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Home Away from Home: Extending Library Services for International Students in China's Universities

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ABSTRACT

In response to the rapid growth of international students in China's universities, it is important for university libraries to extend their existing services, which were mainly designed for native Chinese students. This paper reports on a research study aimed at extending library services for international students by identifying and understanding their requirements. An exploratory case study research design was adopted. Specifically, the Wuhan University Library was selected as the case study, at which 23 international students were approached and interviewed using semi-structured questions. The analysis of interview data pointed to 14 library service requirements in four main themes: feeling welcomed, convenient accessibility, comfortable learning environment and diverse learning resources. On this basis, five practical strategies were formulated. This study focused on China's university libraries, however, the research findings provide useful implications and insights that can be shared across international borders.

Introduction

China has one of the world's largest higher education systems, which has more than 14 million staff and 257 million students (People's Daily Online, 2015). In the past decade, China's economic growth has encouraged its universities to build and enhance their international presence and reputation. The internationalisation of China's universities has been heavily weighted by the Chinese central government, and implementation is expected to be with a high priority, instead of actively finding solutions to resolve a number of eminent structural and systemic problems within the higher education system (e.g., creating equal access, optimising educational structure, reducing bureaucracy and combating corruption in resource management).

In fact, the internationalisation of China's universities has been noted and confirmed in the National Plan for Medium- and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development 2010–2020, which is a national-level strategic document, jointly issued by the State Council of China and the Ministry of Education. According to this plan, there are two underlying strategies for internationalisation: (1) significantly promoting education and research quality and the international visibility of China's universities; and (2) significantly increasing the enrolment of international students (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2010).

On top of this national strategy, the Chinese Ministry of Education launched the Study in China program in late 2010, which, as stated by

Mr. Yubo Du, Vice Minister of education, was aimed to attract “about 500,000 international students by the year 2020, enabling the country to become the largest Asian destination for international students” (China Scholarship Council, 2013). In the 2015–2016 academic year, about 50,000 international students studied in China's universities, and the number is expected to be significantly higher in 2016–2017 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2017a, 2017b).

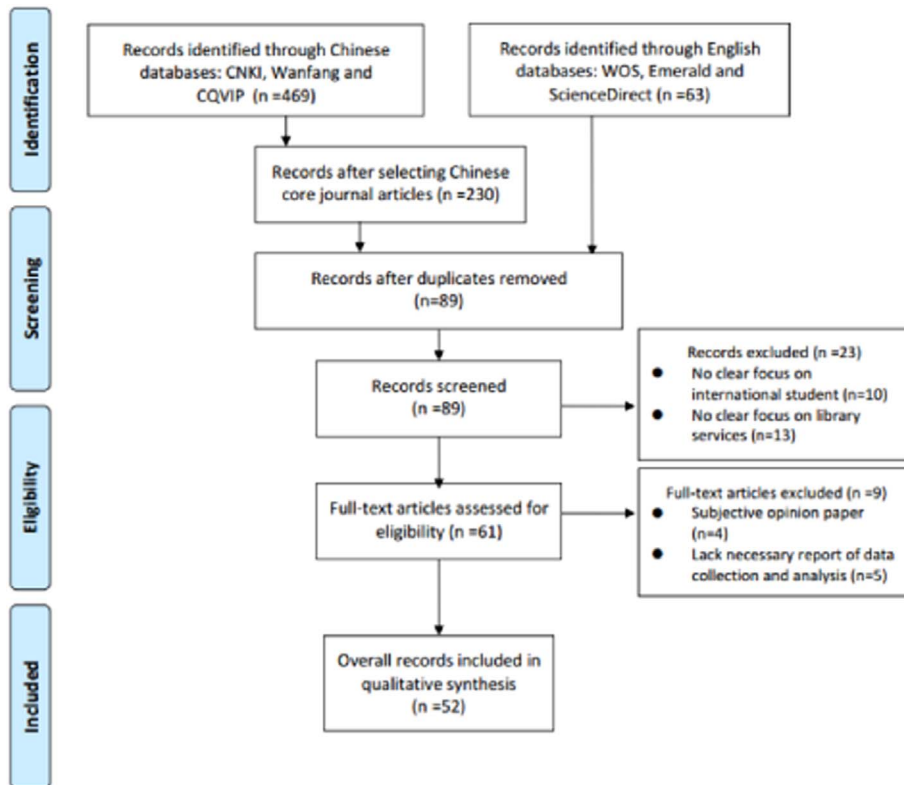
To support the Study in China program, the Chinese central government provided a total of 20 billion CNY (approximately 3 billion USD) in financial support for setting up scholarship packages, upgrading university teaching and research and social facilities, as well as for renovating and promoting university libraries and library services (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2017a, 2017b).

It has been widely discussed in the literature that when compared with native students, international students have very different information needs and requirements (Hughes, 2010; Shaffer, Vardaman, & Miller, 2010; Yi, 2007), as well as different behaviors in the searching, evaluating, reading, writing and citing of information (Zhao & Mawhinney, 2015). Therefore, many researchers assert that providing well-developed library services are critical for international students in adapting to a new environment, reducing cultural and language barriers, enhancing information literacy skills and eventually achieving academic success (Nzomo, Ajiferuke, Vaughan, & McKenzie,

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Fig. 1. Process of literature selection using a PRISMA Flow Diagram.



2016; Suhasini & Raghini, 2000; Zoe & Dimartino, 2000).

Similarly, some Chinese researchers claim that China's university libraries should become supporting platforms for this new and fast-growing community of international students (Chen, 2011; Zhang & Liu, 2016). Nevertheless, China's university libraries are unprepared to provide the services that international students needed (Chen, 2011; Yang, Liu, & Tong, 2015). Many (e.g., Luo, 2016; Liu, 2013a, 2013b; Wang & Chen, 2012) point out that not only have no comprehensive services been provided, but very limited attention or systematic efforts been made to understand the needs and requirements of international students.

This paper reports on one of the very early research studies, which aimed to articulate specific and pragmatic strategies for extending the existing library services in China's universities by identifying and understanding the requirements of international students. This study was supported by the National Social Science Foundation of China.

Research methods and design

Research objectives and questions

According to the aim of this research, which was to develop strategies for extending the existing library services in China's universities based on identifying the requirements of international students, the following research questions were formulated:

- What are the international students' requirements for university library services?
- What strategies can be articulated to extend the existing services in China's university libraries?

These research questions were employed throughout the research project, not only as the overarching research design and the selection of appropriate research methods, but also to guide the processes of data collection and analysis in the field.

Research design

This study utilised a qualitative research design, which combined critical literature review, case studies, and data collection and analysis.

Critical literature review

The literature review was carried out in two stages. The aim of the first stage was perform a general review and to provide a theoretical and contextual basis for more systematic literature retrieval and analysis in the second stage. Specifically, stage one has two goals: (1) to identify what library services had been provided to international students on a global scale; (2) to gain a general understanding of the present international student services provided in university libraries in China.

During the second stage, academic works both in English and Chinese were systematically retrieved and analysed. Two sets of academic databases were searched. The first set included three international academic databases: Web of Science, ScienceDirect and Emerald. The second set included three Chinese academic databases: CNKI, Wanfang and CQVIP. All these academic databases were systematically searched in early May 2017, using the search strategy presented below:

("international" OR "foreign" OR "overseas") AND.

("student" OR "reader" OR "user" OR "customer") AND Library*.

In general, databases searches returned a total of 532 articles, including 63 articles in English (20 from Web of Science, 24 from Emerald and 19 from ScienceDirect), and 469 articles in Chinese (147 from CNKI, 124 from Wanfang and 198 articles from CQVIP). All the retrieved articles were carefully screened by the research team. To demonstrate the literature screening and selection processes clearly, a preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analysis (PRISMA) flow diagram was developed (see Fig. 1).

As shown in Fig. 1, the following five inclusion/exclusion criteria were applied: (1) to ensure the quality of the Chinese articles, only those articles published in the Chinese Social Science Citation Index (CSSCI) journal were selected; (2) articles without a clear focus on

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