305

Compassion Without Structure: The Rise of Private Tutoring Services Among Chinese International Students in Canada

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

Despite widespread narratives of compassion and inclusion, international students in Canada often face structural gaps in academic and social support. This paper focuses on Chinese international students and their growing reliance on co-national private tutoring services to navigate unfamiliar academic systems. While these services offer cultural familiarity and guidance, they also expose students to academic integrity risks. Using Schlossberg's transition theory and organizational behaviour concepts, the paper explores how informal "communities of survival" emerge when institutional supports are inadequate. It argues that universities' rhetoric of compassion often masks a withdrawal of responsibility, leaving students to resolve structural inequities on their own. This case challenges assumptions about inclusion and raises questions about the ethical responsibilities of higher education institutions, particularly as internationalization continues to serve institutional financial interests. By highlighting this tension, the paper contributes to ongoing debates about equity, integrity, and belonging in international student support frameworks.

Full paper

Introduction

Despite narratives of compassion and inclusion in Canadian higher education, significant structural gaps persist in support systems for international students. In response, informal, co-national private tutoring services (PTS) have emerged as alternatives for Chinese international students seeking academic and social support. While these services offer culturally familiar guidance, they expose students to substantial risks of academic misconduct (Antoneshyn, 2020; MacLeod & Eaton, 2020). Using Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory and Ahmed's (2012) institutional critique, this paper explores how

institutions' compassionate discourse masks underlying structural deficiencies, shifting responsibility to students and informal networks.

Research Objectives

This paper critically examines the paradox between universities' stated values of compassion and the lived realities of international students. Objectives include:

- Investigating institutional gaps prompting reliance on PTS.
- Exploring the consequences for academic integrity.
- Analyzing how institutional practices diverge from their compassionate narratives.

Theoretical Framework

Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory offers a framework to understand the transitional stress students experience due to inadequate institutional support. According to Schlossberg, successful adaptation requires resources to outweigh deficits during transitions. Conversely, Ahmed's (2012) critique of performative diversity emphasizes that institutions frequently engage in symbolic compliance without addressing systemic inequities, creating structural barriers for marginalized groups, including international students.

Literature Context

International students experience significant transitional challenges, including language barriers, academic adjustment, and acculturation stress (Li et al., 2016; Zhang & Beck, 2014). Canadian universities, driven by neoliberal imperatives and commodification of international education, often inadequately address these transitional needs, emphasizing recruitment over comprehensive student support (MacLeod & Eaton, 2020; Tran, 2017). Consequently, Chinese international students increasingly depend on private tutoring services (PTS), perceived as culturally familiar support networks (Yung, 2020; Zheng et al., 2020). However, reliance on PTS also raises critical concerns regarding academic integrity (Antoneshyn, 2020; U of T News Team, 2022).

Analysis and Discussion

Chinese international students report isolation and cultural dissonance, exacerbating transitional difficulties (Li et al., 2016; Zhang & Beck, 2014). Co-national private tutoring services (PTS), such as Easy EDU, temporarily mitigate these stresses by offering culturally familiar academic content and peer support in Mandarin (Antoneshyn, 2020; Burns, 2022; Zhang & Beck, 2014). However, these services deepen students' dependency on informal rather than formal institutional support, raising serious academic integrity concerns.

Institutional responses underscore the severity of this structural failure. For instance, the University of Toronto initiated legal action against Easy EDU for unauthorized reproduction and sale of course materials, explicitly criticizing its exploitative business model targeting international students' anxieties (Burns, 2022; U of T News Team, 2022). These legal measures, though reactive, highlight universities' recognition of systemic vulnerabilities created by institutional neglect.

Disciplinary cases further illustrate PTS-related risks. A recent tribunal case resulted in severe penalties, including a suspension exceeding two years, for an international student who attended an Easy EDU session during an exam period (University of Toronto v. H. Z., 2023). The tribunal emphasized that involvement with commercial tutoring services aggravated penalties due to deliberate circumvention of institutional structures. Similarly, the University of Alberta charged 40 students with academic misconduct linked to Ez4EDU, accused of directly providing assignment solutions under the guise of tutoring (Antoneshyn, 2020). These cases show how reliance on informal tutoring rooted in institutional inadequacies endangers students academically and jeopardizes their immigration status.

Additionally, investigative reporting at U of T revealed increased academic misconduct during online learning, highlighting systemic weaknesses in detecting and deterring dishonesty (Anielska & Anteblian, 2021). This context reinforces that reliance on commercial tutoring reflects deeper structural gaps in university support, not merely student misconduct.

Ahmed's (2012) framework further elucidates this paradox. Institutions publicly emphasize compassion and inclusion, yet their structural practices often fail to support these values effectively. Consequently, institutional responsibility for academic and social integration shifts implicitly onto students, who must navigate unfamiliar academic cultures without adequate institutional guidance. The proliferation of co-national PTS thus emerges not as an empowering choice but as a survival strategy amid institutional neglect.

Significance and Contribution

This analysis critically advances understanding of neoliberal influences on Canadian higher education, specifically highlighting unintended negative outcomes for international students. By explicitly linking recent institutional actions, disciplinary cases, and media investigations, this research emphasizes the urgent need for proactive, culturally-sensitive institutional reforms that address international students' genuine academic and social support needs, realigning institutional practices with compassionate discourse.

Conclusion

Institutional narratives of compassion without corresponding structural support compel international students toward informal, high-risk coping strategies. To fulfill genuine compassionate commitments, Canadian universities must critically restructure their support frameworks, providing accessible, culturally informed, and academically rigorous resources that authentically integrate and protect international students.