

Chapter 48

Analysis of Factors Influencing Chinese Undergraduate Students' Choice of Foreign Postgraduate Education

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ABSTRACT

This questionnaire study, involving 4,903 final year undergraduate students in China, investigated Chinese students' intention to seek foreign postgraduate education. Drawing on college choice models and "push-pull" models, this research presented a comprehensive model to explain Chinese college students' choices of foreign education. Logistic regression analysis showed that personal academic performance, foreign language proficiency, family socio-economic status, institutional factors, and quality of foreign education had significant impact on the intention to study abroad. The students' outward mobility was also driven by their dissatisfaction with domestic postgraduate education. The participants' perception of the academic quality of postgraduate education in the USA was the most positive, followed respectively by the UK, Hong Kong, and Australia. Theoretically, the research indicated that it was the "push-pull" pairs, as exemplified by dissatisfaction with domestic postgraduate education and perceived positive images of foreign postgraduate education, that led to Chinese students' decision to study abroad and their selection of specific study destinations. This study has implications for recruitment and retention of Chinese students in higher education institutions both in and outside China.

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INTRODUCTION

With China's growing economic prosperity, the number of Chinese students choosing to study in foreign higher education institutions has been increasing over the past two decades. Despite a growing number of studies on the factors that "push" and "pull" mainland Chinese students overseas (e.g. Bodycott, 2009; Bodycott & Lai, 2012; Tsang, 2013; Wu, 2014; Yang, 2007), research is needed to investigate the characteristics and nature of Chinese students' demand for and choice of foreign education at postgraduate levels (Wu, 2014). There is particularly a lack of large-scale quantitative research on Chinese college students' intention to continue education abroad (*ibid*). This chapter presents and discusses a questionnaire study involving 4,903 final year undergraduate students at 12 universities in four Chinese cities. The study investigated the intention of Chinese senior university students to study abroad for postgraduate education, their selection of study destinations and the factors influencing their choices. This paper contributes to the deepened understanding of Chinese college students' international mobility. It has implications for both China and host countries which wish to retain their attractiveness to Chinese college students in a global educational "market".

BACKGROUND

Roughly 2.72 million students studied outside their country of citizenship in 2005 (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2007). This number increased to 4.6 million in 2015 (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2017). It is predicted that the demand for international education will rise to 7 million by 2020 (Altbach et al., 2009). Since 2000, the number of Chinese students heading overseas for education has been increasing annually by more than 10% (ICEF Monitor, 2016). In 2012 399,600 mainland Chinese students studied abroad (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2013). The number increased to 544,500 in 2016 (MoE, 2017). A significant proportion of Chinese students abroad chose to study in the USA, the UK and Australia (UNESCO, 2010; see also Wu, 2014). These three English-speaking countries remained the most popular study destinations for Chinese students (Department of Education and Training Australia, 2017). As shown in Table 1, in the academic year 2015/16, the number of Chinese students studying in the USA, the UK and Australia respectively reached 328,547, 97,850 and 97,984, making Chinese students the largest international student group in the three countries (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2013, 2014a, 2015, 2016, 2017a, b, c). The majority of Chinese students overseas are registered in degree programs (Wang & Miao, 2014), particularly at postgraduate levels (IIE, 2016; UK Council for International Student Affairs [UKCISA], 2017). Although in Australia more Chinese students are currently pursuing undergraduate degrees, the number of Chinese students in postgraduate programmes in Australia have been rising fast over the past five years (see Table 1). These students contribute significantly to their host countries' economy (IIE, 2014b; Espinoza, 2015). As importantly, they are significant for the healthy development of their host countries' higher education sector, security and international connection (Association of International Educators [NAFSA], 2015).

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