

10-19-2015

A Case Study of the Influence of Student Recruitment Agencies on Chinese Students' Decision-Making When Pursuing Higher Education in English-Speaking Countries

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A Case Study of the Influence of Student Recruitment Agencies on
Chinese Students' Decision-Making When Pursuing Higher Education in
English-Speaking Countries

By

Yiting Jiang

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Faculty of Education and Academic Development
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Education
at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2015

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September 9, 2015

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ABSTRACT

This case study examines in what ways student recruitment agencies influence the decision-making of Chinese students when pursuing higher education in English-speaking countries. Research shows that the decision-making process, involving selection of programs, institutions, and destinations for international students, is influenced by various factors (Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Hazelkorn, 2011; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Pimpa, 2003). However, the extent to which student recruitment agencies influence the decisions of Chinese students has not been sufficiently studied. Research participants were 25 Chinese students who were using one student recruitment agency located in Northwest China. Data were collected through a questionnaire and interviews. The results indicate that the degree of influences of the agency on students' final decisions depends on the degree of the knowledge students have on the process of studying abroad. This study potentially benefits higher educational institutions, who can adjust academic programs and marketing strategies to attract more international students.

DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my professors and mentors who enlighten me to pursue my study in education; and to my parents who always support me with greatest love in the world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to people who have guided me through the completion of the thesis. I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Zuo Chen Zhang, whose continual feedback, guidance, patience, support, and willingness to let me explore my interest in education and encouragement to complete this study. I would like to thank my second reader Dr. Jonathan G. Bayley, who spent great time working on details with patience, provided valuable suggestions to my thesis. I would also like to thank Dr. Diana Kao from the Odette School of Business, who generously agreed to be the external reader in the thesis committee, enlightened me as to improving my work. It would not be possible for me to complete the thesis without the guidance and support from my thesis committee. I would like to thank Faculty of Education, where I spent two years with great memories, provided assistance in many ways to support their students.

I would like to thank my participants, whose contribution in this study is deeply appreciated. I would also like to thank my friends who helped me through hard times. It is grateful to have them in my life.

My sincere thanks to my grandmother and parents, whose continuous support, encouraged me to pursue my goal in education.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CET4	College English Test Level Four
ESL	English as a Second Language
HEI	Higher Education Institution
CNY	Chinese Yuan Renminbi
TEI	Tertiary Education Institution
UK	The United Kingdom
USA	United States of the America

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Globalization and internationalization create greater possibilities with respect to information sharing, technology, ideas, and the flow of people among nations (Chin & Ching, 2009; Knight, 2014). Knowledge, as an industry itself, has become the major input for productivity (Kurtoglu 2008, as cited in Gul et al., 2010). Kafotos (as cited in Gul et al., 2010) argues that higher education institutions (HEIs), as the centre of information sharing, are important in the area of creativity and innovation. International higher education has significantly increased in the context of economic globalization and has provided more opportunities for international students (Wu, 2014).

International students are those “who are not residents of their country of study or those who received their prior education in another country” (OECD, 2011). The number of international students, who are interested in pursuing studies out of their home country, increased to 3.4 million in 2009, up from 2.1 million in 2002 (Choudaha & Chang, 2012). According to Choudaha and Chang (2012), the four leading destination countries are the United States of America (USA), the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, and Canada. From 2002 to 2009, the number of international student enrolment in Canada increased from 52,650 to 87,798 (59.9%), followed by the increase in the UK, which was from 227,273 to 368,968 (61.6%); the number of enrolments in Australia and the US increased from 179,619 to 257,637 (69.7%), and from 582,996 to 660,581 (88.3%) respectively (Choudaha & Chang, 2012).

These trends are a result of the popularity of English language as the *lingua franca*¹ within the global context (Wilkins & Huisman, 2011). International students, who learn English as a foreign language, want to acquire English primarily as a

communication tool rather than as a means of acquiring textbook knowledge (Kell & Vogl, 2012). The possibility of communicating with native English speakers on a daily basis is more attractive for international students than going to non-English speaking countries (Kell & Vogl, 2012). Chinese students make up a large portion of the international student body, thus significantly influencing the enrolment numbers in HEIs, which in turn creates a greater demand for English as a Second Language (ESL) courses (Choudaha & Chang, 2012; Kell & Vogl, 2012).

China has seen a dramatic economic growth since 1979 (Mazzarol, Soutar, Smart & Choo, 2001), which has supported cross-border higher education and students' mobility (Li & Bray, 2007). The increasing number of wealthy families in China allows students to afford study overseas (2007).

During the period of 1978 to 1999, 320,000 Chinese students were enrolled in different countries overseas (Li & Bray, 2007). China was the major supplier of international students in other countries in 2000, and it was also the largest source of students in the USA (2007). From 2003 to 2013, the number of Chinese students studying abroad rose from 117,307 to 413,900 (28.3%); There were 651,260 Chinese students enrolled in postgraduate programs abroad and the number raised to 1,793,953 in 2013 (China Statistical Yearbook, 2014).

A greater demand of learning English, peer competition, increased family income, and dissatisfaction with the Chinese higher education, are all reasons for the increase in Chinese students' global mobility (Choudaha & Chang, 2012; Kell & Vogl, 2012; Mazzarol, Soutar, Smart, & Choo, 2001). These factors are from the demand side, which motivate Chinese students to study abroad (Findlay, 2010). For instance, peer

competition is evident from increasing enrolments in HEIs in China, which grew from 2.9 million in 1995, to 13.3 million in 2004; as well as increasing number of applications through the National Entrance Examination, which has increased from 3 million in 1998, to 8.7 million in 2005 (OECD, 2009). Meanwhile, Chinese students from the middle class experience unequal opportunities in their home country (Kell & Vogl, 2012). Therefore, seeking educational opportunities overseas improves the financial status of the next generation of the Chinese middle class (Hazelkorn, 2011; Waters, 2006, as cited in Findlay, King, Smith, Geddes & Skeldon, 2011). With the expansion of Chinese higher education, an increasing number of Chinese students are able to enter domestic HEIs. Therefore, this results in more competition among peers in the labour market. Obtaining higher education overseas creates better opportunities for Chinese students within the domestic labour market and increases the possibilities of immigrating to other countries (Kell & Vogl, 2012). The demand of higher education is influenced by the following factors: Students' desire for personal achievement, educational and career opportunities, and high expectation from their parents (Parker et al., 2012; Smith & Hu, 2013).

Aspects of the supply-side, which refer to HEIs in English-speaking countries, also encourage Chinese students' global mobility (Parker et al., 2012). Chinese students contribute significant financial and cultural capital to host countries (Parker et al., 2012). Recruiting international students has become a pathway for host countries to attract talented students and future skilled workers (Kell & Vogl, 2012).

The growth of international education provides more choices to Chinese students, in academic programs, institutions, and destination countries. However, limited information, language barrier, and changing visa policies complicate the procedure for

Chinese students who wish to go abroad. For these reasons, student recruitment agencies emerged as a business, which provide counselling services, including the selection of destinations and institutions, the arrangement of travelling and accommodation, and the assistance of visa application (Pimpa, 2003; Thomson, R. Hulme, Hulme & Doughty, 2014). The recruitment agencies gain direct information from partner institutions to recruit potential applicants (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Western universities have relied on these agencies to act as brokers. They have attracted a large number of international students through education fairs, which are organized by their partner agencies (Thomson et al., 2014). In addition, Pimpa (2003) argues that educational consultants, working at the recruitment agencies, are also regarded as mentors by students, because of their professional knowledge in this area and their educational background overseas.

Purpose of the Study

The development of student recruitment agencies has influenced international students' decisions (Pimpa, 2003). According to a study conducted by Pimpa (2003), the agencies have more influence on Thai students' decision-making than that of parents or peers. However, research regarding the influence of student recruitment agencies on Chinese students' decision-making is insufficient. This case study helps the research gap by gaining a deeper understanding of Chinese students' decision-making process, especially the influence of student recruitment agencies. The research question is as follows: In what ways do student recruitment agencies influence Chinese students' decision-making process with respect to choosing destinations, HEIs, and programs.

The potential benefit of the study is not only for prospective Chinese international students, but also for HEIs in English-speaking countries regarding their marketing strategies and interaction with student recruitment agencies in China.

Interest in conducting this research came from my previous work experience as an educational consultant, as well as my role as an international student in Canada. From my work experience, I noticed that students could build a trusting relationship with their consultants. However, there are some students who have doubts about choosing recruitment agencies because they are regarded as business brokers.

Outline of Chapters

The research paper incorporates five chapters. The first chapter states reasons for the growth of international education in China in the context of globalization. It is essential to investigate from demand and supply sides, why studying in English-speaking countries has become a trend. Chapter two outlines a review of the extant literature with regard to aspects of the education system in China, existing pressures for Chinese students, and differences in teaching pedagogies and learning styles between China and Western countries. It gives a further explanation of reasons why students pursue higher education overseas instead of in the home country. Chapter two outlines the development of student recruitment agencies, in order to explain why using the agencies has become a common practice, when students prepare for studying abroad. This chapter also presents literature relating to international students' decision-makings. In order to undertake this study, it is crucial to illustrate what research has been completed in this area. The development of the push and pull factors have contributed to many studies aiming to understand international students' mobility, which is regarded as a guiding factor for

research in studying influence on international students' decision-making. The study focuses on the process of decision-making rather than the result. Therefore, in chapter three, I demonstrate the research methodology and procedure that I used in this study. The combination of a survey questionnaire and interviews allows me to investigate participants' decision-making process individually. Chapter four outlines the data analysis procedure for this study. The findings of this study are also presented in this chapter. It contains quotations and tables to demonstrate how the recruitment agents influence students' decisions. Chapter five discusses main partners and components of decision-making process, differences and similarities of the influence from the agents' suggestions between undergraduate and graduate applicants, as well as the limitation of the study and the implication for future research.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The decision-making process, for international students wishing to study abroad, is complex and time-consuming (Hazelkorn, 2011). According to Hazelkorn (2011), students and parents may take risks when they make the investment. Kell and Vogl (2012) suggest that international students, who are funded by their parents, undertake financial risks due to the high cost of tuition fees, living expenses, and exchange rate between countries. The extent literature identifies more than 20 areas that influence international students' decision-making (Chen & Zimitat, 2006). As stated by Cubillo, Sanchez and Cervino (2006), students consider international education as a means towards self-enhancement. One of their aims for investing in higher education overseas is to increase the potential for employment opportunities in the home countries (Cubillo et al., 2006). Thus, future employers value HEIs overseas greatly, which influences international students' decision as to where to study (Kotler & Fox, 1995; Mazzarol & Hosie, 1996). Peer competition has increased in China, due to the growing number of applications in domestic HEIs and the job market, thus increasing the demand for higher education abroad (Choudaha & Chang, 2012). Students experience pressures not only from their peers and families, but also from education and employment competitions. In order to figure out the source of pressure and intentions of students studying abroad, it is necessary to understand China's educational structure and differences of teaching pedagogies and learning style between Eastern and Western countries.

China's Education Structure

The Chinese education system has a "12+4" model, which means six years of compulsory primary school; three years of compulsory junior high school; three years of

senior high school; and four years of tertiary education (Mazzarol, Soutar, Smart & Choo, 2001). The six years of compulsory primary school addresses Chinese language, mathematics, moral education, physical education, visual arts, and music. Most primary schools also include English language classes in the curriculum. Junior high school adds science (chemistry, physics, and biology) and social sciences (history and politics) subjects into the curriculum. Subject area specialisation starts in senior high school level, which means students may choose their academic area in either ‘Science’ (including chemistry, physics, and biology) or ‘Arts’ (history and politics) (p.11). Senior high school education is considered of a great importance, as it prepares students to enter university having taken the National Entrance Examinations (Mazzarol et al., 2001).

With the implementation of the “12+4” model, China has achieved universal participation of primary school (99% students reaching grade 5). Seventy three percent of students were enrolled in secondary high school (2000 to 2005) and the adult literacy rate was 91% from the period of 2000 to 2004; (95% males and 87% females) (OECD, 2009).

Vocational Education. Vocational education and training schools provide certification and skill acquisition for students who pursue a career in certain professional areas (OECD, 2009).

Gallagher et al. (2009) summarized vocational education schools in China in OECD review by stating the following:

The provision of vocational education and training involves higher vocational institutions (part of the tertiary education system) and secondary polytechnic schools, advanced technical schools, technical schools, employment training centers, private training institutions and enterprise-based training centers.

Technical schools and employment training centers adhere to the National Occupational Qualification Certification System whereby trainees are required to obtain an occupational qualification certificate as well as a diploma. Since 2000, entry-level certificates are required for ninety professions. The vocational qualification system comprises five levels: elementary, intermediate, advanced grade skilled worker, technician, and senior technician. Elementary (36%) and intermediate grade skill workers (48%) account for some 85% of people with vocational certificates, with technician (1%) and senior technicians (0.1%) in short supply (p. 7).

Tertiary Education. The tertiary education system in China consists of “regular tertiary education institutions (TEIs), adult tertiary education, in-service training for vocational qualifications, and preparatory programs for State-administered College level examinations for self-taught candidates, distance education and internet-based education” (OECD, 2009, p. 7). The rapid growth of student enrolments in regular TEIs has shown the importance of achieving higher education in China. From 2003 to 2014, the number of student enrolments in TEIs has risen up from 382.2 to 699.8 per 10,000 people (China Statistical Yearbook, 2014).

The 211 Project, which was implemented in 1995, provided funding from a pool of 30 billion CNY for 100 universities that specialize in engineering, physical and biology sciences, aimed to improve their facilities and knowledge that required for future economic development in China (Gallagher et al., 2009).

The 985 Project announced in 1998, provided additional funding of 14 million CNY to 36 TEIs, in order to attract internationally renowned professors to China, and to develop international research capacities in these institutions (p. 36).

The National Entrance Examination. To enter higher education in China, students must take the National Entrance Examination, which is known as *gaokao* in China (Davey, Lian & Higgins, 2007). The National Entrance Examination system has been in effect since 1952 as a way of selecting university entrants (Davey et al., 2007). The standardized test evaluates student academic performance and is composed of three main subjects (Chinese, mathematics, and English) and three optional subjects (history, politics, and geography; or biology, chemistry and physics) (Davey et al., 2007).

Cut-off scores are set in different provinces in China as an unconditional requirement to select candidates. A lower minimum score is for the entry to second-tier universities, whereas a higher minimum score is for consideration by first-tier universities, such as universities included in the 211 Project and the 985 Project (Davey et al., 2007). The difference of cut-off scores has led to geographic discrimination (Davey et al., 2007; Wang & Chan, 2005, as cited in Hannum, An & Cherng, 2011, p.11). For instance, students residing in major cities, such as Beijing, have privilege to be accepted by local universities with lower scores than those of students who reside outside of the major cities (Davey et al., 2007). The three primary issues deal with equitable selection opportunities, selection standard, and peer competition stress.

Selection opportunities. The privilege of resident regions creates geographic discrimination. As stated above, students who live in less developed areas have to achieve higher exam scores than students from major cities, in order to enter first-tier

universities (Davey et al., 2007). The system reinforces inequalities for students living in rural areas, where schools have less funding, limited resources and facilities, and make it more challenging for students in less developed areas to enter their preferred institutions (Hannum, An & Cherng, 2011).

Selection standard. The criteria of selecting university entrants depend solely upon the final score of the National Entrance Examination (Davey et al., 2007). Unlike the application and recommendation protocols in Western countries, a student's overall academic performance, extracurricular activities, or personal characteristics (e.g. leadership, communication, and creative abilities) are not usually considered as a part of the selection criteria (Davey et al., 2007). Candidates consider this yearly exam as a "once in a life-time chance", which speaks to the importance of this exam. If students fail to perform well on this exam, they will not have the opportunity to enter their preferred university, which in turn may disappoint their parents and impact their future success (Wang, 2006). As the final score decides student destiny, teachers and students primarily focus is on passing the exam (teaching/studying to the test) rather than on comprehending the content (e.g., problem solving) (Davey et al., 2007).

Peer competition stress. As stated earlier, Chinese parents and students consider higher education as an essential stage in the student's life, in order to succeed in a highly competitive labour market and to improve one's socioeconomic status in society (Liu, 2012). Preparation for the National Entrance Examination starts at an early age and parents hold high expectations for their children to succeed in school (Davey et al., 2007). Chinese children spend most of their time studying and participate in a variety of after-school programs, as well as private tutoring (Liu, 2012). The pressure has led to a

fear of failure, low self-esteem, and psychological problems (Davey, 2005; Davey et al., 2007).

However, the reform of China's education system has made considerable progress in recent years. Since the early 1990's, the education participation rate for students between the ages of 18-22 has increased from approximately 10% to 22% (Gallagher et al., 2009). In recent years, the high demand for education and increasing competition in domestic TEIs has driven students to seek opportunities overseas (Mazzarol et al., 2001). The reason for analysing the aspects of the Chinese education system is to understand their desire for studying abroad, which in turn implies that there is a degree of dissatisfaction with the domestic educational system.

Eastern and Western Teaching Pedagogies and Learning Styles

Smith and Hu (2013) believe that culture and philosophy have influenced teaching pedagogy, learning style, as well as education policy and practice in China. Chinese culture is greatly influenced by Confucianism, which has influenced teaching pedagogies and learning styles in China (Smith & Zhou, 1989). "Confucian values of *Dao* (teachers leading the way), *Ren* (benevolence, love and humaneness towards others), and *Li* (students follow tradition, and not to challenge authority of elders and teachers) influenced the role of teachers in the Chinese culture" (Smith & Hu, 2013, p. 87). The above quotation suggests that Confucianism has created distinct roles for teachers and students. Students do not question teachers' instructions and teachers occupy domination and authority in the classroom (Smith & Hu, 2013). Discipline, strictness, commitment, perseverance, and diligence are considered to be essential qualities of teaching pedagogies and learning styles in China (Smith & Hu, 2013).

In comparison to Confucianism, John Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism has influenced Western culture and educational values (Smith & Hu, 2013). From Dewey's perspective, teachers should create a learning environment, which encourages student engagement in the form of continuous inquiry with others, in order to solve authentic problems (Dewey, 1916; Dewey, 1938).

The differences in teaching pedagogies and learning styles have proven to be a motivating factor in Chinese students' drive to seek post-secondary education outside of their home country. Education in a Western context may lead Chinese students to question earlier learning styles and teaching pedagogies.

English Language Desire

With one quarter of the population in the world being fluent or competent in English, it has become the most widely spoken language globally (Crystal, 2003; Nero, 2012). With the influence of the Open Door Policy² implemented in the late 1970s, English as a primary tool of communication has played a key role to connect China with the rest of the world (Liu, 2012). Therefore, learning English as a foreign language has become a national-wide trend and an asset in labour market for Chinese students (Liu, 2012; Wolff, 2010). The popularity of learning English is evident from kindergarten to university (Wolff, 2010). TEIs require undergraduate students to pass a standardized national English test, known as the College English Test Level Four (CET 4) and employers prefer candidates who have CET 4 certificates (Wolff, 2010). Therefore, English proficiency has been considered a main factor in guaranteeing opportunities and success in both the academic and professional settings (Liu, 2012).

The English language instruction that Chinese students have received prior to post-secondary education has been primarily focused on learning grammar and syntax, but they lack speaking ability and comprehension (Wolff, 2010). Students' lack of an English speaking environment motivates them to seek out opportunities to live and learn in the English speaking setting (Wolff, 2010). English speaking instructors, at the post-secondary level, are in great demand and offer Chinese students a limited opportunity to advance their English skills (Wolff, 2010). After-school activities, such as English clubs and speaking contests, are available for university students (Liu, 2012). However, limited resources and time in this context do not guarantee adequate opportunities for Chinese students to practice on a daily basis (Wolff, 2010). Consequently, pursuing higher education in English-speaking countries has become one of the major options for students who wish to improve their English proficiency (Mazzarol et al., 2001).

The Growth of Student Recruitment Agencies

Student recruitment agencies have become a bridge to assist students seeking higher education opportunities overseas (Zhang & Hagedorn, 2014). Agencies undertake actions on behalf of students to process their applications (Huang, Raimo & Humfrey, 2014). In a study by Zhang and Hagedorn (2011), involving four universities in the USA, two thirds of the Chinese undergraduate applicants used recruitment agencies to assist them in the procedure (as cited in Zhang & Hagedorn, 2014). The findings also show that more than 60 percent of participants would recommend the agencies to other students (Zhang & Hagedorn, 2011). The authors found that students expect agencies to assist them in four areas:

- Contacting with HEIs on behalf of the student

- Selecting suitable institutions or preferred countries
- Preparing application documents
- Preparing visa applications and visa interviews

More than 100 HEIs in the UK recruited international students through recruitment agencies (Matthews, 2012). In Australia, 57.6% of all new international entrants were recruited through agencies (Raimo, 2012). With the trend of receiving higher education abroad, student recruitment agencies have created organized business and play an essential role in the application process for international students (Zhang & Hagedorn, 2014). In China, over 400 student recruitment agencies have registered with the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education of People's Republic of China, 2012). The recruitment agencies offer a variety of services for students, such as providing information (application requirements, language courses, or tuition cost), counselling on HEIs and course options, preparing application documents, airport pickup, home-stay arrangements, and the completion of accommodation applications (Zhang & Hagedorn, 2014).

Students have considered the recruitment agencies as a valuable source of information (Huang et al., 2014). Agents who have experience in studying and living overseas are regarded as mentors (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011; Pimpa, 2003). There is a perceived urgency when pursuing higher education overseas, but because of the lack of knowledge and experience, students choose recruitment agencies to prepare their applications (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011; Zhang & Hagedorn, 2014). In this growing market, both parents and students prefer to choose agencies that are registered with the

Ministry of Education of China and employ experienced agents, in order to ensure a quality service (Huang et al., 2014).

Theoretical Framework

The *push and pull factors* have been developed over the years. These are the factors that encourage Chinese students to apply to study overseas; and the aggressive recruitment undertaken by universities in English-speaking countries. During the 60s and 70s, McMahon (1992) was one of the first researchers to study international student mobility (Wilkins & Huisman, 2011). McMahon's (1992) push factors suggest that international students' mobility depends on the home country's level of economic wealth, the extent of commitment to education from the government, and the availability of education opportunities in the home countries. The pull factors indicate that students are attracted by foreign economic development and the scholarship assistance from the destination countries (Wilkins & Huisman, 2011). Altbach (1998) suggested the pull factors relevant to the academic context, such as the availability of research facilities and the diversity of multinational classmates in the host countries. Davis (1995) states that the pull factors encourage students to choose specific destinations or institutions, whereas the push factors motivate students to study abroad even if they do not have a clear plan for their education.

Mazzarol, Kemp, and Savery (1997) suggest that there are three stages when students decide to study abroad (p. 18):

- The decision to continue education
- The decision to study whether in one's home country or overseas
- The choice of a destination country

After the completion of the three stages, students then choose their destination and HEIs. Mazzarol et al. (1997) summarized six factors that influence students' choice of a host country (p. 29):

- The degree of knowledge that students have of their destination countries
- The quality of higher education in that destination
- The recognition of the students' qualifications in the home countries and other countries after graduation
- The influence from parents
- The costs of tuition fees and living expenses in the destination countries
- Living environment (geographic proximity to and social links in their destination countries)

Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) identify four factors relating to HEI selection (p. 87):

- The reputation of the institutions
- The quality and expertise of the faculty
- Whether the students' previous qualifications are recognized by the institutions
- Whether the qualifications of the institutions are recognized by the future employers

The extent literature shows that the perceived reputation of HEIs and the quality of the programs are the major factors to concern when students select destination institutions (Whilkins & Huisman, 2011). HEIs are ranked annually on a number of variables (the reputation of the institution, recent graduates' employment rates, the physical plant, and the quality of courses, etc.) (Hazelkorn, 2011). However, Ramirez and

Berger (2014) argue that a ranking cannot accurately represent the level of expertise of faculties and learning experience at a university.

Family input, peer recommendations, and recruitment agents' suggestions also influence students' choices on HEIs (Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Soutar & Turner, 2002). Pimpa (2003) suggests that there is not enough information available on English-speaking HEIs for international students. Students believe that recruitment agencies are a primary source to obtain such information. Furthermore, agents also prepare applications on behalf of students (Mazzarol et al., 2001).

Although, the push and pull factors explain international students' mobility, it is necessary to consider possible influences on this phenomenon, influenced by their gender, age, socioeconomic status, and personal experience (Li & Bray, 2007; Wilkins & Huisman, 2011; Kell & Vogl, 2012). Students' decision to study abroad are not only influenced by the level of economic development, the richness of culture experiences, the reputation of HEIs, and the opportunity to continuously practise English, but also by students' family circumstances, their personality, and life experience (Hemsley, 2001; Wilkins & Huisman, 2011).

This study focuses on influences on Chinese students' decision-making process by incorporating the push and pull factors as a theoretical framework. This investigation aims to better understand how recruitment agencies influence students' decision-making process.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative case study conducted at one student recruitment agency, located in Northwest China. The fact that the interviews were on-site helped the researcher to better understand participants' perspectives relating to a certain context (Bogdan & Bilken, 2003; Flyvbjerg, 2006). The purpose of this case study is to have a better understanding on how the selected student recruitment agency influenced students' decision-making, relating to choose destination, institution, and academic program for their higher education abroad.

The Recruitment Procedure

The student recruitment agency is one of the branches of this company. The agency has departments which serve five locations: the USA, the UK, Canada, Australia, and Asia. Because this study focuses on students who intend to study in English-speaking countries, participants were recruited from the US, the UK, Canada, and Australia departments only. Every department has four to five agents, (also called education consultants), who work with students to complete their requirements for going abroad. The entire process includes the following steps: selecting and applying for potential HEIs, choosing an academic institution, and applying for a student visa to the destination country.

During the first stage of this process, students can initially apply for up to five HEIs at the same time, and then select a final institution according to their application results. Agents prepare visa documents and submit applications on behalf of students. When this study was undertaken, the agency had 189 students signed up to begin the process of applying to institutions in English-speaking countries and to receive assistance

in applying for a visa. During the recruitment process, the researcher distributed 30 flyers to students who were above 18 years old. Twenty-eight students replied to my flyer, indicating their willingness to participate in the study and of those, 25 students agreed to complete the full study (questionnaire and interview).

Participants

Of those who agreed to participate in the full study ($n=25$), 16 were females and 9 were males (14 participants aged between 18 to 21; 10 participants aged between 22 to 25; and one participant aged between 26 to 29). Of these, 11 were high school students and 14 university students. With respect to chosen destinations, nine chose Canada, six chose the USA; eight chose the UK; and two chose Australia.

As a part of completing the survey, students provided demographic information. Students' personal lived experiences may have had an impact on decision-making (Cubillo, Sanchez, & Cervino, 2006). Twenty-one students had no work experience, three students had full-time work experience and one student had a part-time job during school holidays. During this time, most participants were preparing take the English proficiency test (*International English Language Testing System - IELTS* or *Test of English as a Foreign Language - TOEFL*), yet they felt more comfortable to complete the survey and interviews in Chinese. Although English and Chinese were available for language options, all participants chose Chinese as their preferred language, stating that they were not confident enough to speak English during the interviews.

Methods

Methods are the specific techniques that are used in research to collect data (Bogdan & Bilken, 2003). In this study, participants completed the study in two steps: a

survey questionnaire and an audio recorded semi-structured interview. The survey and interviews were available in both English and Chinese, giving students a language response option. The Chinese participants chose to complete both options in their native language (Chinese). Twenty-three students agreed to have the interview on the same day as they completed the questionnaire, while two students asked to reschedule the interview for another time.

Survey. The purpose of using a survey questionnaire was to gather participants' demographic information. Participants were asked to respond to questions relating to age, gender, education, work experience, as well as preferred destination. This personal information helps the researcher to understand participants' perspectives in the interview procedure. The survey questionnaire contains open-ended questions, in order to gather more information about the degree of knowledge participants have had on studying abroad before they chose to use the recruitment agency. Each questionnaire was completed in a private room on the research site (recruitment agency). All participants returned the questionnaire in a sealed envelope and placed it in a drop-off box at the agency.

Interview. The researcher interviewed participants individually in the private room at the agency. The participants talked about their perspectives and experience in working with their agents to decide their destination, HEIs, and programs. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes. In order to encourage participants to express their thoughts more deeply in a relaxing environment, the interview started with casual questions (Bodgan & Bilken, 2003).

The combination of two methods is beneficial to understand individuals' perspectives. While most students had a similar outcome (choice of HEI and destination), the process they chose to make the decision varied. The purpose of using two sources of data collection was to gain valuable information on the participants regarding possible changes during decision-making, reasons for these changes, and the influences of the agents on this process. Furthermore, the decision-making process may also vary between undergraduate and graduate applicants; as well as applicants who had work experience and who did not have any work experience. The survey questionnaire allowed the researcher to gather such information, in order to have a better understanding on the decision-making process from participants' different backgrounds. Some questions listed on the interview outline did not apply to every participant. However, the major aim of the interview was to get a deeper understanding of their perspectives. During the interview, participants appeared to be comfortable and took an interest in the process as they discussed aspects of their life experiences.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

I completed the transcription process right after each interview. Having completed an interview I would make adjustments to the next interview protocol as needed (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). As a result of having the transcribed interviews, I was able to have a deeper conversation with my participants with more detailed questions. The transcription process helped me organize the raw data, as well as review my posed questions and improve my interview skills. In order to understand in what ways the agents' suggestions or opinions influence participants' final decisions, it was necessary to investigate what factors affect students' choices when choosing a destination country, a HEI, and academic programs. I collected data relating to the following factors:

- Rationale for pursuing higher education in English-speaking countries
- Reasons for using the student recruitment agency instead of completing the application process themselves
- Factors (other than agents) that influence participants' decisions in choosing destination countries
- Factors (other than agents) that influence participants' decisions when choosing HEIs
- Factors (other than agents) that influence participants' decision relating to choosing a major and program
- The influence that agents have on students' choices of destination countries
- The influence that agents have on students' choices of HEIs
- The influence that agents have on students' decisions, relating to choosing a major and courses

There are two steps in data collection procedure. The first step is to gather demographic information from participants. I consider each participant as an individual. Differences in socioeconomic status, educational background, and personal experience are essential factors that may have an impact on their decision-making. The second step is to seek answers to the eight factors listed above. During data collection, I received 28 questionnaires and interviewed 25 students. Because the questionnaire and the face-to-face interviews were closely linked, only the data acquired from those students who completed both aspects of this investigation were used during the analysis process.

Data Analysis

There were three steps in the coding procedure: data translation, data labelling and grouping, and data comparison. *Open coding (line-by-line coding)* was used during the first-stage of the coding process. *Axial coding* was applied to look for connections among codes that were created during the first coding stage (Kendall, 1999). Corbin and Strauss (1990) addressed that “Open coding is the interpretive process by which data are broken down analytically” (p. 12). It allows researchers to interpret details from the data and to analyse reasons behind the answers (Wicker, 1985; as cited in Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Using open coding allows the researchers to return to the site with deeper questions (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Line-by-line coding, which is used as an approach in open coding, is a means of understanding specific details in transcriptions and categorizing information (Charmaz & McMullen, 2011; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Participants often speak of things that are not relevant to the proposed study. Therefore, line-by-line coding can help researchers filter data and gather important information, based on a response to posed questions (Charmaz & McMullen, 2011).

In order to compare differences and similarities among data, *axial coding* was used at this stage. Strauss and Corbin (1990) define *axial coding* as “a set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories.” (p. 96). After creating labels from raw data via open coding, axial coding allows researchers to compare grouped data to generate categories.

The combination of open coding and axial coding improves the data analysis procedure. It is not only used for breaking down the information, but also for comparing data to make connections.

Translation. Because both the questionnaires and interviews were completed in Chinese, the first task involved translating the Chinese responses into English. After each interview, I translated raw data into English and sent it to participants to ensure the validity of my interpretation. Temple and Young (2004) state that researchers, who can translate data themselves, are the best situated to carry out cross-language research, because they interact with participants and understand the expressed intentions within a given context. With the help of on-site notes, I was able to translate difficult raw data resulting from linguistics and culture differences between Chinese and English. Generally, participants agreed with my translation, with the exception of a very few changes.

Data labelling and grouping. The next step was to label and group translated data. Line-by-line coding was used during this process. By reading through the transcript, I was able to highlight keywords and to capture important phrases to create subthemes. The following exchange clarifies this process:

Author: Why do you want to get your Master’s degree abroad instead of in China?

Student: I think because I am an open-minded person. So I don't think I actually can fit in my peers or get noticed by my teachers [in China]. I'm more interested in experiencing an open-minded³ teaching style because sometimes I don't really agree with what my teachers taught me.

In this example, "open-minded³ teaching style" was highlighted, and from the transcript, a subtheme named "different teaching pedagogies and critical thinking" was created. This procedure was repeated until I reached data saturation. This means that there was no new subtheme found (Khandkar, 2009).

Data comparison. After labelling and grouping all translated data, similar subthemes were grouped together and a theme was created for each group. During this stage, axial coding was used to analyze similarities and differences among data.

Participants expressed different views in why they chose certain destination countries.

Student 1: I thought about going to the US but later I changed my mind because of the safety issues. People are allowed to carry guns there and I've seen news about shooting cases on campus. So I decided to go to Canada instead.

Student 2: I want to go to Canada because I like its natural environment. I watch TV shows about Canada and I think it's beautiful there.

Student 3: I chose to go to Canada because the city I am going to doesn't have as many Chinese students as other cities do. I think language environment is very important for me to improve my oral English. I know many Chinese students.

They speak Chinese to each other even if they are abroad. I don't think it's helpful for improving their English skills.

The three students quoted above talked about why they chose Canada as their destination. During the labelling process, I specified “safety environment” for *student 1*; “natural environment” for *student 2*; and “language environment” for *student 3*. To compare the data, it is obvious to find similarities among three subthemes. Therefore, an “environment” theme was created on the acquired data. Thus, when students make decisions regarding the destination countries, they consider the overall environment as a factor that may influence their final decisions.

All subthemes were gathered into different groups and each group had its theme. For some subthemes that did not apply to any groups, they were created as separate themes, so that new factors can be analyzed inclusively. For example, when I asked one student why she wanted to go to Canada, she answered:

I chose Canada because it has better immigration opportunity. There are higher chances to get PR (Permanent Residence) status for post-graduate students in Canada than any other countries.

In this case, the subtheme “immigration opportunity” was created, but it does not apply to any existing groups. Therefore, the subtheme itself is considered as a theme.

In order to analyze how the agents’ suggestions influence students’ choices, it was necessary to understand why they choose to study in certain English-speaking countries, HEIs, and programs during the process of data comparison. After categorizing themes from the subthemes, the next step of data analysis was to summarize these themes, in order to understand the following aspects:

- Rationale for pursuing higher education in English-speaking countries

- Reasons for using the student recruitment agency instead of completing the application process themselves
- Factors that influence participants' decisions in choosing destination countries, HEIs, and a major/programs

The analysis of the above aspects built a foundation for finding how the agents' suggestions would influence students' decision-making process. Because this case study focused on the process of decision-making, during analyzing data, in order to finally approach the research question, we need to understand why students make such decisions (regarding studying abroad, and choosing their destination country, HEIs, and programs). In order to understand these decisions mentioned above, we also need to examine why students decided to pursue higher education abroad initially. It is the first step before they can decide their destinations, HEIs, and programs. Another fact that should be investigated is the reasons that students chose the recruitment agency to complete the procedure of studying in English-speaking countries, as the aim of this study is to understand in what ways the agents' suggestions influence students' decision-making process.

Rationales for studying abroad. In Table 1(below), eight themes and corresponding labels of rationales are presented for student studying abroad. In these themes, the major factors that push students to study abroad are differences in education policies, teaching pedagogies and learning styles between China and destination countries. Other factors (trend, peer competitions, environment, different life experiences, international opportunities, and personal reasons) also motivate students to study abroad. The differentiations of education policies are evident from following views: (a) the

application system is more flexible than the National Entrance Examination; (b) students are not satisfied with higher education in the home country; and (c) the less schooling duration to obtain degrees in destination countries.

Student 1: Now I'm in my senior year in the higher school. Everyone is so stressed out about the National Entrance Examination. I want to continue my higher education abroad because I can enter a university through applications. I don't want to attend the exams. It's too stressful. My chance of being accepted by the first-tier university [in China] through exams is slim. I have a good academic performance [in general] but I'm afraid that I will get nervous during the exam. The application procedure gives me a better chance to go to a better-ranked university abroad.

Six students stated that they were not going to take the National Entrance Examination because of the option of studying abroad. One participant expressed that she was not satisfied with higher education in China:

I'm in my first year at the university. I'm not very happy about it. To be honest, the curriculum is dull. I don't think it's suitable for me. There aren't many selective courses for me to choose. According to what I heard from my friends who [are] studying abroad, the curriculum setting is more flexible over there. That's why I decided to study abroad.

Two students decided to study abroad because of the one year or two-year Master's programs, which usually takes three years to complete in China. Particularly, students were attracted by the one year post-graduate programs in the UK. They believe

that a Master's degree is an asset in obtaining a decent job. The less time period they spend to complete the degree, the sooner they can start their career.

Reasons for using the recruitment agency. Table 2 (below) shows that there are four factors, which encourage students to use recruitment agencies in order to help them apply to study abroad: (a) the agents provide application assistance. Students believe that the agents have more experience dealing with the application process, which in turn increases the chance of a successful application (of institutions and student visa); (b) the agents provide pertinent information of HEIs (ranking, the curriculum, and scholarship availability), latest visa policies, and general living conditions in destination countries. Students responded that the agents have access to the updated information through partner HEIs, which makes it more reliable than information posted on the Internet. When needed, the agents are willing to communicate with representatives of institutions on behalf of students.

Three participants said that they had little knowledge of studying abroad. Because of the promotional booklets of institutions, visual information (pictures and videos), and presentations held by invited guests who lived abroad, students were able to choose their preferred destination and institution with assistance of the agents; Generally, students did not feel confident to complete the application themselves because of their lack of English skills. Fourteen students stated that because of their lack of English proficiency, they could not locate relevant information on official institutional websites; (c) both students and parents are greatly influenced by those agents who had international experience; and (d) some students chose to use the agents because of a recommendation for their friends.

Table 1 Reasons of Obtaining Higher Education in English-speaking Countries

Question 1. Why do you want to pursue higher education in English-speaking countries?	
Themes	Subtheme
Differences in educational policies between countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entrance procedures • Length of schooling
Differences in teaching pedagogies and learning styles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical thinking • Teacher-oriented versus student-oriented
Trend of studying abroad	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influences from parents • Influences from friends
Peer competition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level of competitiveness • Level of competition in the labour market
Living context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Living environment • Language opportunities
Diverse experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lived experiences (personal and educational)
International opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immigration
Personal reasons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintaining relationships

Table 2 Reasons of Using the Student Recruitment Agency

Question 2. Why do you decide to use the agency instead of completing the application process by yourself?	
Theme	Subtheme
Professional service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assistance with visa and entrance application (comprehension of content and English language) • Assistance for document preparation in order to save time • Making sure students follow the application schedule and requirements
Agent resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information about HEIs and visa policies • Ability of communicate directly with universities abroad
Agents' reputation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friends' recommendation
Student services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extra services (airport pick-up; arrangement of accommodations) • The agents impart their experience to the students

Choices of the destination country. This question identifies what factors participants consider when they choose the destination country. New factors were found in this study, in addition to the six factors stated in the push and pull theory:

- Differences in education policies (entrance exams, etc.)
- The varying entrance requirements and visa policies of the destination
- Immigration opportunities

Table 3 Summary of participants' choices in destinations and level of education

Destination Countries	Participants	College	Undergraduate	Graduate
Canada	9	2	4	3
UK	8	0	2	6
US	6	0	4	2
Australia	2	0	1	1

From Table 3 (above), we can see that of the four destination countries, Canada and the UK were the top two options for post-graduate education. Canada was also the top choice for students who decided to go to college. The US placed third, especially for students who pursuing bachelor degrees. Only two students were interested in going to Australia for higher education.

In addition to the six factors associated with the push and pull theory, there were three additional factors that influence students' choices. The theme "differences in education policies" primarily refers to how long it takes to graduate and to obtain a degree. The UK was often the first choice for graduate applicants because of the length of program (one-year Master's programs). This shorter length of time-to-completion allows students to enter the job market sooner. For the students who study in the UK, they are less likely to immigrate to this country due to stricter immigration policies. Canada attracts more students because of the cheaper tuition fees compared to that in the UK. A couple of students responded that their relatives, who live in Canada, are able to take care of them while they are away from home. Students have an option of settling in Canada after graduation, which they believe brings more opportunities into their life.

Another factor that influences participants' choices relates to the entry requirements of institutions and visa policies in the destination country. This explains why students chose Australia in this study. One student had the following to say:

I prefer to study in Australia because my academic performance meets the entry requirements of a better ranking university there compared to universities in [the] US or [the] UK. In addition, I didn't have the chance to go to the university listed in 211/985 projects [in China], which is required by better ranking universities in [the] UK. I think it's risky to try. I also thought about going to Canada, but the student visa takes longer to process.

From the statement above, the student's choice of destination was influenced by the entry requirements of the institution and visa policies in the country. Other factors did not influence the student's choice significantly.

Choices of HEIs. According to the push and pull theory, students' decisions of HEIs are influenced by four factors: (a) The reputation of the institutions; (b) the quality and expertise of the faculty; (c) whether the students' previous qualifications are recognized by the institutions; and (d) whether the qualifications of the institutions are recognized by the future employees. In this study, the ranking of an institution was the most influential factor when students chose HEIs. Each country has its ranking system. For instance, students use Maclean's Guide for Canada HEIs and Times in the UK. Seven students believed that the quality and expertise of the faculty should also be considered. Other factors (e.g., quality and experience of the faculty) did not have significant influence on their decisions. The following four additional factors also influence students' choices:

- Location of HEIs
- Existing Chinese student population
- Programs in HEIs
- Personal reasons (maintaining relationships)

The location of HEIs also influences students' decisions. Institutions located in major cities have higher costs but more job opportunities. Furthermore, an existing community of Chinese students is another factor that students would consider. One student responded:

My purpose of studying in an English-speaking country is to improve my English. I know there are thousands of Chinese in [the] US but I prefer to study at a university where there are less Chinese population. I know that I don't have courage to talk to English speakers and if I got comfortable by hanging out with friends I would be more hesitated to speak English. So going somewhere that has less Chinese population will give me a chance to force myself to practise English. However, another student had different thoughts:

I think I'm a shy person. I don't know how to make friends and my English is not very good. I get very nervous when I talk to English speakers. I think going to a place that has more Chinese students is better for me. I know I will be alone at the beginning. Because my families will be far away from me and I don't have any relatives or friends there. I think making friends is helpful for me to adapt to a new environment, especially when we all come from China. It will help me overcome being homesick and we can also take care of each other. Also we can

study together without language barriers. So, I prefer to go to a university where there are more Chinese students.

From the above different opinions, it is clear that students' personalities and their reasons for studying abroad are connected to the number of Chinese students at the chosen institution.

Both program and course offerings are important to Chinese students. However, the program of study takes precedent.

I'm always interested in the wine industry. Unfortunately, the related course is offered by colleges more than universities in Canada. From my perspective, I don't mind going to college because I know this is what I want to do in the future.

This is the often case with students who wanted to pursue certain specialties in colleges. They also believed that there are more co-op programs⁴ in colleges than universities, in order to give the student the opportunity for real-life work experience.

Personal reasons also influence students' choices. Although with assistance of the agents, students can submit up to five applications to HEIs, a small number of students applied to only one institution. This is often the case when students wish to join their partners who study overseas. Thus, the factors, such as the rankings of institutions and the quality of faculties, are not considered as essential influences on students' choices.

Choices of majors/programs. Data showed that a student's decisions as to preferred programs are influenced by six factors:

- Career opportunities
- Personal interest
- Popularity of a given program

- Related educational background
- Family influence
- Requirements of graduation

Most students took future career opportunities into consideration when they chose majors. Participants believed that finding a decent job is more crucial than personal interest, even if they were not very interested in the programs they applied for. The following student conveyed this attitude:

To be honest, I know nothing about finance (the program she applied for). I wanted to study arts especially photography. But my parents suggest [that] it is not realistic for me to obtain a degree in photography. Studying finance will give me better job opportunities. It doesn't matter if I choose to stay in [the] US or return to China after graduation. The knowledge I will have in finance will be more useful [in both countries].

The data showed that undergraduate applicants who did not know what programs they wanted to study would often choose the more popular ones (finance, economic studies, and business management). Furthermore, personal interest also influences students to choose preferred programs. Eleven out of the 25 students believed that they feel more motivated to work on those programs that they are actually interested in. Five graduate applicants chose the program that was relevant to their educational background. The applicants indicated they believed that a graduate degree (i.e., a Master's degree) related to their undergraduate degree would advance their knowledge. For those students, who were not sure what programs they wanted to apply for, it was their parents' input

that greatly influenced their selections. In addition, the ease of completing the program also influenced some students' choice of programs.

Summary. In this section, in addition to explaining the reasons that students choose to study abroad and use the agency to complete the process, the section also analyzed the factors that influence students' decisions when choosing destination country, institutions, and programs. The finding section will outline the influence that agents have on students' decision-making, when choosing the destination country, institutions, and programs.

The Findings

Depending on the degree of the knowledge that students have on the process of studying abroad, the findings are categorized into the following:

- Influence from the agents on the decision to study abroad
- Influence from the agents on the decision as to the destination country
- Influence from the agents on the decision to choose an academic institution
- Influence from the agents on the decision when choosing a major/program

Influence from the agents on the decision to study abroad. Most participants indicated their interest in studying abroad when they came to the agency for consultation. However, they had little knowledge of the application process and the costs involved in the entire process. A number of students had difficulty deciding whether or not they should spend the necessary funds to study abroad. Often the agents, who are regarded as a source of information, would persuade students to study abroad.

For those students who had more knowledge of studying abroad (knowledge of destination country and entry requirements), their decisions were not influenced by the

agents' suggestions. Before consulting the agents, these students had made up their mind as to where and what to study. The purpose of acquiring the service of an agent was to ensure a successful application to the preferred university and to obtain a student visa within given time limit.

Influence from the agents on the decision as to the destination country.

Participants, who had more knowledge about destination countries, did not find the information from agents was useful. One student stated the following:

I have friends who are studying in England now. They always send me pictures and share their experience. I think I gained more information about the city and the university from them than my consultant (agent). To be honest, the consultant didn't actually live there, but she knows what to do. That's all I need. Before I came here (to the agency), I got information about the UK and I know that's where I want to go.

Participants, who had some knowledge about preferred countries, were anxious to gather more detailed information. Three participants could not decide on a destination country. They consulted the agents in different departments to obtain the specific information (costs, living environment, and employment opportunities). This information proved being helpful to participants when choosing where to study. Some students, who had already decided on a destination county, would consult the agents in order to verify the information they obtained from other sources (relatives who live in the destination country, friends, and information on the Internet).

Influence from the agents on the decisions to choose an academic institution.

Four situations were found in this study, which explained how the agents' suggestions

influence students choices of HEIs: (a) Participants who did not have much knowledge of institutions; (b) participants who only heard about well-known institutions; (c) participants who had knowledge of what programs to study, but did not know which institutions they should apply relating to specific programs; and (d) participants who only had preferred locations in the destination country.

Most ($n=19$) participants possessed little knowledge of potential institutions.

When a student chose the preferred destination country, the consultant in that department would prepare a list of recommended institutions, based on students' academic performance and financial budget. In this case, the participants were significantly influenced by the consultant's suggestions. They chose preferred institutions from the list and prepared for the application. Students believed that the consultants have years of experience in selecting suitable HEIs for students and their recommendations would be valuable. For those students who had fewer options, as a result of poorer academic performance, they often easily accepted the agents' recommendations. On the other hand, some participants did not agree with the consultants' suggestions. They were not satisfied with institutional rankings or suggested programs and HEIs. In these cases, participants chose the institutions themselves.

Students who only heard of well-known universities were also influenced by consultants' suggestions. These students, who attempted to apply for the higher-ranking institutions in their destination country, were often not aware of the entry requirements. Consequently, when their academic performance and the English proficiency test results did not meet the entrance requirements, students relied on the consultants' suggestions to choose an institution.

When students had little knowledge about the curriculum of the institutions, but they had decided what programs to study in the future, the agents' suggestions played an important role in the decision-making process. According to the example listed earlier, one student wanted to pursue studies relating to the wine industry. However, she did not know which college offers the relevant program, thus the agents' suggestions of the college that offers the program relating to the wine industry would influence her primary choice. The findings showed that students' choices of HEIs were greatly influenced by the agents' suggestions, when they had little knowledge about the institution.

When students' had some knowledge of HEIs, the degree of the influence from the agents varied. If the information provided by the agents matches the knowledge that students obtained from other sources (relatives or friends who live in the destination country and the Internet), students would have more confidence in the agents and they would accept the agents' suggestions. These suggestions proved quite powerful, especially from students who had applied to a preferred institution on their own but were rejected. For those students who only applied to one institution, due to personal reasons (maintaining in the relationship), their decisions were not influenced by the agents' suggestions.

Influence from the agents on the decisions when choosing a program.

According to the degree of the knowledge (participants who did not have much knowledge, some knowledge, and plenty of knowledge) participants had on the majors and programs, three cases were found in this study: (a) Participants who did not know what to study; (b) participants who had general ideas about what field to pursue, but did

not know which relevant programs to apply; and (c) participants who had made their decisions of what programs to study but changed their mind after consulting the agents.

Most undergraduate applicants did not know what to study in the future. Since the employment opportunities and personal interest were the main factors that influence students' choices of the programs, participants who did not know what to study would prefer to consult the agents to choose their preferred programs. Thus, the agents' suggestions significantly influenced participants' decisions. For those participants who had general ideas about what field to pursue, but did not know what specific program to study, the agents would provide more information in the curriculum of the institution and the entry requirements to meet the participants' needs. Some participants changed their mind about the preferred program after consulting the agents. Because they realized that their academic performance may not meet the entry requirements of the program. In this case, those students' decisions were highly depending on the agents' suggestions about suitable programs.

Participants who were going to pursue a Master's degree and had plenty of knowledge of the programs were not influenced by the agents' suggestions. The aim of signing up the service with the agents was to complete the application procedure successfully within limited time.

Chapter Summary

From the findings we can see that students' decision-making process includes the involvement of students themselves, their parents, and the agents. Students who had little knowledge of the application process mainly relied on the agents' suggestions. To some extent, parents' input also influenced students' decisions. When students had some

knowledge, they preferred to compare information from different sources. In this case, students used the agents' opinions as references, especially when their agents had experience in living in the destination country. Students who had plenty of knowledge did not rely on the information from the agents. They focused more on the agents' assistance of the application of institutions and the student visa.

The findings also showed that when students decided to study abroad, they had to make decisions in three steps to complete the full decision-making process: (a) Which English-speaking country they want to go; (b) which institution they want to study at; (c) which major/programs they want to study in the future. Therefore, I analyzed factors that influence students' decisions of each step during the process of data analysis, in order to understand how the agents' suggestions influence students' final decisions. The findings showed that the degree of the influence that the agents have on students' final decisions depends on the degree of the knowledge that students have on the three steps of studying abroad.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to investigate in what ways the selected student recruitment agency influences Chinese students' decision-making process when they pursue higher education in English-speaking countries. According to Mazzarol, Kemp, and Savery (1997, p. 18), there are three phases involved in students' decision-making:

- The decision to continue education
- The decision to study abroad instead of the home country
- The decision of the destination country

The study investigated the three phases and continued to explain the factors that influence students' decisions when choose HEIs and programs. The findings showed that studying in English-speaking countries is regarded as a means of self-enhancement in students' academic and personal experience (Cubillo, Sanchez & Cervino, 2006). Students who choose the recruitment agency expect the professional service in the application of HEIs and the preparation of the student visa. When students have little knowledge in studying abroad, they consider the agents as a source of information and a role of guidance. Some students choose to use the agency due to the language barrier during completing the applications in English. For these students who do not want to deal with the complicated application process (translating documents, editing paperwork, and mailing application files) by themselves, the recruitment agency becomes the primary choice to complete the process on behalf of students.

The findings explained that students themselves, their parents and the agents are involved in the decision-making process. The degree of the influence from the agency on

students' decision-making depends on the degree of the knowledge that students have of the three major elements of studying abroad:

- The destination country
- Institutions
- Programs

Undergraduate applicants also take their parents' input into consideration when choose preferred HEIs and programs. Future undergraduates do not have much life experience because they are dependent on their parents. These students do not have a clear goal for their future career. When undergraduate applicants choose their programs, the opinions from their parents, the popularity of the program, and the ease of completing the degree requirements are the main factors that influence students' decisions.

Undergraduate candidates make decisions with the guidance of their parents. The more knowledge students have of the three elements (the destination country, institutions, and programs), the less their decisions were influence by the agents. The findings showed that nine out of 11 undergraduate applicants are significantly influenced by their agents' recommendations.

Compared to undergraduate applicants, graduate candidates have already acquired knowledge in a specific major at the university level. A couple of participants in this study also had related work experience. The experience helped them choose preferred programs, in order to enhance their professional skills for the future career. Because graduate candidates had more specific plans for their career, they often make their own decisions in addition to considering their parents' inputs. However, the influence from the inputs was minor. When graduate applicants have little knowledge in studying abroad,

the agents' suggestions play an important role in the process. Graduate applicants who had work experience are less influenced by the agents.

The findings showed that whether students' previous qualifications are recognized by the institutions and whether students' future qualifications are recognized by future employees do not have significant influence on students' decisions. Higher education institutions in English-speaking countries are willing to cooperate with Chinese students, in order to meet their needs in English language courses, the accessibility to the information of HEIs, and the variety of programs (Soutar & Turner, 2002). Therefore, students do not consider the recognition of their previous qualifications as a major factor. Because of the development of information sharing, students have more sources to obtain information of institutions. With the list of more than 10,000 recognized HEIs in 44 countries provided by Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2014), students can use it as a reference when choose HEIs overseas. The list ensures that students' qualifications are recognized not only by the future employers, but also by the Ministry of Education of China. Thus, students do not consider the fact that whether or not the degree is recognized by the future employers.

In this study, participants believed that it is necessary to use the recruitment agency to complete the process. There are 80 percent of students who are willing to recommend the same agency to other students. According to Zhang and Hagedorn (2011), students have certain expectations from the agency. The findings in the study proved the authors' statement. After completing the study, majority of students have been accepted by preferred institutions. They agreed that using agency can assure efficiency and the quality of the process. However, as a source of facts, other students stated that

they cannot fully rely on the agents. These students noticed that the information provided by the agents sometimes is not updated on time. Because studying abroad is an important decision for students and their families, they prefer to gather more reliable information before choosing what is believed to be the best for them. Another fact is that when an agent has signed up the service with more students who waiting to progress the process of studying abroad, students need to keep tracking of their own application process with the agent, in order to obtain the most updated application status.

Limitations of the Study

This is a case study conducted at only one student recruitment agency. The agency has formed their own business culture, which may not be able to apply to other student recruitment agencies. Furthermore, the region of the recruitment agency, the size of the business, and the reputation of the agency may also influence the findings of this study. Therefore, the findings cannot represent the process of decision-making for all Chinese international students. The outcome of this study is to draw a small picture of this topic. Another limitation is that students prefer to work with the agents who are more responsible, professional, and friendly. Although the reputation of the recruitment agency is important, students have to work with the agents to complete the process. In this study, the agents are not considered as individuals. Thus, the agents' different personalities and personal experience may also have influence on students' decision-making process. The third limitation is the difficulty to categorize such rich data. It was challenging to categorize and to organize the data with limited resources, which may have impact on providing a clear and thorough explanation of the findings.

Implications for Future Research

The findings of this study have potential to benefit prospective Chinese international students, HEIs in the English-speaking countries, as well as student recruitment agencies in China. Chinese students can use this study as a reference to understand how this particular recruitment agency influences students' decision-making process, in order to evaluate the value of signing up the service at the student recruitment agencies. HEIs can have a better understanding of this group of Chinese students' perspectives towards the student recruitment agency. The recruitment agencies can also improve their service by gaining a deeper understanding of students' perspectives regarding working with the agency. Additionally, researchers who are interested in the relationship between the recruitment agencies and Chinese students' international mobility can have a brief understanding of this topic through this study.

This case study investigated the influence that the recruitment agency had on students' decision-making process of studying in English-speaking countries. Future research may also analyse the influence from the agents' personalities and experience on students' decision-making process. More research can be carried out through comparing different student recruitment agencies in various regions.

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FOOTNOTES

¹A language that is used for the communication purpose, between speakers with different native languages (House, 2003).

²A policy that allowed China to open to the outside world, which aimed to increase its international trade volume (Lee, 1994).

³An expression that was used by the participant to express the desire of seeking different teaching pedagogies and experiencing different learning styles in English-speaking countries.

⁴An curriculum model that allows students to link academic knowledge with work experience (Wilson, Stull & Vinsonhaler, 1996).

APPENDIX A: LETTER OF PERMISSION

JJL Overseas Education Consulting & Service Co., Ltd
金吉列出国留学咨询服务服务有限公司

Email: marketinguk3@jil.cn
www.jil.cn

January, 16, 2015

Dear Miss Yiting Jiang,

As per your request to conduct research for your Master's thesis at our company, it is a pleasure for our company to give you permission to post your recruitment posters in our office and contact our clients. To show our full support, we will also provide a private room for you and your research participants to conduct the survey and interviews. If you need any additional support, please feel free to let me know. Thank you.

Sincerely,
XinYue

Manager
JJL Overseas Education Consulting & Service Co., Ltd
金吉列出国留学咨询服务服务有限公司
E: marketinguk3@jil.cn
www.jil.cn

APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM



Title of Study: “A Case Study of the Influence of Student Recruitment Agencies on Chinese Students’ Decision-Making When Pursuing Higher Education in English-Speaking Countries”

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Yiting Jiang, a Master student from the Faculty of Education at the University of Windsor. The result will be contributed to my final thesis.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel to contact Yiting Jiang or Dr. Zuochen Zhang. Yiting Jiang can be reached by email: jiang11f@uwindsor.ca and Dr. Zuochen Zhang can be reached by email: zuochen@uwindsor.ca.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Through a survey questionnaire, and an interview, the purpose of this study is to examine in what ways student recruitment agencies influence Chinese students’ decision-making, when pursuing higher education in English-speaking countries.

PROCEDURES

Research data will be collected in two stages:

1. Survey questionnaire;
2. Interview

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

1. Voluntarily complete the anonymous survey questionnaire that includes multiple choice questions and open-ended questions. The content will include demographic

information, and questions related to the research question. The survey questionnaire will take 10 minutes to complete.

2. Participate an individual interview that will last for approximately 30 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

Overall:

The study does not include deception or biomedical elements. Participation of this study is voluntary.

Survey:

There are no foreseeable risks, discomforts, or inconveniences associated with the survey questionnaire.

Interview:

Interview topics will not harm participants psychologically and physically. Participants can withdraw the study at any time. To ensure the confidentiality of participants' personal information, all information is confidential in this study and the data are only accessible to the researcher.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

Benefits to the participants

Participants will have the opportunity to evaluate the service from the student recruitment. It will be helpful for participants to communicate with their consultants, in order to improve services in the future.

Benefits to the society

Higher educational institutions can gain a better understanding of Chinese students' perspectives with regards to applying for higher education in English-speaking countries through student recruitment agencies. The result of this study also has the potential to benefit higher educational institutions in English-speaking countries by adjusting the marketing strategies of the student recruitment agencies in China.

COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION

There is no payment for the participation of this study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission.

The survey is designed to be anonymous. Please do not write any information that may identify yourself on the questionnaire.

Interviews will be audio-recorded without disclosing participants' identity. All records remain confidential and participants will be assigned with pseudonyms in the data collection as well as in the research report. If you wish to withdraw from the study, your interview record can be removed immediately once you make the request.

The researcher will have access to the data. After the completion of the research report, all material data from the survey will be shredded; audio recordings will be erased; and electronic files will be permanently deleted from the computer.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to be in this study. If you volunteer to participate in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer in the questionnaire, and still remain in the study.

Any withdraw from the survey must be done before the questionnaire is submitted. The survey is anonymous, so there will be no way to identify individual participants once the questionnaire is submitted, and withdrawal will be impossible.

The audio recording of the interview will be transcribed without identifying individual comments, so if you decide to withdraw from the interview before it starts, you can do so

by leaving the room. During the interview, you can withdraw by leaving the room and your record will be removed immediately to protect your privacy. Once the interview is completed, participants cannot withdraw their data as it would be very hard to identify each participant's inputs and delete them.

FEEDBACK OF THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY TO THE PARTICIPANTS

The findings of this study will be available to the participants by posting the result on the University of Windsor REB Study Results website. An electronic copy of the result will also be offered.

Web address: _____ <http://www1.uwindsor.ca/reb/study-results> _____

Date when results are available: _____ 2015/04/30 _____

SUBSEQUENT USE OF DATA

These data may be used in subsequent studies, in publications and in presentations.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact: Research Ethics Coordinator, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, N9B 3P4; Telephone: 519-253-3000, ext. 3948; e-mail: ethics@uwindsor.ca

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT/LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

I understand the information provided for the study "An Investigation of the Influence of Student Recruitment Agencies on Chinese Students' Decision-making when Pursuing Higher Education in English-speaking Countries" as described herein. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

These are the terms under which I will conduct research.

Signature of Investigator

Date

APPENDIX C: LETTER OF INFORMATION



Title of Study: “A Case Study of the Influence of Student Recruitment Agencies on Chinese Students’ Decision-Making When Pursuing Higher Education in English-Speaking Countries”

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Yiting Jiang, a Master student from the Faculty of Education at the University of Windsor. The result will be contributed to my final thesis.

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Through a survey questionnaire, and interviews, the purpose of this study is to examine in what ways student recruitment agencies influence Chinese students’ decision-making, when pursuing higher education in English-speaking countries.

PROCEDURES

Research data will be collected in two stages:

1. Survey questionnaire;
2. Interview

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

1. Voluntarily complete the anonymous survey questionnaire that includes multiple choice questions and open-ended questions. The content will include demographic information, and questions related to the research question. The survey questionnaire will take 10 minutes to complete.

2. Participate an individual interview that will last for approximately 30 minutes.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

Overall:

The study does not include deception or biomedical elements. Participation of this study is voluntary.

Survey:

There are no foreseeable risks, discomforts, or inconveniences associated with the survey questionnaire.

Interview:

Interview topics will not harm participants psychologically and physically. Participants can withdraw the study at any time based on their request. To ensure the confidentiality of participants' personal information, personal information is confidential in this study and the data are only accessible to the researcher.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

Benefits to the participants

Participants will have the opportunity to evaluate the service from the student recruitment. It will be helpful for participants to communicate with their consultants, in order to improve services in the future.

Benefits to the society

Higher educational institutions can gain a better understanding of Chinese students' perspectives with regards to applying for higher education in English-speaking countries through student recruitment agencies. The result of this study also has the potential to benefit higher educational institutions in English-speaking countries by adjusting the marketing strategies of the student recruitment agencies in China.

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There is no payment for the participation of this study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission.

The survey is designed to be anonymous. Please do not write any information that may identify yourself on the questionnaire.

Interviews will be audio-recorded without disclosing participants' identity. All records remain confidential and participants will be assigned with pseudonyms in the data collection as well as in the research report. If you wish to withdraw from the study, your interview record can be removed immediately once you make the request.

The researcher will have access to the data. After the completion of the research report, all material data from the survey will be shredded; audio recordings will be erased; and electronic files will be permanently deleted from the computer.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to be in this study. If you volunteer to participate in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer in the questionnaire, and still remain in the study.

Any withdraw from the survey must be done before the questionnaire is submitted. The survey is anonymous, so there will be no way to identify individual participants once the questionnaire is submitted, and withdrawal will be impossible.

The interview will be audio recorded and the recording will be transcribed without revealing the interviewee's identification. If you decide to withdraw from the interview before it starts, you can do so by leaving the room. During the interview, you can withdraw by leaving the room and your record will be removed immediately to protect

your privacy. After the interview, , if you decide to withdraw, then your inputs will be deleted and not included in the study.

FEEDBACK OF THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY TO THE PARTICIPANTS

The findings of this study will be available to the participants by posting the result on the University of Windsor REB Study Results website. An electronic copy of the result will also be offered.

Web address: _____ <http://www1.uwindsor.ca/reb/study-results> _____

Date when results are available: _____ 2015/04/30 _____

SUBSEQUENT USE OF DATA

These data may be used in subsequent studies, in publications and in presentations.

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If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact: Research Ethics Coordinator, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, N9B 3P4; Telephone: 519-253-3000, ext. 3948; e-mail: ethics@uwindsor.ca

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT/LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

I understand the information provided for the study“An Investigation of the Influence of Student Recruitment Agencies on Chinese Students’ Decision-making when Pursuing Higher Education in English-speaking Countries”as described herein. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

These are the terms under which I will conduct research.

Signature of Investigator

Date

APPENDIX D: SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE



A Case Study of the Influence of Student Recruitment Agencies on Chinese Students'
Decision-Making When Pursuing Higher Education in English-Speaking Countries
Survey Instrument Draft (English Version)

This survey questionnaire is anonymous. Please do not write your name on the questionnaire.

Please answer the following questions.

1. Gender: _____

2. Age

18-21

22-25

26-29

>30

3. Occupation

Undergraduate student

Postgraduate student

Other (Please specify):

4. Education background

High school certification

Bachelor degree(s) in (Please specify):

Master degree (s) in (Please specify):

Other (Please specify)

5. Work experience

I do not have any work experience

I have part-time work experience

I have full-time work experience (Please answer Question 6 if you choose this one)

Other (Please specify):

6. How many years of full-time work experience do you have?

Less than 1 year

1-3 years

4-6 years

More than 6 years

7. Which country are you interested in for going studying abroad?

8. What degree(s) are you going to obtain?

Bachelor degree(s) in (Please specify):

Master degree (s) in (Please specify):

Other (Please specify):

9. Who brought up the idea for you of studying abroad?

Myself

My parents

Other family members

Friends

Others (Please specify):

10. What information do you know about higher education in the destination country?

11. Where did you get the information above from?

Internet

Education consulting firms

People who have related experience

Other (Please specify):

12. What other information do you want to know about higher education in the destination country?

13. Where do you prefer to get this information from?

- Internet
- Education consulting firms
- People who have related experience
- Other (Please specify):

14. Did you change the destination country after consulting the education consultant?

- Yes
- No
- I was not sure which country I wanted to go.

15. Did you change your choice of universities/colleges after consulting the education consultant?

- Yes
- No
- I was not sure which university/college I wanted to apply for.

16. Did you change your mind about courses after consulting the education consultant?

- Yes
- No
- I was not sure which course I wanted to study.

Note: By submitting this form you consent to participate in this study.

This is the end of the survey. Thank you very much for the participation. If you have any concern regarding this survey, please contact Jiang Yiting by email:

jiang11f@uwindsor.ca

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW OUTLINE



Interview Questions (English Version)

1. Why do you decide to pursue your higher education in an English-speaking country?
2. Why do you decide to come to the student recruitment agency?
3. When you choose your destination country, what factors do you consider?
4. When you choose your major and university, what factors do you consider?
5. Did you change your mind of the destination you wanted to go to? Please tell me why you did or did not change your mind?
6. Did you change your mind of the course and the university you wanted to choose? Please tell me why you did or did not change your mind?
7. Who participated in selecting your destination? Please tell me how you work with this person/others to make the decision.
8. Who participated in selecting your school and major? Please tell me how you work with this person/others to make the decision.

APPENDIX F: RECRUITMENT POSTER



Recruitment Poster (English Version)

Dear students,

I am conducting a research study titled “A Case Study of the Influence of Student Recruitment Agencies on Chinese Students’ Decision-making when Pursuing Higher Education in English-speaking Countries”. This study aims to examine in what ways student recruitment agencies influence Chinese students’ decision-making, when pursuing higher education in English-speaking countries.

I am looking for volunteers to complete a survey questionnaire and to participate in a interview. If you would like to participate in the survey, please fill out the enclosed questionnaire and return it to me.

If you would also like to participate in a interview, please contact me. Thank you very much!

This study has received REB clearance at the University of Windsor.

Yiting Jiang

M.Ed student at the University of Windsor

VITA AUCTORIS

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