

Chinese Students' Postgraduate Education Choices in China: An Exploratory Study of Their Key Influences

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Summary

This developmental paper explores some of the reasons underpinning Chinese students' choice of domestic postgraduate education. The exploratory qualitative data suggests a number of potential influences which are: (i) The financial cost of tuition fees and living expenses; (ii) How students perceive their employment prospects to be improved once they have completed their postgraduate studies; (iii) The desire to acquire greater levels of knowledge allied to a study interest; (iv) The influence of referents; (v) A desire to study at a university close to their family residence, and (vi) the academic reputation of the chosen university. These exploratory findings act as a starting point in further theoretical development and future empirical data collection.

Word Count: 1911

Introduction

There is a growing literature on the reasons why Chinese students choose to study overseas (Duan, 1997; Yang, 2007; Zhao, 2013; Zhu, 2014). There is also more general critical discourse on whether students can be viewed as consumers of university services (e.g. Bowden, 2011; Clayson and Haley, 2005; Eddie, 2013; Molesworth et al, 2011; Redding 2005), as well as debates about the marketisation of higher education (e.g Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006; Lowrie and Hemsley-Brown, 2011). However there is significantly less literature on the reasons underpinning Chinese students' choices pertaining to higher education within China, especially at postgraduate level. This is somewhat surprising given marketing academics are increasingly interested in the Chinese student consumer in order to build wider theoretical understanding of Chinese consumer behaviour and markets (Erevelles et al, 2001; Frank et al, 2013; Zhou et al, 2010). From a marketing perspective this under-researched area has implications for: (i) understanding the influences behind Chinese domestic choice of higher education services, and (ii) for building theoretical understanding of the 18-25 Chinese consumer. In an attempt to go some way to alleviate this gap in the literature, this developmental paper attempts to explore some of the influences behind why Chinese students choose to study at postgraduate level in the domestic Chinese higher education market. This is particularly important given the very substantial growth of the Chinese higher education sector and student numbers over the last 20 years, coupled with the desire by the Chinese authorities to build a smaller number of elite level and world leading institutions (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2012; Ngok, 2008; Wang et al, 2012; Zhang et al, 2012).

Literature Review

The influences for Chinese students' postgraduate education choice in China are varied. Appendix 1 presents some of the influences that emerge from the literature (e.g. work prospects, trend of taking the National Entrance Examination for Postgraduate (NEEP), study ability, study interest, academic reputation of institution, university location, influence of referents etc). They are classified according to influencers underpinning a decision to: (i) complete postgraduate studies; (ii) choose a particular university/ college, and (iii) choose a particular course.

Lu (2007) analysed the motivation and influencing factors for college students preparing for the NEEP. Lu (2007) found five factors that can influence students' motivation to complete the NEEP. They are academic reputation, work prospects, parents' expectation, the city where the selected university is located, and the increasing trend of taking the NEEP. Moreover, Zhu et al. (2010) found that the most important motives for postgraduate study were study interest, possibility of finding a better job, and acquiring a higher degree. The top three important factors affecting institution selection include: (i) academic reputation; (ii) favoured city where the selected institution is located, and (iii) the selected institution location being not far away from home or relatives. For selecting a specific course, the top three important factors are: personal preference, academic reputation, and perceived work prospect enhancement. Study cost is also important to their study decision. There were 32% of respondents who deemed that the cost of study (i.e. tuition fee) is very important. There were 60% of respondents who claimed their consideration of study cost influenced their decision when sitting the NEEP, but nevertheless they did not regard the cost as the most important factor. Just 7.5% of respondents did not see the cost as a problem at all. There were 85% of respondents who indicated that their parents would cover the cost of study (Zhu et al, 2010).

Wang and Lin's (2009) study of motivations to complete the NEEP found that 33% of respondents chose postgraduate study to "further improve or enhance [their] own knowledge", and 51.8% viewed postgraduate education as a "higher starting point for finding a better job". The motivations for success at the NEEP varied. The majority (61.6% respondents) stated they would "try [their]... best regardless of the result". Whilst 29.5% respondents stated "I will pass NEEP by any cost". When asked "when you are preparing NEEP, what do you worry most [about] which may cause the failure of your NEEP", many respondents chose "poor studying environment" and "pressure of

family economic burden". In addition, study competency can greatly influence the decision of whether to take the NEEP, with academically capable students more likely to participate (Wang and Lin, 2009). Wang and Wang (2002) found that many NEEP applicants believe that they can gain competitive advantages in the job market after they acquire a Master's degree, while some other students think that future job promotion opportunities are likely to be enhanced with a higher degree. Many studies have found the importance of the city where the selected university is located (Li and Ren, 2013; Lu, 2007; Wang and Wang, 2002; Zhu, et al. 2010).

Method

Data was collected by way of semi-structured interviews with 8 respondents who were presently undergraduate students at Chinese universities, but intended to go on to postgraduate education in China in due course. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data analysis was undertaken in line with principles in Miles and Huberman (1984). The interviews were conducted in Mandarin although translated into English for data analysis purposes.

Findings- Data Analysis and Interpretation

The exploratory data suggests that for postgraduate study in China the following influences may be important:

- (1) *The financial cost of tuition fees and living expenses.*
- (2) *How students perceived their employment prospects to be improved once they have completed their postgraduate education in China.* Respondents typically viewed the acquisition of a higher degree as a precursor for enhanced employment prospects within China. This is linked to a perception amongst some participants that there is a growing trend in Chinese society of obtaining a postgraduate education.
- (3) *The desire to acquire greater levels of knowledge allied to a study interest.*
- (4) *The significant influence of referents, most notably by friends, and of secondary influence family and university undergraduate tutor advice.* The influence of friends is demonstrated in the following data:

"I like this university and I have many friends here who decided to stay."

"I met my friend ... and borrowed a lot of books from her and she gave me advice. After I lived in ... [the] University for a few days, I firmly decided to apply ... because I really love the study atmosphere there. With my friend's help, I attended a few lectures in ... and collected some important studying material for the NEEP."

The influence of existing university tutors is well demonstrated from the following data:

"Students are usually recommended to their own university because the university wants to retain good students. But students can also contact other universities and then be recommended to another university...My university tried to retain me. They didn't want me to go. My university did not have good Master's applicants. Most of the applicants were from poorer universities... Therefore, they tried to retain good students within the university".

- (5) *A desire to study at a university close to their family residence to avoid the need to travel and live away from home.* As a respondent remarked:

"I don't like to go too far away [from] my hometown for a long time"

- (6) *The academic reputation of the chosen university in China.* This was influenced by a desire to study at a more prestigious university that was likely to be better resourced and have an overall better study and learning environment.

Discussion and Theoretical Implications

The financial cost issue is a theme which has emerged in the work of a number of authors (e.g. Li, 2007; Wang et al, 2014; Zhang, 2014). For example Li (2007) finds that there is a tendency for the higher ranking universities to charge lower fees than lower ranking universities because the higher ranked universities are better resourced. This inverse price-quality relationship is interesting in light of Erevelles et al (2001, p.179) finding that "there is no direct relationship between price

perceptions and product quality perceptions for Chinese consumers”. There is a tendency for lower income families to shoulder higher university education fees if their children are attending lower ranked universities and colleges, leading Zhang (2014) to consider the impact of affordability of higher education for low and middle income families in China. This issue may provide a partial explanation to our finding that the academic reputation was important for Chinese students seeking postgraduate opportunities. Hence generally speaking if students can access higher ranked institutions this may reduce the financial burden on themselves and their families. Linked to this may be a theme which emerges in our data relating to the need to live near families when studying at postgraduate level, as a means by some respondents to reduce postgraduate costs.

How students perceived their employment prospects to be enhanced after postgraduate education is a theme which aligns with debate in the extant literature regarding the rate of return to educational expenditure in an increasingly competitive employment market in China. For example Li et al (2007, p.691) assert that “the higher the educational level, the greater the employment probability. The starting salary is also higher”. They furthermore assert that “the reputation of the institution has a significant and positive impact on employment probability and salary” (Li et al, 2007, p.691). Hence Li et al (2007) suggest that the rate of return to higher education is positive, although Zhong (2011) notes that the rate of return is contingent on the quality and ranking of the university attended. It should however be noted that these findings seem to refer to undergraduate rate of returns. Hence there is further research required in relation to the rate of return to postgraduate education.

The influence of peer referents which emerges from the data is also an interesting theoretical direction. For example Han and Li (2009) have found that in a study of undergraduate Chinese students living in university accommodation that females are more likely to respond to peer influences than male students. Despite this, the impact of peers’ and superiors’ influences on consumption behaviour in Chinese postgraduate higher education choice has been under-researched.

Conclusion, Limitations and Future Research

This paper commenced by reviewing the literature on the influences for domestic postgraduate study in China. Our exploratory empirical data showed that influences may include: (i) The financial cost of tuition fees and living expenses; (ii) How students perceive their employment prospects to be improved once they have completed their postgraduate studies; (iii) The desire to acquire greater levels of knowledge allied to a study interest; (iv) The influence of referents; (v) A desire to study at a university close to their family residence, and (vi) the academic reputation of the chosen university. The limitations of this study are that the sample size is small, and as such cannot explain fully the motivations behind Chinese students' choice of domestic education. There are inevitably a number of other important factors that influence Chinese postgraduate student choice which this research has not surfaced. This is because the data collection was part of a larger doctoral study with a much wider research agenda than the topic of this manuscript. For this reason this manuscript is a developmental paper which the authors are considering developing further. A suggested methodological approach would be for a larger qualitative data collection phase aimed at further understanding the drivers behind domestic Chinese students' choice of postgraduate education. A large sample size quantitative data collection phase could be later implemented. Hence this developmental paper acts a basis for further conceptual development, and future data collection and analysis.

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Appendix 1

Influences	Influences Behind a Decision of Studying for a Postgraduate course	Influences Behind Students' Choice of University/ College	Influences Behind Students' Choice of Course
Work prospects	Li (2007); Li and Ren (2013); Lu (2007); Wang and Lin (2009); Wang and Wang (2002); Zhu et al. (2010); Zhu (2014)		Li and Ren (2013); Zhu et al. (2010).
The trend of taking the NEEP	Li and Ren (2013); Lu (2007)		
Study ability	Wang and Lin (2009)	Li and Ren (2013)	
Study Interest (Knowledge acquisition)	Li and Ren (2013); Lu (2007); Wang and Lin (2009); Zhu et al. (2010)		Li and Ren (2013); Zhu et al. (2010)
Academic reputation (i.e. academic reputation of institution and faculty)		Li and Ren (2013); Zhu et al. (2010)	Zhu et al. (2010)
The city where selected university is located		Li and Ren (2013); Lu (2007); Wang and Wang (2002); Zhu, et al. (2010)	
Influences of normative referents (i.e. parents' expectations and financial support)	Lu (2007); Li and Ren (2013); Wang and Lin (2009)	Li and Ren (2013)	Li and Ren (2013)