

# Social Support Discourse for International Students in an Australian Tertiary Context

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## Abstract

*Acculturative stress caused by cultural transition can lead to huge pressure for international students in a new sociocultural environment. These pressures are significantly associated with such negative emotions as homesickness, loneliness, anxiety and depression. In order to alleviate their acculturative stress and enhance their psychological and social wellbeing, effective social support is needed to help them successfully adapt to the new environment. In this study, a total of 20 international students and 5 university staff participated in the semi-structured interviews regarding their understanding of social support system for international students in a regional area in Australia. Four important sources of social support were identified in this study: family, friend, university and community. Due to different functional characteristics, each source plays distinct roles in assisting international students. Evaluation to these sources of social support was also discussed in this study.*

**Keywords:** social support, international students, family support, peer support, tertiary education

## Background

Australia, with its reputation in quality education, has recently attracted an influx of international students. In recent years, due to economic development and globalisation there is a dramatic increase of international students coming to Australia and attending various courses. Australian Education International (AEI, 2012b) reported that in 2011 there were 557,425 full-fee paying international students staying in Australia on student visas. Among them, 242,351 (43.4%) enrolled in Higher education. International education has contributed a great deal to the Australian economy. AEI (2012a) states that international education contributed \$ 16.3 billion to the Australian economy in export income in the financial year of 2010-2011. Almost 60% (\$9.4 billion) among them were contributed by the higher education sector. AEI (2012a) also shows that International education services is Australia's largest services export industry ahead of travel services (\$11.9 billion), technical, trade-related and other business services (\$3.7 billion).

As transferring from a familiar environment to a new one which is linguistically, socially and educationally different, most international students' minds and bodies need to be adjusted to the new challenging environment. Thus, they are susceptible to various physical illness (e.g. insomnia, frequent minor illness, upset stomach and/or headache) and psychological problems (e.g. loneliness, homesickness, anxiety, and depression) (Axelson, 1993; Bock, 2008; Sandhu, 1995; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994; Winkelman, 1994).

Social support is the availability of caring persons who can be relied on for assistance at the time of stress (Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990). Due to the geographical distance from the family, international students have fewer opportunities to access support from their families and friends; and also because of cultural differences, it would be harder for them to establish interdependent networks compared with local students (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008). A number of research works (Crockett et al., 2007; Lee, Koeske, & Sales, 2004) show that social support, in the form of practical assistance has a stress-buffering effect for international students, including their acculturative stress, depressive symptoms, reactions to stressors and life satisfaction, etc. Other studies (Jou & Fukada, 1995; Misra, Crist, & Burant, 2003; Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002; Yeh & Inose, 2003) have also agreed that social support greatly influences the international students' health and wellbeing. Individuals with ineffective social support may be more sensitive to life stress, and they would feel undervalued and experience higher levels of distress (Hovey & Magana, 2000; Rudd, 1990).

There are two types of social support discourses: instrumental support and emotional support. Instrumental support refers to assistance with practical problems, providing information, advice, and tangible aid. Emotional support concentrates on affective aid, showing sympathy and understanding (Sarason et al., 1990). Furthermore, social supports usually come from a variety of sources, such as family, friends, universities and other larger communities. It is necessary to make a distinction among the different sources because each source may help the students cope with various emotional, social, and educational problems in a distinct manner (Olson & Shultz, 1994; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Students tend to opt for family, friends, or other students to seek help with emotional-social problems, and they opt for lecturers, administration staff for educational problems (Leong & Sedlacek, 1986).

University is an essential social support discourse for international students and assists them to adjust to the new academic environment. Support from universities or other educational institutions mainly concerns practical problems, including educational activities, academic genres and living arrangements (Ward & Masgoret, 2004). Many universities have established a special office serving international students, offering assistance programmes, such as orientation programmes geared to international students' lifestyle, English language support, peer programme, etc. (Jenkins & Galloway, 2009) to try to provide effective support to international students. However, Sawir et al.'s (2008) study found that few students rely on the support of the university since not all know that the services are available, especially at the early stages of their study.

Support from friends is another indispensable source of helping international students to cope with their stress. They may rely heavily on their peers, rather than professionals for information support and emotional support (W. Heggins & Jackson, 2003). Some studies (Sykes & Eden, 1987; Ward et al., 2001) noted that co-national friends are the most powerful source of support for overseas students. Students from the same nation may offer some useful resources and share practical strategies for coping with stress in a new environment. Also, co-national friends can provide emotional support which helps the student reduce depression and overcome loneliness. Based on a study conducted in New Zealand (Ward & Kennedy, 1993b), satisfaction with co-national networking had a positive correlation with Malaysian and Singaporean students' psychological adjustment. However, contact with only co-national friends would impede culture learning and engagement into the host society (Adelman, 1988; Arthur, 2004). Just as Pruitt's (1978) research conducted in the United States, the overall degree of adjustment was poorer for those international students who had more contact with co-national friends. Therefore, co-national relationship can be both helpful or harmful, depending on the nature of the relationship and the group's contact with other groups, especially with members of the host culture (Ward et al., 2001).

Therefore, establishing friendship with the local community is of importance to international students when coping with stress and promoting psychological wellbeing. Klingberg and Hull (1979) pointed out that familiarisation within the local context is related to the general wellbeing of foreign students, in both non-academic and academic aspects. Other researchers have maintained a similar opinion that satisfaction with the host national relationship has been positively related to the psychological wellbeing of sojourners (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1993a). Many international students however report that establishing friendship with local students is disappointing and a difficult experience (Arthur, 2004), especially Asian students who may experience greater difficulties than other international students in terms of adjusting to campus life and establishing friendship with host nationals (Sodowsky & Plake, 1992; Talbot, Geelhoed, & Ninggal, 1999).

Family is perceived as one of the most intimate sources for emotional and financial support (Williams, 2007). The relationship between financial supports provided by family and international students' wellbeing has been discussed before (See 2.3.1.5). Emotional support from family mainly focuses on dealing with being upset, feeling loneliness and discussing relationship issues (Ward & Masgoret, 2004). Some international students rely on their parents' judgment. Even if they sometimes disagree with their judgment, they still have faith in that their parents have their best interests at heart. However, some international students may try to conceal the difficulties from their families due to concern about loss of face (Williams, 2007). For married students, marital relationships are considered as the primary source of social support. According to Stone Feinstein and Ward (1990), quality of spousal relationship is one of the most significant predictors of psychological wellbeing of sojourners, since harmonious marital relationships can offer a good source of social support and is buffer to the acculturative stress(Ward et al., 2001).

A review of literature indicates social support to international students has been comprehensively discussed in the previous studies. However, most of these studies were undertaken in urban areas

with a focus of those students in metropolis, and few concentrated on those in the rural area. In fact, those international students studying in rural area may have different experiences and perceptions about social support as fewer social support facilities or authorities are provided in rural areas. This study aims to investigate what sources of social support provided to international students in an Australian regional area and how international students evaluate to these support.

## Research methods

Qualitative research method was utilized in this study to gather in-depth participants' perceptions to social support in the Australian regional area. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data. A total of 25 participants, 20 international tertiary students and 5 university staff currently studying and working at the University of Tasmania participated. Some demographical factors such as age, gender, degree pursuing, length of stay, and English level were taken into consideration in the process of recruitment. All the interviews were conducted face to face, and each took within 30 minutes. The interviews were recorded with the participants' approval beforehand. A list of questions, an information sheet, and a consent form had been sent to participants in advance of the interview. The interviewer asked follow up questions and elaborated according to the participants' input. The audio files were then transcribed into textual files and saved in a hard disk with password. Subsequently, the collected data were entered and analyzed by computer-aided qualitative data analysis software NVivo software (version 8).

## Data analysis and Results

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse qualitative data in this study. Through systematic data analysis, themes emerging from the set of data and the relationship identified among these themes gave researchers an explicit understanding of participants' perceptions of these issues. Two cycles of coding were conducted: the first coding cycle was an initial coding process. With NVivo (Version 8), researchers read carefully the transcripts sentence by sentence, and then drew and dropped the relevant meaning units into the same coding group. At the same time, new codes were created when new meanings which did not fit any existing coding groups were encountered. Followed by the first cycle of coding, the second cycle of coding was then undertaken. At this stage, such analytic skills as classifying, integrating, abstracting, and conceptualizing were utilized to find out the deeper relationship among those codes produced from the first cycle coding. Along with identified relationship, hierarchical structures were established and themes gradually emerged from the sets of data. Four themes emerged from the set of data and are presented here in the order of support from "university", "friends", "family", and "community".

### Theme 1: Support from university

#### *Academic support*

The university played an important role in providing academic support and administrative support to international students. Academic support is the most important parts of university support. In the interviews, most student participants (16 out of 20) indicated that they sought support from their lecturers, tutors and/or other academic staff when experiencing difficulties in their study. An academic staff interviewee also said,

I think the main support we are asked for is academic support. A quite number of students asked for academic support. ...they asked in terms of discussing assignments, discussing their written components. Sending you emails all the time, trying to arrange a meeting often and regularly.  
(Academic staff 2)

Half of student participants (10 out of 20) gave a positive evaluation to the academic support from the university. These participants said that their lecturers were very happy to help them and in turn they were very satisfied with the support. A Chinese student participant gave the following responses,

My unit coordinator and my supervisor are good. They are caring and very friendly, and if I have some questions, I can always contact them to talk about, and deal with problems, so I think it is good. (Student 20)

However, 3 student participants expressed their dissatisfactions with the academic support provided by the university in the interview. Two salient problems were concluded: some international students did not think that they received enough attention from their lecturers or tutors; and others felt they were treated differently or even unfairly from the local students. These problems made them feel

greatly excluded in the unfamiliar academic environment. A Chinese student participant stated her experience:

I think we do not get enough concerns from our teacher. Sometimes they explain something, I cannot understand clearly...I think they should consider that I have disability in using the language. I am not same as local students. When I ask the faculty to support, they said you are international students, we are not in charge of you, you should go to international students' service and ask for help. Somehow, I feel I don't belong to the university. (Student 12)

#### **Administrative support**

Apart from academic support, the university has an office – International Service which specifically provides support for the current and prospective international students in the university. Two administrative staff members interviewed in this study are from this department. According to their responses, international students usually come to the International Service to seek solution for practical problems or problems which they might find difficult to solve by themselves and/or others.

Most people come here for more practical thing. I want to change my enrolment, or visa problems, or what I can change my course. Why most of students come to see us for such basic and administrative things. (Administrative staff 1)

But certainly there will always be students who need to come to us because they may be problem to their friends, their church, whatever they cannot help with him because it is too big.  
(Administrative staff 2)

Most student participants' responses agreed with the two administrative staff as they did have experiences in seeking support from the International Services. Based on students' feedback, some of them were satisfied with the services provided by the International Service. As a Malaysian student participant said,

It is helpful in many ways in terms that they can help in my study; they teach me how to do certain things, in terms of security, and activities. They do provide, organize trips, events and participate...So in general, I am quite happy with what the uni providing. (Student 8)

However, 2 student participants were not satisfied with the administrative support provided by the university. The reasons are: they received slow responses from the university; and they did not get clear information from the university. A Chinese student gave the following response:

But sometimes their direction are not quite useful, because when I have some problems, they would say you should go to see this person or that person, They all said you should go for another person. I don't know. Maybe the institution like regulations or something like that.  
(Student 3)

#### **Theme 2: support from friends**

Peer support is another important source in the process of adaptation to the new environment. Most student participants considered friends as their first source of support when they have problems. Friends usually provide support on advisory and emotional aspects.

#### **Advisory support**

According to the participants' responses, advisory support claimed by international students was wide ranging: seeking accommodation, looking for part-time jobs, car repairs, checking grammatical mistakes for their assignments, etc. A Chinese student participant said,

I think if I meet some problems, firstly I will ask my friends whom I consider as my best friends, to help me. I remembered that when I just arrived in Launceston, I stayed in a bag pack. And then I just asked my friend who was in Launceston to help to find an accommodation. She was very helpful and found a share-house which was close to uni within one week. (Student 20)

#### **Emotional support**

Emotional support is another important part of peer support. Great pressure caused by an unfamiliar environment might bring various negative emotions to these international students. Peer support can relieve their stress and cheer them up to overcome difficulties. Friends easily understand each other because they are under the same situation or may have the similar experience. Hence, emotional support from friends becomes very important in times of difficulty. Many participants mentioned that they did not feel lonely because of their friends' companionship and encouragement. As a Chinese student participant said, "And I also got some friends here who shared the same believes and shared the same experiences. It's ok, I get a lot of times to talk them. I don't really feel lonely" (Student 4). Another Chinese student gave a similar response:

It is very helpful to talk to them (my friends). Only talking is enough. If you have some problems and you cannot talk to anyone, you just think it by yourself, it is very horrible. If you talk to them, they can say, "Yeah, I can understand". Maybe both of you have the same problems. (Student 14)

Most student participants (15 out of 20) gave a highly positive evaluation of support from their friends and acknowledged that their friends' support really played an important role in their process of adaptation. An Indonesian participant (Student 7) said, "And also I have a lot of friends here, I don't find anything difficult here, I am quite happy", and a Nepalese student gave an in-depth explanation on the benefits of the friends support:

Yes, they are quite helpful being communicate with people, being friendly with people. It makes you happy, makes your time pass easily, makes you fulfilling, and makes your heart and your mind feel happy. If you are happy in your heart and mind, you will be pretty happy, and you will look younger, and you will live longer. (Student 15)

However, support from friends also has its limitations. As the participants responded, most of their friends were international students as well and they were also a group of people who need to be supported. Thus, their friends would not provide more professional support in some aspects, such as academic support and psychological consulting. As an administrative staff member gave an example in the interview:

Like I know with some students if they suffering from depression and anxiety. Their friends know that is limited how much they can help, they are no try counselling. They are busy students as well. Therefore, the best way is talking to us and then we can refer counsellors to provide professional support. (Administrative staff 2)

### **Theme 3: support from family**

Because of its unique emotional attachment, family support was highly valued by the participants. Among the four sources of support, family is the only one which cannot help students to solve problems locally since it is normally far away from the host country. However, family support is irreplaceable and has its unique advantages. According participants' responses, they usually seek support from their family for some private problems. As a Chinese student (Student 3) said, "There are some things you cannot talk to your friends, for example, something important or something private, you can talk to your parents". And also the family might be one of the best listeners for some international students to pour out their negative feelings because "they can talk openly with their family about their worries" (Administrative staff 2).

#### ***Emotional support***

Family support was considered by the half of student participants (10 out of 20) as a main source of emotional support. Among them, 3 student participants mentioned that they had kept a high frequency of contact with their family by either telephone or the internet. It is very important to keep an emotional attachment with their family because frequent contact could effectively relieve these students' acculturative stress.

Encouragement and care were two important aspects of family emotional support mentioned by these participants. As a Chinese student (Student 13) said that, "If I feel depressed, I will call my mum, and mum will encourage me and said you can do better or you can study very well. My mum is my motivation". Family was considered by these students as an emotional strength to strongly assist them to eliminate negative emotion. Apart from encouragement, care and concern was another important aspect showed by their family. Academic performance, health and security were high concerns in their family. The Chinese student (Student 20) gave the response that "My family always worried about me. They always ask me to study hard and to eat better, keep healthy, and don't go out at night".

#### ***Financial support***

According to participants' responses, family was the major financial sponsor for most international students although there were other sources of financial support including scholarships, part-time jobs, and their own savings. As mentioned above, financial concerns caused by the lack of money directly influence international students' standard of living as well as their psychological wellbeing. Those who have adequate financial support from their families would be at a low level of worries. The Chinese student's response is an example (Student 13) said, "No, I don't have financial problems, because my parents support me, now I don't need to worry about money, but I don't know in the future".

### **Advisory support**

In the interview, 5 student participants noted that their family usually gave advices and help them to solve various problems in Australia. According to their responses, the elders in family including their parents, grandparents, and those who have had similar overseas experiences usually provide advices. Advisory support has become one of the important aspects of family support. As the student (Student 9) said, "They won't know what happening in most of time, and when they find out after we tell them, they would give wises, give commands. Generally it's quite helpful".

Regarding the evaluation of family support, 7 student participants gave a highly positive feedback on this support. An Arabic student (student 1) said, "They give me a big support...The best support is from family. Family give you all the support, the biggest support, and a staff member (Administrative staff 1) also acknowledged that "their family support them to make a huge effectiveness".

However, one student did not think that family could provide substantial support because they were far away from the host country. She also considered that frequently asking for support or speaking out negative feelings to their family would make the family worry. Therefore, she rarely seeks support from their family. It is her response: "You know they are too far away from here, so I meet some problems here, I don't ask for help from them, because if I talk with them they become very worried. It's not good". (Student 20)

An administrative staff raised another issue in regard to family support. Some students would have a negative evaluation of their family support because their family put too much pressure on them. These students' parents have too high expectations and force their children to achieve goals. Such pressure would negatively impact these students' psychological wellbeing. The following is the staff member's response:

But also some things could be a cause, because some of the pressure put on the students by the family, the expectations they are going to be successful, earning money to be spent for them to come to Australia. So that sort of expectation also can be a trigger to some of these problems as well. (Administrative staff 2)

### **Theme 4: Support from community**

Compared with other sources of social support, support from the immediate community was given relatively less importance by the participants. About one third of student participants said that they rarely or never seek support from the local community. A Vietnamese student (Student 6) explained a reason that support from family, university, and friends basically satisfied her needs already so she did not need to seek support from the local community. However, an administrative staff participant (Administrative staff 2) considered that the underlying reason was cultural differences. As international students are more or less culturally different from the local community, it would be the greatest barrier to make close contacts with the community.

However, 8 participants in the interviews mentioned that church or any other local religious communities play an important role in providing support to international students in emotional and spiritual aspects as these religious communities tends to influence people spiritually by guiding them in a positive way to look at the world. These supports can be greatly helpful for a range of conditions including loneliness, homesickness and depression. A Chinese student participant expressed his feelings about church in the interview,

You can meet different people there, you can talk to your friends because they are quite friendly, they can talk to the priest. Maybe they cannot solve the problems, maybe they cannot give some practical ideal or practical help, but at least there are somebody you can talk to, and they will give you some relief, and they will let you be positive about these things. At least that's good. (Student 3)

## **Discussion**

Social support is considered as an essential way to assist international students in dealing with their acculturative stress and help them adapt to the new environment successfully. Different from coping strategies which pay more attention to adjustment of people's inner world, social support indicates a process of seeking and receiving support from people's outer world. Four sources of social support were identified in this study: family, friends, university, and local community. Due to difference functional characteristics, the four sources play distinctive roles in these students' sojourn journey (Olson & Shultz, 1994; Ward et al., 2001). The study discovered that accessibility and effectiveness

were two main criteria to evaluate these sources of support. The following few sections will discuss the four social support sources and international students' evaluation to these support.

### **University**

University is an education-professional institution which does not only convey academic knowledge but also provides an opportunity for international students to understand the local culture via being involved in the education activities. Thus, from both the academic and socio-cultural aspects, support provided by the university can be more professional than other sources of support. Support provided by the university is grouped into two categories: academic and administrative support.

#### **Academic support**

From the academic aspect, most of the student interviewees gave a positive evaluation to the quality of education and showed a satisfaction with the academic support provided by the University of Tasmania. Many students have experiences, either face-to-face or by email, of seeking support from lecturers and tutors in regarding to academic problems, assignments or other learning tasks. In most cases, they can get efficient feedback and professional support.

However, a small number of the student participants have dissatisfactions with the academic support provided by the university. They were disappointed by not receiving attention. They claimed that lecturers and tutors should pay more attention to international students who were generally disadvantaged in English language competency and unfamiliarity with the Australian educational style. However, the lecturer participants' responses to this issue were divided. While some of them agree with the students' claim, the others proposed a totally opposite view that special treatments should not be given to international students as all students should be given equal support. Thus, whether to provide extra assistance to international students has become a controversial issue among academics in the university.

Some student participants were not satisfied with academic support provided by the university also because they had experiences of being treated unfairly by academic staff at the university. They said they did not get as much academic support as local students and even refused support by some academic staff and the faculties due to their status as international students. Such experiences caused these students' negative feedback to the university, which would increase their acculturative stress accordingly.

#### **Administrative support**

Apart from academic support, administrative support is another important part of university support. International Office or some other administrative departments at the university are main units taking the responsibility. International students could access these service for some practical problems such as visa issues, legal problems, or travelling issues (Jenkins & Galloway, 2009; Zhai, 2004). If the problem was beyond these departments' abilities, the international student would be referred to other relevant organisations or government departments, such as psychological counselling and immigration office. These departments, especially the International Office played an important role in promoting intercultural communications through on-campus activities, such as Multicultural Day, Harmony Day, and celebrations for various cultural festivals.

In evaluation of the administrative support provided, efficiency and effectiveness are two essential criteria. In this study, some international student participants were highly satisfied with the support provided by the administrative departments. In contrast, those who were not satisfied tended to have complaints about the slow responses and unclear instructions provided.

While these departments, especially International Office was believed to be helpful by some international students, some participants rarely or even never accessed these administrative departments at the university (Johnsom, 1993). The lack of knowledge about the services provided was one of the main reasons that obstructed international students from accessing administrative support at the university (Sawir et al., 2008; Zhai, 2004). Another reason for rarely accessing university administrative departments was that most students preferred to solve problems by themselves or seek support from friends. These students would turn to International Service or other university administrative departments for help only when the problem was beyond their own or their friends' capabilities.

### **Friends**

Support from friends is named as peer support. Most international students would give their preference to peer support while facing difficulties in the host country (W. Heggins & Jackson, 2003; Zhai, 2004). The main reason of such heavily dependence on peer support is its accessibility. Under

some circumstances, it could be more convenient to access friends than other sources, such as the university, family, or community. Also, friends are commonly a group of people who are at the similar age, sharing similar interests and experiences and easily understanding each other (McGrath & Burtcher, 2004; Zhai, 2004). Thus, gaining support from friends was practical and could easily satisfy international students' needs.

### ***Advisory support and emotional support***

The two functions of peer support were advisory support and emotional support. On the one hand, friend was one of the important advisory conduits from which international students can obtain useful information. Such advisory information could be widely ranging from academic to non-academic aspects. Advisory support from friends can greatly facilitate international students' settlement in the unfamiliar environment academically, socially and psychologically (Ward et al., 2001; Williams, 2007). On the other hand, friend played an important role in emotional support (Ward et al., 2001; Williams, 2007). As most of participants in this study that talking to friends was one of the most effective ways to relieve stress, because friends' companionship was very helpful in overcoming negative emotions such as loneliness, depression, homesickness, and anxiety.

### ***Issues related to friends support***

Advantages of friend support were highly evaluated by the participants, while a small number of related issues were raised. One of the issues was that international students were inclined to make friends with those people who were from the same nation, called co-national friends in literature (Arthur, 2004; Sykes & Eden, 1987; Ward et al., 2001). It is reasonable and explainable that co-national friends can understand each other better because they speak the same language and share the same culture. However, as Adelman (1988) and Arthur (2004) argue, grouping only with co-national friends and rarely contacting local friends would obstruct international students' engagement into the host society and increase their acculturative stress although it may help relieve their stress in the short term.

Support from friends has another limitation besides one pointed out above. As most international students' friends are students as well, which makes it hard for them to give each other advices in a professional way as they all are lack of professional knowledge in some aspects. There is also a mutual influence between these students and their friends. Positive influences would provide an impetus to international students' adaptation, while negative influences would increase the stress in the process socio-cultural adaptation. There is limited literature discussing friends' influences on international students, but some research on friends' influences on adolescence could be regarded as references (Berndt & Keefe, 1995; Knecht, 2008).

## **Family**

Among these four sources, family was the only which cannot provide "on the spot" support because most of them were far away from the host country (excluding those students who have a family in Australia). In spite of the location factor, family was still regarded as the most original source of support due to its unique biologic and emotional attachments with these students (Williams, 2007). Also, family was perceived as the most reliable and intimate group of people with whom international students could discuss private issues or pour out negative feelings without concerns (Zhai, 2004). Hence, family support was irreplaceable and had its unique advantages compared to other sources of support. A high frequency of contacts with family was beneficial to relieve acculturative stress and help international students to adapt to the new environment. Modern technologies, such as telephone and internet, greatly facilitated this kind of communication (Williams, 2007). Here, family support is discussed from three aspects: emotional, financial and advisory support.

### ***Emotional support***

Emotional support is one of the most salient functions of family (Ward & Masgoret, 2004). Encouragement and care as two typically positive emotional forms identified in this study. Continuous encouragements can provide a positive strength for international students, making them more confident to overcome difficulties occurring in the acculturation process and helping them relieve negative emotions, such as frustration, depression, and loneliness. Thus, those student participants who were getting more family encouragement tended to be more successful in adjusting themselves and more effective in adapting to the new environment. Another important family support was care. As the participants' responses, academic performance, health status and security were mostly cared by their families. Care from the family brought great warmth to these international students and thus boost these students' wellbeing.

### ***Financial support and advisory support***

Apart from emotional support, families also provided financial and advisory support to international students. Family is the primary source of financial support for the international students (Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2006). Adequate financial support reduced the students' financial worries and therefore was beneficial to their health and wellbeing (Galloway & Jenkins, 2005; Mori, 2000). However, highly depending on families' financial support would raise these students' a sense of guilt and self-denial and thereby negatively influenced their psychological wellbeing.

Lastly, the family provided advisory support to international students. Although most families were not able to provide "on the spot" support due to the long distance, most international students were still willing to seek advisory support from their families because they are perceived as the most reliable and intimate people (Williams, 2007). It was also found in this study that international students tended to seek support from the older generation and those who had overseas experiences in their families (Root, 1985).

### ***Limitations of family support***

Since families provided a great support for the emotional, financial and advisory aspects, most of the participants in this study gave a high evaluation on their family support. However, the study found that a small number of students rarely seek support from their families for two reasons. The first reason was that some student participants do not believe that their families were able to provide substantial support because they were far away from the host country. Instead, they considered that frequently asking for support, constantly talking about negative experiences, or highly depending on the family would bring a great financial and/or psychological burden to the family. This group of students tended to be more independent and try to avoid seeking much support from their families. The second reason was related to the belief of the family. Some families, especially Asian families, have too high expectations and push their children to be successful academically and socially, and therefore caused a severe stress on the student (W. J. Heggins, 2003; Sue, 1981). Thus, the students from such kind of family tended to conceal the difficulties from their family to avoid losing face in front of the family.

### **Community**

Apart from family, friends and university, local communities were source of social support identified in this study. However, international students rarely accessed the local community to seek support. As to the reasons why they do not seek support from the local community, the international student and the university staff have divided perspectives. In views of the international students, they thought that support from other sources, including family, friends, and university, was enough and thus there was no need to seek support from the local community. However, university staff considered cultural differences is the greatest barrier. Differences in languages, customs, values and lifestyles tended to greatly hinder the international students to closely contact the local community. The view of the university staff is supported by McGrath and Burtcher's (2004) study which argues that cultural difference is the main cause of low rate of seeking support from the local community by international students.

Nevertheless, those international students who had experiences in seeking and receiving support from the local community gave a high evaluation. Churches and other religious communities were responded as a major part of community support (Butcher, Lim, McGrath, & Revis, 2002; Solberg, Choi, Ritsma, & Jolly, 1994). As their responses, these religious groups had become a strong spiritual strength and help them go through the difficult time. With the help of religious beliefs or faiths, international students' acculturative stress and negative emotions were effectively relieved. This study also found that international students' local friends were mostly from local church or other religious communities (McGrath & Burtcher, 2004). In the views of these students, these local religious groups served as the bridge between the international students and the local society. Thus, positive contacts with local religious communities may help promote international students' social and psychological wellbeing.

### **Conclusion**

Social support is very important to relieve acculturative stress and help international students adapt to the unfamiliar academic and socio-cultural environment. In the aspects of university support, providing more academic support was expected by most international students. Promptness and effectiveness are two requirements proposed by these students. Friend support is indispensable in the entire social support system. Companionship with encouragement, consolation and company is very beneficial to

relieve acculturative stress. However, it is suggested that international students should try to make more local friends because getting more involved into local society will help them to quickly adapt to the host country. With unique emotional attachment, family usually provides essential support in financial, emotional and advisory aspects. However, family support has limitations because of location. Family's too high expectation also restricts some international students to seek support from their family. Lastly, community support, especially church or other religious community was highly valued by international students. Religious support gives a strong spiritual strength to help these students understand the world and themselves.

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