

**Online Information Session:  
an Alternative Channel for Information Flow between Canadian  
Universities and Prospective Students**

By

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Submitted to OCAD University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Design  
in  
Inclusive Design**

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, August 2015

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## **Abstract**

As a Canadian citizen of Chinese origin, I am aware of the language and cultural barriers high school students from China face when attempting to gather information online for selecting a school in North America for higher studies. Systematic research revealed a gap between the information channels they resort to and the channels through which universities approach prospective students. I attempted to bridge the gap by exploring effective alternative information channels. I examined the needs of prospective Chinese students through preliminary research with current students at OCAD University. I also explored Baidu Forum and WeChat, two online social media channels most used by Chinese students. I designed an online information session where universities could provide information to prospective students in China in real time, and conducted two sessions, one from Toronto, Canada and one from Tai Yuan, China. My recommendations to OCAD University about effective ways to reach prospective students from China could be extrapolated to other universities and countries.

## **Dedication**

To: Joey

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# **1 Introduction**

## **1.1 Background**

The phenomenon of globalization, accelerated by the Internet, has been silently but substantially affecting the way we live, eat, love, and learn. Driven by unlimited Internet connectivity, curious and smart learners seek the best educational opportunities across the globe. More and more young people feel propelled to move across countries for education. An estimated 4.5 million students around the world are getting their post-secondary education abroad today—twice as many as roughly a decade ago—and more than half of them are from Asia (The Star, September 11, 2014). As of September 2014, the number of international students in Ontario was 66,417, with each international student contributing about \$35,000 to the province's economy (*ibid*). In Canada, international students are charged higher tuition (three to four times their Canadian peers) to help subsidize the universities (The Star, March 8, 2010). Increase in tuition for international students in Ontario in 2013



was 10% as compared with 3.3% increase for domestic students (Statistics Canada, 2013). It becomes important, therefore, for universities to improve communication with prospective international students. There is a need for creating alternative ways for Canadian Universities to reach out to prospective international students and meet their information needs.

## **1.2 Problem Space**

As a person of Chinese origin, now a citizen of Canada, and as a post-secondary student in Canada, I became aware of the difficulties that prospective Chinese students undergo in sourcing the required details about Canadian universities for informed decision-making regarding application and admission. The number of Asian students getting their post-secondary education abroad has doubled over the past decade to around 2.5 million. For Chinese high school students, selecting an international school could be a long and daunting process. Seventy per cent of the students hire agents to help with the application process and the

number of agents has increased 10 times from 2003 to 2013, standing at 394<sup>1</sup>. I hypothesized that high school students in China find it difficult to make informed decisions independently about application and admission to foreign universities because the western university information channels are not designed to keep their cultural information practices in mind. Taking OCAD University as an example, student recruiters will visit China every September to recruit students for the coming year (OCAD U's Undergraduate Application deadline is Feb 1<sup>st</sup>) with partnered schools in China. In summary, I observed that students in China receive their information passively. Recruiters from Canadian universities have limited freedom, either, in terms of the selection of schools from which to recruit students, and/or the choice of which Chinese cities they can work in. To empower these students to make independent and informed decisions, university

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<sup>1</sup> <http://tinyurl.com/q464nm5> (English translation of page from a Chinese website [www.wanjixm.com](http://www.wanjixm.com)).

information channels not only need to be designed more inclusively to cater to culturally diverse students, they also need to be flexible for both Chinese students and Canadian schools to facilitate two way communication channels convenient for both parties. During expert interviews with Sean Baker (staff member in charge of OCAD U's international student recruitment), he stated that OCAD University has partnered with over 19 schools in China including international high schools, and colleges within the city of Shanghai, Hong Kong and Beijing.

I began the research with the term 'information system' but as I understood better, I preferred to use the term 'information channel'. System is passive whereas channel is active. Also, the term 'channel' suggests greater two-way communication than 'system'.

### **1.3 Users and Their Context**

My MRP, therefore, studied the case of prospective Chinese students targeting OCAD University. In order to rescue them from

expensive recruitment agents in China and empower them to source their own information, it is necessary to understand their information needs and the channels they predominantly use. Mismatch between their information needs and the information dissemination practices of OCAD U need to be identified and the gaps bridged. This was done by analyzing the information practices of prospective Chinese students (specifically students that target OCAD University), examining their information needs and problems to identify cultural gaps, and designing solutions for better information flow. OCAD University, as a secondary user, is in need of improved information channels to minimize international travel and maximize the university's outreach efforts. More user needs will be discussed in the paper at section 2.

The overall aim of my MRP was to begin a research path to make Canadian universities more accessible to students from China and other countries. For my MRP I specifically use OCAD U

and Chinese students as a case to explore. Hopefully, this will be expanded in future to cover other universities and countries. The goal of my research project was to examine the information channels predominantly used by Chinese high school students and to assess how OCAD U could take advantage of those channels by strengthening their presence there. To this end, I gathered inputs from prospective Chinese students looking for undergraduate programs in art & design in Canada. I also explored Baidu and WeChat, the two online social media channels most used by Chinese students, and also worked on designing an online information session where universities could provide information to prospective students in China.

#### **1.4 Design Challenge**

The design challenge I undertook was to create a new information channel - online information session – that responds to the needs of prospective students from China. The design was

informed by information gathered regarding student needs and refined iteratively through co-design with the students.

I also ethnographically explored the social media information channels actively used by students, such as Baidu forum and WeChat, to discover how OCAD University could better engage these channels and reach out to the students.

### **1.5 Design Approach and Methods**

I adopted a user-centered design approach, gathering user needs through ethnography and surveys. I also explored the current OCAD U practices through expert interviews with members from the recruitment division. Participatory design and evaluation was the method used to design the online information session. The project followed a timeline as indicated in Figure 1.

Activity / Period (2014-15)	October				November				December				January				February				March				April					
	W1	W2	W3	W4	W5	W6	W7	W8	W9	W10	W11	W12	W13	W1	W2	W3	W4	W5	W6	W7	W8	W9	W10	W11	W12	W13	W14	W15	W16	W17
<b>Phase 1: CANADA</b>																														
Literature review & Environmental scanning																														
Design of Info pages & Online session																														
Recruitment of students (ITERATION 1)																														
Pre survey / data analysis																														
Online info session / post survey																														
Data analysis / Design refinement																														
<b>Phase 2: CHINA</b>																														
Recruitment of students (ITERATION 2)																														
Pre survey / data analysis																														
Online info session / post survey																														
Data analysis / Design refinement																														
Recruitment of students (ITERATION 3)																														
Pre survey / data analysis																														
Online info session / post survey																														
Data analysis / Design refinement																														
Final wrap up																														

Figure 1: Research timeline

### 1.6 Outcomes

This research project undertook an iterative, user-centered design of an online, real time information session with prospective students from China. The potential benefits of such a system for the students would include higher effectiveness and efficiency in seeking information to support informed decision-making and the opportunity to bypass third party agencies. The anticipated benefit to Canadian universities would be facilitation of international student recruitment, an increase in the number of international student admissions, and better aligned expectations

regarding the chosen University leading to a more successful student experience.

## **1.7 Report outline**

The next section describes how information about user needs was gathered through preliminary research, based on which online information sessions were designed and conducted. Section 3 describes the design, conduct and evaluation of online information sessions. Section 4 explores the use of Chinese forums and chat programs by students and suggests ways in which Canadian universities can make use of these channels to reach out to prospective students. A discussion of the outcomes of the project is given in Section 5 followed by the final section where contributions and next steps are listed.



## **2 User Needs Gathering**

A review of related literature revealed that international students typically experience the following problems: difficulty with the English language, cultural differences, and loneliness. Often these problems can be attributed to an information gap. (Berry, 1997; Kim & Abreu, 2001). Culturally, Chinese students tend to favor in-person or telephone communication over emails or websites (Zhou & Zhang, 2014). Further, as a Chinese student myself, I can see that although Canadian university websites provide information for prospective students, much of that is not designed in a fashion that Chinese students are accustomed to.

I conducted a preliminary survey of Chinese students currently studying in OCAD U. I also conducted a heuristic evaluation of the OCAD U website pages providing information for prospective students. I personally participated in a Chinese online forum - Baidu Bar - and a chat platform - WeChat - both of which are most popular among youth in China.

From my observations, I noticed that OCAD University, as a secondary user in this context, also has several criteria they want their recruiting department to meet. First of all, OCAD U's Recruitment Department has very limited staffing, thus the preferred options for efficiency and scaling are online resources. Every in person recruitment session that occurs in China represents a large cost to the university. Last year, the average cost was \$12,000 for two weeks. In this project, I have considered cost as a critically important constraint; I will explore methods that are cost-effective.

## **2.1 Preliminary exploratory research**

I conducted a literature survey and environmental scan to examine previous and contemporary work in this area. I also conducted expert interviews with the OCAD U student recruitment office to ascertain the current position of international recruitment and related information systems at OCAD University.

There are many professional agents for Chinese students applying to schools abroad. The cost can range from 1000 RMB to 10000 RMB with a guaranteed admission (the agents usually submit applications to more than one school to ensure the success enrolment rate for their client). One of the platforms Sean Baker from OCAD U student recruitment office pays to use is Zinch. The Wikipedia entry for Zinch describes it as “a company that helps students find scholarships and engage in college networking and recruiting” (Wikipedia, 2015).



Figure : Screen captured from Zinch, [www.zinch.cn/ocad-university](http://www.zinch.cn/ocad-university)

The above figure is of the first page Zinch leads to after I search for OCAD on the website. The content of this page has photos of OCAD; the location of the university; the administrative requirements; and videos of OCAD U. It also shows that 841 students have connected with the OCAD U recruiter. OCAD U recruiter Sean Baker has mentioned in the expert interview that since this is the first two years OCAD has started using Zinch, there is not much data showing the direct relationship of Zinch and new OCAD U students.

After leaving my email on Zinch, here is the automatic message I received from Sean Baker:

*“Hello from OCAD U!*

*Recently you had visited our school profile on Zinch.cn.  
Thanks for connecting with us!*

*I would like to congratulate you on taking your first step to expanding your knowledge about studying abroad. Taking on an international perspective in your academic career is a difficult and*

*significant decision to make – but should you choose to, I promise you will be glad you did.*

*I'm here to offer you my help in making that decision. While I am an ambassador for OCAD U, I can also be one for studying abroad in Canada. Connect with me about any questions you may have – from the academic curriculum to student life on campus, even the weather! Let me know what your biggest worry is about studying abroad. What are you most excited about?*

*OCAD U is located in the heart of Toronto – Canada's largest city and one of the world's most culturally diverse. People from around the world find home and community in Toronto. Our city is the ideal destination for those studying abroad, but also for those passionate about the global perspective.*

*If you would like any more information on OCAD U programs, studying in Toronto or Canada please feel free to reach out to me directly.*

*Best of luck on your search and I hope to hear from you!*

*SEAN BAKER  
Manage Student Recruitment  
T 416 977 6000 x4868  
E sbaker@ocadu.ca  
OCAD University  
100 McCaul Street, Toronto, Canada M5T 1W1*

*www.ocadu.ca*

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My preliminary data was gathered during an international student event organized by the OCAD U Chinese Students Association. I conducted a survey of 45 OCAD U Chinese International students. Analysis of the data indicated clear patterns:

1. What are you currently studying in OCAD?

- Graphic design (11)
- Environmental Design (9)
- Industrial Design (9)
- Illustration (9)
- Painting and drawing (3)
- Photography (3)
- Material Art (2)
- Sculpture (1)

2. What other schools have you considered besides OCAD?

- Ryerson (11)
- Emily Carr (6)

- Sheridan College (6)
  - University of Toronto (5)
  - University of Waterloo (2)
  - Seneca College (2)
  - SAIC (2)
  - SVA (2)
3. How did you know OCAD?
- Teacher's recommendation (19)
  - Determined research (17)
  - Friends and colleagues (13)
  - Word of mouth (9)
  - Random browse (5)
  - Agencies (3)
  - Advertisements (2)
  - Recruiter presentation (1)
4. What information was not accessible from OCAD?
- Tuition (6)
  - Portfolio assessment (what makes a good portfolio) (6)
  - Deadlines (3)

In a short survey I conducted, I discovered that International Chinese students studying at OCAD U had also considered Ryerson University and Emily Carr University in

Canada. School of Art Institute Chicago (SAIC) and School of Visual Arts (SVA) were also mentioned in their considerations. Most of the International Chinese students know about OCAD U from their teachers in China and this awareness ought to determine where OCAD U should market their information. What I found interesting from the survey is the inaccessible information sent out from the school during the application process. Tuition fees, portfolio assessment requirements and deadlines are not clear on the websites. All of these problems are design opportunities for my online Information Session so the school can improve their services to prospective students.

After collecting the preliminary data I tried to invite Ryerson University, Emily Carr University, and University of Toronto to participate in the online information session. I also shared the data with all the recruiters that had agreed to participate. I ensured that students are clear when it comes to information regarding tuition, portfolio assessments and deadlines for application.

I also shared my research results with Sean Baker and Casey Hinton from the Student Recruitment Department of OCAD



University, who incorporated these results for future recruitment strategies.

### **3 Online information session – design and evaluation**

From a marketing point of view, there was a challenge at the beginning. If I am hosting an OCAD University only online information session, students who haven't heard of OCAD U will not participate at all. Chinese students tend to attach themselves to schools with international recognition (Online, 2014) Although OCAD University has a rich history as an art and design school, design schools in the United States still attract more students. In 2013, the total number international students from China studying in United States was 235,597 versus 2,5346 students in Canada. (Online, 2014).

In terms of marketing content, I tried to include more universities during the information session to have a guaranteed audience and also to increase diversity. I approached York University, Ryerson University, University of Toronto and Emily

Carr University in the beginning and received confirmation of attendance from Emily Carr, University of Toronto and of course OCAD University.

Taking preliminary survey results into consideration, I tried to promote the free online information session in Chinese classrooms through teachers and agencies in China. I have also incorporated the usage of Chinese social media such as the Baidu Forum as well as WeChat, which I will explore and elaborate in the later session. Moreover, Sean Baker and Casey Hinton helped to spread the message via OCAD University's Zinch email list.

In summary, this phase of the project was comprised of the following steps:

- Pre-session survey of target student group.
- Design of online information session between OCAD U and prospective Chinese students with participation from U of T and Emily Carr.
- Conducting the first online information session from Toronto, Canada.
- Post session survey of participants.

- Conducting the second online information session from Taiyuan, China.
- Post session survey of participants.

### **First Online Information Session**

Time: January 16th 6:00am-8:00am

Number of students attending: 17

Participating schools: University of Toronto (Ting Li), OCAD University (Casey Hinton), Emily Carr University (Kevin Bird)

### **Second Online Information Session**

Time: January 30th 6:00am-8:00am

Number of students attending: 12

Participating schools: University of Toronto (Ting Li), OCAD University (Casey Hinton), Emily Carr University (Kevin Bird)

## **3.1 The process**

The process is described below.

I conducted the design of online information sessions in two phases: Phase 1 in Toronto, Canada and phase 2 in Beijing, People's Republic of China. An award from Mitacs Inc. under their

Globalink program supported my work in Beijing. My host supervisor, Prof. Zhao Xiaoyan at the University of Science and Technology, provided research space with Internet connectivity for me to work in her laboratory and helped me with the recruitment of participants and organization of the first online session. Her supervisory role, as per the Mitacs Globalink program, was limited to supporting my research activities, and she is not a co-investigator or co-supervisor of my research.

I designed an online information session (like a webinar) where students from China could meet representatives from OCAD University and ask questions in real time. With the help of the host supervisor in Beijing, I recruited around 20 high school students living in Beijing and conducted a pre-session online questionnaire survey (as in Appendix A) to elicit their information seeking needs and cultural preferences. Students under the age of 18 were asked to participate along with a parent or guardian who

provided consent and completed the survey along with the student.

Adult students completing the online survey (and parents/guardians of those under 18) filled in the online consent form for doing the survey. A separate consent form was taken from those who attended the information session as that involved audio recording and a post-session survey. Adult students filled in the consent form as in Appendix C and students under 18 filled in the consent form along with their parent/guardian as in Appendix D.

The criteria for participants were that they must be currently enrolled high school students (with no age restriction) and interested in studying in an art & design school in Canada. Those under the age of 18 years participated with a parent/guardian. Recruitment was continued until participants were booked for both sessions. The following channels were used for advertising the sessions: WeChat (Chinese WhatsApp); Xiaonei

(Chinese Facebook); and my personal connections. An official event was created in both channels. Professor Zhao Xiaoyan helped in promoting and facilitating the recruitment in Beijing.

I attached a poster in WeChat and Xiaonei that said: “Free online University meet up with OCAD University, Toronto, Canada. Your questions regarding the schools will be answered. Please sign up through online survey for different time slots as seats go fast!” An online survey link was mentioned on the poster. Contents of the online survey, including the information/consent form, are given in Appendix A. Those who successfully signed up for a time slot and filled out the survey were directed to a THANK YOU page with the confirmation message: “Congratulations, you have successfully qualified for the Online University meet up on the day you have selected. Please present yourself at 7:30 pm at 5th floor, Building A of Guo Mao complex, No. 69, Tai Yuan west city road, Tai Yuan, on the day you have selected. If you are under

18 years, please bring your parent/guardian with you for the information session."

I gathered recruitment booklets, takeaways and presentations from all participating schools ahead of time so I could suggest any changes and translate and to deliver the printed materials to the students during the information session.

I designed both an event poster and website e-banners, I posted all promotional materials through Baidu, WeChat, other websites and agents in China.

你是否  
有兴趣来加拿大读书?  
你是否  
还在寻找适合自己的大学?

## 2015加拿大 名校线上见面会



文科理科招生官任您现场提问  
届时会获得学校最新一手资料还将会有机会获得精美礼品。

时间: 2015年1月16日 晚上7:00-9:00  
2015年1月30日 晚上7:00-9:00

地点: 太原市府西街69号国贸大厦A座5层太原正枫英语

查询电话: 0351-8689078  
查询邮箱: janeyang@catchedu.ca

合作院校:



Figure 2: Promotional Poster





*Figure 3: Promotional e-Banner*

I did not pay any compensation to individual participants; participants attended the online information session based on their own incentive and motivation. In terms of benefits, they were offered free attendance to an online information session that connected them with three schools in Canada. They had access to the most up-to-date information and brochures. They had a chance to interact directly with school representatives. They had, or were directed to, the most accurate contact information and resources. Their feedback helped in refining the online

information session design, which would benefit students in the coming years.

By way of contact information, only email ID was collected from the participants, purely for the purpose of informing any change in the date or time of the online session. The survey responses remained anonymous. No code was added to them to connect them with any email ID.

Phase 1: I conducted the first online, real-time information session in December 2014 with the survey participants (minor students accompanied by their parent/guardian) residing in China in the OCAD University premises at 205 Richmond Street W in Toronto; OCAD University representatives and I participated from Toronto. The host supervisor arranged for a student researcher to help conduct the Beijing side of the online session. The session was audio recorded with the consent of the participants. Online session participants completed a post-session survey (as given in Appendix B) providing feedback about their experience with the

session and suggesting improvements. I analyzed the survey data and transcripts of session recording to augment the design of the online information session. Having students co-designing the webinar is expected to optimize the value of the online information and the online session.

Phase 2: In January 2015, I traveled to China to gather first hand data. My host supervisor provided me with all assistance for the space, Internet connectivity, faculty mentoring and other resources I needed for the research. In Beijing, I recruited a second cohort of 15 high school students (those under the age of 18 participated with a parent or guardian) and deployed the online pre-session questionnaire survey. I then organized and conducted an online information session with those students and OCAD University representatives like the previous one, except that this time I was in China and a colleague helped me on the Toronto side in conducting the session. I conducted the session in

the University of Science and Technology at 69 Tai Yuan West City Road, Tai Yuan, Shan Xi Province, China.

Post-session survey and data analysis were conducted as described earlier and the design of the online information session was refined as the second iteration of user-centered design.

### 3.2 Pre session survey results

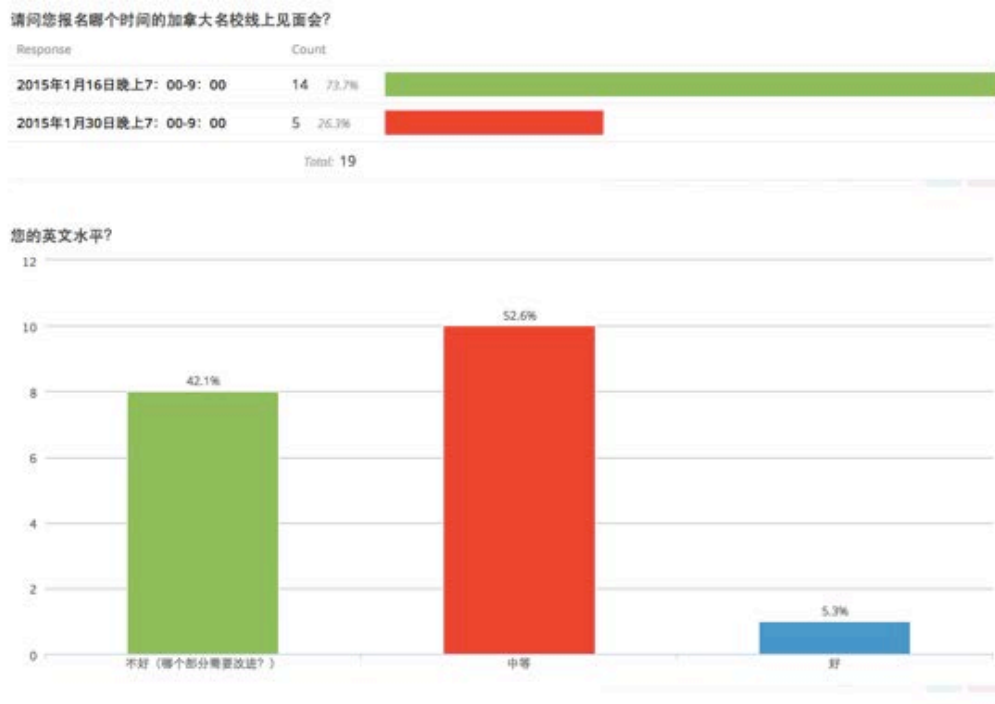


Figure 4: Sample data from FluidSurvey

1. Which day of the online information session are you signing up for?
  - 14 chose 2015,01,16
  - 5 chose 2015,01,30
2. What's your English proficiency?
  - 42% not good
  - 52.6% middle so-so
  - 5.3% good
3. How did you know about this online information session event?
  - 29.5 % teacher's recommendation
  - 5.9% from friends
  - 82.4% English institutions and agents in China
4. Are you actively preparing to study abroad in Canada now?
  - 5.9% Yes, I will be applying independently
  - 23.5% Yes, I have hired an agent
  - 11.8% Yes, but haven't made a decision on hiring an agent
  - 47.1% No, still deciding
  - 11.8% No, don't think I will be going to Canada
5. Which of the school you have heard about before? Ontario College of Art and Design, University of Toronto or Emily Carr
  - 36.8% Ontario College of Art and Design

- 57.9% University of Toronto
  - 21.1% Emily Carr
  - 36,8% non of the schools
6. Please rate the OCAD U website: (5 means the website is overall accessible and you are able to find what you need, 1 means the opposite)
- 30% Rated OCAD U website 4 out of 5
  - 70% Never been to the website
7. Please rate the U of T website (5 means the website is overall accessible and you are able to find what you need, 1 means the opposite)
- 8.3% rated 1 out of 5
  - 8.3% rated 4 out of 5
  - 25% rated 5 out of 5
  - 58.3% never been to the website
8. Please rate the Emily Carr website: (5 means the website is overall accessible and you are able to find what you need, 1 means the opposite)
- 18.8% rated 1 out of 5
  - 6.3% rated 2 out of 5
  - 6.3% rated 3 out of 5
  - 6.3% rated 5 out of 5
  - 12.5% rated 4 out of 5

9. What is it that you cannot find from the website?
- Graduate studies courses, instructors and study focus (1)
  - Specific application requirements, tuition fees (1)
  - Not known yet (3)
  - Chinese (1)
10. What fields are you interested in learning in the university?
- Graphic Design (1)
  - Nothing specific (1)
  - Business, media (2)
  - Design (4)
  - Education (1)
  - Architecture (1)
  - Arts or Graphic Design
  - Painting (1)
  - Don't know (3)
11. What is the reason or rationale behind choosing the above field? (You can pick more than one)
- 15.8% Hot topic
  - 52.6% Hobby
  - 31.6% High employment rate
  - 31.6% Ranking
  - 26.3% Teacher's recommendation
  - 5.3% Friends or colleagues experience

- 10.5% Support from the parents/guardian
  - 5.3% I don't know
12. Are you facing any of the barriers below?
- 5.3% Application process being unclear
  - 10.5% Documents and material needed being unclear
  - 5.3% Accommodation while study aboard
  - 57.9% Language scores not meeting the standard
  - 10.5% language preparation being unclear
13. Please write down a question you would like to ask OCAD University the most; it will be answered during the information session.
- Graphic Design Graduate studies courses and language requirements (1)
  - Information about Internship or Co-op and how to apply for such opportunities (1)
  - If my language score does not meet the minimal requirement, does going to authorized language school help to receive the same offer? (1)
  - What is the minimal score requirement? (1)
  - What is the required IELTS Score? (1)
  - What is your advantage in the most popular major? (1)
  - Can a graduate from arts become a teacher? Or teachers college education needed? (1)



- Does Emily Carr University have international student workshop to help students? (1)  
I don't know (2)

Below is the email I sent to Casey Hinton regarding the pre-survey results before the first information session:

*Hi Casey,*

*I assume this week was your week to catch up with all your work, good luck with everything!*

*There are few things I need to let you know regarding the online information session tomorrow:*

- 1. You have about 20 minutes to present, if its possible please send me the slides today so I can prepare some of the translation. P.S you can arrive a little earlier to upload your slide on the computer, or you can email the slide to me and I can help you download it into the computer.*
- 2. Please send me a link to OCAD U promotional video; I need to upload onto YOUKU for our audience to view.*
- 3. OCAD campus is really strict about granting access outside of operation hours, for tomorrow, I hired a security guard to escort me into the building. I will be there around 5:00am and you may need to be escorted too. Please come to the lobby of 205 Richmond around 6:00ish and give me a call, I will send down the security. My number is 647-898-5178.*

*4. We have a confirmed of 16 student participation, plus their parents we are looking around 20. It is less than I expected, but it is understandable since online meeting is relatively new to them. We know for sure there will be more students participating in the second round on the 30th of January.*

*5. Below are some of the data analyses:*

*This is for a question: **What kind of barriers you are experiencing right now?***

***63.5% answered Language scores***

***12.5% answered language preparation***

***12.5% answered others with no specify***

***6.3% answered applications and submission deadline are not clear***

***6.3% answered accommodations while study aboard***

***Which school did you hear about before our information session?***

*The last answer is never heard of before*

*For the students who answered the survey, here are their interested faculties: **Graphic Design, design, education, business.***

*This chart is the answer for the questions: **what is the reason or rational behind choosing the above field?***

***50% answered due to their own hobby and interest***

***31.3% for high employment rate***

***31.3% answered high ranking***

***25% answered teacher's recommendation***

***12.5% answered hot topic***

***12.5% support from parents***

***6.3% Friends or colleagues experience***

***6.3% others***

*some questions and problems they have so far are:*

- 1. Internship ? Co-op opportunities ? how to apply?*
- 2. Can't get information about graduate classes and the field of study of available principle advisor.*
- 3. If my language score is not enough, can I still get admitted if I go to language school first? (Does school provide language classes?)*
- 4. Admission transcript (the scores each school requires for getting admitted)*
- 5. IELTS requirement*
- 6. Can't find information about Tuition, how to apply step by step on the website.*

*7. Is there any master program related to graphic design? if yes, what is the administrative requirement?*

### **3.3 First Online Information Session**

#### *3.3.1 Part one - Introduction*

The online information session started around 6:00 am in Inclusive Design Class room (7:00pm in Taiyuan, Shan Xi Province China). I was the event organizer, host, promoter and interpreter. I kindly introduced the time schedule of the information session stating all the schools that are participating.

I shared my own experience as an international student in the beginning, what is Canadian culture, demographic layout, geographic property etc. I explained my barriers when I first studied in Canada, my struggles and methods to overcome the issues.

Here is the transcript of my opening:

“Good evening everyone! Thank you Emily for the introduction. First of all, I would like to welcome everyone to the Canadian Universities online information session. My name is Jane Yang and I am the project manager. Thanks to Golden Maple English Institution to co host this first online information session in China. Emily and Angel (my assistants in China) will assist with anything on site, please go to them if you have any questions.

It is 6 AM now here in Toronto, I am in the Masters program meeting room of OCAD University. Joining us later will be three recruiters from three universities. Although it is a very new way of connecting, we have received huge support from all the recruiters. Kevin Bird from Emily Carr really tried their best to accommodate us; he is video conferencing with us around 4 am Vancouver time. I really appreciate this.

What we wish to do through these online information sessions is to shorten the distance between Chinese students and Canadian universities, opening up a new channel for allowing a

healthy dialogue. This project wishes to identify and solve the current hardships caused by cultural and language barriers. We hope the students can make more accurate decisions and achieve their goals better after going through this very informative information session.

Canada has two official languages, English and French. It is mandatory to display both languages on all the packaging and official websites. Canada is an immigration haven, having the most diverse cultural groups. One fourth of the population was born outside of Canada. There are more than 34 ethnic groups with population exceeding 100,000, such as German, Italian, Ukrainian, Polish, Filipino, Irish, French, etc.

Canada is the second largest education export country. Becoming an international student in Canada not only means studying in Canada, the other significant half is living. I believe all the parents in the session today have done some research about food, housing and transportation services in Canada. I came to

Canada when I was 15 years old, without finishing the first year of middle school in China. I started from grade 8 in Canada and the high school here finishes at grade 12. I have lived in homestay for a while and clearly remember half a year as being a milestone. After half a year I started to figure out the language, the cultural differences. I started to discover what I have in common with other native Canadian students. I obtained a bachelor degree from Simon Fraser University with the focus in Interactive Arts and Technology. And now I am doing my master's degree in Inclusive Design here at OCAD University. Overall, I feel that Canada is a very friendly country with most of the things being fair and equal.

A lot of the parents want to know about living expenses in Canada. Recruiters will share with you all the tuition costs and I can quickly go through expenses of housing and food to give you a rough idea. If you eat in any food court, 10 dollars should be enough per day; per month this would amount to 600 dollars, which is 3000 RMB. It is cheaper to buy raw food here and cook

yourself. Sharing an apartment with others will cost 400-800 dollars per month depending on the location, which is roughly 3000 RMB.

I will summarize some of the problems I have experienced through the 12 years of studying and living in Canada. Language is definitely the biggest barrier. Passing IELTS or TOFEL is just the beginning. Local language is the basic communication tool for students to immerse into the society. It will affect the way you learn, connect and adapt. The second biggest barrier is that of knowing your rights. For instance, a lot of international students are not aware of the benefits included in the tuition fee they have spent. It usually covers dental insurance, health insurance, and one-on-one mental health consultation. Schools offer free writing workshops, career assistance and student lawyer services. Please pay attention to where your money goes and know your rights.



Emily, please let me know if there are any questions so far. I will then pass the presentation to Casey Hinton, the recruiter from OCAD University.”

### *3.3.2 Part two - Presentation from each school*

Each school had their own preference of presentation. The general presentation slides can be broken into the following sections:

- About the school (physical location, facilities)
- About Toronto
- Faculties (what does the school offer) and teaching staff
- Student life and housing
- How to apply
- Academic requirements
- Tuition and costs
- Recruiter’s contact info

### *3.3.3 Part three- Q&A session after each presentation from three schools*

Q&A was the trickiest part of the whole session as it was hard to do a group Q&A and there is always a need for interpretation (that I had to do).

Most of the answers were related to how to apply for each school, the language requirements and the English institutions that can offer recognized English supplementary classes. The biggest struggle I saw students were having was with the language score. Students were eager to learn the strategies in applying, the requirements for portfolio and what makes a good portfolio.

### *3.3.4 Part four - Wrap up (giving out contact information)*

In order to keep the online information session easy to manage, I encouraged each recruiter to stay within their time range (30 minutes). To manage this, I let them leave GoToMeeting after their session and a quick Q&A was completed. Their last

slide contained their name and contact information. We let the students know that we were running an equivalent session by the end of January so they could come again or invite any friends who were interested.

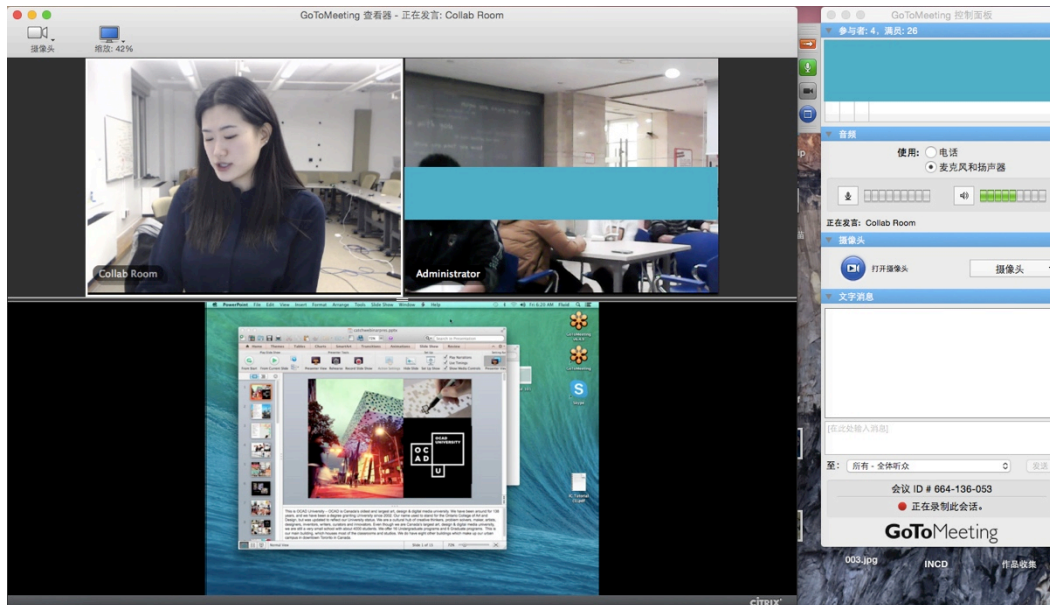


Figure 5: Screen captured of GoToMeeting during online information session



*Figure 6: Online Session in China*



*Figure 7: Online Session in China 2*

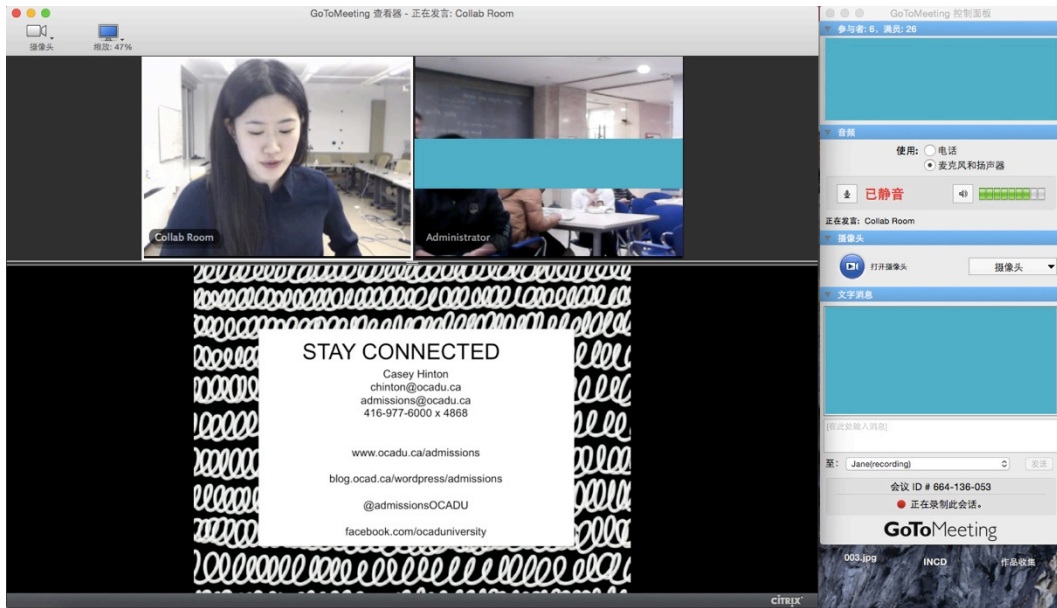


Figure 8: Online Session in Canada



Figure 9: Online Session in Canada 2

## **3.4 Feedback**

### *3.4.1 Feedback from first session*

There were a total of 17 students, 3 parents and 4 staff members who participated. The information each school delivered was very comprehensive.

1. Emily Li, the coordinator from China, thought that there was slight information overload for the students who participated. Note, I tried to compress the information session into two hours, broken down in the following way: 20 minutes for each school's recruitment presentation plus interpretation and 20 minutes for my own opening and introduction. From my observations, I noticed students taking notes quiet seriously; I could imagine how overwhelming it can be if all the information coming out from the information session is new to the students.

2. Students felt that the Art and Design schools could showcase some of the current or past students' portfolio work to

meet the prospective students' visual expectations. They could also share stories of current or past students alumni's accomplishments and employment success stories.

3. The students appreciated the fact that Ting Li had the U of T logo behind her during the presentation. They felt that Kevin Bird and Casey Hinton could also use OCAD U and Emily Carr's banners to identify their universities and to differentiate themselves from the other universities.

4. Since there could be some questions about graduate studies, it would be good to prepare some of the answers, otherwise the contact information for graduate school should be included in the slides as well.

5. My suggestion was to shorten the information a little, highlight the most important information for example: how to apply, administration process and requirements, tuition, strategies on applying, internship and co-op.





*Figure 10: The second online information session in China, photo by Angel Miao*

### *3.4.2 Feedback from second session*

I would like to add some comments on the second information session as I was meeting all the students and parents in person. It was a very different experience for me and I felt that I needed additional assistants. During the second information session, I experienced several technical difficulties and obvious delays. I appreciated how understanding both the participants and the student recruiters were when there were problems. I was

the only one adjusting all the GoToMeeting settings, listening to all the conversations and questions and monitoring the time scheduling. It was overwhelming at some points.

Below are all the post survey answers we have analyzed.

There were total of 6 anonymous answers.

1. Was the information session helpful today?

- Yes. (6)
- I learnt more details about Canadian universities, requirements to study abroad and specific faculties. (1)

2. What would you suggest to do differently?

- Please introduce to social clubs of each school, also details of the hardware, facilities of each school. (1)
- It will be great if you can provide the presentation PPT, more residential details. (1)

- Tell us more about each faculty and the career path coming from these faculties, an introduction to extra curricular activities. (1)
- The technical difficulties, there were some interference in between the session. (1)
- How to prepare portfolio. (1)
- Adding more insight in the living part in Canada. (1)

Note, as you can see, all the points being translated from Chinese to English is very helpful to recruiters here in Canada. The presentation slides and content were already adjusted according to the answers of the preliminary survey.

3. Are there other schools you wish to connect via online information session in the future?

- Simon Fraser University, UBC or other school with good humanity faculties. (1)
- Other Canadian universities. (1)

- UBC or other schools have great achievements in one particular focus. (1)
- Not any school specifically, just want to know different schools. (1)
- Art and Design schools in United States. (1)
- More business schools. (1)

Note: Students have diversified needs; it is great to see what each of them had in mind. In the future events they can be redirected more precisely.

4. What other activities would you wish to participate in the future?

- Short 10 days tours to Canada. (1)
- Workshops teaching application strategies for Canadian Universities. (1)
- Wish to participate in workshops that introduce details of specific classes and some kind of introductory course. (1)

- Wants to learn more information about studying abroad. (1)
- I would like to participate in more information sessions. (1)
- I would participate in session where more international students sharing their experience. (1)

My own feeling about the online information session was, overall, very positive. It was very low cost (GoToMeeting software monthly fee is around 39 dollars plus recruiter's time plus facility usage). There were three places where students could take control of the information session in order to get answers to their questions. 1. Pre survey question: This was where they could fill in their questions and concerns before the information session. 2. During the Online Information Session: Students were encouraged to ask questions during the session; we designed a Q&A session near the end. 3. After the information session: Students were given all the content and contact information from the Online Information Session so they could initiate private conversations afterwards with each of the individual student recruiters from

each school. As I mentioned earlier, the benefit of moving the traditional student recruiting process online is that it can happen any time, anywhere, therefore exposing OCAD U to more international audiences across the globe.

#### *3.4.3 Feedback from Recruiters*

- The online information session was helpful.
- More students from different places learned more about the universities.
- None of the students who participated followed up until the time of feedback.
- The facilitator/interpreter (me) did a good job.
- Some challenges were: There were technology Issues. Presentation or speech got cut off during the session. It was hard to do group Q&A through the online session.
- We are willing to participate in online information sessions in the future.

## **4 Exploring Chinese Social Media**

### **4.1 The Baidu Forum**

#### *4.1.1 Description*

The Baidu Tieba, (loosely translating to “Baidu Forum” and literally meaning "Baidu Paste Bar"), is the largest Chinese communication platform provided by the Chinese search engine company, Baidu ([www.baidu.com](http://www.baidu.com)) (Figure 11). Baidu is claimed to be the largest Chinese website and the largest Chinese search engine in the world. Baidu has gradually shifted the habits and preferences of Chinese students and parents. Due to language and cultural barriers, prospective students who are interested in studying abroad (and their parents) will perform Baidu search when they are not able to locate the right resource on the foreign university webpage. Even current students use the same strategy.

As of 2014, there were more than 8 million online communities on the Baidu Forum with more than 10 million registered participants, where individuals perform interactions in

groups based on their interests. Any individual can take the initiative to form a community within the Baidu Forum.



Figure 11: Screen captured from Baidu Forum, [www.tieba.baidu.com/](http://www.tieba.baidu.com/)



The existing communities on the Baidu Forum are formed around subjects such as entertainment, gaming, literature, music, art, sports relationship, TV programs, animation, culture, demographic region, living and such. Registered users interact with each other asynchronously. The purpose of the people participating in the discussions might be as simple as to chat about a new movie they have recently watched, or a hot incident that just took place somewhere in the world. It is a natural “Think Cloud” where the topic that interests most of the people would have a higher participation rate and more active audience.

The Baidu Forum consists of 8,206,580 online communities interested in various topics with more than 10 million registered participants, but sharing the same infrastructure. New topics surrounding news articles or fresh events emerge anytime, with around 8,000 new posts being created daily. The interaction is mainly based on text with the support of photos and video files. The photo uploading mechanism is only designed for desktop

users and I will discuss about the mobile version of Baidu post bar later, in the challenges section. Each main topic contains unlimited “post chambers” where people can continuously add posts.

In terms of the technical aspects of the Baidu Forum, registration is really simple, with very few steps: (1) type in phone number (Chinese telecom only) OR email address; (2) type in chosen password (3) successfully solve a CAPTCHA (which will be discussed in the challenges section as well). After registration, the user is ready to post and reply to any post.

Users are classified as regular or advanced. Regular users can create a new theme post (around any topic) and upload photos, videos, music, and emoticon. Advanced users are allowed to also upload doodles. Classification as an advanced user is based on performance evaluation in three areas:

1. Attendance - the longer you stayed logged on, the higher the score.

2. Points per action - creating posts, replying to posts, initiating voting posts, and participating in voting generates points per action.
3. High quality posts – Award of points is based on the number of replies the posts get; the higher the number, the more points are awarded.



Figure 12: Screen captured from OCAD community forum on Baidu, [www.tieba.baidu.com/?ie=utf-8&kw=OCAD&fr=search](http://www.tieba.baidu.com/?ie=utf-8&kw=OCAD&fr=search)

#### *4.1.2 Ethnographic exploration*

Within the Baidu Forum, the “Prospective and Current Chinese OCAD U Students forum,” is an online community of Chinese students interested in or connected with studying at OCAD University (Figure 12). I explored this online community by becoming a member to study its use by prospective Chinese students. I experienced the above community as an insider and studied it objectively as an outsider. I focused on this community to discover the activities, questions, and interactions happening within. Screenshots of some activities in the forum are presented in Figures 3 and 4.

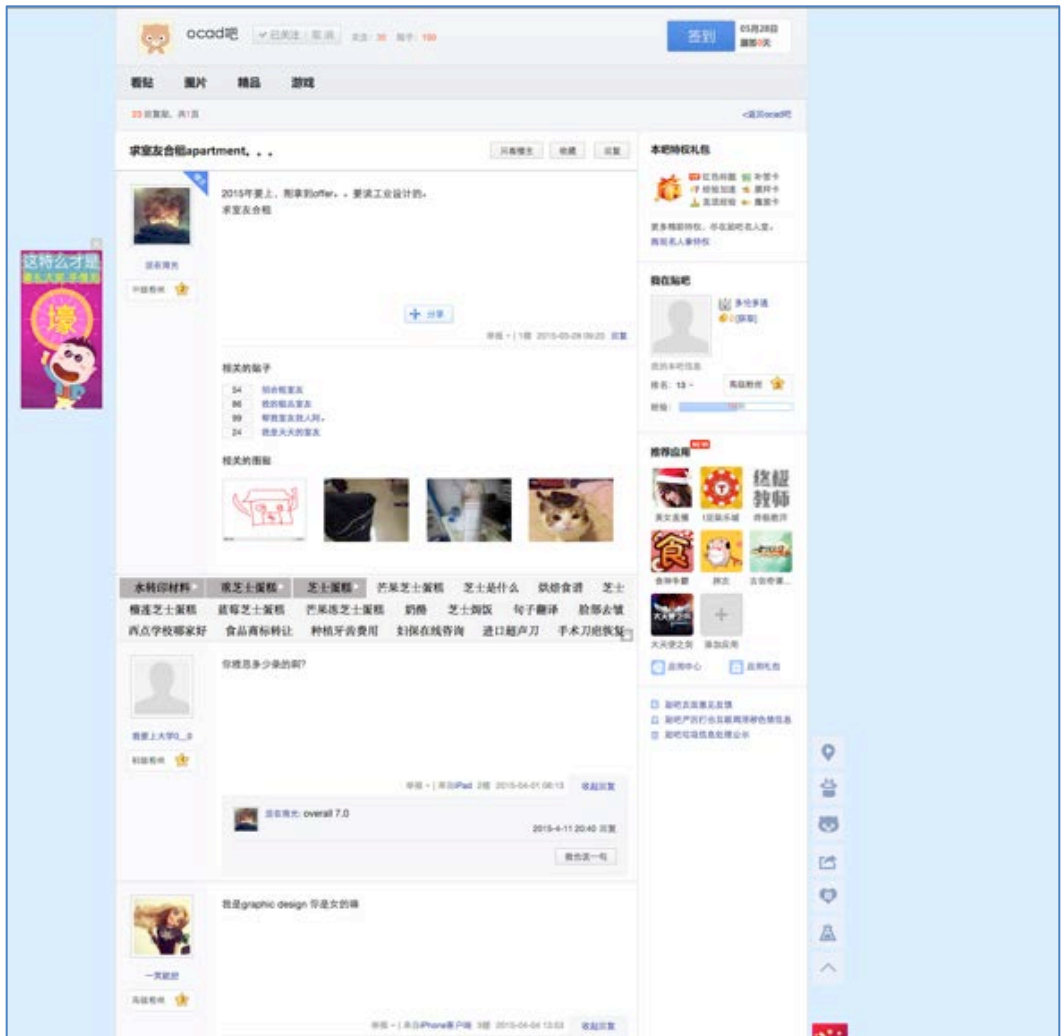


Figure 13: Screen capture of a post regarding a student looking for roommate at OCAD U



*Figure 14: Screen capture of a discussions happening under a post*

I specifically focused on the OCAD U community on Baidu, which has 40 subscribers and 207 posts. They are gathered in the channel due to their common interest around OCAD University. One good thing about the Baidu Forum is that anyone can view any of the posts and get the same amount of information whether they are registered users or not. To reply or post in the forum, registration is a must.

After reading through all the posts in the OCAD U Baidu Forum community, I have summarized the discussion topics into the following categories:

- Housing questions - Often, students who are currently enrolled in OCAD U create posts to find roommates.
- Looking for opinion - Prospective students occasionally look for suggestions about a particular major or faculty at OCAD U (e.g., Jewelry Design)
- General questions about OCAD U – Information relating to school in a foreign country. (e.g., school ranking, tuition fee, accommodation, transportation etc.)
- Administration questions - Such as IELTS score requirements, EAD (English for Art and Design) program, problems they have encountered that are not being answered by anyone (missed deadline on portfolio submission etc.)

- Making friends – Chinese students sometimes simply want to connect with International Chinese students at OCAD U for a sense of companionship.

Of course, there are students participating in the forum for more than one of the purposes listed above.

#### *4.1.3 Analysis of site design and processes*

##### Types of users

I would categorize the users into two types: Community consumers, who take valuable information away and leave replies occasionally. Content creators who actively posts and reply to others' posts. However, these two types of users are often interchangeable. To a topic of my interest, I would be a content creator, but for other topics that are initiated by others I can simply take away information as a community consumer. Unlike YouTube or Vimeo where content creation requires technical proficiency in making media files and would pose technical



barriers for some users, the Baidu Forum posts are text based, and so are inclusive of all who can read and write online. Anyone can post anything; therefore any input is welcomed (provided the information passes the system check). Everything is content driven, so, regardless of whether one is an advanced user or a novice, there is no barrier for anyone to post or participate in discussions. This is a strong positive factor that supports diversity.

#### Identity/Anonymity/Privacy

The Baidu post account has no connection to the user's real name or true identity. It doesn't link to any user's social media account. However, clicking on the name reveals all the history of a user, including what other topic he/she has subscribed to, and all the replies he/she has posted. A sample from a random user from the OCAD U community is shown in Figure 15.

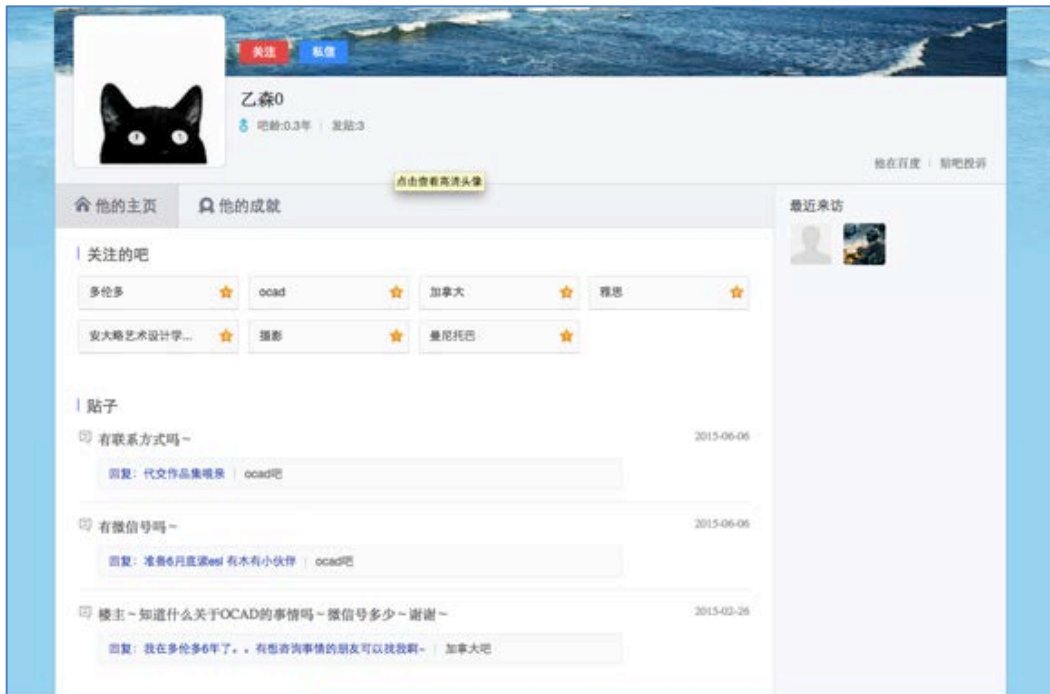


Figure 15: Screen capture of a user history revealed by clicking on user name

Users can register a completely irrelevant name during the easy registration process for the desktop version of the post bar. In Figure 15 above, a user with name Eason (Chinese translation of the term he/she) has a cat as his profile photo. However, the behavior and history of a user are transparent in this case, I could not find a preference in the settings page to hide all the posts I have posted.

### Banning/removal of user

I am not sure how high a threshold the Baidu Forum has for the system to remove/ban the user completely. It is clear that some posts make no sense. Posts that contain abusive and coarse language are captured and removed by the system.

### Immersive Experience

The Baidu Post Bar is based on discussive interaction between users. Users are easily immersed into the community because of its narrative characteristics. Users would want to browse through most of the posts for the best answer or reply. However, there is no “recommended posts” or “related topic” at the end of each post within a post thread. It has become a “dead end”.

### Key Decision makers and decision-making process

The system makes some decisions in terms of monitoring all the posts and users on repetitive posts (advertisements suspect) for the use of abusive and coarse language. On the other hand,

users can monitor each other as well by simply clicking on the user's name, it will trace back to all the posts, replies, and any other information he/she left in the Baidu Forum.

#### *4.1.4 Challenges/Issues*

##### Text alternatives for non-text content

All of the image content displayed by the system does not have alternative text that describes the image to users with visual impairments. However, most of the image content uploaded by users usually has some sort of text description of what it is. Another problem is with flashing visuals that occur in all the advertisements.

##### CAPTCHA

This is a regular feature in all debates about accessibility issues. The letters shown in the CAPTCHA are very hard to identify even for people with fine eyesight (Figure 16).



*Figure 16: CAPTCHA letters are hard to identify*

### Order and searchability of posts

There is no hierarchical structure in the grouping or display of the posts. Posts are only organized in a chronological fashion, with the newest post on the top and oldest at the bottom, regardless of the content or the popularity. The numbers on the left show how many replies are there to each sub-topic (Figure 17).



*Figure 17: Number of posts shown on the left side; advertisements indicated*

Since anyone can start a new post with any content in mind, there are always advertisements. I experienced two types of advertisement here: one posted by the users (registered corporate account or individual account) and one posted by the system. As can be seen in the third item in Figure 17, instead of numbers on the left it says “marketing”. Marking out

advertisements is a very efficient way to market the material to the right audience for free.

Further, there is no search function (key word search) beyond the surface layer of the posts. If I want to know any specific topics related to OCAD U that were posted before, I can only preview the topic of each post. I cannot see the whole discussion unless I click into each post.

Mobile registration requires Chinese phone number

Another barrier for the Baidu Forum is its mobile application. New users cannot complete the registration process for the application without a Chinese phone number. Users can log into existing accounts only. Many Chinese students in Canada only have a Canadian phone number. Therefore the system does not allow prospective Chinese students to easily connect with other international students across the globe.

Language barrier

The language/slang/terms being used are mostly those that are common amongst younger generations. This is a typical issue for most of the online communities, where language itself has evolved with culture. Everyone else who is not involved with internet themselves may find it challenging to understand.

Personal experience being a participant in the community

The reason this online community is attractive to me in the context of my MRP is because there is a huge potential to promote OCAD University through a platform like this. During the research stage of my MRP, I have hosted an online event “Online information session” for prospective Chinese students in partnership with OCAD University, University of Toronto and Emily Carr University. I posted my notice for recruitment in the Baidu OCAD U Students Forum and attracted a number of participants.





*Figure 18: My promotion of Online Information Session on Baidu OCAD Forum*



*Figure 19: My promotion of Online Information Session (poster) on Baidu OCAD Forum*

Prospective Chinese art students applying to OCAD University often rely on information from agents. Cultural and language barriers prevent their success in searching information on the OCAD University website. As part of my preliminary work

relating to the MRP, my suggestion to the OCAD University's student recruitment department was to be aware of the situation and to reach out to students through the right channel instead of passively waiting for the students to find OCAD University.

Finding this growing OCAD University community on the Baidu Forum is a stepping-stone to increased recruitment. So far the community has 40 subscribers (subscribers receive posts alert) and 211 posts. However, surprisingly about 60% of the participants are students who are not yet enrolled in OCAD University. Students gather in the forum to discover both official and casual information related to OCAD University.

The OCAD U Baidu Forum currently has some negative aspects:

- Content Sharing – There is a lack of connectivity between OCAD U's main website and the online Chinese student

community on Baidu Forum; this could apply to student communities in other cultures and countries as well.

- Website Architecture - Since Baidu Forum is very text heavy, it would be necessary to organize/filter all the content into a consistent framework. In addition, constructing a search function could help users in locating the right information more easily.
- Privacy Issues - All the posts are public and open to everyone, there is no option of sending a private note to a particular user. This would not be ideal if users want to exchange their private information only with a trusted individual.
- Create Immersive Experience – If the post is about a roommate search, the current suggested posts are also in the same topic, but in different schools of different countries, which is not efficient at all. There should be a feature that allows the collection of related posts.

#### *4.1.5 Enhancing Content Sharing between OCAD U & Baidu Forum*

Going through all the posts related to OCAD U's administration questions revealed that all the answers to questions regarding the portfolio deadlines and interview locations are actually available through the OCAD University website. Some prospective students don't even know what the OCAD University website is. More transparency needs to be created to this particular group of people showing them where they could find all the accurate resources. OCAD University could be a "residence enterprise," meaning it could use the Baidu Forum as a platform to promote itself. Representatives from OCAD University should monitor and reply to posts or even post links from the official website to the forum posts if it is possible. Eventually the goal would be to educate the audience that OCAD University's website is the ultimate answer to all their questions related to the university. However, when interacting with a group from a completely different culture, we need to meet users in a

familiar context and learn first, and then try to educate the group members.

This section on the “Baidu Forum of Prospective and Current Chinese OCAD U Students” illustrates how students use social media for information seeking. It affords the matching of resources of universities to the needs of prospective students. Connections could be drawn between OCAD U teachers and recruiters here in Canada and prospective and uninformed students overseas. For mutual benefit, this online community could be connected to OCAD University’s website, which posts accurate, reliable and up-to-date information about the school.

## **4.2 WeChat**

WeChat is a Chinese version of the popular chat program WhatsApp. It has been downloaded and used in more than 90% of

the smart phones in China according to a Curiosity China report<sup>2</sup>. The report also indicates that the number of active users on WeChat has reached 549 million people per month. It is not solely an application focused on Chinese users. Rather, it is used in 20+ languages in 200+countries.

WeChat is a very efficient social media channel to promote OCAD University. Once the OCAD University account has been registered on WeChat, news, articles and promotional materials can be easily distributed to followers (prospective students across the globe). And a domino effect can be achieved as users share information with others.

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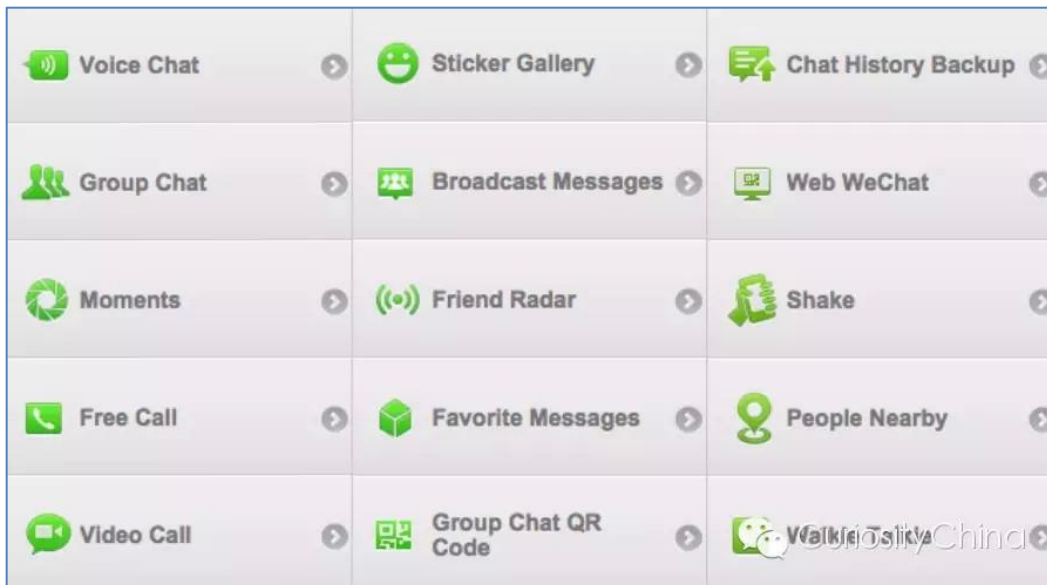
<sup>2</sup> Curiosity China: <http://www.cnadtop.com/focusNews/2015/6/2/be6b7c0e-a0f1-4470-a73d-027f92bbaf49.htm>



Figure 20: WeChat's user data 1,

<http://www.cnadtop.com/focusNews/2015/6/2/be6b7c0e-a0f1-4470-a73d-027f92bbaf49.html>

This chart shows the growth of WeChat users and how it is gradually increasing.





*Figure 21: WeChat's user data 2*

<http://www.cnadtop.com/focusNews/2015/6/2/be6b7c0e-a0f1-4470-a73d-027f92bbaf49.html>

Figure 21 shows the current feature set of WeChat, while more features are being developed as my report gets written. The main functionality is voice chat, where people communicate with each other by sharing voice recordings. It is an effective, words-free (optional), asynchronous type of communication. Similar to WhatsApp, users can send image files easily. Groups can easily be formed by anyone. The maximum number of members that could be invited into a group chat is 300. "Moments" is where people share their photos and stories with friends. "Moments" could be a great promotion channel where one shared story could reach thousands of other people (users' friends). Another great feature of WeChat is its ability to scan and recognize QR codes. This implementation allows communication between information on other platforms and things in the real world with WeChat users.

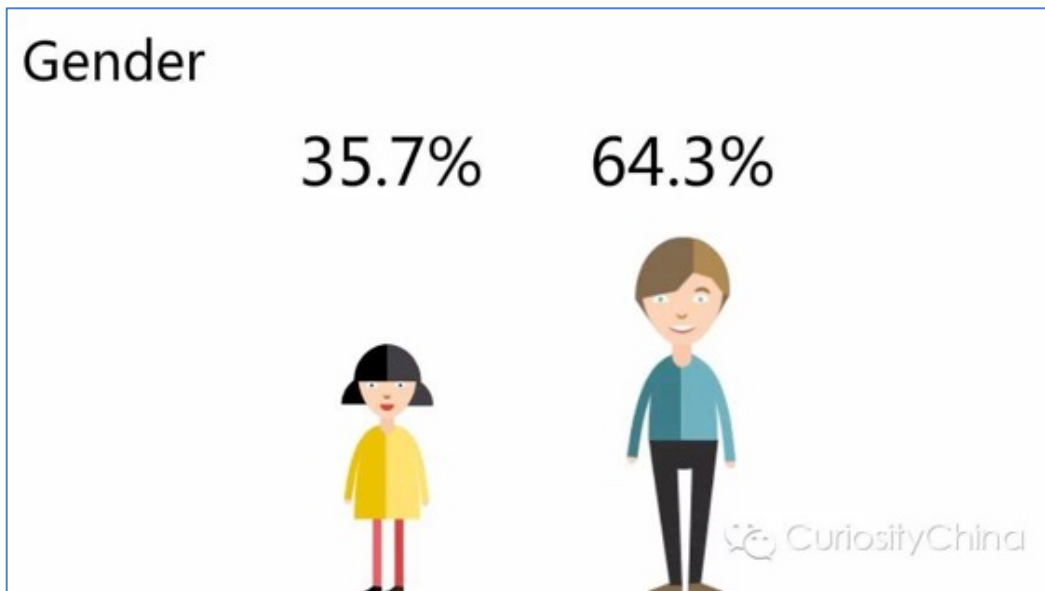


Figure 22: WeChat's user data 3

<http://www.cnadtop.com/focusNews/2015/6/2/be6b7c0e-a0f1-4470-a73d-027f92bbaf49.html>

This figure shows the gender distribution of WeChat users. All my social connections, regardless of their gender, are using WeChat.

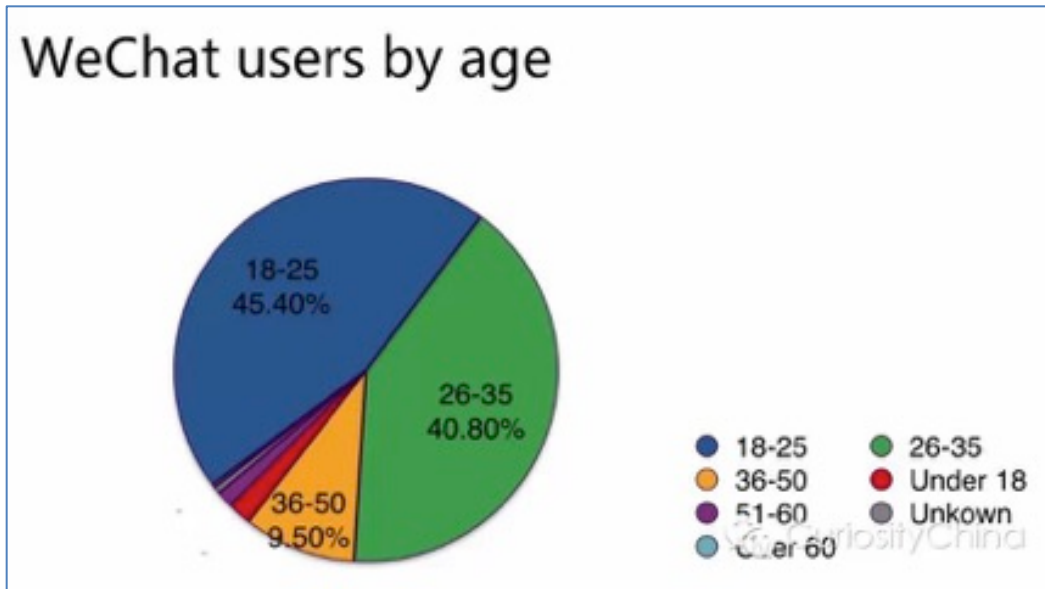


Figure 23: WeChat's user data 4

<http://www.cnadtop.com/focusNews/2015/6/2/be6b7c0e-a0f1-4470-a73d-027f92bbaf49.html>

This pie chart shows the age group of WeChat users. The biggest portion (45.40%) is used by younger generation. Users of ages between 36-50 (9.5%) are using WeChat with the main purpose of communicating with their children who are on WeChat.

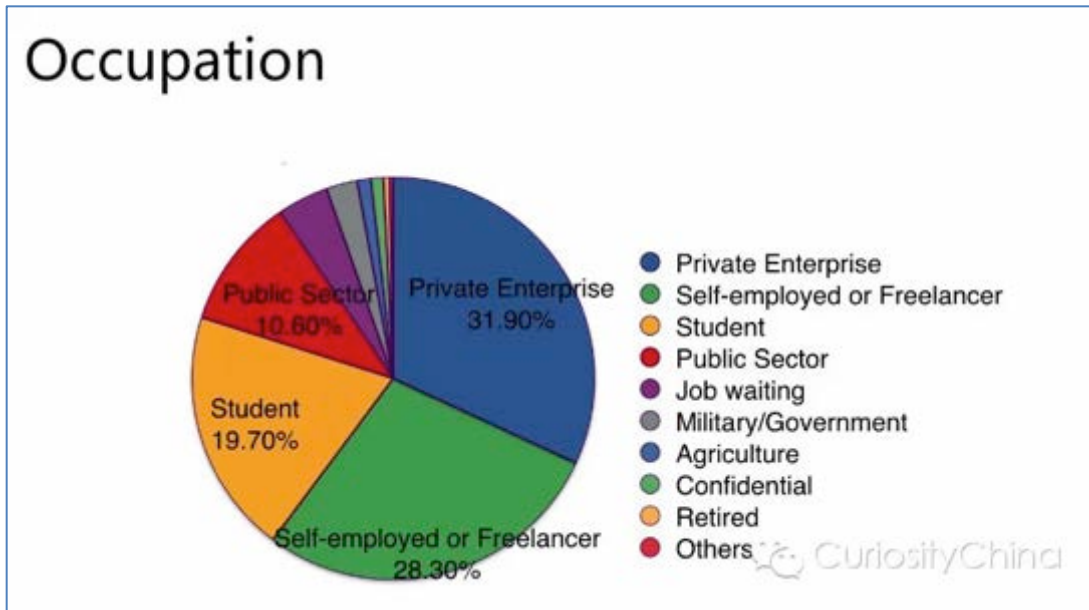


Figure 24: WeChat's user data 5

<http://www.cnadtop.com/focusNews/2015/6/2/be6b7c0e-a0f1-4470-a73d-027f92bbaf49.html>

This figure indicates slightly different information than the previous chart. Students occupy 19.7% of the WeChat's user group.

I was invited into two OCAD U WeChat groups formed by other students of OCAD University. One is Called OCAD Chinese

Student Association (with 134 members, not all of them active) and the other is OCAD Masters (with 18 members all currently enrolled in OCAD Graduate studies). Groups are only formed through private invitation from one of the existing members of the groups. Since the groups are closed and I do not have the permission to share the content outside the groups, I cannot take screen shots and post in this report.

By shadowing the WeChat group for a few months I gathered information on the types of content students share within the group. Conversations on WeChat are similar in content to those on the Baidu Forum, but more active, possibly because information is exchanged more frequently through chats than through forum posts. A few salient points of usage are given below:

1. Room rental and buying/selling of furniture: Picture are posted within the group conversations to showcase rooms and furniture that students wish to rent or buy/sell.

2. Seeking academic help: Often, student's post academic-related questions such as the deadline for assignment submission, acceptable ELT scores, EAD (English for Art and Design) duration, etc.

3. Study groups and extracurricular activities: Because chatting provides so much freedom, students could initiate any activity, such as study groups and other extra curricular activities as they want and whoever is interested could follow up.

4. Selling and buying of course materials: Information relating to selling and buying of textbooks, used equipment, painting tools, and such are often exchanged within the group conversation.

5. Distribution of any kind of information: Any new item whether school-related or otherwise, could be posted within the group.

The popularity of the OCAD Chinese student WeChat group should not be ignored as it demonstrates why and how students are seeking help from each other rather than from the Student Centre of OCAD University. The university needs to explore how their staff could take advantage of this communication channel to promote the school to the right audience, improve students' user experience after admission in solving their problems and thereby create a positive reputation for the school.

## **5 Discussion**

The objective of my MRP was to examine the information seeking practices of Chinese students, identify information channels they use most for seeking information about prospective international schools, and explore how they could be strategically implemented for recruitment. As a preliminary exploratory exercise, I examined how Chinese students seek information about international schools in general and OCAD University in particular. Based on the findings, I came up with the idea that an online information session would meet the needs of the students well. I also examined social media channels used by Chinese students to get information about OCAD University, and came up with ways in which OCAD University could take advantage of those channels for reaching out more effectively to Chinese students.

The biggest problem I observed that pushed the formulation of my research was the communication barrier. This is a constant



struggle between schools in North America and prospective Chinese students. Applying for schools is assumed to be much more complicated by students with no academic English background and it has generated a money making market for all the service agents in China. Because there is a lack of market regulation in these agencies, the fees that students pay vary in ten folds (Phoenix news, January 11, 2013). Money is only a secondary issue here. With highly unprofessional agents who provide fake or false transcripts, students are at risk of lifetime prohibition of entry to Canada or even North America (*ibid*).

As identified earlier in the report, there are many possible social media channels such as the Baidu Post Bar or the WeChat tool to promote OCAD U to prospective Chinese students. As my original contributing idea, I constructed an online information session that provides an online real-time channel for recruiters to address prospective international students through the Internet. I decided to conduct two sessions, as this was a more tangible

experience about which I could gather feedback right away. I did one session with myself in Toronto, Canada and the other with myself in Tai Yuan, China. Students, parents and recruiters from the three universities that participated in both the sessions welcomed the idea whole-heartedly. All the feedback received from them is positive, with minor suggestions for improvement. During the online information session in China I could see that all the participants really appreciated my time and my help and they were taking notes all through the session. I could see that my effort added significant value to them.

The most important success of the project was that the online information sessions were found to be very useful by the participating students. Recruiters from the two other schools that participated – University of Toronto and Emily Carr University – were very happy about their participation. The resulting protocol for conducting inclusive online information sessions with prospective students will be provided to OCAD University for

their consideration and possible implementation for the next recruitment round. Once the online information session becomes a regular activity, it will hopefully give confidence to students, encouraging them to apply to schools independently. It would foster a “soft landing” experience, reducing culture shock for newcomers. As future work, the design elements could be further customized and adopted by other universities.

## **6 Conclusion**

### **6.1 Contributions**

This project came up with recommendations for OCAD University regarding revamping their information channels with prospective international students with a view to help international students on the one hand and increase recruitment for OCAD University on the other. Specifically with respect to Chinese students, the project suggested ways for OCAD University to participate more effectively in Chinese online forums such as the Baidu Forum and chat platforms such as WeChat, which are two channels frequented by students seeking information about international schools. Most importantly, a new information channel – the online information session – was designed and two sessions were conducted to get feedback. Two other universities – University of Toronto and Emily Carr University – participated in the online sessions and found the experience useful. It is hoped that these steps could be taken further by the universities to

create a more empowering experience for prospective international students from China as well as other countries.

## **6.2 Next Steps**

- More online information session need to be conducted and refined through evaluation.
- Better use of social media by OCAD U as a channel for recruitment information flow needs to be explored.
- The outcomes from this project need to be extended to other Canadian universities and to students from other countries.

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