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## Factors Influencing Chinese University Students' Study Abroad

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### Abstract

*In the context of the era of economic globalization, the country's higher education has shown an international development direction, and China, as a developing country, is also the world's largest exporter of international students. This study is to understand the willingness and influencing factors of university students to go and receive education abroad. The research analyzes the factors that affect students' willingness to study abroad on basis of samples of 455 students from Jiaying University. The study found that the willingness of students to go and receive education is affected by the interaction of the students' personal and environmental factors. This article can provide suggestions on how to improve the internationalization level of universities, how to improve the education and teaching qualities, and how to enhance their attractiveness.*

**Keywords:** *Factors, Willingness, University Students, Study Abroad.*

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### 1. Introduction

The program Managing Internationalisation was established in April 2011 by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Higher Education Program. Internationalisation policies of governments and higher education institutions are intertwined in this program to assist them in handling the various problems related to internationalisation. Although the internationalisation of higher education (IHE) has gained popularity since the 1980s, the introduction of this program proves that internationalisation has become a global phenomenon (Zhao, 2021).

China has been sending students and academics overseas for more than a century, but many Chinese students studying abroad have grown dramatically in the last two decades (Xiao, 2017). China has been a significant supplier of students for international institutes worldwide (Yang, 2012). China's economic progress over the last few decades has resulted in a growing number of middle-class families ready to send their children overseas for study (Brooks and Waters, 2011). Chinese households spend generously on their children's education because of the Confucian belief that "knowledge alters one's fate." All of the family's savings are spent sending youngsters abroad for education (Xiao, 2017). The Chinese government has progressively promoted significant local educational investments in foreign education and intercultural interaction to enhance national competitiveness (Marginson et al.,

2011).

The understanding and practice of IHE have evolved from outcome-oriented international activities and strategies associated with International Higher Education to process-oriented integration of international, intercultural, or global dimensions into the purpose, functions, and delivery of secondary education (De Wit and Hunter, 2015), and e-mobility. Even in the face of global crises, the IHE has grown in the past twenty years. This is because internationalisation has penetrated every aspect of the university, from teaching and education to research, scholarship, enterprises, and innovation, to culture and ethos (Foskett, 2010). As a result, the globalisation phenomenon has sprung up with enormous force and effect. In recent years, change and development appear synonymous with “innovation”. A postmodern world is defined and impacted by globalisation. According to Vaira (2004), this phenomenon is a global economic and technical pressure to enhance consumption and profit-making. According to some academics, all areas of human effort are affected by this phenomenon (Beerkens, 2003).

In recent years, with the change of students' attitudes and the development of the national political situation, the number of university students who choose to study abroad has begun to decline. Students with generally superior family backgrounds and outstanding academics do not choose to study abroad. Under this circumstance, this paper conducts a research on their willingness to study abroad to find the reasons why students are unwilling to study abroad.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Historical Background of Internationalisation of Higher Education (IHE)**

In the 1980s, internationalisation approaches were mainly activity oriented (De Wit, 2011), and many studies focused on internationalisation at the institutional level and the integration of international students, socially and academically (Sanderson, 2011). Since the 1990s, IHE has taken a more integral process-based approach to improve international cooperation and economic competitiveness. During this time, internationalisation was defined as a process of “integrating an international and intercultural dimension into the teaching, research, and service functions” (Knight, 1994). Although this definition has been widely used, there are several shortcomings. It has limited objectives because it does not relate to the public good and has excluded international activities at the institutional and national levels (Van der Wende, 1997).

In response to these shortcomings, Knight expanded her definition of internationalisation to “a common way to measure global, cultural, or global dimension by reason, power or the delivery of post-aid education” in 2003. This definition focuses on the internationalisation of tertiary education as a dynamic institutional change process. While the IHE has succeeded, the driving forces have become multiplex and changed as internationalisation evolves and are different from institution to institution, nation to nation (Knight, 2003). Many have argued that the IHE is now driven primarily by financial gains. Given the growing economic competitiveness and the focus on the accumulation of profit from internationalisation, Several researchers have stated that globalisation is “like any other needs and problems facing the distribution of land in social, economic and labour markets” (Van der Wende, 1997). This has transformed higher education (HE) from focusing on the public good, cooperation, democracy,

and democratic citizenship into a rigorous and boundless competition in international markets using aggressive marketing strategies (Turpin et al., 2002).

Building on Knight's definition above, De Wit and Hunter (2015) expanded the concept of IHE, “the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions, and delivery of post-secondary education, to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society”. This definition suggests that internationalisation should be more inclusive, achieving more excellent social order and supporting equality and democracy.

Knight (2011) and De Wit (2011) observed some prevalent misconceptions in the IHE. They summarised that some organisations use English language programs as critical indicators of internationalisation. For example, some students believe that any kind of studying or staying abroad is equivalent to internationalisation. At the same time, institutions equate having international students and internationally-based programs internationalisation. Some researchers believe that internationalism is intrinsic within the nature of universities, where no strategy is required, and that international activity is considered the aim of internationalisation (Zhao, 2021).

Different understandings of IHE can be gained for various reasons for internationalisation. International development in education must be complete, everything is equal, and workers expect more extraordinary social achievement (Zhao, 2021). The internationalisation of education has been accelerated by unprecedented globalisation, expanding knowledge, and a multicultural society (Altbach, 1998; de Wit, 2018; Stier, 2010). Reasons for internationalisation have evolved and are driven by varying influences. Blumenthal et al. (1996) laid out criteria for the IHE from political, financial, social and academic, scientific, and technological dimensions. Likewise, Knight (2003) outlined reasons for the IHE into political, financial, social, and academic facets, which also provided an overarching taxonomy to understand the rationales of the IHE. This concept was extended to including financial, political, educational, sociocultural, technological, and academic aspects by Maringe et al. (2013). Even though their model clearly showed the strategies and motives for each aspect, there is an overlap between educational, technological, and academic measures.

Like many other countries worldwide, China responded to the call of globalisation where many aspects of the country, including education, had to change to cope with trends in the international market. China has been an active participant in the global arena like in business, technology, and economy, and education plays a vital role in the Chinese national objective to capture the global market. The history of Chinese HE is marked by several milestones that reflect the formulation of the country's current HE system. The following section provides an overview of the historical, sociocultural, and political influences that shaped the Chinese HE framework, with many provisions in common with the HE system in other nations while having many Chinese characteristics. Exploring this long history and context of the Chinese higher education system allows for a better understanding of the challenges Chinese HE faces, the reforms, and the rationales for increased internationalisation efforts in recent years (Xiao, 2017).

## **2.2 Rationales for China's IHE**

IHE is a global phenomenon for many reasons that motivate China to internationalise. The intention is to grow personal assets in finances and academic gains, business exchange and expansion, country-building, and social transformation and advancement at the community level. At the institutional level, the rationales include landmarking and profile, quality development, keeping up with international norms, student and staff improvement, organisation and syllabus integration, and knowledge building (Kyrychenko et al., 2017).

Since the mid-1970s, the Chinese government has reformed its education system for several times to provide students with proper education and promote holistic development to cope with difficulties and optimise the opportunities globalisation brings (Liu, 2011). In 1983, the Chinese government suggested internationalising Chinese education, which became the guideline of the Chinese government in reforming educational policies. It “orients education towards modernisation, globalisation and future construction” (Harvey, 2005). Those researching the IHE in China have recognised the leading role of the national government in developing and implementing internationalisation strategies, contrary to other countries (Marginson, 2011). The Chinese government which has acted as a critical policy-maker, program designer, and financial provider has compelled HE institutions to implement their internationalisation practices within a fixed framework (Li and Tu, 2016).

In China, the government has deployed significant resources to top Chinese research universities through Project 211 and Project 985 in hopes that they can stand out among their international peers (Li and Tu, 2016). Many elite Chinese universities have emerged in recent years thanks to the hefty investment that the Chinese government has allocated to internationalise its top universities (Chiose, 2016). As a result, the international movement of faculty and students have dynamically changed. China has become an appealing destination for international students and faculty to study and work in, not just from traditionally outbound countries like Southeast Asia and Africa but also from Western countries. This changing direction exemplifies how China uses its IHE strategies to enhance its international influence (Yang, 2016).

## **2.3 The significance of studying abroad**

Under the increasing degree of economic globalization, governments of various countries have been actively expanding foreign exchanges, promoting the internationalization of higher education and the increasingly close educational relations among countries.(Wang & Gao, 2000). At present, with the gradual development of the massification of higher education in China and the increasing pressure of employment, more people choose to study abroad to receive foreign education concepts in order to gain more competitive weight in future employment. In view of the fact that international students can be an important human resource for the country and the huge economic benefits they bring directly, countries have also introduced preferential policies on studying abroad, which has objectively created a favourable environment for studying abroad. (Li, 2013). It is important both for the sending country and the international student to study abroad.

### **2.3.1 Study abroad education provides opportunities for Chinese students to receive advanced**

Chinese students who study abroad are either publicly-funded or self-funded. Most of the publicly funded students are top students in the entrance examinations of other countries and regions, and these students are attracted to study in other countries and regions with generous offers, which makes it possible for these students to receive a better education than they could at home. Due to the shortage of higher education resources in China, a significant number of students are not yet able to receive satisfactory higher education, and studying abroad provides educational opportunities for this group of students as well. Self-funded students account for nine out of ten of all international students in China, and a large proportion of self-funded students are those who did not get into top universities in China or who failed in the entrance examinations. Studying abroad gives this group of students access to good learning opportunities that are not available at home.(Li, 2013).

### **2.3.2 Returning students have become pillar talents for China's social development**

After returning to China, students who have received higher education abroad have played an important role in economic construction and scientific research, and have become important talents for China's social development. At present, 77.6% of the presidents of universities directly under the Ministry of Education are returned overseas students; 80.5% of the academicians of the two academies directly under the Ministry of Education are returned overseas students; 62.3% of the doctoral supervisors are returned overseas students; 71.7% of the directors of key research laboratories and other academic backbones are returned overseas students. The proportion of doctoral supervisors who have studied abroad has also reached 62.3%; 71.7% of the academic backbone such as directors of key research laboratories are returned students."(Li. G, 2015) This is only the number of returnees working in universities, but it is already a glimpse of the contribution made by returnees. They have become an important force in the economic development and construction of China.

## **2.4 The Current Situation of Chinese Students Studying Abroad**

With China's rapid social and economic development and increasing emphasis on education, China has seen an upsurge of studying abroad. According to the "Report on the Development of Studying Abroad in China" released in 2019 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020), the total number of Chinese students studying abroad in 2019 was 703,500, an increase of 41,400 or 6.25% over the previous year; the total number of all kinds of students returning to China was 580,300, an increase of 60,900 or 11.73% over the previous year. From 1978 to 2019, the total number of all types of students studying abroad reached 6,560,600, of which 1,656,200 were studying or researching at relevant stages abroad; 4,904,400 had completed their studies, and 4,231,700 chose to return to their home countries after completing their studies, accounting for 86.28% of the group that had completed their studies.(Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020).

However, with the advancement of China's education reform, colleges and universities pay more attention to improving the comprehensive abilities of students and cultivating applied talents, which is conducive to the employment and career development of students after graduation.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Questionnaire**

This article takes the students in Jiaying University as the research object. Jiaying University is located in Meizhou, Guangdong Province, China. This article aims to understand what factors affect the students' intention to study abroad, and on what degree different students view on studying abroad. In this way, we can have a more comprehensive understanding of the current willingness and influencing factors of university students to study abroad. Meanwhile, in the current environment where the number of students studying abroad has slowed down, as a window for foreign exchanges, we shall also have an idea what universities should do to improve the internationalization and increase the willingness of students to study abroad.

This study adopted a questionnaire method. Questionnaire is the most commonly used tool for descriptive surveys, because it not only works best with standardized questions which will be interpreted the same way by all respondents, but also is good for exploratory research that requires large numbers of open-ended questions. According to Cowie et al. (2002), the advantages of questionnaire method are that the researcher can collect large amounts of data in a relatively short space of time; also, anonymity of participants can be assured. It is easy to carry out statistical analysis of a range of factors, including gender, status and age.

In order to get the useful information, the questionnaire should be made sense to the participants. If the questionnaire design is not validated, it will waste the time of participants. Thus, it is important to pilot questionnaire to make it effective. Here, the questionnaire is designed from three dimensions of personal factors, family factors and external environment. The respondents need to fill in basic information and answer questions about the factors influencing students' intention to study abroad. Then valid questionnaires were collected, and the main factors that affect Jiaying University students to study abroad were analyzed. Based on this, suggestions on how to improve the level of international education were put forward.

#### **3.2 Data collection**

The analysis of the questionnaire data relied mainly on descriptive and comparative analysis. In this article, it takes the students in Jiaying University as sample. 500 questionnaires were distributed, and 455 questionnaires were returned, with 455 valid questionnaires and a 91% return rate. After obtaining the questionnaire data, the first part of the questionnaire was analysed descriptively to understand the basic situation of the samples. The second part of the questionnaire was analysed by weighted average summation and ranking with reference to the Likert scale. The third part of the questionnaire was also analysed by weighted average summation, and then compared with the results of the second part to draw corresponding conclusions.

### **4. Results and discussion**

The main influencing factors that affect the decision-making process of university students to study abroad include macro factors such as the international environment, educational policies and educational levels, as well as micro factors such as personal situations, family backgrounds, and the internationalization of colleges and universities. Therefore, the

influencing factors of Jiaying University students' decision-making process of studying abroad will be discussed from both the micro-level such as personal and family factors, school policy factors, and the macro-level of international factors.

#### **4.1 Personal and family factors to study abroad**

Jiaying University students' personal foreign language capacity, family economic status, and parents' education significantly affect their decision-making behavior to study abroad.

##### **4.1.1 Personal foreign language capacity**

As an important part of foreign colleges and universities deciding whether to accept international students, academic performance is a factor that every student who is willing to study abroad must refer to. Of the 455 students surveyed, 251 believed that academic performance was the biggest issue affecting overseas education. Personal capacities such as foreign language capacity, learning, as well as personal subjective willingness have a positive impact on their willingness to study abroad. 75.16% of the students take foreign language proficiency as one of the important criteria for studying abroad. Students with good foreign language communication skills are more confident and more inclined to go abroad to learn about foreign cultures. Therefore, foreign language proficiency is positively correlated with students' willingness.

Students with excellent academic performance during the university period have more opportunities to apply for and are more likely to be awarded with individual or on-campus scholarships, which will relieve the financial pressure of individuals studying abroad to a certain extent. Meanwhile, those with excellent academic performance enjoy a high pass rate for IELTS, TOEFL and other certificates. When studying abroad, they are more adaptive to solve problems such as language barriers and cultural differences. Thus, academic performance has a significant impact on students' motivation to study abroad.

##### **4.1.2 Family economic conditions**

Economic conditions are the biggest problem affecting overseas studies, accounting for the highest proportion, reaching 86.59%. The family's economic base determines the student's study path and choice, and the expenses of studying abroad is mainly provided by the family. The investigation on the family background of the students showed that among the four different groups of students with annual family income of 100,000 yuan and below to more than 500,000 yuan, the number of students with 100,000 yuan and below accounted for the highest proportion, reaching 64.4%. While the proportions are 30.77%, 3.08%, and 1.76% for the annual family income of 100,000 yuan to 300,000 yuan, 300,000 yuan to 500,000 yuan, and more than 500,000 yuan respectively, showing a vast majority of well-off families while a small minority of middle- and high-income families. The higher the family's annual income level, the less financial pressure to study abroad, and the greater the possibility of students studying abroad.

##### **4.1.3 Parents' education background**

According to the data, the parents of the surveyed students have different levels of education. 0.66% of the students have parents with overseas study backgrounds; the number of parents is

the largest with education background of junior high school, primary school and below, accounting for about 60%; only around 10% of the students have parents with college, undergraduate or postgraduate education background. In view of parents' expectation that their children grow up to be talents, the educational background of parents may affect students' decisions to study abroad.

In terms of objective conditions, students' academic performance, foreign language proficiency, education background of students' parents, and family income have obvious influences on students' willingness to study abroad. Moreover, the role of high income in promoting the choice of studying abroad has continued to be prominent over the years, and studying abroad has become an important path for the dominant class to maintain their status to some extent. The gap between urban and rural areas in China has resulted in the differentiation of economic development and educational resources. There are also differences in values and living environment to varying degrees due to geographical relations. According to the cultural reproduction model, when parents have a higher cultural and educational background, their children will have a greater advantage in educational opportunities via educational expectations, cultural capital, human capital and other aspects.

#### **4.2 University policy factors to study abroad**

Jiaying University has established exchanges and cooperation with universities or institutions in 23 countries and regions so far, including the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Germany. Multi-level and multi-type overseas study and exchange programs are available for students of various levels and types, such as half-year non-academic exchange student programs, overseas internship and employment programs, and vacation overseas study tour programs. Jiaying University provides a good platform for students to study abroad during their university period.

The survey showed that 29.67% of the students were satisfied with the international academic activities of our university, and 47.91% were basically satisfied. 63.08% of the students knew little about the internationalization of the university; 33.19% of the students had a general idea and only 3.47% of the students knew very well. In addition, 61.1% of the students did not know about the relevant national, provincial and municipal policies for studying abroad; 34.07% of the students had a general idea, and only 4.84% said they knew very well.

In terms of the channels for learning about study abroad programs, 72.09% of the students learned through WeChat, QQ and other online platforms, while 38.02% and 44.62% of the students learned from counselors, teachers or on-campus lectures. Students acquired information about going abroad mainly through the network, supplemented by offline channels. The main channels for students to obtain information from the university are publicity posters, teacher guidance, and on-campus propaganda. The forms in which the university promotes international exchange projects are relatively single and unattractive to students, so that students fail to obtain official information from diversified forms of publicity.

Students are unable to learn about the latest trends of international education in our university as well as international academic, scientific and technological developments in time. Due to limitation in acquiring information about studying abroad, Students' international



awareness and communication skills need to be improved, and their international vision needs to be broadened.

### **4.3 International factors to study abroad**

Expected destination countries for studying abroad vary from different students. The top three destinations they intend to visit are: developed countries in Europe such as the United Kingdom and Switzerland, developed countries in Asia such as Japan and South Korea, as well as the United States and Canada. Students tend to study in developed English-speaking countries and developed regions in East Asia in terms of the comprehensive strength, geographical location, language environment, and cultural and historical ties with China.

The high teaching quality and academic atmosphere, different life experiences, and favorable political environment in the destination countries or regions contribute as a pulling force for students to study abroad. The data shows that 90.11% of the students consider the political security of the destination country as the most concerned factor in their decision to study abroad, while 86.81% of the students regard the country or region's attitude towards China as the most concerned factor. As for studying abroad, both economic pressure and personal safety abroad are taken into consideration. Changes in the social and political environment and national political stance have an important impact on the orientation of university students' values and international outlook, which are the external factors that affect their decisions to study abroad.

In the meantime, students pay more attention to the foreign student policies and education standards of the destination country or region, accounting for 79.34% and 79.12% respectively. The survey on the factors students are concerned about destination institutions shows that more than 80% of the students choose the cost and learning environment (teachers, professional courses, cultural experience courses) as the most concerned factors, while 61.98% of the students are most concerned about the institution's world ranking, popularity and other reputation competitiveness. Moreover, improving professional quality and innovative thinking, as well as high teaching qualities are also the main incentives for students to study abroad. The above data reflects the students' needs for high-quality international research and teaching. They hope to learn foreign advanced educational concepts and scientific knowledge, experience different academic atmospheres, teaching methods, management systems, and cultural life, thus showing obvious preferences for studying abroad.

## **5. Recommendations**

### **5.1 Improve students' learning and foreign language abilities**

Academic performance and language and cultural factors directly affect students' willingness to study abroad. Students' academic performance, comprehensive assessment and foreign language abilities are important factors that affect their intention to study abroad. Students need to make full use of classroom resources and network resources, improve their learning abilities and foreign language proficiency, pay attention to updated news on politics, economy, culture, technology, etc., keep pace with the times, and cultivate their own awareness of internationalization.

Relying on the School of Foreign Languages, universities should regularly hold English

Corners or English Weeks for teachers and students, promote foreign teaching forms, provide science popularization for cultural customs and legal differences in different countries, and offer opportunities to experience different cultures. Besides, universities should further improve the quality of teaching, improve the degree of professional matching of students, and connect their domestic majors with foreign majors. Also universities should enhance exchanges with foreign universities in terms of teaching quality and professional standards, providing students with chances to experience different academic atmospheres, teaching methods, management systems and cultural life.

Meanwhile, universities should cooperate with third-party institutions for studying abroad to provide TOEFL, IELTS and other English qualification training for students, improve students' enthusiasm and skills in learning and applying English, and improve students' overall English level and willingness to study abroad.

## **5.2 Broaden students' horizons and enrich the international atmosphere of the campus**

Universities should regularly communicate with foreign universities and keep update their specific situations and deepen exchanges and cooperation with them. Presently, our university has carried out overseas exchange programs with the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, Italy, Canada, Malaysia and other countries and regions, offering students with more choices for overseas exchanges. The international exchange program agreements reached between our university and these foreign universities have realized mutual recognition of credits and exchange of majors, reducing the time cost for students to exchange abroad.

In addition, on the basis of the original foreign exchange projects, our university will strengthen communications with foreign universities and expand the ways of cooperation and exchanges with them. We shall enrich the international cultural activities on campus and provide students with a richer way to experience the international atmosphere, such as opening lectures, holding on-site consultation meetings or simulating international conferences for research subject discussions.

## **5.3 Establish and improve the student-home-university exchange mechanism**

The cooperation with students' parents in the promotion of international exchange programs provides a strong support for students to go abroad and communicate. The university maintains effective communication with families, keeps abreast of the situation of students studying and living abroad, and provides timely assistance.

## **5.4 Increase publicity efforts and expand understanding channels**

Universities should increase the publicity of international education, play a guiding role in students' willingness to go abroad for exchanges, and regard it as an important part of cultivating international high-quality talents. Besides, universities should broaden the ways for students to learn about studying abroad, provide detailed information, and let more students know about international exchange programs. All secondary schools and foreign affairs offices should help popularize knowledge and policies related to studying abroad and provide relevant guidance for overseas exchanges and assist students in planning for going abroad.

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