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A home away from home: building an organic online support community for Chinese students using WeChat

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Abstract

Traditional university support structures have generally been predicated on a 'one size fits all' approach that stresses a mechanistic, bureaucratic approach. Support is transactional in nature with students accessing it only when needed. Support focuses on both individual tutorial and centralised mechanisms which have proved effective for only some students. This paper proposes an organic student support system that is based around five features: agility in the environment, a tutor-student partnership, informal two-way communication, a student-led community, the inclusion of a knowledge-hub. The student support system in this article is based around Chinese students at a large UK university who felt disenfranchised by the current support mechanisms, so an alternative model was set up using the group-based instant-messaging social media platform, WeChat. The findings of surveys and interviews with Chinese students demonstrated that the featured organic student support system proved extremely successful and is something that could be replicated with other groups of students in the future in UK higher education.

Keywords: organic; student support system; community; WeChat.

Introduction

In April 2020, the Chinese government offered all Chinese students in the UK a package to help combat the threat of Covid-19. In this package, masks, washing gel and medicine were

all provided free of charge. At one large university in the UK, over 1200 students registered for the package, a number that illustrated the scale of the problem of displaced students. These students were stranded far from home and with the switch to remote studying becoming a necessity, they were without many of their support networks that they had come to rely on.

Although the Covid-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for the introduction of the organic support network described in this article, it was not the sole, or indeed even the main reason for its existence. Whilst it can be argued that university support for students has evolved significantly since the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act (Department of Education, 1992), with HEIs now offering a multitude of services for their students (including well-being advice, help with visas, policies, academic support and financial advice), this tends to operate on a 'one size fits all' basis (Huang and Turner, 2018). If students need support, it is undoubtedly the case that it is available, but it can be difficult to navigate through the maze of mechanisms, especially given the general nature of much that is available (Liu et al., 2017). Communication is often carried out in a variety of ways including use of a virtual learning environment, email, social media, the student's union, the international office and class representatives. This means that students can become confused and, if information is not consistent, receive contradictory messages (Lane et al., 2019). Communication is often perceived to be slow and lacking in any human relationship as the size of universities means that it is rare for students to be allocated one person for support (Lane et al., 2019). Requests for information or support become a transactional relationship rather than a human one.

These difficulties are exacerbated for international students who have to navigate an educational system that is different to the one that they are used to; they are also likely to have different needs to their UK counterparts as their frames of reference are rooted in their home country. Whilst some nationalities are comparatively well represented in UK universities, for other students there are likely to be very few students from their home country where they are studying which can increase the loneliness felt. Chinese students, as the biggest proportion of the international students, expressed their anxiety that they were not able to go to the campus as usual and worried that there was limited communication with peers and lecturers, and felt extremely concerned about their study and life. They stressed

their desire for an internet-based support network with first-hand information and instant replies from academics and administration.

This article will explore how the traditional, mechanistic student support networks at one university have been replaced by an organic network which was originally targeted at Chinese students but can be made applicable for any group of students.

Background and literature review

Changing HE landscape

There has been a significant change in the UK higher education landscape since the passing of the Further and Higher Education Act (1992). This act led to an increase in the number of students attending university but also a change in the demographic makeup of the cohort. As an illustration of this, in 1994, 271,000 UCAS applications were accepted compared to 533,000 in 2018 (Bolton, 2020). In short ‘we have gone from a higher education system that serves only a narrow band of people, to a broader, more diverse and more open system’ (BIS, 2016, p.7). Whilst in many ways these changes have been welcomed as broadening education to include more people, it also created challenges for establishments whose support networks could not cope with the increased numbers and the diversity of students (Kearney, Stanley and Blackberry, 2018).

Support networks within UK universities have traditionally focused on making sure that there was someone on hand to provide academic and emotional support for students (Lusk and Fearful, 2014). This is usually done in a centralised manner that asks the student to take the lead when they need help. Support systems are advertised but as a general rule the first move needs to be made by the student, so although there is general agreement for the need to have these systems in place (Peach, 2005), their use is limited by the requirements of the student. Students have long complained about the support offered, a problem exacerbated if the student is classed as ‘non-traditional’, a point made by Nichols (2010). This is applicable to a range of different groups; Grebennikov and Skaines (2009) noted how the gender of the student affected their view but what was common to many studies was that formalised

support systems were valued less highly than support from peers (Cahill, Bowyer and Murray, 2014).

International students support

One group that struggles to access support is international students (Menzies, Baron and Zutshi, 2015) as not only are they managing the transition to university, but they are doing it without their social and cultural support structures (Andrade, 2006). The UK is a popular destination for international university study, with nearly 500,000 international students. Out of those, 120,000 are Chinese (HESA, 2020). The main reason for this is that they believe that the UK higher education learning experience could help them secure a good job in the competitive Chinese market (Li, 2013). There is a perception that the innovative, practical and personalised education undertaken in HE in the UK not only provides students with a wide range of academic knowledge, but also enhances higher-order soft skills including problem solving and critical thinking, which are required and valued by today's employers (Brooks, Waters, and Pimlott-Wilson, 2012). However, studying abroad creates great challenges for students who come from various culture backgrounds.

UK universities recognise these needs and provide students with a range of interventions to help students to adjust to the new environment (Simmons, 2013). These include support with finance, academic coaching, mental health and health services, all of which have a positive impact on student retention (Nichols, 2010). Universities have also started to use different social media sites and apps as a complementary strategy to support students in their academic and personal life (Gomes et al., 2014). This support tends to be better received and viewed as more convenient than traditional face-to-face support by students who have grown up surrounded by technology (Prensky, 2010).

The use of social media is often seen as a key method of supporting students who often use it as a means to build and develop a social network in the host country (Hjorth, 2011). Research shows that social media can be used as a successful academic tool to build a community and create a sense of belonging to ease international students' own anxiety (Ryan, Magro and Sharp, 2011). Students, especially those who come from collective cultures where group

support is viewed as more important than individual personalised support, need a sense of community. However, whether existing social media support services are suitable for these needs is questionable (Roberts and Dunworth, 2012).

Chinese students are used to high-context communication (Jaeger and Buz, 2018), which is used not only to exchange information, but also for relationship development. Students prefer to receive procedural information and regulation from unofficial and personal channels such as private messages or a social media platform. In contrast UK institutions generally implement low-context communications (Jaeger and Buz, 2018) which focus on the accuracy of the information, and which are often delivered in the written format (e.g., the course handbook). The differences between these two communication systems generates great obstacles for Chinese students (Scudamore, 2013). Such situations can get worse when the organisation is not aware of cultural differences and uses inappropriate communication strategies. McWhorter (2014) suggests that the media and context used is key to the decoding of the message: for example, Chinese students' lesser emphasis on text and the greater emphasis on visual clues (known on WeChat as 'stickers') to ascertain emotional responses to events (Zhou, Hentschel and Kumar, 2017) is something which is not generally used in the UK.

Traditional mechanistic support systems

To address the challenges described above, various support systems are put in place in UK higher education, most of which might be described as mechanistic in nature (Lindsay, Downs and Dunn, 2003). The traditional support networks within most universities have revolved around a personal tutoring system which helps to build the resilience of students (Brewer et al., 2019). Within the university that is the subject of this paper, this was known as the Academic Personal Tutoring system (APT). On arrival, students were allocated a tutor who was a student's first point of contact for all academic matters. Academic tutors are the most popular support service used by the student, and this is based on the perception that academic tutors are more approachable, and students value the informal nature of their relationship with the academic tutor (Walsh, Larsen and Parry, 2009). For pastoral issues, the APT would signpost the relevant professional service. Group sessions of around 30 were

used which led to a situation where students would find it difficult to share concerns. The APT did not necessarily teach the students so there was no relationship built between them. Attendance at these sessions was low and the perception was that they added little to the student experience. APTs often had little knowledge beyond academic matters and staff often felt undervalued and lacking in confidence with less training and time to respond to complex problems beyond the academic (Cindy and Johnson, 2019). It is worth noting that students sought pastoral support from friends on their course and family members more frequently than the professional support service on campus (Walsh, Larsen and Parry, 2009). All support services were used less than expected irrespective of age or other demographic, as students felt less comfortable with the formal nature of interaction (Walsh, Larsen and Parry, 2009).

Within this university, these issues were addressed by the introduction of a coaching system with the idea of working in partnership with students. Coaches (who were supposed to be academic members of staff noted for their expertise in support) were available for students to discuss issues with and to offer support where necessary. Whilst this system was designed to build on the idea that students tend to ask academics they trust for support (Wolstencroft, Calver and Hudson, 2019), the reality was that due to the size of most universities, students struggled to see the same person and often had to wait before support was available. The lack of personal relationships and the lag in support meant that our original 1200 students were not supported as well as they could be, with questions going unanswered and their anxiety building up.

Organic support systems

As we have seen, traditional support networks are not always an appropriate way of ensuring that the needs of international students are met. In part this is because what is used tends to be mechanistic in nature and lacks any agility (Burns and Stalker, 1961). While they might work for some students, for others, and especially those who are some distance away from home, an alternative approach is needed which is more flexible. This calls for a more organic system (Burns and Stalker, 1961) which can be far more receptive to the needs of those who need support and react to events (Gerster, Dremel and Kelker, 2019). An organic based structure and culture can provide a competitive advantage to the organisation (Wei, Samiee

and Lee, 2013) as well as being more agile in terms of its form and its communication approaches.

WeChat support group

The support group that is the focus of this paper was set up in March 2020 with eight members on the Chinese social media platform, WeChat. WeChat is an instant-messaging application, allowing users to send words, emojis and pictures and to make audio/video calls. Users can also form a WeChat group with a maximum 500 members. The popularity of WeChat in China and its features, including a translation function and search engine, made it the ideal choice to support Chinese students remotely. Numbers grew rapidly due to 'word of mouth' and after four weeks over 350 members were part of the network. Students were drawn to the group by the chance to speak their home language as well as the opportunity to interact directly with academics (at the time of writing there are six academics and one senior leader in the group) and get instant answers. At the start of the group, academics stimulated debate and discussion by including discussions regarding life in the UK, questions about concepts discussed on students' courses, implication of new policies and even the best place to purchase eggs in the city during a time of scarcity. In addition to this, traditional Chinese customs such as giving out 'lucky bags' were used, and these proved popular amongst students with students feeling reassured by them and understanding the cultural significance.

With the intention being to develop a harmonious and supporting community on the WeChat group, from the start a number of rules were stressed:

- No discussion of politics.
- No abusive or bad language.
- No adverts.

Anyone who broke these rules would be removed from the group. The result was that the group operated in a supportive manner with few disagreements. At the start, academics found that they had to answer a large volume of questions, but the amount of input needed declined as the group became more established and members started helping each other.

Methodology

Data was collected in May 2020 via an online survey and online interviews. Firstly, an online questionnaire invitation was distributed to all 350 students in the WeChat group. In the survey, participants were required to indicate their perception of the usefulness of the WeChat support group, as well as their opinions on the traditional student support network. A total of 77 respondents completed all questions in the online survey, representing a response rate of 22%. In addition to the questionnaires, 23 interviews were carried out (schedule available on request) and the interview explored the initial themes in more depth. The sample selected represented a cross-section of participants in the WeChat group and included students who had returned home and those who were unable to. Each interview was conducted via Microsoft Teams and was audio recorded. Students were asked to reflect on their experiences in using the WeChat students' support group during the pandemic. The interview questions were as follows:

1. What are the differences of perceived usefulness between the traditional western supporting system and culture-specific social supporting apps?
2. How to gain a high-level sense of community?

The recordings were 15-45 mins long and transcribed using Otter.ai, an artificial intelligence-based transcription service, and both authors checked the accuracy of the transcription manually afterwards. SPSS was used to analyse the quantitative data (e.g., the descriptive statistics of the participants' demographics). A mean score was computed to evaluate the usefulness of WeChat during the pandemic. Thematic analysis (Guest, Macqueen and Namey, 2011) was used to analyse the qualitative data collected through the interview.

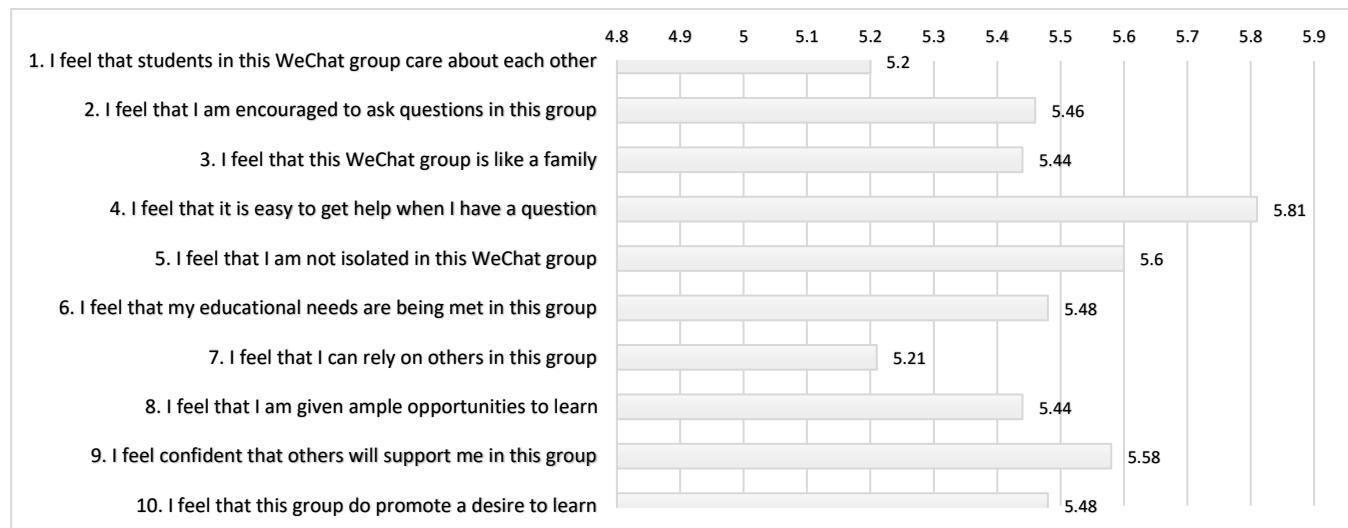
Findings and discussion

The demographic profile of the sample selected for this study showed that 32.5% of respondents identified as male (67.5% as female), whilst 92.2% were aged between 19 and

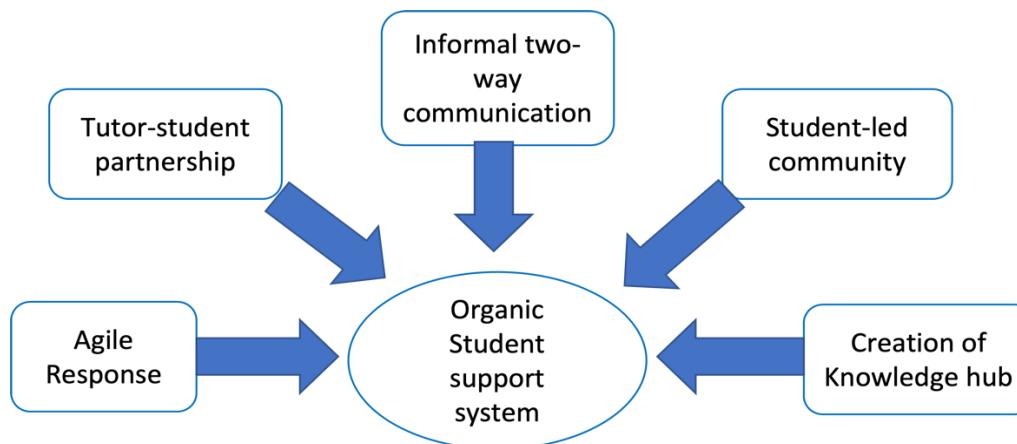
24 (7.8% were 25-30). 81.8% were final-year undergraduate students whilst 62.3% believed they were fluent in English. 24.7% of students viewed themselves as confident in digital literacy skills; 33.8% were neither confident nor not confident. 41.5% thought that they were not confident, although what is interesting is that this is very much a perception of the students and tutors viewed them as far more confident. Most did not use more traditional 'Western' forms of social media such as Facebook or Instagram.

The averaged data from the questionnaire is below; this was graded on a 7-point scale with 7 being the most positive answer.

Figure 1. Students' perception on the usefulness of the WeChat.



We have broken down the findings using thematic analysis and identified five key themes (see Figure 2) that we will investigate in detail. Each theme leads to a separate conclusion and identifies features of a successful support network for these students. All five features need to be present for the system to be viewed as an organic student support system.

Figure 2: Organic student support system.

The importance of a tutor-student partnership

The importance of a partnership was stressed by many students. This involved having direct access to academics and leaders and being able to ask questions or make suggestions. Although partnerships between the two groups is often stressed by universities, the reality is rather different (Wolstencroft, Calver and Hudson, 2019). Communication between the two groups tends to be rather stilted with poorly attended office hours and emails (where there is often a 48-hour turnaround period) being the chosen method of communication. Where other forms are present, for example staff-student consultative committees, these are classed as partnerships, however they meet infrequently and resemble a more transactional partnership unlike an online community where the partnership is more obvious, immediate and deeper.

One student put this very clearly: ‘This group will help me understand more information from the university especially as information is delivered by university lecturers, it is more official’ (Interviewee 2).

This view of WeChat as an official channel contrasted with previous attempts to support students where engagement was very low. WeChat enhanced the quality of communication by improving trust in the relationship by facilitating quick responses and a known medium. This was confirmed by another student: ‘The participation is high as everyone uses WeChat on a daily basis and this will allow us to have better communication between lecturers and students’ (Interviewee 15).

The relationship with lecturers was seen as crucial; 'you feel very close to the lecturers', as one student put it, and it also gave them access to more than one source of information: 'I can talk directly to some teachers and get an instant response, there are different teachers such as Leader A and Teacher A who can explain the messages in a different way to make it clearer' (Interviewee 6).

This contrasts with the more mechanistic tutoring or coaching systems where the focus was on one-to-one support. It allowed students to access greater psychological comfort as they were reassured by the support offered and also the fact that senior members of staff were present in the group; this reassurance confirms the work of Gomes et al. (2014). Some addressed issues to one teacher in particular which seems to confirm the importance of the relationship students have with lecturers (Wolstencroft, Calver and Hall, 2019).

The partnership element comes across strongly in the findings. Students talked about how they were supported by each other (a theme which will be explored later on) but also how they felt a connection to teachers due to the enhanced communication. One student put this succinctly: 'WeChat is highly used by Asian students so that they can receive the message instantly and it increases the connection with teachers through group communication' (Interviewee 17).

Reversing this, it was valued by teachers who could ensure messages were passed directly to students, something that is particularly important during a time of a pandemic.

We should not neglect the reverse argument with some students praising the social aspect – 'I can see many classmates who I would never know before and I can add their account as my WeChat friend and send them instant messages' (Interviewee 14) – but also understand the limitations of the mechanism: 'I do not think that this group can enhance my social network, except as a study group or study professional discussion' (Interviewee 9).

In terms of the first feature of an organic student support system, WeChat formed 'tutor-student partnership[s]', where tutor and students work as a team, based on a trusting

relationship, with the aim of solving problems and supporting the academic and pastoral needs of students.

Informal two-way communication is very important

One of the biggest attractions about using the support group was that students were able to use their native language to communicate. Returning to McWhorter (2014), it is vital that the correct media is used and by using one the students are familiar with, they felt comfortable and able to ask questions, thus creating far less anxiety. WeChat is used extensively for social messaging and the difference between it and more traditional forms of university communication are explained clearly by one respondent: 'Since I am in China, it is not easy for me to have access to Facebook and Twitter. Emails and Moodle are fine, but it is not that much convenient. It's more like a boss sending messages to employees' (Interviewee 5).

This differentiation between formal and informal channels and the coding that this entails (Jaeger and Buz, 2018) is exacerbated by the volume of communication received as mentioned by many of our respondents:

. . . students are also concerned with the overloaded email they received; therefore they won't check all the emails in detail. . . . and most of the emails we usually received are not useful emails (Interviewee 22).

This deluge of emails is something that mitigates against the success of any message that universities attempt to give when it comes to support: 'Sometimes, I received more than 30 emails a day, and I could not tell which email is more important, it takes ages to check one by one' (Interviewee 14).

Other students mentioned the culture shift needed for them in terms of making sure that they checked communications constantly, something that was already engrained in WeChat (Hjorth, 2011).

The informality of the group helps students to engage with both peers and lecturers and to feel as though they are supported (Ryan, Magro and Sharp, 2011). WeChat's translate function enables participants to express themselves rather more fully than they might be able to if limited to English. There is also a higher level of informality in a platform such as this, with stickers used to convey emotion in a more imaginative but easily identifiable way. This was illustrated by two students:

- 'It is more convenient to communicate with lecturers as you can use voice message written message or videos. Email is too complicated and sometimes the lecturers can forget to reply, on WeChat they always reply' (Interviewee 11).
- 'I would like to get some useful information about my study and sometimes I have confusions about the message, but I can ask and get a quick response in the WeChat group' (Interviewee 16).

This speed of response and informality were major attractions. Clearly it depends on the individual academic as to the speed of response, but students reported far quicker replies on WeChat. Whilst this was seen as a positive, there were a small number of dissenting voices when students were asked about the benefits of this form of communication with a minority concerned that if there were too many non-academic issues discussed, it would be difficult to filter the important information: 'For most of the Chinese students, they would repeatedly check the information from WeChat daily, but sometimes too much information or text might result in students neglect[ing] the genuinely useful information' (Interviewee 20).

In terms of the second feature of an organic student support system, WeChat facilitated 'informal two-way communication', using the right digital language to communicate with students with the aim of breaking down barriers, increasing the reach of communication, removing unnecessary hierarchical systems and enhancing both communication to students and the ability of students to ask questions.

Creation of a knowledge hub

Whilst communication from universities tend to be mechanistic in nature (Burns and Stalker, 1961), this support network is designed to create a repository of knowledge that students are able to use without having to refer to academics. If you ask any lecturer, they will say that there are a number of standard questions that are asked on a regular basis and this is replicated online. Using WeChat's search facility, you are able to look for previous answers to your question. This takes pressure away from academics and also encourages students to become self-sufficient. After a short period of time, academics only had to respond to questions which referred to areas that had not already been covered. This was mentioned by many of our respondents and is best illustrated by this final year student: 'I found the most useful point of this WeChat group is the search function. Even if the teacher could not reply instantly, if the question has been asked by other colleagues and the problems are being solved, I could benefit from their discussion' (Interviewee 12).

In effect, what was happening was that students were becoming less reliant on teachers and were becoming more independent. The knowledge discussed was not just limited to individual support but also encompassed all aspects of academic life, as can be ascertained from these quotes from two students studying in their final year:

- 'Especially during the period of writing the report, many students (including me) borrowed many academic books in the library, because of the epidemic situation they cannot be returned in time. So these teachers are also particularly enthusiastic to help us to contact the heads of relevant departments' (Interviewee 6).
- 'Tutor also shared the information on how to find a job and the companies which are looking for graduate interns, which was very helpful' (Interviewee 7).

These two examples might not fall into the traditional category of academic support, but these queries are part of a wider sense of belonging which helps students feel as though they are not alone (Lusk and Fearful, 2014).

As the group matured, other students in the group started to help. Students shared documents relating to revision notes that had been created, how to reference assignments and even how students could book flights home after the Chinese government introduced the

'Five One' policy (which meant that each Chinese airline could only fly one route, once a week to any one country. Other airlines could fly one flight a week to one city in China): 'WeChat group is good for our study because it is more efficient than emails and other support systems. If someone has questions, he can get the solutions from WeChat group quickly because not only professors, but also colleagues would answer him' (Interviewee 11).

This feeling of belonging and the sense of community is explored later but what it helped to contribute is a feeling that there was a true two-way communication system in place with everyone helping each other: 'I think the WeChat group chat is very useful. It can improve the efficiency of information communication and correct mistakes. Students and teachers can discuss and learn effectively. Students can help each other' (Interviewee 5).

It also helped foster the spirit of everyone working together:

Using email to contact my lecturer, my problem can be solved, but the answer could not be shared with the other students. Within the WeChat group, I realised a lot of students have the same questions, and the lecture[r] answered the questions, I don't need to ask again. (Interviewee 22).

Some students shared their experiences on the quarantine process in China, and reminded the rest of the students on what to prepare when they are going back home, again helping build a hub of knowledge.

In terms of the third feature of an organic student support system, WeChat enables 'creation of a knowledge hub' and creates a bank of knowledge that students can browse to answer their questions without having to refer to any other sources.

Agile response

What has become clear is the importance of a support system that is organic and also flexible enough to deal with the needs of a particular group. A feature of an organic structure is that it is reactive to both its external environment and the demands of members. This contrasts with

the traditional university support systems which tend to be static in nature and responsiveness is limited by regulations and the scale of modern universities. This means that the ‘one size fits all’ structures might well be useful for some but organic structures are more useful when dealing with either particular groups, or alternatively if they need to react to events. This responsiveness might well be termed as being ‘agile’ given the system’s ability to adapt.

This agility refers to many aspects of its structure. Our first quote shows how it can adapt to the Chinese cohort: ‘For Chinese students these tools (Facebook, Twitter and emails) are not familiar’, so on the surface this agility refers to the tools used, but it also relates to the psychological element that Lusk and Fearful (2014) have described. One participant talked about the importance of that element: ‘This group provides me with great academic support and mental insurance during Covid-19. I feel not neglected by the university’ (Interviewee 13).

That feeling of having a responsive, agile system that is there to support you, permeated many of the answers. Often students mentioned one element where they needed help but then linked that to the wider sense of being supported and belonging: ‘I got the news about the cancellation of July graduation ceremony; I can start to plan my internship earlier’ (Interviewee 18).

Others referred to things which had been organised to help support students: ‘[the] Chinese union is also in the group to help us who are left in UK [and] could not buy the flight tickets back home. I got my rescue package provided by Chinese embassy from the union as well’ (Interviewee 7).

What comes across is the breadth of support that is requested by students and how in traditional structures all these demands would be difficult to accommodate. A quick review of some of questions illustrates this:

- ‘My classmates invited me and I expected it to solve problems such as the graduation ceremony during quarantine’ (Interviewee 9).
- ‘I am expecting more indication about coursework from my tutors’ (Interviewee 19).

- ‘It is a platform that can support Chinese students, for me it has a more psychological effect’ (Interviewee 23).

This is just a small section of the issues raised which illustrate the need for agility.

In terms of the fourth feature of an organic student support system, WeChat offered ‘agile response’, creating a community that is flexible, rapid and responsive enough to adapt to the external environment, any changes, any situations and the needs of its internal members whilst maintaining sight of its end goals.

A student-led community

Drawing together the discussion above, what is clear is that a key feature of any organic student support system is a sense of community. This was something that was mentioned in a previous study (University of Sheffield, 2017) and is replicated here. Many of the quotes mention support from peers as well as tutors and the creation of a knowledge hub is another indication of a community-based approach. Instead of a group of individuals, the support system operates in the way a community operates. This means that members have shared goals and values and they operate in a cooperative manner. The key transition is one from a broadly hierarchical structure where communication comes down the organisation to one that is far more proactive. This means that members help and support each other when faced with adversity, which creates a more equal community, almost like a family, which people like to be part of. This means that it can perpetuate after the initial purpose for joining it has been fulfilled.

Some students explicitly mentioned this feature: ‘When the moment my problem [late submission concern] is answered in this group, I feel this is a community I can trust and [rely] on’ (Interviewee 1).

Others linked the community to the pandemic that was part of the external landscape: ‘Some students also shared important information on where to get the toilet paper, flours and pasta

[during Covid-19, these things were in short supply for a period of time], which is always helpful' (Interviewee 15).

What was interesting is the extent to which the community became more than just a source of academic support in a short space of time. Some students reinforce the concept of community by way of a specific example: 'I asked the question on how to print the transcript of my result, there are more than 10 students help me with the question, I feel supported' (Interviewee 8).

Whilst this was one specific example, others talk about the wider benefits of the community. These include a sense of belonging when many miles from home – 'We will share food from our hometown, which makes us feel very close and warm. Tutors often check on our situation and provide a lot of support' (Interviewee 13) – and also a sense of a common purpose. The sense of a family that came through in the quantitative results was eloquently summed up by one student:

Tutors and students also sent WeChat lucky bags to engage the group, I really appreciated that. And I also like the fact that nobody is allowed to put any advertisement in the group, we are strongly bound together because we are a family not for other commercial purpose. (Interviewee 7).

Whatever their motivation for seeking help however, it is the words of another participant that resonate the most: 'we can discuss our problems and sort them together'.

In terms of the fifth feature of an organic student support system, WeChat created a 'student-led community': the creation of a community where students are able to help and support each other rather than always being reliant on outside help.

Conclusions and moving forward

What this research has illustrated is that the traditional student support systems used within the UK higher education system are no longer fit for purpose. The tutor system, founded as it was in an age when universities catered for a very different student body, represents a mechanistic network that lacks the flexibility needed for many students. Universities were asked by the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act to work flexibly and meet the needs of the student body, a point reinforced by the recent creation of the Office for Students, however, in the majority of cases support mechanisms are transactional in nature with students having to make the first step. What this has meant is that a significant number of students do not feel supported.

Prime amongst groups who have struggled to engage have been Chinese students who are used to a system that stresses quick, two-way communication between students and lecturers. There is an emphasis on the relationship between lecturers and students, a point that has been stressed by other groups of students (Wolstencroft, Calver and Hall, 2019). The 'one size fits all' approach does not cater for all students and although some universities have attempted to foster supportive relationships via a coaching approach, this has not always been successful due to the bureaucratic nature of universities and the multiple needs of students.

What we are proposing is an alternative way of supporting students that is both agile to needs and can be linked to a wider web of support. It recognises the heterogeneity of the student body and is one where the basic principles can be transferred to a range of different groups. The support system is organic in nature as it lacks the bureaucracy inherent in the more mechanistic systems used. The five features identified need to be present for the system to work but what is also important is that the choice of media is crucial. In our example, WeChat has been used successfully due to the familiarity participants have with it, but other forms may be relevant for differing groups. Other social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, or Instagram could also be adopted for the group of students, who might use these apps on a daily basis. The exact design of the system depends on the student body, but what we can conclude is that social media based organic student support systems can certainly support a broader range of students.

A key feature that has shone through is that it is vital to have a sense of community within the organic support system and when looking at the future this is something that could be explored further. The use of more flexible technology such as WeChat Work could ensure that more students are involved whilst peer-assisted learning might well help to create the community.

However, several limitations should be noted. Firstly, this study used a case study method, and the sample used is from a group of Chinese students studying in the same UK university, therefore the findings may not be generalisable to fit all students. However, given the similarities of students' needs in finding more efficient and personalised support (Prowse, Ruiz Vargas and Powell, 2021), we expect that there might be some generalisation of these findings to cover students who are supported with group-based instant-messaging applications. Secondly, the participants for both the survey and interview are voluntary, which might raise the risk of bias towards the efficiency and usefulness of the social media based organic support system.

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