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An Education in Exploitation: Chinese International Secondary School Students and the Dark Side of International Education

Helen Liu
York University, Canada

ABSTRACT

Canada's international education system is highly unregulated, with many recruitment agencies and homestay services taking agency in providing these services to students, leaving them vulnerable and open to exploitation. Furthermore, many school boards often do not take responsibility in arranging these services for international students, resulting in a lack of accountability that can further contribute to a cycle of deceit and students navigating this process with limited knowledge or oversight. Utilizing international student security (ISS), this article draws on interviews with six Canadian secondary school teachers from and two Chinese international secondary school students all located in Toronto and the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) to reveal the profitability of international students, and the exploitative nature of international student services providers like recruitment agencies and homestay companies. Ultimately, the article identifies responsible key stakeholders and beneficial institutional and policy improvements to better regulate international education and protect these vulnerable international youth.

Keywords: international secondary youth, international student security, international education policy, homestay companies, recruitment agencies

INTRODUCTION

Many Chinese international secondary students enter their host countries in a vulnerable state, often studying unaccompanied or living with limited assistance and support (Kuo & Roysircar, 2004; Popadiuk, 2009). As minors, they often exercise less autonomy and are at a higher risk of experiencing exploitation from

recruitment agencies and potential mistreatment or neglect from their guardians (Kuo & Roysircar, 2004; Popadiuk, 2009). These circumstances raise questions regarding the gaps in responsibility and quality of care these students receive, with an apparent need for greater regulation and oversight in a system full of gaps. Furthermore, many issues often go unaddressed as international students have voiced how reluctant they are in sharing their struggles due to the pressures to successfully integrate, along with a lack of understanding in their status as minors and the fear of being sent home (Popadiuk, 2009; Lee, 2015; Wu, 2019). Utilizing international student security (ISS), this article draws on interviews with six secondary school teachers in Canada, alongside two Chinese international secondary school students, revealing issues regarding the profitability of international students, and the exploitative nature of international student services like recruitment agencies and homestay companies. Ultimately, the article identifies responsible key stakeholders and beneficial institutional and policy improvements to better regulate international education and protect these vulnerable international populations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

With the rise of the "middle class," it has become the norm for many Chinese families to send their children across the globe to independently gain an education and provide more opportunities (Cheng, 2019; Mok, 2015; Saito, 2023). Though there are numerous terms that have been created to describe these unaccompanied student populations, one of the most recognised terms is "parachute kids" (Tsong et al., 2021). This term emerged in the early 1980s and 1990s to describe the phenomenon where children from East-Asian countries were "dropped into the new culture on their own or with minimal adult supervision," (Popadiuk, 2009, p. 230; Saito, 2023). Prior to studying overseas, these youths spent many of their developmental years in a culture that greatly contrasted with the practices and values of their host country, such as being educated in different languages and learning structures and being involved in their own understanding and customs of youth (Saito, 2023; Tsong et al., 2021).

Much of the available international student literature is primarily focused on the post-secondary student population, despite the recent increase of student enrollment from international secondary students who are often entering the host country as unaccompanied minors (Cheng, 2019; Popadiuk, 2009; Tsong et al., 2021). Though there are a variety of issues that are commonly shared amongst international students, such as language barriers and homesickness, there are distinct concerns and issues for international adolescents given their vulnerable age and stage in life (Popadiuk, 2009). International students who arrive in their adolescent years may face unique issues and increased vulnerability, especially those unaccompanied, as they may lack familiarity with host society customs or possess little English proficiency to adequately express themselves or be understood (Tsong et al., 2021).

There are countless gaps within Canada's education system and international student programs where aspirations to support and care for

international youths are not truly being met, like the exploitative recruitment agencies, homestay programs, and even school tactics to profit from international students. International education recruitment agencies and the homestay industry is highly unregulated, with several private organizations taking agency in providing these services (Wong et al., 2010). These conditions leave international students vulnerable, as schoolboards are not engaging in an extensive process that ensures these external services have been adequately assessed and approved to ensure high quality living standards for these unaccompanied minors. Furthermore, although many school boards mention homestay services on their international educational brochures, most emphasize that they do not take responsibility in arranging homestay services for students (Peel District School Board, 2020; Toronto District School Board, n.d.; York Region District School Board, n.d.). This lack of accountability can lead to a cycle of deceit with international students navigating this process with limited knowledge or oversight.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SECURITY

International student security (ISS) aims to improve standards of protection and human security for international students with respect to personal, financial, and domestic safety (Marginson, 2012). Marginson et al. (2010) introduced ISS to expose the hardships and unresolved issues that international students experience, which include concerns regarding personal safety, financial issues, housing challenges, language adversities, racism, segregation, and feelings of loneliness. In doing so, ISS's fundamental purpose is to improve the human security of international students by moving beyond just viewing these student populations as consumers and to extend rights, values, and protections for them beyond national borders.

Literature has revealed the need for greater protections and entitlements for international youth in Canada to support the success of these vulnerable populations. Many of these international students are often seen as outsiders, drifting in between uncertain or unclear bearings in their host country. Several national governments often engage with the act of going back and forth between utilizing international students for their benefits or quickly disregarding them as hazards during challenging times (Marginson, 2012). This was especially clear during the emergence of COVID-19, where many Asian international students quickly became ostracized from the public, subjected to slurs and cruel remarks to "go back home" (Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020, p. 1375).

Marginson (2014) defines human agency as "the sum of a person's capacity to act on her/his own behalf" (p. 10), and this lack of agency is another distinct difficulty for many international students. For international youth who are limited in their status as minors, this can further weaken their human agency. This is significant as active human agency has been associated with an increased ability for individuals to adapt with change and "academic success, emotional happiness and intercultural relations" (Marginson et al., 2010, p. 61). International

secondary students' status as minors also plays into another distinct issue they face, which is the housing and homestay systems that are often unregulated and easily exploitative. Furthermore, the language experiences and struggles for international secondary school students can be very dissimilar to domestic student experiences and impact their ability to communicate and address security concerns, such as utilizing support services, or dealing with authorities, institutions, and other educational processes.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

Participant Sample, Interview Protocol, and Data Analysis

This article stems from a larger study that explored five international secondary school students' experiences studying abroad in Canada and six secondary school teachers' observed experiences of this student population. The study revealed major issues for two of the five student participants who had direct experiences with international student services like recruitment agencies and homestay services, alongside teacher participants' concerns and experiences with international students and their homelife. Through this exploration, a major theme regarding the profitability of international students and issues with the unregulated and exploitative international student services like recruitment agencies and homestay companies were identified. The study adopted a qualitative approach, employing phenomenology to understand the lived experiences of international secondary school students and prioritized their perspectives to garner detailed and rich data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the open-ended interview protocol, the research questions explored for this article were: How regulated are international student services in Canada? What are the described experiences and observations of recruitment agencies or homestay companies? Due to research restrictions implemented because of the pandemic, all interviews with student and teacher participants were conducted online through Zoom, a communications platform.

The international secondary school students were recruited from Immigrant Youth Centre (IYC), which was created by the Centre for Immigrant and Community Services (CICS) which is part of Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada. Student participants ranged from ages 16 to 18 and have studied in Canada as an international student for six years or less. The teacher participants were recruited through the technique of snowball sampling, with the researcher contacting colleagues on public school boards that had experiences that aligned with the explored phenomenon. The teaching experiences of these teacher participants range from three years to twenty years on their respective school boards. All student participants home countries were from China, and all student and teacher participant schools were in Toronto and the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) with participation being voluntary. Following the return of signed informed consent forms from interested participants, interviews were conducted, audio recorded, and the data transcribed. Participants were provided a copy of

their transcribed interviews to allow them to engage in member-checking, and then data was coded and analyzed for themes to explore the research questions.

Researcher Positionality

Since the student participants that were interviewed were a vulnerable population, it is essential to outline my positionality as a researcher and reflect upon my own personal identity. I identify as a Chinese-Canadian woman and am a child of immigrants from Shanghai. While I am aware that I may not be able to identify with all the experiences of international Chinese students, my ethnic background and ability to communicate in Mandarin is a potentially important aspect to the study as matching researcher and participant race may increase the comfort levels of participants (Mizock et al., 2011). While all the interviews were conducted in English due to potential issues in the translation process, there were still moments where participants faced difficulty in expressing certain words or their experiences. During these times, students were able to communicate in their first language as I understood Mandarin and I would clarify the information they were trying to share in English. These students expressed relief that I was able to interpret their emotions or experiences correctly, which helped foster an environment where students felt comfortable and enhanced the quality of our rapport and research relationship (Mizock et al., 2011).

FINDINGS

Student Participant Experiences

Financially Motivated and Exploitative Recruitment Agencies

Though only two of the five student participants (Student 1 and Student 3) came independently through recruitment agencies and utilised homestay services, their accounts of their experiences were insightful and identified problematic gaps and issues prevalent with international student services. They noted numerous vulnerabilities that they, along with many of their other international student peers, were exposed to that had a direct impact on their overall experiences in Canada. First, one of the major issues identified within the data from Student 1 and Student 3 was their negative experiences with their respective recruitment agencies. Both highlighted how they felt these agencies were only motivated financially as the level of support and facilities advertised were not honored following payment. These recruitment agencies were also irresponsible and did not provide the necessary information or support for international students studying abroad. Student 1 emphasised how the recruitment agencies just "work for money [and] don't really take care of you […] Mostly, I feel like they're just money orientated" and as an international student, they had very limited resources and knowledge to fully understand their options. As a result, they felt "taken advantage" of because the information these agencies provide and "whatever they say we are going to believe it 'cause we have no choice or no idea what is actually going on."

Student 1 also shared how contrasting their interactions with agencies were prior and following payment, as "they were nice and eager before we made

a contract, but after they take the money it was so different, it feels like they are just not responsible at all." Student 1 also revealed that it was not just limited to an initial fixed cost for the recruitment agency services, but ongoing support was fragmented and came at additional costs for students. For example, Student 1 shared that recruitment agencies did not make it clear the necessity of a guardian as they were a minor studying abroad in Canada. Despite being legally required to have a guardian, if Student 1 needed guardian signatures for forms or to request their guardian to attend school meetings, they would be forced to pay for these services on a per use basis. They stated that:

> My Guardian was definitely not helpful at all because I don't even know who it is. I'm not sure who is my guardian and I have never met my guardian because it's through school and I have to contact the school to sign my forms and communicate with them for everything. I didn't realise that you have a separate guardian that is not your host family […] If I needed meetings I would have to pay like $100 for it. The agency literally has the price for it and I don't even know if that is legal […] I just have the feeling that the agency is taking advantage of us students, it was really not acceptable […] Even if I wanted to ask my guardian to sign some sort of form, I could not do it too much. I think five signatures were free but after that I would have to pay my guardian to sign these forms […]

Student 1 expressed how exploited they felt, as they had no option but to accept these conditions as they did not have the ability to change recruitment agencies. Furthermore, they discussed that despite unfair and exploitative conditions, they were never able to take action because they, along with other international students, were unsure of what was considered legal within Canadian standards, what their rights were as international students, or fears. Student 1 stated:

> We are really a minority. We don't have any support and the laws are very different for us so we are not certain if that is right or that is wrong. This is not our home country and a lot of people who come here don't want to be kicked out of the country or be sent back home so we could not really speak up about stuff. We would be angry about some sort of people or things that happened to you but we just wouldn't know if it is legit or not.

Student 3's experiences with their recruitment agency shared similarities, as they also mentioned how financially motivated their agency was and how little support was provided throughout their process. They reflected that while the recruitment agency itself might be acceptable, the recruitment agent that worked with them had numerous issues and did not take any responsibility in providing support. Student 3 stated "I just feel they are really focused on trying to get your money and then leave and don't help us a lot after." Student 3 also mentioned how different the level of support and service was experienced prior and following contract signing and payment. They stated that prior to payment many of the recruitment agencies advertised the numerous supports that students will have, but "after going to Canada it's nothing. If I really want to ask them questions, they may answer me, but because I've already paid the money, I can feel they don't

care you know?". They reflected how inaccurate the advertisements were and that the "ads just too aggressive. They're not right, they are not that ideal."

Problematic Homestay Services and Inconsistent Guardian Support

In regard to homestay services, Student 1 expressed confusion as to what the role of the host family was in comparison to a guardian, as they stated there were "a lot of third parties involved and makes it very complicated." Though Student 1 had a host family assigned to them through the agency, they shared a difficult circumstance they faced where they needed medical help and was met with a complex and uncooperative process. When they requested to see a doctor, it felt that neither their guardian, host family, nor recruitment agency was taking any responsibility for their needs. Through this process, Student 1 learned that their host family was unable to take them to receive medical assistance as they were not their guardian. As such, their host family had to email the school, then the insurance company to request for this medical assistance. At the same time, Student 1 had to "contact my guardian at the same time so it was frustrating when it takes so long to actually figure out what to do and what help I can get." Student 1 expressed how there was a significant lack of responsibility from all parties, and that "this is definitely not my responsibilities and I don't feel good and I did not know what is happening […] I have to do all the things myself so this was really frustrating so I wish that could improve."

Student 1 also revealed that there was no guarantee for the quality of the host family that international students are assigned with, and that they were warned by recruitment agencies prior to studying abroad about the potential inconsistencies of quality. They explained that the agency "would tell you it depends what kind of host family you match with […] I just didn't know like how mean [my host family] were going to be or how nice they would be." Student 1 stated that the recruitment agencies prepared them with these potential homestay experiences by being "really clear about it, they said there might be really bad host families. They were super straight forward that it's just your fortune and depends which family you will be assigned to," which indicates that many recruitment agencies were aware of the inconsistent standard of quality between host families and lack of monitoring involved in this process. Despite these warnings, Student 1 expressed that they still wanted to live with a host family because they did not want to live on their own and wanted a host family to take care of them and "it's supposed to feel like a family […] But it's not always like that, you can't expect a lot." Despite the label of 'family,' Student 1 stated they did not receive a level of comfort or support they expected from these services and that ultimately, "I think it's just a job for them."

While the host family that Student 1 stayed with was nice, they experienced confusion and a lack of clarity regarding the exact role their host family served for them, and what standard of quality and care they are supposed to meet. Student 1 also explained that their host was also a teacher at the school they were attending, and when they attempted to discuss their home experiences with their friends, the principal explicitly told them that they were not allowed to discuss any details as "this is dangerous to your host family." As a result, they

expressed confusion regarding "what the rules are about this" and wished that agencies would have informed them prior. This experience highlights the lack of organisation, and guidelines or information that international students are provided with regarding host family matters, and how problematic this could potentially be as it appears that international students are restricted in sharing their home life and experiences with their peers and friends. As a result, this could be a deterrent for international students to not share their real concerns, issues, and potential circumstances of mistreatment or abuse due to fears of breaking the "rules" that were placed upon them.

Student 3 had similar experiences regarding the level of care and support they received from their homestay experience, as the support from their host was inconsistent and unstable. Student 3 explained that when they first arrived, the host was very kind and did many things to help them familiarise herself with Canada, but in reality, it was not truly this positive experience. Rather, after some time the host began to "show their real face" and they were "not that kind, not that supportive. Sometimes she is maybe emotional, really emotional. Like, when she is happy she is kind to everybody but when she is not happy she is rude, impolite, and really hurtful to everybody."

Student 3 explained that their host would often make negative and "hateful" comparisons of them with their own children or other host family students, often talked about hosting costs, and made many promises that they would never fulfill. When asked about the possibility of changing host families, they expressed that there were no guarantees "to find another better host." Additionally, because their host family location was in a good area and that the costs for the service was not as expensive as other services, their informed them to "just deal with the relationships […]". They explained "I can't really afford the risk because I can't check if they are actually really good before I go there. If I change and they are not really good or worse, I can't afford to keep changing." It is apparent that international students were aware of the lack of consistency and quality standards amongst host families and have come to just accept below average support and services out of fear of the chances of receiving 'worse' treatment elsewhere.

Teacher Participant Experiences

Profitability of International Student Recruitment

All teacher participants highlighted the profitability of recruiting international students, as international students are often viewed and valued as "cash cows" from education systems across all levels and expressed concerns with the unregulated system of international education. While some teachers shared how there has been explicit pressure from school meetings to recruit international students and "talks about the money" (Teacher 4), another teacher revealed the exploitative methods they discovered their school undertook to increase international student numbers that made them question the ethics of schools. Teacher 3 discussed that their school was labelling students who were not English Language Learners (ELL), also known as English as a Second Language (ESL),

as such if one or more of their parents or guardians were not proficient in English. Through this discovery, they learned that:

> The school gets more money because they're labeled as ESL is what I'm hearing […] This is my understanding, that it doesn't impact the student because they've been functioning as is and it came as a shock to them. For example, for the OSSLT [Ontario Secondary Student Literacy Test], when they were contacted regarding extra time. So, I guess it benefits them rather than hinders them. But for the school, [it] would be, like budgeting, because it's saying, hey, I have 200 students who are immigrants or ESL, they get money for it. This was so shocking to me to see, and I just wonder if this is legal?

Teacher 1 also questioned the recruitment process involved in their school and school board, as they identified that there were often gaps and disconnect in the information international students possessed. They stated, "It would be interesting to find out more about the recruitment process and what they're saying to these students in China […]" as many students often arrive surprised by aspects like having to do certain assessments or come with the assumption that things would be easier in Canada.

Homestay and Guardianship Issues and Lack of Support

Furthermore, when discussing the legitimacy of international student services, Teacher 1 noted that when contacting a guardian for an international student listed in the system, they started to "realize that this one guardian is responsible for a million kids. And they don't live with them obviously." Teacher 1 shared an incident when they attempted to contact a guardian regarding a student of theirs and they had immense difficulty in even remembering the student despite them telling "the name of the student I was calling about so many times […] In the end they told me they would call me back once they find more information […]". Noting this lack of responsibility, Teacher 1 stated that it was apparent "this was just a job that they do during the workday. I just don't get how they set these kids up with these kinds of services where they clearly don't get the right or enough support from." This teacher also revealed how predatory these homestay services can be, as they recalled one incident where the principal of their school had to "physically go to a house to find a student that hasn't come to school for God knows how long and when [they] got there it was really just like a group home." These students were neglected and were left to fend for themselves as "some kind of company came in and perhaps stocked the fridge, maybe came and did cleaning, and then left these teens to themselves to take care of each other."

Teacher 2 also shared an experience with one of their students who utilised guardian and homestay services and was facing a conflict with their guardian. They revealed that this student's guardian made it clear that "once [they] turned 18 the guardian wanted nothing to do with [them]." This was strange to Teacher 2 as this student was "wonderful" and never badly behaved, so it was surprising for them to hear that the guardian declared they were "not communicating with the school when this student turns 18. It was clear [they] didn't want anything to do with this student anymore." These instances

demonstrate the lack of genuine care and responsibility that these guardians possess towards their assigned international students. Learning about these students' experiences is despairing as many of these youth who come independently as minors often have little to no other adult figures to rely on, and their guardians "should be another form of support" (Student 1), but instead, are often unreliable or even strangers in these youths' lives.

Teacher 4 also shared that as teachers, "we don't really get that much information" and as a result it made things difficult when faced with emergency or medical situations. They shared an experience with one of their students who was ill and had to go to the hospital, but the school could not get a hold of their parents. Despite parents contacting them the next day, medical decisions were made, and the guardian was responsible for this. Despite international students' safety being legally guaranteed through the homestays and guardianships assigned to them, Teacher 4 expressed that "I don't really get the sense that these students really feel safe or that there is someone they can really turn to." Teacher 3 also noted that many Chinese international students tend to not share their struggles at home, due to the varying circumstances involving homestays and guardianships, as many were often not living with their parents. As such, when attempting to talk to students about their home conditions or circumstances, student will "often not say much about it. I think they feel a little embarrassed or don't know what to say […]".

The quality of care was also an issue that Teacher 6 discussed. Despite not having any direct personal experience communicating with Chinese international students' homestay hosts or guardians, Teacher 6 still expressed concerns for Chinese international youth that use these services. They explained that based on their own perception and what they heard from their teacher colleagues, it is undeniable that parents are generally more concerned about their own children. When international students are staying with a host family, and "you need to contact them about issues going on with the student, or the student needs more support at school or home […] I'm not sure if they will truly be able to get it from their host families." Teacher 6 highlighted that for many of these international students, they often do not have as many forms of support that many domestic students may typically have. For example, they may not receive peer support if they are newly arrived students and have yet to foster friendships, or if there are language barriers this might be another obstacle to receive support from adults. This led to Teacher 6 expressing concern that if students "don't have support at home either, then where are they getting support from? What do you do?".

This lack of support and quality of care from host families was directly addressed by Teacher 4, who explained that in many cases the homestay hosts often do not get along with students. Even though "these people are supposed to be taking care of them, but many don't actually really care or have an interest in their education, so students end up late for school or skip classes." Teacher 4 went on to share that not only negatively impacted students' educational outcomes, but many of their other basic needs were not being met either as a result. Teacher 4 shared that "some students just don't look like they're being taken care of. Even

just simple hygiene where their clothes are dirty, or they don't seem like they're in good spirits or happy" which will ultimately impact their sense of belonging and ability to succeed in their host countries.

DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The data from both student and teacher participants highlight the various gaps within international education systems that leave students vulnerable and open to exploitation.

The Government of Canada amended the Immigration and Refugee Act in 2011 declaring that only authorized representatives possessing the required skills and credentials were allowed to charge their services to help with immigration and refugee applications, including educational agents (Government of Canada, 2011). However, there remains numerous exploitative agencies and homestay services that still manage to slip between the cracks, bringing into the question the vague standards used to determine what qualifies as an "authorized representative" (para. 3) and what exact skills and training are required to be an educational agent and be an established recruitment agency. The study revealed numerous circumstances where recruitment agencies or homestay services have provided misleading or false information and services that breach the interest of students.

As Marginson (2012) discussed, if there is no minimum measure outlined regarding the quality of services for international students to use as a gauge, the vague or ambiguous wording of this Act can leave international students vulnerable, as they are less familiar with the standards and conventions of the host country's service and more at risk of receiving less than they are entitled to. Furthermore, in this context international students are treated as consumers who "will regulate standards by making market choices," (Marginson, 2012, p. 503). However, international students who are overseas, and who have very little connection to the host country, rely solely on recruitment agencies, and may not have the opportunity to evaluate the quality of these services prior to purchase. As such, there needs to be modifications implemented within school boards and on a federal level to provide more concrete protections for international students, rather than just providing unenforced guidelines that are "silent in many crucial areas, such as student safety, and freedom from discrimination" (p. 504).

Schoolboard Responsibility

Though numerous school boards mention specific homestay services students can contact on their brochures, they ultimately declare that they do not take responsibility in arranging homestay services or guardianships for international students (Peel District School Board, 2020; Toronto District School Board, n.d.; York Region District School Board, n.d.). Despite this, there still needs to be a level of accountability that school boards put forth in protecting these vulnerable youth, as a standard level of monitoring and regulations should be implemented within each school to support and protect their international student populations, especially those who come independently as minors to Canada. For example, teacher participants experiences revealed how one guardian was responsible for numerous international students, which is indicative of potential neglect or lack of

accountability these guardians may have in supporting these students properly. Other circumstances have highlighted how teachers have noted international students with host families are not being provided a level of high-quality care.

As educators, there is a duty to report and a "responsibility to protect children and youth from harm" (Ontario College of Teachers, 2018, p. 1), and to report suspected child abuse. Though this is required for children aged 16 and under, educators can still conduct a report if they suspect a child who is 16 or 17 in need of protection under reasonable grounds. In this act, neglect, caregiver absence and separation, and caregiver incapacity all fall under grounds of protection alongside various forms of physical and emotional abuse. Based on the data, it appears that there is a potential for international students' conditions to be overlooked, under-reported, or conditions minimized (Chen et al., 2020). Administration needs to take responsibility in bringing awareness for teachers that international student populations included under their duty to report, and what potential unique circumstances of neglect and abuse are common for these youth who are under the care of recruitment agencies, guardianships, and homestay services, especially with an added layer of language and cultural barriers. As ISS highlights, many concerns regarding the lack of regulation and responsibility often occur in the "informal and private domains" (Marginson et al., 2010, p. 76) and these students deserve equal respect, worth, and protection that is afforded to their domestic counterparts in all aspects of life.

Furthermore, while it is not viable for school boards to regulate every international student recruitment agency or homestay service, school boards can implement regular monitoring and assessment of their internal recruitment agents that are associated with their board. Based on interview data and my own research process, many school boards often have internal recruitment agents and representatives. School boards are encouraged to implement monitoring measurements and levels of management to ensure that their agents are providing truthful information about their school boards, maintain up to date knowledge about their schools, identify areas where there are issues or need amendments within their services, and to recognize where inappropriate or exploitative practices are being used within their internal recruitment (Nikula, 2022; Nikula & Kivistö, 2020; Nikula & Kivistö, 2018).

Federal Government Regulations

On a federal level, the international student market is saturated with potentially low regulation, and it can be difficult for the Government of Ontario to assess every recruitment agency and homestay service. However, there are realistic and achievable measures that can be implemented within international education to protect the rights of international youth, the first being enforced transparency from international student agencies and services. During the research process, it became clear that information regarding recruitment agencies and homestay services were heavily guarded and only accessible once individuals commit to the provided service. For example, in my own efforts to attempt to investigate the processes that recruitment agencies undergo within school boards, there was little documentation available online and I was unable to obtain information from recruitment agency

representatives unless I was approved for external research with the associated school board. In another circumstance, for homestay services that were advertised on school board international education brochures, I was unable to obtain information from the organization regarding the homestay regulations and procedures unless I was able to pass the interviews to become a host for international students. The unwillingness and protective nature of responses, alongside the lack of available information online, brings into question potential conflicts of interests from school boards. It also draws attention to how easily international students can be exploited as they potentially do not have a method to proactively validate these services.

Marginson et al. (2010) discussed how there is very little international students can do to "pressure providers" (p. 503) to improve the standards of their services, as often times many students' families have already been charged exorbitant prices for these services, and as Student 1 and Student 3 highlighted there are "no guarantees" to find a better service if one tried to change. There needs to be a required standard on a federal level implemented for international student services to be transparent on their websites regarding full processes, procedures, and potential fees that are conducted in their organizations. For example, Student 1 shared they were not informed prior to their agency commitment that there were additional fees like being charged for guardian signatures, which is an exploitative practice that needs to be regulated. Furthermore, information regarding the difference between the role of guardianship in comparison to host family needs to be provided clearly, alongside concrete steps outlined for special circumstances, such as medical emergencies, to avoid similar issues and barriers that Student 1 faced. If recruitment agencies and homestay services are forced to provide in-depth information and outline their exact practices, there could be less misrepresentation or deliberately misleading information advertised to students, as there is information and clear expectations and standards of practices and responsibilities that students can track and refer to. Alongside this, these international student services should be required to outline the rights and protections that international youth are entitled to on their websites. As both literature and the study revealed, many students are unaware of the rights they possess as international students within their host country, with many issues going unaddressed due to fears of being sent home (Popadiuk, 2009; Lee, 2015; Wu, 2019). As Student 1 stated, many international students were unaware of what circumstances and conditions were ethical and legal, with many possessing fears of being "kicked out of the country" which resulted in a reluctance to "speak up about stuff […] we don't have anyone to reach out for."

The current neoliberal framework of international education where students are seen as consumers produces very little interaction between the government and students. Instead, "[r]esponsibility is devolved from government to educational provider" (Marginson et al., 2010, p. 66), where the responsibility of happiness and security of the student is founded with the provider through this consumption relationship, leaving implications for the human security of these youth. Though recruitment agencies have the responsibility to ensure that they are providing adequate services for international students, the Government of Ontario needs to

also have a level of accountability in encouraging school boards to regulate their internal agents and
services to mitigate systemic gaps and noncompliance. The Government of Ontario needs to expand the scope of international student security by implementing a reporting system that provides vulnerable international students a voice to make formal reports to the Government of Ontario regarding any mistreatment, misconduct, or neglect of duties and agreed services for the international education service they are utilizing on reasonable grounds. The Government of Ontario can decide what measure of investigation and corrective action they want to conduct, if any, on an individual case by case. This reporting system will allow them to have the necessary data that can assist in identifying any notable trends or patterns of concern or issue from international youth. This will also allow international students to have increased agency, as they will have access to a direct method of connecting with the Government of Ontario to raise concerns, spread awareness, and report issues as many international youths are unaware of what supports and services they can access for help.

Feedback and self-reported issues from international students can help identify problems with recruitment agencies and agents, the quality of service provided, transparency, and financial exchanges and charges conducted (Nikula & Kivistö, 2020). One aspect of this reporting system that does need to be considered is potential liability with language barriers, as there may be a potential for international students who possess limited English proficiency to struggle to fully understand the questions on the reporting form or are unable to communicate their issues or experiences across effectively. As such, there could be options available where forms are translated in various languages that will allow international students to provide the most accurate information as possible and be reviewed by representatives that are proficient in the language. This resource is especially important for international students who feel that they have experiences that are difficult to disclose to proximate individuals, if they are unsure there are conflicts of interest between their schools and agencies, or for students who feel they "don't have anyone to reach out for" (Student 1).

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study has a small sample size and does not claim to be representative of the general international student population. However, the experiences of the two Chinese international students in this study provide valuable insights and help identify issues and policy gaps. This study ultimately contributes to the limited existing literature on this population, providing a better understanding of the exploitative international student services international youth potentially face in Canada, and revealing the lack of accountability and regulation from school boards and the government (Kuo & Roysircar, 2004; Popadiuk, 2009; Popadiuk & Marshall, 2011). This research highlights discrepancies that may be present within general international support structures, institutions, and organizations to ensure that these vulnerable populations receive the protection and support they deserve during their studies in Canada. There needs to be further work on implementing a standardized system on a federal level for international student services that

provides transparency of all services, better regulated monitoring of internal recruitment agents within school boards, and improved accountability within schools to better protect these vulnerable youth.

Note

Appendices for this article can be found on the JIS website at https://www.ojed.org/index.php/jis

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Author bio

HELEN LIU, MEd, is a doctoral candidate in the Faculty of Education at York University and a teacher on the York Region District School Board (YRDSB). Her research interests include media literacy education, social justice, and the exploration of international student experiences in the context of critical race theory and equity issues. Email: hliu566@gmail.com