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Promoting acts of kindness on campus: Views of Chinese international students in the UK

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Abstract

There is increasing research on the challenges experienced by Chinese international students during their studies in the UK such as language barriers, social interactions, academic achievement, and psychological adjustment. This study proposes to understand these challenges through a kindness approach. It explores how sixty-three Chinese Master's students from a British university interpreted the challenging and supportive features of their learning environment through the notion of (un)kindness. Drawing on 63 semi-structured interviews, the study reveals a range of ways these students experienced academic staff and student interactions as "unkind," as well as their experiences of teaching materials, coursework feedback, and administrative support. It identifies three key factors that students perceive impede acts of kindness on campus. The findings offer important insight into the practice and the value of using a kindness approach to improve Chinese international students' academic and social experiences in the UK.

Keywords: kindness, Chinese students, studying abroad, curriculum internationalisation

Introduction

This paper explores the practice and the value of using a kindness approach to support Chinese international students during their study in the UK. Kindness here refers to "selfless acts performed by a person wishing to either help or positively affect the emotional state (mood) of another person" (Passmore & Oades, 2015, p. 90). The experience of Chinese students is of particular relevance because they make up the largest cohort of international students with 139,130 studying in the UK

in 2019/20 (UUK, 2021), and they face challenges in adapting to studying at a UK university (Huang, 2012; Zhou & Todman, 2009). The challenges can be language barriers, social interactions, academic achievement, and psychological adjustment (Li, 2016). This has resulted in high levels of stress, especially for Chinese Master's students who have only one year to acclimatise to life in the UK whilst meeting challenging educational objectives (Cheng *et al.*, 2018).

Studies suggest that acts of kindness by academics could create a positive impact on student learning and wellbeing in the education setting (Krane *et al.*, 2017; Markle, 2019). For example, Jasielska (2020) reveals that perceived kindness strengthens the connection between trust and happiness in students, as being kind contributed to viewing academics more favourably. Acts of kindness activate positive emotions which can make students feel relaxed, safe and calm (Layous *et al.*, 2017; Kearney *et al.*, 2013). In contrast, an unkind act can cause students to feel weak, inferior and can lead to underperformance including a lack of engagement in a course programme, for example, missing classes (Layous *et al.*, 2017). This suggests that acts of kindness could contribute to students' interest in developing positive interactions with lecturers and peers during their study.

The notion of kindness is of high importance to Chinese students (Lau, 1988; Matthews, 2000; Hui, 2005). They regard it as a quality pertinent to maintaining interpersonal relationships (Fu *et al.*, 2004). This is because teachers' kind-heartedness is a central value in the Chinese educational system. Teachers are often seen playing the roles of moral guardians, congenial patrons, as well as knowledge holders and transmitters who never grow tired of teaching (Hui, 2005; Lee, 2001). Kindness is demonstrated by knowing student names, being interested in their work, treating students as equals, and caring about their wellbeing in the Chinese context (Hui, 2005; Lee, 2001).

Some research studies carried out on Chinese international students in the UK have highlighted how kindness from the church community helps students see things differently, offers them resources to deal with their difficulties in life, and facilitates their understanding of local culture (Li, 2016; Li, 2011). However, there is a need for further research in order to understand how students perceive acts of (un)kindness and the significance that they attribute to such acts in the context of their academic and social integration. This study aims to address this gap by exploring adjustment challenges experienced by Chinese international students in the UK through a kindness lens. It identifies acts of kindness and unkindness on campus, analysing the importance of kindness to students, and pointing to factors which are perceived to impede acts of kindness. This paper argues that developing a kindness culture has the potential to improve practices of teaching, learning and administrative support and increase Chinese international students' level of satisfaction for their academic and social integration.

I will discuss three main challenges experienced by Chinese students who study at universities in the UK, and then introduce our theoretical approach to "kindness." These challenges include language barriers, lack of social interactions, and academic experiences.

Challenges of Studying Abroad

Language barriers

Although most Chinese international students have passed English entry language exams, they often experience challenges in using the language fluently, which can impede their academic and social communication with peers from non-Chinese backgrounds (Tian & Lowe, 2009; Ma, 2020). This can lead to withdrawal from class interaction, which then goes on to entrench a feeling of inequality and marginalisation (Cheng *et al.*, 2018), especially when home students have a parochial attitude

and are impatient with second language speakers and unfamiliar accents (Lacina, 2002). Chinese students as a result can be sensitive about their language abilities, and they may blame themselves and make attempts to solve the problems in their own way rather than seek university support (Tian & Lowe, 2009; Ma, 2020). This suggests that increasing native-speaking academics and students' awareness of second language challenges is essential as that contributes to developing a supportive environment in which students become confident in seeking help and support.

Lack of social interactions

Getting integrated into the society of Western Developed Countries is another identified challenge that some Chinese international students face (Edwards *et al*., 2003). They recognise the need to learn about different cultures, but find it difficult to develop personal relationships with home students (Mikal *et al*., 2014; Tian & Lowe, 2009). One explanation is that many British students' reliance on socialising in venues with crowds, loud music and alcohol is unattractive to Chinese students, hence making it difficult to interact and make friends (Cheng *et al*., 2018).

Another explanation is that Chinese international students tend to create friendship through frequent interactions, group activities, and a collectivistic lifestyle which prioritises the community over the individual, but home students are more individualistic and may perceive this approach as intrusive (Ruble & Zhang, 2013). These different social norms increase the difficulty in making friends between these two cohorts of students and it accounts for some Chinese students perceiving home students as unfriendly, indifferent, and arrogant (Tian & Lowe, 2009).

Academic experiences

Adjusting to different teaching and learning approaches is another common challenge experienced by Chinese international students (Huang, 2012; Wong, 2004; Scally & Jiang, 2020). Chinese students have been depicted as passive, rote learners who lack creativity and engagement (Cheng *et al*., 2018). They are also described as having difficulties with group-based activities including participating in group discussions, asking questions, and forming critical arguments (Wheeler, 2002; Ruble & Zhang, 2013). These views reflect a stereotyping "deficit" perspective of Chinese international students, as well as a lack of knowledge that fluency in oral English can be affected by accent, fast speech and confidence. For example, the fear of making a mistake in spoken English, anticipating embarrassment, can easily reduce Chinese students' confidence to take part in class discussions (Wenli, 2011; Tian & Lowe, 2009).

Research reveals that Chinese international students are concerned about the lack of institutional support to facilitate their academic and social transition (Mikal *et al*., 2014). They feel that barriers between staff and students are more significant than in China (Bamber, 2014). For example, one view is that the personal tutoring system in the UK can be procedural in that students need an appointment to see their tutor, whilst students feel teachers in China are easier to approach and more willing to make friends with students (Wong *et al*., 2015). This is partially because kind-heartedness and helpfulness by the teacher is viewed as a key value in China (Hui, 2005; Lee, 2001). Another concern relates to a perceived lack of adequate advice and guidance for assessments (Bamber, 2014). The Chinese system relies on examinations, and the content is broadly "spoon-fed" to ensure high marks for well-prepared students (Bamber, 2014). In contrast, assessment in the UK mainly focuses on essays and thesis writing and its guidance is seen by Chinese students as ambiguous (ibid).

Going beyond academic and linguistic realms, social and cultural adaptation is not easy for Chinese international students in the UK (Li, 2011). For many, studying abroad may be the first time they live independently (Sánchez *et al.*, 2006). The limited social and cultural exposure and lack of pastoral care contribute to loneliness and isolation amongst Chinese international students, and can trigger depression (Mikal *et al.*, 2014; Lillyman & Bennett, 2014). Chinese international students express their wish for improved student support to help them understand different cultural norms and practice (Heng, 2017). There is a need to explore how academics and host universities could offer better support to reduce Chinese international students' risk of stress through a kindness approach.

The wide range of challenges that Chinese international students have experienced suggests that there is good space to improve student support and to build a truly international learning environment on campus, especially when the institution has a large number of international students. There is a need to consider Chinese international students' needs, their social norms and cultures of learning, and develop a culture of kindness which can help evaluate the teaching and learning environment on campus.

Kindness

In this section, I identify a few important schools of thought which have influenced the development of the concept of kindness and explore its importance in the higher education sector. One approach is the school of positive psychology, which recognises that kindness has a significant effect on people's well-being. It focuses on how to increase positive experiences so that people can thrive and flourish (Otake *et al.*, 2006; Layous *et al.*, 2017).

In contrast there are those who believe that the best way to show kindness is to be strict, because being strict to the person will regulate their emotion and enable them to achieve a goal (Erber & Erber 2000; Tamir, 2009; López-Pérez, Howells & Gummerum 2017), for example, giving harsh comments in feedback so students can improve their work. In the context of international students' experiences, the receipt of harsh feedback and other challenges encountered by international students could enable them to grow and experience a truly transformative educational experience (Gu & Schweisforth, 2015). This argument can be portrayed as "unkind" from a Chinese student's perspective, but with the intention to benefit international students' academic development in the long term.

Diverse interpretations of kindness in the literature focus on particular aspects of the term. Pommier (2010) interprets kindness as being understanding towards others who are suffering instead of being critical or indifferent towards them. Kerr *et al.* (2015) define it as a combination of emotional, behavioural, and motivational components and consisting of behaviours that benefit other people or make others happy. Passmore and Oades (2015, p. 90) associate kindness with "selfless acts performed by a person wishing to either help or positively affect the emotional state (mood) of another person." This definition echoes the view by Curry *et al.* (2018) that kindness is action intended for others' betterment. Similarly, Binfett and Passmore (2019) suggest that helping others, showing respect, and encouraging others were perceived as acts of kindness among students.

These definitions clearly make references to positive interpersonal interactions, in particular, helpfulness, empathy and compassion. Helpfulness suggests readiness to give support or advice to students when needed. Empathy requires that in showing kindness one will share the feelings of another. This will require understanding students' perspective or resonating with them emotionally, so acts of kindness are not hurtful or insensitive. Compassion suggests that in showing students

kindness one will not want to harm them. These definitions suggest that kindness is not just about what the teacher thinks or feels, it is also essentially the reality and experience of the students to whom the act is being shown. Kindness is thus considered as a value that can be developed (Kaplan *et al*., 2016) in this study, and as a moral duty to act that extends beyond legal responsibility especially when that action substantially benefits another party (Caldwell *et al*., 2014).

Curry's (2016) interdisciplinary research uses psychological theories—kin altruism, mutualism, reciprocal altruism, and competitive altruism—to explain different types of kindness. Kin altruism means that people will be kind to their families (Gardner & West, 2014). This type of kindness can take the form of love, care, sympathy, and compassion. Mutualism means that people will be kind to members of their communities to promote their interests (Bissonnette *et al*., 2015). Here kindness is in the form of loyalty, civic-mindedness, community spirit, and commitment to a cause. Reciprocal altruism means that people will be kind to those they might meet again and who might return the favour at a later date (Amici *et al*., 2014). Competitive altruism means that people will be kind to others when it enhances their status, and it explains kindness in the form of generosity, bravery, heroism, chivalry, magnanimity, and public service (Raihani & Smith, 2015). These different types of kindness suggest that people can be motivated to be kind to family, friends, colleagues, spouses, and even strangers under some conditions.

Increasing number of studies reveal that positive staff-student interactions are connected with improved learning, increased persistence, student engagement, and student sense of belonging to the university community (Thomas, 2012; Kim & Lundberg, 2016; Morrison & Evans, 2018; Tan, Mansi & Furnham 2018). Students often link their own engagement to the enthusiasm and approachability of teaching staff, and the degree to which those staff are perceived to invest in developing positive relationships (Clegg & Rowland, 2010; Cramp & Lamond, 2016; Carter *et al*., 2018). This suggests that acts of kindness can significantly impact students' engagement of building positive staff-student interactions. For example, Cramp & Lamond (2016) applied the kindness approach to the design of an online learning programme, revealing that the perception of tutors as friendly and accessible can help students to develop more confidence and to participate more actively in the course. In contrast, a lack of personal interaction could lead to students' negative experiences and obstruct their access to university services (Palmer, O'Kane, & Owens, 2009).

Kuh *et al*. (2006) reveal that students who have positive experiences are more likely to seek out further interaction with staff. While certain contexts such as large-class environments are associated with fewer opportunities for kind interactions (Bryson & Hand, 2007), positive interaction experiences could still happen (Clegg & Rowland, 2010). The complex and varied nature of kind interactions suggests a need to investigate these nuances by focusing on how students identify and interpret the specific acts of kindness/unkindness on campus.

Methodology

This study addresses two key research questions:

1. How do Chinese international students experience and interpret the acts of kindness/ unkindness experienced during their MA studies in the UK?
2. What are the key factors that impede acts of kindness on campus from the perception of Chinese international students?

It draws on the experiences of 63 Chinese students (29 male and 34 female) who completed a Master's degree at a British university. The university was chosen as a single case study, aiming to

produce an in-depth analysis of perceived acts of (un)kindness on campus. The chosen university is well-established in the UK and internationally renowned, located in a city known for its diverse communities with a large number of Chinese students on campus. Business studies and engineering were the subjects chosen for the study as they were popular among Chinese international students.

The study adopted a "snowball sampling" technique to select the 63 participants. It began with a few students who then helped identify other participants from business and engineering studies. These two subjects were chosen because they are very popular among Chinese international students (HEFCE, 2014). Gender, age, and discipline were considered in the selection of these participants to achieve a balanced sample. Most of the participants were under thirty, and they had begun their courses in the UK following completion of their undergraduate studies in China.

Table 1 *Research Participants*

Variable	Gender		Subject		Time in UK		Age		
	Female	Male	Engineering	Business studies	Period in UK 0-1 year	Period in UK 1-5 years	20-25	26-30	30+
Number of participants	34	29	27	36	40	23	51	7	5

One-to-one interviewing was used as the main data collection method and was conducted in person. A semi-structured interview schedule containing open-ended questions was used to explore research participants' experiences and encourage detailed interpretation of acts of kindness/unkindness on campus. The interviews were conducted in English upon the agreement of the research participants. The length of the interviews ranged from 30 to 90 minutes. They were audio recorded and professionally verbatim transcribed to ensure accuracy.

Content analysis (McKee, 2001) employing NVivo software was used to analyse data to identify themes in the research participants' experiences and interpretations of acts of kindness and unkindness during their study in the UK. For the content analysis, I adopted a deductive approach by identifying two broad thematic categories—"show of kindness" and "show of unkindness" linked to our research questions. The interview data was coded into these categories, according to the key themes, emerged from the findings. This addressed the two research questions. The context (i.e., by who, when, where) in which the acts of kindness and unkindness occurred were considered. The research team individually cross-checked the data and relevant analysis to ensure rigour, trustworthiness, credibility and validity of the findings.

It should be noted that this study is exploratory and qualitative in nature. It does not intend to produce findings that represent all Chinese international students in the UK. It aims to identify and illustrate the challenges that Chinese international students experienced through a kindness lens, presenting a snapshot of their perceived acts of kindness/unkindness on campus, and suggesting ways in which institutional support could improve their experiences.

Findings

All the research participants reported that they experienced challenges in both academic and social arenas during their study in the UK. They highlighted the challenges of studying in an English medium classroom, and a lack of positive interactions with tutors and peers. Socially, they highlighted the limited opportunities to make what they felt were "good" friendships with non-Chinese peers. These challenges were related to perceived acts of unkindness which put the

research participants in a vulnerable position. They highlighted the stress and lack of confidence they experienced during their UK course.

Unkindness on campus

There were incidences where half of the Chinese student participants felt that their lecturers were unkind to them. The examples given included limited information on how to prepare for assessment, and some lecturers appeared as uncaring and unhelpful when students were seeking help.

> *Sometime when you ask question, they will say "don't ask me, you can find it on Moodle." I'm not used to it. In China when you ask, teacher always answer you [sic]. It's good to improve my ability to find it. On the other hand, when you talk to your student this way, they may be afraid of you and will never ask questions. (E3)*
> *In my module, I don't receive many important information from the lecturer. When the exam comes, I read the PPT and books, and then go to exam. (F21)*

The perceived unhelpfulness and uncaringness are related to a perceived unwillingness by academic staff to bear the vulnerability of their students when they sought help. This view corresponds with the argument by Philip and Taylor (2009) that kindness is the sympathetic identification with the vulnerability of others.

The act of unkindness is also reflected in a concern among research participants that their programme failed to recognise that they had different needs to 'home' students. For example, a Business Studies student pointed out that his programme only used British focused textbooks:

> *The teachers like to say when you come here, you just learn from us. That's not true, as everything is changing. You have many Chinese students, so you should think about changing the textbook and having more combination. (E3)*

This concern suggests a need for British universities to internationalise their curriculum to include international perspectives in their programmes in order to enhance their employability beyond the UK, especially those with a large cohort of international students. Students also perceived limited administrative support as representing "unkindness." For example, a participant was interested in attending a training session on campus, and emailed the administrative contact to apply, but got no reply. Due to this, she missed the opportunity. She was grateful that her supervisor took it up and contacted the International Office to complain on her behalf:

> *The lady said: "I will let you know what's going on," but she never let me know. I sent her emails, and she didn't get back to me, so I talked to the lady in charge of the scheme and she said, "oh we just had our last training session, and I'm sorry you can't do it." I shared my experience with my professor. She was very angry and wrote an email to that lady. This is a great experience for me that I can get support from my teacher. (E1)*

Reactions to perceived acts of unkindness from administrative staff suggest that positive interpersonal interactions on campus and university attention to student needs meant a lot to the Chinese international students. This suggests a need for the university to increase kind behaviours such as being helpful and caring on campus, as they contribute to positive interactions (Caldwell *et al.*, 2014).

Factors impeding the act of kindness

The data revealed that there were three key factors that students perceived impeded acts of kindness, including large class sizes, a large proportion of Chinese students in their programme, and a limited knowledge of Chinese culture on campus. The majority of the research participants believed that these factors reduced their opportunities to have positive interactions with tutors and peers, especially when they needed to learn about local and different cultures. For example, a large-group lecture was the main teaching method in their programmes, which constrained the actualisation of kindness to students. Research participants held a view that even if a lecturer showed kindness by encouraging them to interact, this was often not possible due to the large class size. Here are two examples of the perceived "unkindness" on campus:

> *In the big lecture, there is not much opportunity to ask question. In the tutorial, or the small class lecture, I have lots of opportunities to interact with the lecturer. (A5)*
> *We have a lot of students in the lecture, so even if you hand up or you want to ask questions, it's difficult for the lecturer to notice you. It's a problem. (A11)*

A student from Business Studies pointed out that smaller classes offered valuable opportunities for students to interact with peers and tutors:

> *If the university gives us a smaller class, it could improve the relationship between the students and teacher, and the relationship between students. I don't think university should just give you big lectures. (A2)*

Research participants clearly associated large lectures as a barrier to positive interactions. This contrasts to Clegg and Rowland (2010) who argued that positive interactions could happen in the large-class environment. The research participants' negative attitudes to large classes suggests that acts of kindness could be impeded by inconsiderate institutional arrangements which prioritised large-class teaching.

Another factor that students perceive as impeding acts of kindness is the large proportion of Chinese students on courses, especially in Business Studies. For example, a research participant was disappointed that there was little opportunity for him to talk to native English speakers or to get to know peers from different cultural backgrounds, as over 90% students were Chinese in his class.

> *We only have one native speaker in our class. Of the 54 students just one Scottish and one Thai girl, and the other 52 are Chinese. In the group work we talk in English, but I don't think it works. Our English language is limited, and accent, sometimes I cannot even understand my Chinese classmate, so it's problem. (F2)*

The overwhelming number of Chinese students, combined with barriers in establishing friendship with non-Chinese peers, leads to limited opportunities for cross-cultural learning (Yu & Moskal, 2018). The research participants perceived this lack of intercultural interaction and limited opportunities to practise English as an unkind institutional arrangement, as this disadvantaged them. This indicates a need for the university to create a truly diverse and caring environment through mixing up nationality groups in order to increase students' positive interactions on campus.

The third key barrier is cultural difference in socialising and the lack of knowledge of Chinese culture on campus. For example, a male student from Business Studies pointed out that cultural

difference affected students' preference of social activities, and Chinese students found it difficult to get engaged with social activities lacking cultural diversity:

> *My non-Chinese friends go to pub or club, and they are crazy about it. They drink alcohol a lot. If you are out with them, and you don't drink, it is strange, but I believe most Chinese students don't like the style…. (A6)*

The cultural difference in socialising suggests that universities need to consider that it is a big step for international students from a radically different culture and linguistic background to get to grips with student life in the UK. The limited awareness and knowledge of the common cultural values held by Chinese international students, such as collectivism and non-alcoholic social events, will impede acts of kindness on campus, especially the business studies courses where there are a large number of Chinese students.

Moreover, research participants did not feel encouraged to make new connections at social events on campus, and there was lack of "icebreaker" activities.

> *It (university) didn't hold any activities to make us know new friends. They just separated people in different tables, and usually friends will sit together. It didn't have any games or activities to interact with people from other tables. (E17)*

They were disappointed that most of the university social events reflected British social norms and were based around drinking alcohol, which discouraged their engagement and limited their opportunities to make friends with non-Chinese peers:

> *I cannot drink alcohol. Like this kind of social activity, people will drink a lot of alcohol. I will feel embarrassed, so I do not want to go there. (E12)*

Importance of the act of kindness

Despite their experiences of unkindness, research participants saw acts of kindness on campus as significant. The acts of kindness from lecturers were seen as vitally important in students' learning. Here are some examples of how research participants valued such kind acts, no matter how small:

> *The biggest academic support I have got on campus is from my lecturers and my professor. (E19)*
> *The teachers sometimes give us materials and give us some advice about books in library you can borrow. (E2)*
> *I like this teacher very well. He showed us useful knowledge, and useful information that we didn't touch in our undergraduate degree. (A11)*

These examples show that kind acts could positively influence research participants' learning experiences. They highly praised such acts. For example, a student in Business Studies valued his supervisor's quick response to questions:

> *The supervisor is very kind and answers question in class. They reply emails regularly, very fast. This is very useful. (A6)*

One interpretation is that emotion can play a big role in the creation and communication of kindness, so helpful behaviours from lecturers would create positive emotions among students that

they were being cared about. This supports the argument of Kerr *et al*. (2015) that the receipt of kindness motivates positive (learning) behaviours and relationships.

There was also a view among research participants that acts of kindness from lecturers were mainly provided to good students. Take a lecturer's help with a reference letter as an example. This support was highly valued by Chinese students, but was viewed as a conditional act of kindness, only provided to students who performed well academically. For example, a student in engineering felt that he was given reference letters because he was a top student in his class:

> *I got several reference letters from my lecturers and professors, perhaps because of the reason I got all my course about A2. I think that's the reason they gave me the references. They helped me to find PhD in Germany. (E1)*

This quote suggests that an individual's preference can influence their perception of an act of kindness and their such acts. On one hand, individual preference reflects reciprocal altruism (Amici *et al*., 2014), as good students might become successful and return the favour at a later date. On the other hand, showing kindness can be natural to some lecturers, depending on their characteristics. If a lecturer has a lot of passion and wants students to take an active part in his lecture, this passion can positively influence student participation in the discussion. For example, a student from Business Studies explained this view of kindness explicitly:

> *It depends on the tutor's characteristics. Some tutors are very charming and they will lead you to ask very useful questions and encourage you to answer them. It's very good, and you wanted to participate more. (A1)*

Student participants also valued kind acts from their peers. For example, they valued the opportunity to learn from their peers, the importance of receiving help when in difficulties, and the opportunity to make friends outside the classroom:

> *In our group, the Korean guy is an experienced teacher. He taught us a lot useful stuff. (E3)*
> *Some students are very kind. They like to help me when I meet trouble. They believe in me. (A5)*

Discussion

This study reveals that Chinese international students associated kindness with not only positive interpersonal interactions on campus and behaviours such as being helpful, caring and compassionate, but also caring institutional arrangements that consider student needs and cultural diversity. This finding expands the meaning of kindness, as the existing definitions (Kerr *et al*., 2015; Passmore & Oades, 2015; Curry *et al*., 2018) emphasise interpersonal interactions such as helpfulness, empathy and compassion, with limited consideration of the influence of institutional arrangements.

There are three key factors identified as impeding the act of kindness: large group lectures, a large proportion of Chinese students on a particular course, and a limited knowledge of Chinese culture on campus. The first two factors are related to the institutional arrangements of teaching and learning, and they contribute to the learning environment. For example, the large lecture class was used as the main teaching method in the research participants' programmes, especially business studies. The research participants described that arrangement as unkind, because it provided them

little opportunity to interact with peers and lecturers. This suggests that although lecture-based teaching may be cost effective for the university, it creates feelings of disconnectedness from lecturers and peers. These negative emotions can easily lead to feelings of unkindness among students, as emotion could influence the creation and communication of kindness (Kerr *et al.*, 2015). This suggests that improving institutional arrangements would help to improve students' learning experiences and perceptions of kindness.

Lecturers' unwillingness to answer questions pertaining to coursework assessment is raised as a common act of unkindness on campus. Student participants interpreted lecturers' delay or lack of response to queries as representing a lack of interest and that they were uncaring. This suggests that lecturers' prompt reply to students' request for help is essential, as it encourages positive learning experiences. From a cultural perspective, this could be that Chinese students perceive kindness by teachers as a central value which includes helpfulness and empathy (Fu *et al.*, 2004; Hui, 2005).

Research participants in this study also expressed a concern that despite promises of an international education, the predominant practice in their university was to use UK-focused textbooks and teaching materials. They found this approach unhelpful to their employability given the limited employment opportunities in the UK due to visa restrictions, which made them doubt the quality of their programmes and the value of studying in the UK. This suggests that internationalising the curriculum in a way that shows consideration for the real-world needs of international students and their employment prospects (Murray & McConachy, 2018) could be interpreted as an act of kindness. It is dangerous for a university to prioritise the economic gains that international students represent for the institution, without considering how their courses deliver benefits to their students' employability, as academic, cultural and social factors play equally important roles in attracting them to study in the UK (Haigh, 2002).

Perceived acts of unkindness contribute to the challenges that Chinese international students experience in the UK. For example, the English language barrier and the overwhelming number (90%) of Chinese students in Business Studies significantly reduce their opportunity to practise English and to establish intercultural contact with non-Chinese peers. Moreover, cultural differences in socialising, lack of knowledge or interest in Chinese culture on campus, and limited multicultural social activities increase Chinese international students' vulnerability and limit their intercultural learning and opportunities to make new friends. These challenges suggest an urgent need for the university to create a kind and truly international learning environment in which students from diverse cultural backgrounds can become well integrated academically and culturally (Cheng *et al*, 2018).

Implications

The findings of this study suggest that universities need to further develop their recruitment strategy, especially for programmes that are popular among international students, for example, Business Studies. This is because a large number of Chinese students in Business Studies does not make a diverse student body. Diversity needs to be prioritised in recruitment through attracting students from a wide range of countries, avoiding dependence on a particular market. This can enrich the university with different cultures and voices, which will lead to a truly international learning environment.

Students from different cultures and different educational systems may have different needs and expectations, so a one-size-fits-all support approach is insufficient. Instead, a flexible approach would better support students to master different cultures and academic practice. It is equally

important to provide staff with training that promotes positive interactions on campus and increases staff's knowledge and awareness of different cultures and how educational and cultural differences could shape student learning needs and expectations such as class size, peer interaction and relationship between students and academics . Other factors such as staff's prior educational and work experiences and personal aspiration will also need to be considered.

Despite the challenges, the Chinese international students who participated in this study still valued and hoped for kind acts on campus. They described these kind acts as beneficial to their learning experiences, no matter how small. These kind acts can be boiled down to good communication, opportunities for students to attend essential training, and multicultural social events on campus. This means that a kindness approach should be promoted as a shared project among students, academics and administrative staff.

Developing a kindness strategy could help the university to promote kind acts in the practices of teaching, learning and service support on campus. It could be achieved through encouraging staff's responsiveness to student needs, increasing the support measures that alleviate students' stress and enhance their language and social skills, and widening students' opportunities for positive interactions on campus.

Firstly, universities will need to better prepare academic staff to meet international students' employability needs, as employability is a key driver for them to study abroad. Internationalising the curriculum could help increase international perspectives in the course content and creating opportunities for students to get work experiences could increase their competition in the international market (Cheng *et al*., 2018).

Secondly, developing a kindness culture that values students' different views and experiences will enrich the content and international perspectives of the masters' programme. Universities need to increase support to all staff to develop their intercultural awareness and competence, to increase their knowledge of different cultures and values and how cultural differences could affect students' learning styles. This will increase positive interactions between staff and international students and reduce the perceived acts of unkindness.

Thirdly, an increased level of support for Chinese international students is needed to alleviate their stress and enhance their language skills. Research reveals that insufficient oral English skills and the fear of embarrassment due to poor English skills reduces Chinese students' confidence in speaking up in class discussions (Tian & Lowe, 2009). English language support needs to become embedded into programmes, instead of as one-off support at induction. This will increase Chinese students' confidence in expressing their ideas and making good friends with peers from different cultures.

Fourthly, more attention should be paid to the inclusivity and diversity of social activities organized on campus. Our interviews with students suggested that cultural and educational system differences could influence how far they saw social activities as meeting their needs. Events and parties dominated by alcohol may be supported by some local students, but this study suggests that they do not reflect Chinese international students' preferences. When student demographics shift to more international students, social activities that alleviate student stress and benefit their employability will be in high demand, such as introducing different values and beliefs as well as peers' interest and passions, and getting students involved with the local community services.

It is worth noting that developing a kindness culture will not be a straightforward process, as the complex nature of kindness makes it difficult to regulate. When university staff dedicate time and

care to increasing positive interactions with students, there will need to be a balance with other priorities such as research and administration (Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*, 2015).

However, if the higher education sector recognizes and rewards acts of kindness at school and institutional levels, this will motivate staff to value and increase such acts on campus. Increased acts of kindness can be invaluable to the higher education sector, as they will increase the opportunities for the institutions to demonstrate their humane and caring understanding of the challenges facing international students. When university staff treat international students as valued members of the community, that kindness will unlock the tremendous potential that lies within the students and improve their learning and social experiences (Komarraju *et al.*, 2010).

Conclusion

This study explored Chinese international students' experience in the UK through a kindness lens. It revealed that acts of kindness could encourage positive interactions on campus and improve the students' learning and social experiences, echoing the schools of Positive Psychology about the importance of kindness. This study focuses on 63 Chinese international students in one institution, which is a small sample size. It doesn't intend to generalise its findings to other institutions, but theoretically its findings will have important implications for the universities which have a large number of Chinese international students to develop a truly international learning environment. Based on the findings, it proposes that researchers could use a kindness approach to explore the enactment of kindness and perceptions of kindness in different contexts (academic/social) and different scales (classroom/institutional) within the university in the future research.

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