinto's retention model, whether the individual will withdraw from school or exhibit other forms of dropout behaviour, such as temporarily dropping out (withdrawing) or transferring to another institution, is determined by the interplay between the individual's commitment to the institution and their goal of college completion. Either low institutional commitment or low goal commitment tends to result in dropout behaviours. Individuals will choose to withdraw from college if they believe that another activity offers a greater reward in exchange for their time, energies, and resources. Other potential factors may also contain changing supply and demand in the job market and the existence of restrictions such as discrimination.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Several key factors led to increased academic withdrawal, including poor choices, lack of social support, lack of comfort with the academic institution, and limited compatibility with the institution due to insufficient social network contacts (Aljohani, 2016; Christie et al., 2004). Because the decision to drop out or persist is a result of a longitudinal interactive process between an individual and the institution, research in student retention should address the challenges students face when interacting with the institutional social and academic systems.

Studies have documented that even though all students undergo adaptation processes in their first year of university, international students tend to experience more difficulties as compared with local students (Hanassab, 2006), not only due to language barriers, but also because international students often have distinctive expectations and approaches to learning (Campbell & Li, 2008; Deters, 2015). To be precise, their academic progress is sometimes hindered by a failure to adjust to Canadian teachers' pedagogical approaches, difficulty understanding lectures delivered in English, and the challenges of adapting to the new classroom learning environment (Wu et al., 2015; Zhang & Zhuo, 2010). In addition, social acculturation of international students can be hampered by homesickness, loss of support systems, loneliness, lack of meaningful relationships with host nationals, culture shock, perceived discrimination, language

differences, an altering sense of identity, unrealistic expectations of family and self, and financial problems (Deters, 2015; Huang & Klinger, 2006; Russell et al., 2010). When responding to this situation, international students may experience stress and its negative consequences, potentially leading to mental health issues and higher risk of dropout (Ward et al., 2001).

Cultural background is known to impact student learning (Holtbrügge & Mohr, 2010; Preston & Wang, 2017). International students, who have distinctive cultural backgrounds, may perceive their learning environments differently than locals and exhibit different learning habits, attitudes, preferences, perceptions, and behaviours (Deters, 2015; Koul & Fisher, 2005; Salvarajah, 2006). In China, for instance, a teacher-centred approach has dominated the educational system for centuries (Gu, 2006). Even though the social constructivist approach, which encourages students to actively participate in class, has made some inroads into China, Chinese education continues to place excessive emphasis on lectures (Zhu et al., 2009). Influenced by their previous schooling experiences, Chinese international students are more likely to listen than speak during class (Dao et al., 2007; Zhang, 2016). In contrast, Canadian education emphasizes equalitarianism, individual development, independent and critical thinking, and cooperation, all of which entail speaking in class. The mismatch between Chinese students' learning preferences and Canadian education values potentially sets up a disadvantageous situation for Chinese students, causing them to undergo discrimination from teachers in the Canadian system. Moreover, Chinese international students often have difficulty interacting with their Canadian classmates; their interactions are often superficial because of their limited communication competence and cultural differences (Zhou et al., 2005). Consequently, they tend to socialize with and seek help from individuals who share their cultural background, which prevents them from gaining social experience with their host society (Jiao, 2006; Zhou & Zhang, 2014).

### *Academic Integration*

English language proficiency is correlated with the level of confidence students have in completing their programs successfully (Roessingh & Douglas, 2012; Zhang & Zhou, 2010). It is one of the main challenges that influences international students' academic achievement (Hepworth et al., 2018). Insufficient language proficiency affects many aspects of international students' lives. For example, it impedes their ability to make friends with native language speakers, understand course materials, and engage in group work with domestic peers (Preston & Wang, 2017; Zhang & Zhou, 2010). Even though international students with language difficulties can reach similar academic results, their grade point averages (GPAs) tend to be lower than those of domestic students (Berman & Cheng, 2010). Chinese students in particular have less confidence in their English abilities and lack confidence when trying to express their opinions. They struggle with comprehending the lecture content and writing essays, and they

often do not know how to behave in their new academic contexts (Preston & Wang, 2017; Zhou & Zhang, 2014).

Lower levels of English language proficiency can also be linked to acculturative stress or depression (Sümer et al.; Zhang, 2016). International students who experience academic stress often react strongly to other stressors when adapting to their new environments, while their academic stress can become further correlated with these life stressors (Rasmi et al., 2009). For instance, international students may face depression, perceived helplessness, anxiety, paranoia, and irritability, which frequently lead to physical problems, such as persistent sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, and low energy (Lee et al., 2004; Mori, 2000). Even though universities provide academic support and facilities to help international students better fit into their new academic surroundings, international students cannot fully access these support services. Chinese students reported either not being fully aware of the supportive services or feeling intimidated to ask for help (Zhang, 2016).

### *Social Integration*

When international students enter a new country, life in their environment is drastically different from their home country. For example, they often face cultural challenges and culture shock when dealing with job opportunities, visa problems, dating issues, and sociocultural concerns (Yan & Berliner, 2012). Literature on cross-culture acculturation has highlighted the essential role of psychological and sociocultural adjustment in shaping students' learning outcomes during the process of acculturation (Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Wu et al., 2015). According to Berry (1999), acculturation is defined as "the process of culture change that results when two (or more) cultural groups come into contact with each other; the changes occur in both groups, but usually one (the dominant group) changes less than the other(s)" (p. 40). Both domestic and international students need to adapt to one another when these two groups hope to work and learn together effectively (Russell et al., 2010). Rienties et al. (2012) suggested that positive adaptation practices may foster social integration and promote academic success. These practices include sharing accommodations with other students, participating in study associations, joining student communities and clubs, and having friends from the host and home countries. Even though many international students believe that interacting with Canadian peers beyond the classroom will "enhance knowledge of one another, increase comfort in communication, and indirectly improve their classroom performance" (Zhou et al., 2005, p. 297), they often have difficulty establishing friendships with native students and are less likely to be satisfied with the relationships they have with native students (Zhang & Brunton, 2007; Zhang, 2016).

In comparison to domestic students, international students are more likely to experience homesickness, culture shock, prejudice, and discrimination because their family, friends, and social networks are geographically far away (Preston &

Wang, 2017; Zhou et al., 2008). Discrimination has been identified as a stressor that significantly influences international student acculturation. International students commonly report instances of perceived discrimination and off-campus discrimination, which include verbal insults, direct confrontation, exclusion from jobs, and physical attacks (Lee & Rice, 2007). To successfully integrate into the new environment, international students need appropriate social support from family, friends, teachers, and the host society (Rienties et al., 2012; Wilcox et al., 2005). International students who receive such support have been shown to better adapt cross-culturally (Baba & Hosoda, 2014), and students who feel at home and engage with their fellow students and teachers while participating in extra-curricular activities are more likely to graduate (Severiens & Wolff, 2008). In contrast, students who drop out of higher education often report that they received inadequate support from their social networks (Mishra, 2019).

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative methodology was chosen because this study intended to document individual experiences and perceptions. Qualitative methodology offered a focus “on process, understanding and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive; and the product is richly descriptive” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 20). This study focused on describing the experiences of Chinese international students who dropped out of a pre-university ELIP. Case study is especially appropriate because it “investigates a contemporary phenomenon (“the case”) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (Yin, 2017, p. 42). The case study design offered a means by which Chinese international students could describe their experiences and detail their reasons for departure from their academic programs. Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews (Edwards & Holland, 2013) were utilized to capture participant dropout stories. Data collection in this study occurred over a period of one month through two open-ended, semi-structured interviews with five international students who had dropped out of an ELIP. These five participants were Chinese international students who either voluntarily withdrew from an ELIP or did not have sufficient English language competence and were consequently forced to withdraw from their respective programs. All interviewees completed their three-year high school in China before they entered the ELIP, and four of them were from English-medium international high schools where the curricula are aligned with American, Canadian, or British high schools. Based on the interviewees’ descriptions, international high schools in China focused on cultivating students’ English language, knowledge, and skills for studying abroad, and most of the courses in international high schools were taught in English. All interviewees were from upper-middle class families. To ensure the anonymity of each participant, their names were replaced with anglicized pseudonyms: David, Zed, Michael, Fred, and Charlie. Each interview lasted about 50 minutes.

The first round of interviews focused on understanding their backgrounds and ELIP learning experiences. The second interview emphasized dropout stories and understanding their life post-ELIP dropout.

During the interviewing process, open-ended questions guided the interviews, and the questions were carefully developed to avoid discomfort for the participant. The interview questions were established based on the theoretical frameworks of this study. Factors included pre-college schooling, learning motivation and expectation, learning styles, socialization, family and social support, and institutional commitment, and coping and acculturation strategies were carefully interpreted via detailed questions asked during the interview. Participants were given the choice to speak in either Chinese or English. All the participants ended up using their mother tongue, Chinese. By using their mother language, participants fully expressed their feelings and talked about their stories without spending time finding appropriate words and organizing sentences. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, member-checked, and translated into English for analysis. To help the researcher improve the credibility of the data, field notes were taken to record participants' body language, emotive responses, facial expressions, and the paralinguistics that audio recording may have missed. The analysis process involved selecting key ideas, summarizing the field notes, identifying and dividing codes into themes, counting the frequency of the codes, relating those categories to analytic frameworks in the existing literature, and creating a point of view on the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

## RESULTS

In analyzing the participants' decisions to drop out, five themes emerged: learning motivations and expectations, time management, perceived loneliness and isolation, academic barriers, and dissatisfaction with the ELIP.

### *Learning Motivations and Expectations*

All participants indicated that they were living away from home for the first time, and various reasons were given to explain why they studied abroad and why they chose the university they decided to attend. Based on the participants' responses, there were two key motivators for study abroad: parental expectations and employment.

### *Parental Expectations*

Participants reported the primary reason for studying abroad was to fulfill parental expectations. For example, David explained that after taking the Chinese National Higher Education Entrance Examination and failing to secure a score that would earn him a position in one of the top 100 universities in China, his parents encouraged him to study abroad. They reasoned that without a degree from an elite Chinese university, the only way he would be able to find

a secure job after graduation would be with the prestige of a bachelor's degree earned while studying abroad. Likewise, Zed stated that studying abroad was not his idea; it was his parents' suggestion to study abroad. After his struggles in the ELIP delayed the start of his program, he expressed a desire to return to China and start his own business, but his parents forced him to continue with the ELIP to gain admission into university. Zed concluded that his extensive struggles in the ELIP and failure to gain entrance into his program after such a long period of time diminished his motivation to the point where he decided to drop out. David and Zed's experiences were consistent with those shared by other participants whereby, because the students were not intrinsically motivated, their respective struggles negatively affected their learning motivation, which led to their decision to quit the program.

### *Employment*

Participants also reported that they intended to earn a bachelor's degree so that they could obtain a good job, a perception that was largely based on their parents' advice. Zed, Fred, and Michael addressed the importance of education and degrees within the Chinese labour market, noting that candidates can secure distinctive occupations based on their education level. For example, a person with a master's degree can acquire a job with a higher income than job applicants with a bachelor's degree. Likewise, companies value candidates who study abroad and have international work experience. Consequently, the participants believed that if they successfully acquired their undergraduate degree, it would be easier for them to secure jobs with higher salaries in China.

### *Time Management*

Except for a four-hour class each day from Monday to Friday, all interviewees reported that they spent most of their time engaged in online gaming to pass the time, avoid pressure, or socialize with friends back home. They rarely studied after class or even before the final exam. Michael explained that because "life in Canada is boring," he did "not have many things to do." Video games were one of his favourite activities since he was young: "When I was in China, my parents did not allow me to play too much. However, no one controls me in Canada, so I can play any time I want." David and Fred also stated that video games were one of the ways they relaxed and relieved pressure. After failing to pass the ELIP across several semesters, they felt stressed out and admitted to playing online games to avoid the pressure associated with their studies.

### *Perceived Loneliness and Isolation*

Participants regularly contacted their family members back in China, and they used videos, social media, and phones to report on their lives and learning experiences in Canada. However, because all participants did not want their parents to worry, they never told them about their difficulties and problems.



Even though they had dropped out, participants did not tell their parents the truth about their situations. Participants did not have close friends to associate with in their spare time; therefore, they commonly felt homesick and lonely, especially during the first few semesters. They tried to make friends with local and international students, but language barriers prevented them from building strong relationships. In many cases, Chinese students sought to live alongside their compatriots, and their social circle exclusively comprised people from their home culture. David illustrated the issue:

Even though our class in [the] ELIP has international students from other countries, I only talk with them ... when I have to. I had tried to talk with natives and international students from other countries before, but sometimes they seem like could not understand what I am talking about.

As a result, David interacted with his friends in China through social media instead of finding ways to broaden his social networks in Canada. Zed stated he contacted his friends in China “almost every day” because staying at home was boring and “playing online games and chatting with his friends through social media” made him feel less lonely.

### *Academic Barriers*

The five interviewees reported that they faced difficulties in their ELIPs relating to presentations and writing. They mentioned that, in general, Chinese students did not speak English as well as they read, wrote, and listened, because Chinese education pays little attention to oral English. One of the primary contributing factors, they explained, was that they had lacked opportunities to present ideas in English. Even though some participants graduated from international high schools and had their high school education delivered in English by native English speakers, they still found it difficult to express their ideas in English. Participants expected the ELIP to provide targeted guidance in speaking, however, they were disappointed that the training focus was more on practicing English rather than improving speaking / presentation skills.

Writing was also a challenge for participants, and poor vocabulary and grammar negatively influenced their writing ability. They found that Chinese writing strategies and formats were significantly different from those in English, and this discrepancy caused confusion. The instructions for writing in the ELIP were not clear or functional, and participants asked for more targeted training in terms of writing structure and format. Fred noted that, in China, teachers provided clear expectations with respect to how paragraphs and essays are supposed to be structured. However, there was confusion about structural expectations in the ELIP, because the writing strategies did not provide a clear outline for expectations on how paragraphs and essays were supposed to be structured. Moreover, citation was perceived as a major challenge for academic writing. For example, Fred stated that he “did not write any papers in high school” and thus “had to learn citation and learn everything from the very beginning.” Even after the

American Psychological Association style training in ELIP, he reported that he still did “not know how to properly cite reference resources.”

In addition, participants generally believed that the lack of a solid relationship with teachers influenced their learning in the ELIP. They did not seem to engage in communication with teachers during or after class, and teachers did not know enough about Chinese cultural backgrounds, which contributed to inactive learning and high dropout rates. Zed, who had negative experiences with teachers that led him to drop out of the ELIP, shared his thoughts:

Relationships between teachers and students in China are quite different from here. Chinese teachers always tend to push students to study and are more willing to communicate with students. However, ELIP teachers seldom communicate with us like friends. We went through a lot of challenges when we first came here. If teachers were more willing to understand our situations, we may have more successfully adapted to the new environment.

This experience was quite universal among the participants, who reported that they wanted to feel cared for. They wished there was someone who they could go to for personal attention and assistance. Participants also reported that they were unsatisfied with the support ELIPs offered and were disappointed with the fact that ELIP teachers did not notice or ask about their difficulties. Fred stated that one of the reasons he was “not satisfied with ELIP was that they never helped students or even asked about their difficulties.” This lack of assistance made them feel as though the teachers did not care about them and were not invested in the success of the students. To address the multitude of challenges with which they struggled, the participants proposed that teachers more actively seek to motivate students, care about them, provide personal attention and assistance, and consider the culture differences.

### *Unsatisfied with the ELIP*

Chinese international students dropped out of the ELIP because they perceived the program as meaningless. All participants used the word “unsatisfied” when they were asked to comment on their ELIPs, and they also raised specific reasons. There were six key issues: the curriculum was not connected to university learning, the program lacked oral English training, learning and testing materials were not aligned, the criteria to pass were unclear, evaluations seemed unfair, and there was a lack of consistency with respect to who was teaching and what each teacher’s standards were.

While an ELIP is described as a pre-university program that is designed to improve international students’ language abilities for academic purposes, all participants insisted that the curriculum is not functional, and the learning content is not related to their subject learning at the university. They reported that their ELIPs did not help them understand the academic language expectations in their respective disciplines. For instance, Fred complained that the

program's curriculum was rarely linked to his major, engineering. He expected to learn the academic lexicon of his major and apply it to his writing; however, the course only aimed to prepare him for conversational English.

In addition to the curriculum content, Michael's interview highlighted concerns participants had with respect to teachers' pedagogical approaches:

[An] ELIP is not as functional as learning English in Chinese schools. In China, teachers put all their efforts into improving students' learning scores as much as they can. Every day, teachers ask students to remember a certain amount of vocabulary and sentences, and they test students the next day. It is a very useful method that inspires students to keep learning, so ELIPs could also use this method to motivate students.

Moreover, most participants reported that they did not have an understanding of how their teachers marked their papers or decided upon their final results. David expressed his concerns about the lack of transparency, noting that he was not satisfied with the program because he did not understand the criteria. He reported that the teachers always told him that if he worked hard, he would pass. However, they did not tell him what he needed to improve or how he could improve. As a result, he lost faith in the program after he failed it multiple times despite diligently applying himself to his studies.

## DISCUSSION

This study found that participants dropped out of their ELIPs because they could not pass the program or they considered the ELIP a waste of time. Here we present several possible causes of academic failure: learning disengagement, low motivation, lack of time management and self-regulation skills, and insufficient academic/social integration. The findings from this study largely support Tinto's (1975, 1993) retention model.

### *Disengagement in Learning and Low Motivation*

Tinto (1975, 1993) addressed how students' goals of completion and commitment affect their school persistence. Students who pursue higher education without a strong sense of purpose are likely to exhibit lower levels of commitment and hence fail to exhibit a desire to persist. As reflected in this research, disengagement in learning and low learning motivation were significant factors behind student dropout. Most participants reported wanting to study in Canada to earn a bachelor's degree they could use to secure a stable job in the future, a decision that was largely based on their parents' wishes and suggestions. Even though some of the participants had their own interests, their parents pushed them to follow their advice. In this context, the fad of studying abroad is strongly "push-oriented." Chinese education and the demands of the Chinese job market had a significant influence on interviewees. The diploma earned in Western countries, for instance, is generally regarded as superior to the equivalent degree earned at

a Chinese university. In this context, parents of Chinese international students may be more inclined to push their children into studying abroad to secure a bright future for their children. Like the teacher-student relationship in China, the parent-child relationship is significantly influenced by Confucianism, which promotes the notion that parents have absolute authority and children need to obey their parents' orders. Therefore, some Chinese students eventually go abroad, even if they have no real desire to do so. Consequently, they often lack the learning motivation required to succeed.

#### *Lack of Time Management and Self-Regulation Abilities*

Online gaming addiction was a serious problem and a major contributing factor in students' withdrawal from school. This study argues that this was owing to the interplay of poorly delineated completion goals, poor academic / social integration, and insufficient time management and self-regulation abilities, all of which correspond to the factors in Tinto's (1993) retention model. Participants used online gaming as a psychological escape to cope with complicated challenges and stress associated with learning and acculturation. By playing online games, participants' anxiety was suppressed, and they momentarily forgot about the stressors associated with their academic studies. Thus, they used gaming to avoid unpleasant moods and stressful situations. For participants who were retained at school or had withdrawn for years, the online gaming addiction became increasingly serious. Gaming can be similar to drug addiction where individuals use drugs to escape problems (Young, 2009). In this context, the sooner the family intervenes and mental health support is provided, the greater the benefit will be for the student.

A lack of time management and self-regulation abilities may contribute to participants' academic failure. Psychologists and educators have emphasized the significance of self-regulation in academic achievement and have revealed that students with a positive attitude and high motivation are more likely to demonstrate self-regulation and achievement-oriented behaviours. Therefore, they are more likely to achieve academic success (Green et al. 2006; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). In China, children study under parental supervision and often rely on their parents to help regulate their behaviours. Consequently, when Chinese international students live abroad and out of their parents' reach, the students who lack self-regulation start to play online games or even drop out of school. How students manage their time influences how much time they spend studying. This, in turn, affects students' learning outcomes. The participants in this study failed to effectively manage their time, instead spending their time on passive leisure activities like gaming.

#### *Insufficient Academic / Social Integration*

Tinto (1975, 1993) regarded students' social and academic integration as the most significant factor influencing student retention and graduation, and he

believed student success should be based on how well a student integrates both socially and academically into their program. This study found that insufficient academic and social integration posed a threat to participants' persistence in an ELIP, which was caused by culture shock, perceived negative institutional experiences, and lack of social belonging.

As culture has an impact on student learning and shapes their leaning preferences, international students with distinctive cultural backgrounds perceive their learning environment differently (Holtbrügge & Mohr, 2010; Koul & Fisher, 2005;). Chinese education relies heavily on repetitive rote learning and memorization, particularly in language learning. Chinese teachers usually provide a clear format or model for students to memorize and learn. However, learning in developed countries employs pedagogical approaches that emphasize students' use of "deep" approaches to learning (the engagement of critical and logical thinking rather than rote learning). The participants exhibited difficulties adapting to the new learning patterns and eventually failed their exams. During the interviews, participants suggested that ELIP instructors should be more aware of educational differences and recommended that teachers make changes in relation to these differences. In teaching writing skills, for example, teachers should provide clear guidance for English writing structure and remain aware of the writing style typical of students' native languages. This suggestion is consistent with the findings of Cummins (2005) and Guo (2003), who suggest that ESL teachers should be aware of the importance of students' prior knowledge, especially for first language learning. Even though many researchers have emphasized that students' learning outcomes are influenced not only by teachers' teaching styles, but also students' prior knowledge, which includes their first language, culture, and personal experiences, no educator in the ELIP has ever mentioned students' prior education experiences. Efforts thus need to be taken to understand international students' previous learning experiences and education styles when they enrol in an ELIP in case of misunderstandings.

Institutional experience was included in Tinto's (1975, 1993) model as one of the factors that influence a student's departure decision. Formal or informal interactions with academic and institutional staff are seen as having effects on students' institutional involvement and commitment, thus impacting their dropout. Chinese international students in this study generally had negative institutional experiences and were unsatisfied with the support offered, both academically and socially. Some participants dropped out of their ELIP because they perceived an uncaring or even antagonistic relationship between themselves and their teachers. This study argues that these perceptions were potentially caused by distinctive learning preferences and culturally different expectations of student/ teacher relationships. Influenced by Confucianism and their previous learning experiences, Chinese international students are more likely to listen and learn rather than speak during class (Dao et al., 2007). They are accustomed to passive learning, and commonly prefer to ask questions after class and wait

for teachers to proactively anticipate and understand their learning needs and difficulties (Chen, 2007; Zeng, 2006). However, Canadian education emphasizes active participation in classroom activities. Such differences lead participants to assume that their ELIP teachers did not like or care about them, causing them to perceive bias or discriminatory practices among Canadian teachers.

Students' sense of belonging would be shaped by the interactions between students' expectations and their institutional experiences. A sense of belonging could improve student integration into the academic/ social system, which would in turn act as a buffer against dropout (Tinto, 1993). Like other international students, many Chinese international students have high expectations of their ability to socialize and make friends with native students; however, participants in this study found that it was difficult to establish relationships with individuals in the host country. These students instead tended to develop a social circle containing individuals from a similar culture, creating a sub-culture within the environment of the host culture. They tended to maintain a strong ethnic orientation and take on less of the host culture, which impeded them from gaining learning and social experience from the host country. This finding was consistent with previous studies (e.g., Zhou & Zhang, 2014) that have reported that international students primarily socialize with individuals who are of the same culture and seldom socialize with natives or students with other backgrounds due to language barriers. Limited contact with the native culture prevents international students from improving their English language capacity, and students with poor English proficiency experience barriers when socializing with natives that lead them to lose the opportunity to gain host country experiences and language capacity. In these circumstances, students become entrapped in a feedback loop of limited language ability and cultural contacts, thus gradually losing the motivation to actively integrate into the new environment.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study found that Chinese international students drop out of ELIPs primarily due to academic failure. Various factors contributed to the failure of Chinese international students in ELIP courses. One important reason was that they commonly lacked the motivation to learn in Canada. Most participants in this study simply obeyed their parents' desire for them to obtain an international degree, so parents played an important role in the decision-making process of studying abroad. As parents, they should perhaps instead give their children enough freedom to choose what they are really interested in, rather than what the parents believe to be the most useful trend. As for children who heavily rely on parents, families should adopt every possible communication tool, such as FaceTime and international phone calls, to talk about daily happenings and maintain a strong emotional connection. To better help children successfully integrate into Canadian society, parents should encourage children to go out and make friends. Chinese international students whose interests mirror those

of the participants often lack self-regulation skills and allow online games to usurp their time. To combat video game addiction, parents should pay close attention to their children's studies and daily lives.

Another factor that may significantly influence the decision of Chinese students to study abroad is student recruitment agencies (SRAs). According to Peng (2004), 85% of Chinese applicants chose study-abroad agencies to help them apply to Canadian schools. A number of Chinese students had difficulty deciding whether or not they should spend the necessary funds to study abroad. Often, the agents would persuade students to study abroad (Jiang, 2015). SRAs should provide more reliable sources of information, such as academic institution and program information. In particular, if students do not meet the language proficiency entrance requirements, SRA consultants need to provide detailed information about the language program, which includes curriculum, program duration, and graduation requirements, so that students are fully aware of the language learning process before they arrive at the destination country. Further, SRAs can improve their service by gaining a deeper understanding of student perspectives. In some cases, students who do not know what to study would prefer to consult agents, who recommend their preferred programs. In this context, SRAs played an important role in the decision-making process for students. SRAs need to not only provide a variety of choices, but also ensure a high quality of consultation.

For students, learning time management and self-regulation is essential. Chinese international students' lack of self-regulation leads to them spending too much time on negative leisure activities that can result in avoiding studying and thus dropping out. In China, parents supervise their children's learning and control the time they spend playing video games. However, when parents are in another country, the children do whatever they want to do without self-regulation. To successfully pass an ELIP and enter a university academic program as soon as possible, students need to cultivate self-regulation abilities and be more efficient in managing their time. More importantly, students need to find assistance when facing emergency issues such as withdrawal rather than not let others know about their struggles. Parents and students should take proper actions and pay attention as early as possible to obtain ideal results. It would be beneficial if students and parents were to sit down together to proactively come up with solutions to potential challenges before students even left their home country to carefully determine what could be done about the mental and physical symptoms of culture shock and how to help students better integrate into the new environment.

ELIP administrators and teachers should be more attentive to the culture of Chinese international students and communicate more about learning difficulties. As Chinese international students tend to seek more attention from teachers, ELIP teachers should more actively interact with students in and out of class. They could also provide individual assistance for each student so that

Chinese international students might feel more comfortable expressing their challenges. Moreover, teachers need to realize the different learning preferences and teacher-student relationship patterns that Chinese international students are used to so that they can find better ways to educate and establish satisfying relationships with students. To better improve students' language abilities, teachers are required to modify their writing curriculum and add more functional oral communication strategies. More importantly, ELIP needs to pay more attention to the students who have the tendency to drop out. For example, if ELIP administrators were to contact students who dropped out to ask about the reasons for their withdrawal and provide help accordingly, some students may be willing to continue their ELIP education.

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