UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Note: Please sign this form and present it to the Bindery with your thesis, so that it can be bound at the front of the Library deposit copy

RESEARCH THESIS

Author's Declaration

Full name (block capitals, surname first): ZHU HUAER

Full title of thesis/dissertation (block capitals): AN EXPLORATION OF THE DECISION MAKING OF MAINLAND CHINESE UNDERGRADUATES WHO HAVE CHOSEN TO STUDY IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

College/School/Department (block capitals): SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Date of award of degree (leave blank):

1. I understand that one printed and one electronic copy of my thesis/dissertation (the Work) will be deposited in the University Library (the Library) and in a suitable electronic repository, for permanent retention.
2. Without changing the content, the Library or any third party with whom it has an agreement to do so, may convert either copy into a format or medium for the purpose of long-term retention, accessibility and preservation.
3. The Library will publish, and/or arrange with appropriate third parties for the non-exclusive publication of, a bibliographic description of the thesis/dissertation, and the author's abstract.
4. Unless arrangements are made to the contrary, (see paragraph 6. below), the Library is authorised to make the Work available for consultation in the Library, and via a recognised inter library loans system. The Library is authorised to make the electronic copy of the Work freely accessible to individuals and institutions - including automated agents - via the Internet.
5. Rights granted to the University of Birmingham through this agreement are entirely non-exclusive. I retain all my rights in the Work in its present version or future derivative works.
6. I understand that I may apply to the University to retain the right to withhold access to the content of my thesis/dissertation. Access to the paper version may be withheld for a period which shall not normally exceed four calendar years from the congregation at which the degree is conferred. The actual length of the period will be specified in the application, together with the precise reasons for

making that application. The electronic copy may be withheld from dissemination via the web or other networks for any period.

7. I have obtained permission for any use made of substantial amounts of published or unpublished copyright material (text, illustrations, etc) where the rights are owned by a third party, other than as permitted under either The Copyright Designs and Patents Act 1988 (as modified by any related or successor legislation) or the Terms and Conditions of any Licence governing its use.

8. The content of the copies I shall deposit with the Library will be the final version of my thesis, as approved by the Examiners.

9. I understand that the Library and administrators of any electronic theses repository do not hold any obligation to take legal action on behalf of myself, or other rights holders, in the event of a breach of intellectual property rights, or any other right, in the material deposited.

10. I understand that, in the event of my thesis/dissertation being not approved by the Examiners, this declaration will become null and void.

Signature: *Zhu Huaer* **Date:** *27/09/2023*

For Library use (please leave blank):

Classmark: **Accession number:** **Control number:**

eTheses Repository url:

AN EXPLORATION OF THE DECISION MAKING OF MAINLAND CHINESE UNDERGRADUATES WHO HAVE CHOSEN TO STUDY IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

by

HUAER ZHU

A thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

School of Education

College of Social Sciences

University of Birmingham

September 2023

Abstract

The study explored how Mainland Chinese undergraduate students made their study abroad decisions: their initial decision to study overseas; their choice of the United Kingdom as a destination country; and their ultimate subject and university choices. The investigation focused on who or what influenced these decisions, and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on all the above.

Individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted, face to face or online, with 34 participants who were all current Year One or Year Two Mainland Chinese undergraduates studying at UK universities.

The findings indicate two strong themes emerging from participants' data: educational competition as a driver of decision making, and the complex and intersectional nature of the decision-making process. Specifically, Students' initial study abroad decisions and subject and university choices appeared to be influenced by their awareness of educational competition when pursuing university status and navigating *neijuan*. Furthermore, these decision making processes reveal the multifactorial nature of choice making and the overlaps between different factors. There seemed to be no clear-cut phases in participants' decision making processes. Both their initial study abroad decision making and their subject and university choices were shaped by participants' pre-university educational

pathways. Four distinct pre-university pathways appeared in the interview data: the foundation course route, the *gaokao* route, the A-Level route and the international school route. In addition, their access to information sources and parental advice both played an important role throughout their decision-making.

The findings of this study illuminate the processes entailed in Mainland Chinese students' study abroad choice making and add to our understanding of how individual Mainland Chinese students weigh different factors in order to make their study abroad decisions.

Acknowledgements

This research involved the voluntary and unpaid participation of many Chinese undergraduate international students in the UK. I am grateful for their willingness to share their private experiences and personal perspectives on study abroad decisions, even though I was a complete stranger to the majority of the study's participants.

Second, I would like to thank my colleagues and friends for their encouragement, concern, and companionship throughout my doctoral journey.

I also deeply appreciate my parents' support over these four years. They were great sources of strength, providing me with huge encouragement every time I lost confidence or felt upset, and accompanying me through the tough times.

My thanks also go to Tim Davies who has proofread this thesis in accordance with the University of Birmingham's Statement on editorial help for Postgraduate Research Theses.

I will not forget my previous supervisor, Wendy Symes, for guiding me in my research focus and research initial design. I am also very grateful for valuable suggestions on my thesis and continuous encouragement from Tracy Whatmore,

my second supervisor. Her feedback always enlightened my doctoral journey, and motivated me to continue working.

Finally, I want to express my deep gratitude to my lead supervisor, Marion Bowl, for her guidance, encouragement, and companionship. She consistently led me in the right direction and guided me through every challenge. She has been my strongest pillar of support throughout my doctoral journey.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction and Context ……1

International student mobility: the context ……..1

- Defining internationalisation in higher education ……2
- International student recruitment as an aspect of internationalisation ……..4
- Trends in international student mobility……6
- The international mobility of Chinese university students ……..10
- The educational policy context in the UK and China ……...14
- Educational access routes UK undergraduate study ……..17

Outline of the study ……23

- Background to the study ……..24
- Research questions ……..26
- Approach to this study ……..27
- Key findings and Claims …….....27
- Structure of the thesis ……..28

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review ……30

Human capital in higher education……32

The influence of Confucianism on Chinese education……35

The application of the 'push and pull factors' model in international students' study abroad decision making ……38

Chinese students' initial study abroad decisions ……46

- Chinese students' decision to study abroad ……48
- Chinese students' decision to study in the UK ……54

Factors influencing international students' choice of overseas university …….58

- Studies of the factors influencing international students in general ……..59
- Studies of students from a range of nationalities ……63
- Studies of Chinese students' choice-making ……66

Factors influencing international students' choice of subject ……..70

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology, Design, and Data Analysis for the Study ……77

Methodology ……..77

- Methodology: choosing an interpretive approach ……79
- A qualitative approach: choosing semi-structured interviews ……81

Designing the research ……85

- Research questions ……..85
- Initial plan ……86

- Adapting the plan in the light of Covid-19 pandemic ……...86
- Recruiting participants ……..89
- Drawing up the interview schedule ……93
- Conducting a pilot interview ……95
- Ethical considerations ……..97
- Implementation of data collection plan ……..98

Organising, analysing, interpreting, and presenting the data ……...101

- Organising the data ……103
- Analysing the data ……..……105
- Interpreting the data ……108
- Presenting the data ……110

Ensuring validity in the study……..113

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings: Initial study abroad decision making ……118

Deciding to study abroad ……..119

- *Gaokao* influences ……..120
- Seeking the ideal study environment and course structure ……141
- An uneven regional distribution of educational opportunities in China……..147

Deciding to study in the UK ……..160

- Course duration and structure ……..161
- Educational considerations around the ‘obstacles to admission’ ……167
- Parental concerns about safety ……173
- Parental advice when participants had no firm country preference ……177

CHAPTER FIVE

Findings: Subject and University Choices ……188

Subject Choices ……..188

- *Neijuan*: credential inflation/labour market competition ……189
- Considerations of future career opportunities ……195
- Subject limitations in pre-university study ……...200
- The proportion of Chinese students studying a particular subject ……..207
- Parental advice about occupational opportunities ……210

Choosing a university ……218

- Advice from agents ……219
- Draw on the personal experiences of family members ……226
- The educational challenges in determining university choices ……231
- The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on university choice making ….....238
- The influence of web based information and social media messaging on choice making ……..244

- An emerging theme: considerations about finding a future life partner……247

CHAPTER SIX

Discussion: choice making in a complex and competitive environment……...260

Educational competition as a driver of decision making ……..261

- Pursuing university status ……..262
- Navigating *neijuan* ……...264
- Considerations of human capital in decision making…….269

The complex and intersectional nature of the decision making process ……271

- Prior educational experience……..274
- The role and nature of parental advice…….279
- The influence of gender in decision making……283

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion………..……...287

Contributions to our practical understanding of choice making made…….288

- Different pathways, different choices ……..288

- Inconsistency of access to information sources……..292

Implications for aspiring undergraduates, their advisors, and those responsible for their admission ……..…….…..295

Lessons from process…….297

- The lessons from the research process……...297
- The lessons for myself as a researcher ……..299
- Building on the research…….……301

REFERENCES ……...303

APPENDICES ……324

Appendix One: Interview Schedule ……324

Appendix Two: Application for Ethics Review Form ……327

Appendix Three: Information Sheet for Participants ……342

Appendix Four: Consent Form ……344

Appendix Five: Table of demographic information on interview participants ……..345

Appendix Six: Basic themes from interview data ……..352

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

Figure 1. Internationally mobile students around the world in 2010~2020 ……...8

Figure 2. International HE student enrolments by level of study in the UK from academic year 2010/11 to 2021/22 ……...10

Figure 3. Chinese mobile students across the world in 2010~2020 ……....11

Figure 4. Number of Mainland Chinese HE international students by host nations in 2020 ……...12

Figure 5. Mainland Chinese international HE student enrolments by level of study in the UK from academic year 2010/11 to 2021/22 ……13

Table 1. Demographic information on interview participants…….90

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Confucianism: A Chinese philosophy based on the teachings of Confucius and focusing on moral values.

Educational agents: private agents who provide information and guidance to prospective international students.

Filial piety: a term refers to the Confucian idea of respecting and deferring to one's parents.

First batch of universities: tier one universities in China (including 985 and 211 universities) whose Gaokao score requirements are higher than the second batch of universities.

Foundation course: full-time study programmes that are designed for international students to help them to prepare for their undergraduate study.

Gaokao: China's National Entrance Examination; a compulsory admissions exam for final-year high school students in Mainland China wishing to gain access into a Chinese university.

International school pathway: an educational route to gaining access into UK universities for participants who took the International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma and Canadian high school diploma at international schools in China or other countries.

Neijuan: a term widely used in Mainland China to describe the competitive nature of Chinese society that requires great efforts to compete for limited opportunities.

SAT: the Scholastic Assessment Test; a standardised exam widely taken by students who wish to gain access to undergraduate studies in the United States.

UCAS: the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service; a centralised organisation in the UK managing undergraduate applications to UK higher education institutions.

14th Five Year Plan: A national plan which outlines China's socio-economic development goals and strategies for the period from 2021 to 2025.

211 university: the universities of Project 211 refers to more than a hundred universities nominated by Chinese government in 1995 to promote the development of Chinese higher education.

985 university: the universities of Project 985 refers to the 39 top Chinese universities in which the Chinese government chose to invest in 1998.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction and Context

Introduction

This study focuses on international student mobility in higher education and, in particular, on access to overseas higher education. It explores the factors which lie behind Mainland Chinese students' decisions to study at a UK university, their choice of university and of their subject of study. While a number of previous studies have analysed the factors which influence Chinese students' decisions to study overseas at postgraduate level, there has to date been less focus on the individual decision making processes of prospective undergraduates. In addition, the research considers the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the decision making of those participants who were applying to university during 2020-2021.

This introductory chapter is in two parts. The first part presents the context for this research – specifically, the policy and economic contexts for international student mobility, and the movement of young people from China to study in the UK. The second part introduces the background to this study, its purpose and the way in which it was conducted. It also presents an outline of the thesis.

International student mobility: the context

In this section, the context for my research – the international recruitment and

mobility of university students, particularly those from Mainland China – is explored. I will first define internationalisation in higher education, suggesting that it entails reformulation of the aims and purposes of higher education, integrating international concerns into higher education's strategy, environment, and curriculum. I will then discuss recent trends in international student mobility and, in particular, the movement of Chinese students to the UK and elsewhere. I will show that there is a continuously upward trend in both international student mobility in general and Chinese student mobility in particular, and suggest that the rationales behind each need to be taken into account.

Defining internationalisation in higher education

Globalisation and internationalisation are two key terms used widely in discussions of international student mobility in higher education. According to Altbach (2004), globalisation refers to a worldwide trend toward greater economic, technological, academic, and scientific interconnectedness that has affected many people's lives, including the lives of those who work and study in higher education. Internationalisation, on the other hand, has a narrower meaning. It refers to the practices and policies adopted by governments, academic systems – and, in the case of this study, by higher education institutions – in order to respond to, manage and benefit from this globalised environment (Altbach and Knight, 2007).

Knight (2003, p.2) has further defined internationalisation in higher education as: *'the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions, and delivery of post-secondary education'.* This definition, in an ideal sense, therefore, suggests a re-focusing of the purposes and priorities of higher education to recognise international concerns as central factors shaping higher education's target audiences, its strategy, environment and curricula. Viewed in this positive light, and in order to achieve this aim, universities have for some time been in the process of enlarging their range of international activities, and of increasing the number of international students and academic staff within their institutions (Knight, 2008). It has also been suggested that, through these approaches, internationalisation has become gradually embedded into universities' ways of thinking and, in turn, into higher education policies, programmes, curricula and research, and the wider university environment (Welch, 2002). Under the influence of internationalisation, therefore, it has been suggested that universities, their staff, and their students may now gain international experience and therefore more internationalised ways of thinking.

However, the reality of internationalisation in higher education has also been critiqued from a number of perspectives. For example, Stein (2016) has suggested that both discussions about internationalisation and its practice have tended to reproduce 'colonial logics'. Stein argues that 'Western' countries with 'developed'

capitalist economies have been able, as a result of globalisation, to export their academic systems and conceptions of knowledge to less developed countries under the guise of internationalisation (Stein, 2017). Stein sees international student mobility as evidence of the dominance of 'Western' knowledge and values, which perpetuates status inequalities across different countries (Stein, 2016). It has also been observed that the flow of international students seems to reproduce colonial-era mobility patterns (Walker, 2014). For example, developed countries ('host countries') are able to spread their culture, knowledge, and values to developing countries ('home/sending countries'). In addition, the host country is able to use the tuition fees generated from international students to offset their own universities' financial deficits and provide support for university operations and for local students.

International student recruitment as an aspect of internationalisation

A key aspect of internationalisation in the UK, USA and other economically developed Western countries, has been the recruitment of international students both to support universities financially and to build international connections and prestige (Robson, 2011). There seem to be three aims behind international student recruitment: the production of internationally oriented graduates; the generation of university income; and university reputation building.

First, an emphasis on public accountability in higher education has required universities to produce employable ‘international’ graduates (Campbell, 2010) who have developed intercultural competences and analytical skills to work in international settings (Green and Olsen, 2003). ‘International graduates’ here, refers not just to those who have travelled abroad to study, but to those who have, as students, learned from transformative and intercultural experiences, whether studying at home or abroad (Campbell, 2010).

The second reason for recruiting international students is that they are a source of revenue to a national economy, both through the payment of tuition fees and through their non-tuition spending on accommodation and living costs (Stein, 2017). However, as Stein (2016) has pointed out, governments and higher education institutions have tended to promote income generation from international students above all as a way of addressing deficits generated by reductions in public funding for higher education. Others too (for example Knight 2014), have noted a shift in the driving forces behind internationalisation, from international educational partnerships and collaborative capacity building, towards income generation.

A third motivation for universities to recruit international students is in order for them to increase their international prestige and to promote their institution’s

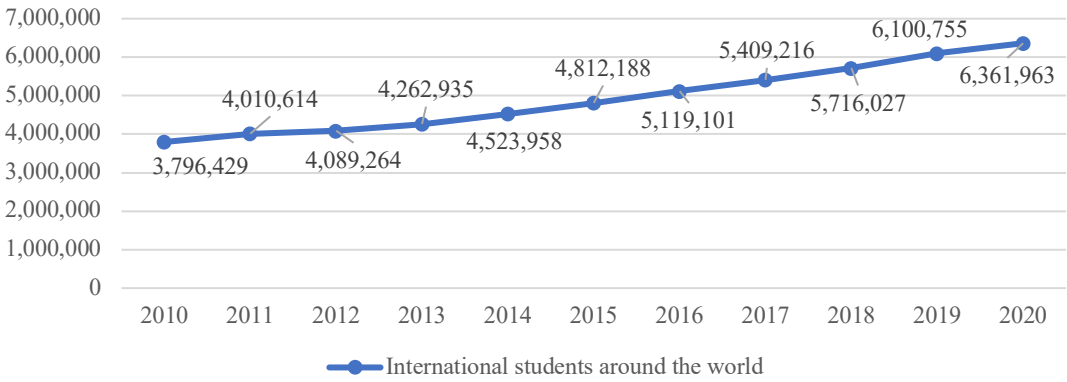
‘global brand’ (Stein, 2016). The increasing marketisation of higher education has, it has been suggested (Knight 2013), led to the development of international marketing strategies, rather than more broadly based internationalisation plans. (Knight, 2013). While such strategies might be beneficial to a university’s ranking and income generation prospects, they might not be helpful in integrating an international, intercultural, and global dimension into that university’s management, teaching, research, and goals (Knight, 2013).

Trends in international student mobility

As suggested above, international student mobility has been one of the most notable outcomes of the internationalisation of higher education (MacEachern and Yun, 2017). The trend towards international student mobility has grown gradually in recent decades and has been widely noted. For example, according to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2023), there has been a steady growth of the number of internationally mobile students across the world, increasing by 68 percent in the ten years from 2010 to 2020 (See Figure 1). Among all internationally mobile students, in 2020 Chinese students appeared to make up the largest proportion, followed by Indian students, Vietnamese students, German students, and US students (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2023). Among these five largest groups of international students, the number of internationally mobile Chinese students was larger than that the total number of international students

from those other countries in 2020 (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2023). According to the data covering the ten past years, China and India have consistently been the two countries with the largest number of outbound internationally mobile students (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2023). In addition to those mentioned above, the Republic of Korea, Nigeria, France, Malaysia, and Saudi Arabia have also appeared in the list of top five countries with the highest number of outbound internationally mobile students recorded once, or more than once, in the past five years (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2023). In terms of the main destination countries for internationally mobile students, the USA appears to be the most popular host country. It has more than 957,000 international students, followed by the UK, Australia, Germany, and Canada in 2020 (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2023). In the past ten years, the US, the UK, and Australia seem to have consistently maintained their top-three ranking of the countries with the largest number of inbound internationally mobile students (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2023). In addition, France and Russia have also been among the top five in the past ten years (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2023).

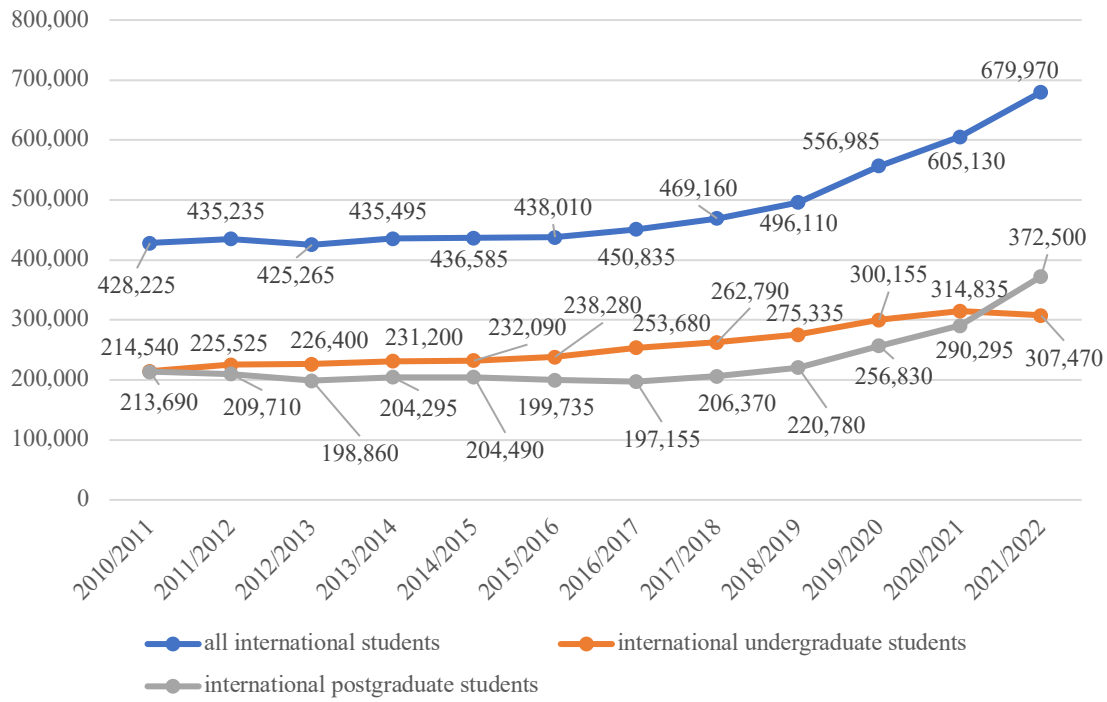
Figure 1. Internationally mobile students around the world in 2010~2020



In terms of international students studying in UK higher educational institutions, there has also been an upward trend. Figure 2 suggests that in the ten years from the 2010/2011 academic year to the 2021/2022 academic year, the number of international undergraduate and postgraduate students rose by 59 percent (HESA, 2023). Within this time span, there was a sharp increase in the number of international HE students in UK universities. In the period from 2018 to 2021 this number increased by 37 percent (183,860 students). In terms of the international undergraduate students in the UK, the number has increased steadily, rising by 47 per cent between 2010 and 2020. However, the upward trend appears to have been checked since 2020, the year of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Between 2020 and 2021 the number of international undergraduates declined by around 2 percent. As for international postgraduate students in the UK, the number remained relatively stable between 2010 to 2018 (at around 210,000 to 220,000), followed by a rapid growth from 2018 to 2021 when the number of international

postgraduates increased by almost 69 percent (by 151,720 students). The growth in numbers of international HE students in the UK between 2018 and 2021 therefore appears to have been mainly a result of the increase in international postgraduates. Between 2020 and 2021, both the number of international HE students overall and of international postgraduate students increased rapidly by 12 percent and 28 percent respectively. This shows that the outbreak of the pandemic did not check the increase in numbers of international postgraduate students in the UK. However, it is perhaps too early to know what the overall effect of the pandemic will be on patterns of international student mobility to the UK and other receiving countries. Currently Mainland Chinese students still appear to be the largest group of international students in UK higher education institutions, as they have been for more than ten years (HESA, 2023).

Figure 2. International HE student enrolments by level of study in the UK
Academic years 2010/11 to 2021/22



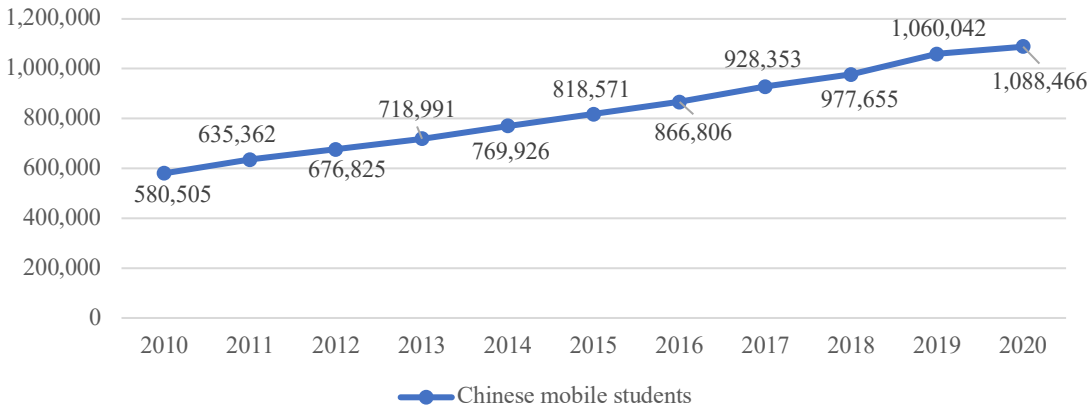
Source: The Higher Education Statistics Agency (2023)

The international mobility of Chinese university students

According to Figure 3, there was also a steadily growing trend from 2010 to 2020 in the total number of internationally mobile Chinese students; an increase of almost 88 percent (UNESCO 2023). Figure 4 shows that the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada were the most popular destination countries for Mainland Chinese students to study abroad in 2020 (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2023). The UK was the second most popular study abroad destination for Mainland Chinese students, attracting more than

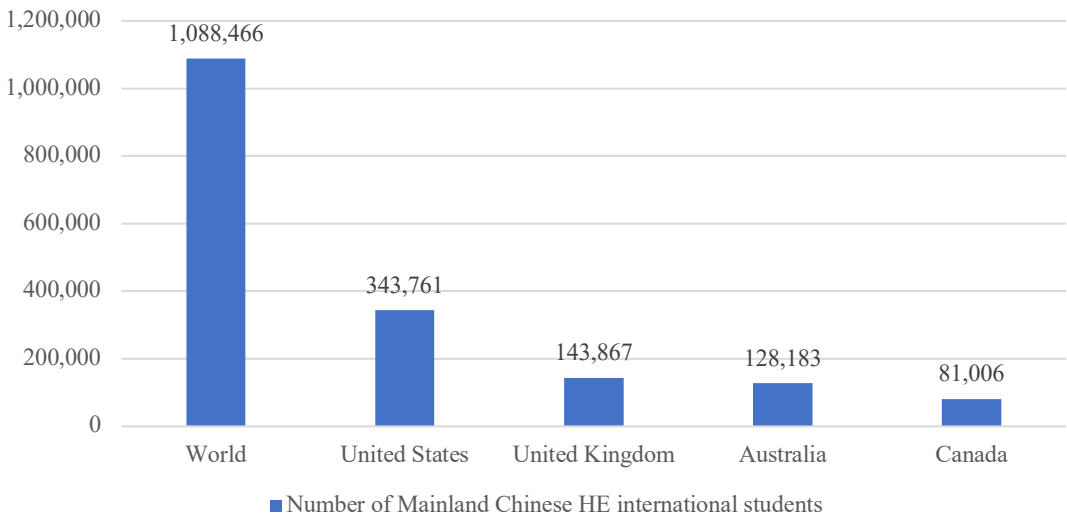
140,000 to UK higher education institutions in 2020 (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2023). These figures appear to confirm Stein's (2016) critique of internationalisation that western developed countries are the dominant recruiters and therefore most likely to gain, both in influence and financially.

Figure 3. Chinese mobile students across the world in 2010~2020



Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2023)

Figure 4. Number of Mainland Chinese HE international students by host nations in 2020

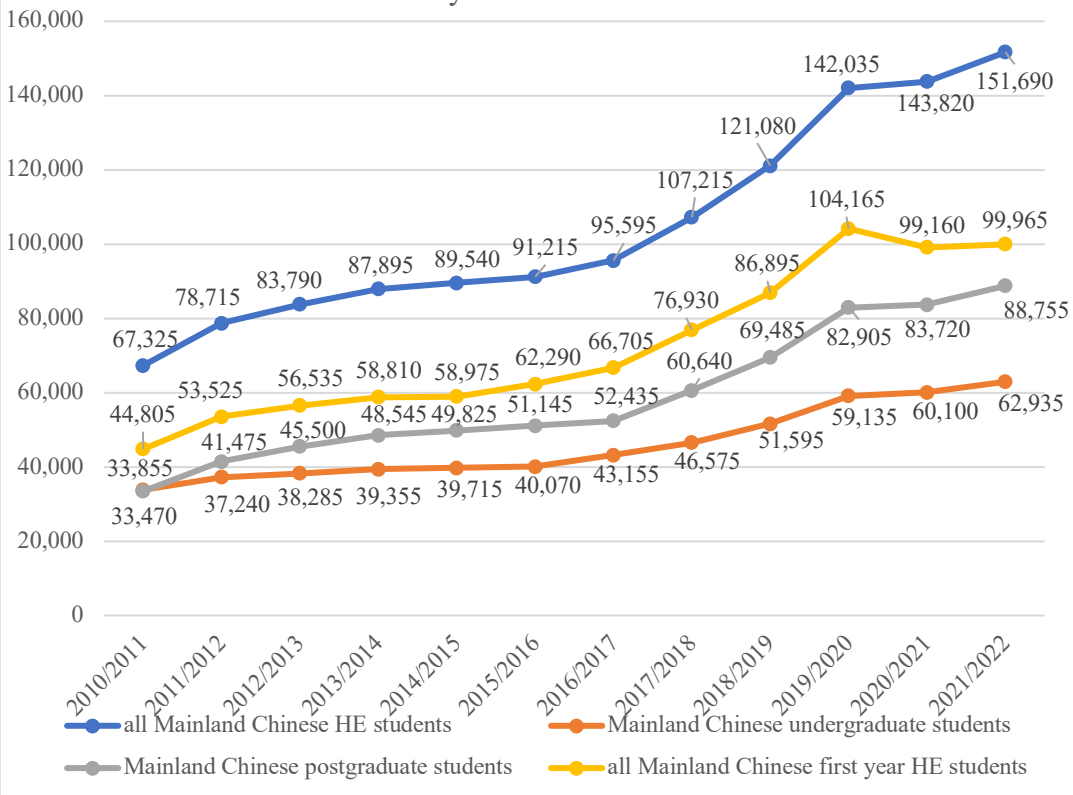


Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2023)

In terms of Chinese HE students in the UK, Figure 5 indicates the trends over the past eleven years (HESA, 2023). There was an upward trend in the recruitment of Mainland Chinese students overall between 2010 and 2021, with an increase of 125 percent over this period. Furthermore, there was a steady increase (of 42 percent) in the six years between 2010 and 2016, followed by an increase of 49 percent in just three years, from 2016 to 2019. This growth appeared to slow from 2019 to 2020, during which time the number only increased by about 1 percent. This may have been due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, Mok et al. (2021) have argued that the global higher education landscape has changed since the emergence of the pandemic. Closed borders and travel restrictions led to many students cancelling or postponing their studies abroad. However, from 2020

to 2021, the number of Chinese HE students in the UK increased by 5 percent. Both Chinese undergraduate and postgraduate student numbers show a similar trend from 2010 to 2021, but the number of Chinese postgraduate students in the UK seems to have increased more steeply than that of Chinese undergraduate students (HESA, 2023). However, not all trends in the number of Chinese HE students in the UK have been upward. Mainland Chinese first year registered HE students appear to decrease by 5 per cent from 2019 to 2021, most likely due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic (HESA, 2023).

Figure 5. Mainland Chinese international HE student enrolments by level of study in the UK
Academic years 2010/11 to 2021/22



Source: The Higher Education Statistics Agency (2023)

Section summary

To conclude, there has been an ongoing upward trend in both international student mobility and Chinese student mobility over the decade. Specifically, the upward trend has also appeared in UK recruitment of Chinese students, including undergraduate students. Notwithstanding the problems brought about by the pandemic, Chinese students still appear to be choosing to study in the UK. Therefore, this is an issue worth studying, particularly as my own study has been able to capture the impressions of those who were making their choices during the pandemic.

The educational policy context in the UK and China

The continuous growth in the number of international students in the UK seems to be attributable, in part, to UK government policy related to supporting international student mobility. In 2019, the UK government published its International Education Strategy which set out two goals to be achieved by 2030: to increase the value of UK education exports to £35 billion per year and to ensure that at least 600,000 international HE students gained access into UK universities (UK Department for Education and UK Department for Trade, 2019). Indeed, international student mobility brings significant income to the UK, and income from international students has been ranked as the fifth most important income stream for UK universities (The Guardian, 14/07/2023). Specifically, tuition fees from international

students seem to account for a third or more of the total income of some UK universities, which suggests that international students' tuition fees play an essential role in UK universities' operation (The Guardian, 14/07/ 2023). According to Figure 2, the data shows that there has been a rapid increase of the number of international HE students in the UK from 2018/2019 to 2021/2022 academic year (HESA, 2023). It appears that this rapid growth has brought benefits to the UK economy with income from such fees increasing from £31.3 billion in the 2018/2019 academic year to £41.9 billion in the 2021/2022 academic year (Universities UK, 2023). The economic benefit from international students not only boosts the UK economy, but also tends to make UK universities increasingly reliant on international student recruitment. However, as has been suggested in the literature (Knight, 2014; Stein, 2016) this reliance on international marketing in order to raise revenues may well conflict with more cooperative and altruistic ideals for internationalisation.

In terms of the educational policy context in China, it appears that Chinese student mobility is also encouraged by the Chinese government. The Ministry of Education of China has published 'The Opinions on Accelerating and Expanding the Opening up of Education in the New Era' to support international student mobility (Ministry of Education of PRC, 2020). 'The Opinions' concentrates on accelerating China's educational modernisation and cultivating the competitive talents required for

China's rapid economic development. In order to achieve this goal, the Ministry of Education aims to build greater educational cooperation with high-quality educational institutions (Ministry of Education of PRC, 2020).

Specifically, the Chinese government has promoted Chinese Scholarship Council (CSC) scholarships. The Chinese Scholarship Council offers opportunities and funding for Chinese students to study abroad via the National Study Abroad Fund (CSC, 2023). The National Study Abroad Fund selects outstanding Chinese HE students annually, and provides financial support for their studies (CSC, 2023).

In addition, the government has endeavoured to use its *hukou* (or residency) policy to encourage Chinese students to study abroad and return to China after their study. The word *hukou* refers to the permanent residence registration system in Mainland China which identifies a person as a resident of a town, city or province and gives them the right to enjoy the benefits of living in that location, such as buying a place of residence and a car (Zwart, 2012). The Chinese government has offered *hukou* (residency priority) in first-tier cities in China to attract returning overseas students, namely in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen.

Section summary

This section provides a general understanding of both the UK's and China's policy context in terms of international mobility. On the one hand, there is a strong

economic incentive for UK universities to recruit international students, including students from Mainland China. On the other hand, this coincides with Chinese governmental priorities to promote rapid national and economic growth by incentivising young people to study abroad and then return to contribute their knowledge and skills to their country. Therefore, how students choose to study abroad and why they choose the UK is an issue worthy of further study.

Educational access routes UK undergraduate study

Chinese students are able to access UK undergraduate study through a number of possible educational routes. There are four main pathways to access: undertaking a foundation course; using the *gaokao* score to apply to a UK undergraduate course directly; taking a course of A-levels; and studying for other international qualifications in international schools, such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) or the Canadian High School Diploma. I will discuss each of these in turn.

Foundation courses are full-time study programmes which are designed for international students to help them to prepare for their undergraduate study. They include the teaching of language and study skills and the academic knowledge and subject content needed for UK undergraduate study (Collins, 2010). Not all foundation course programmes are run by universities; there are a number run by private education providers such as Kaplan. These education providers often have cooperation agreements with universities and provide universities with a stable

source of international undergraduate students (Kaplan, 2023). Students need to make their subject choices before they apply for a foundation course since these courses are subject-specific. For example, in the case of the international foundation programme of the University of London, students are expected to take four modules in their chosen subject area (University of London, 2023). As for the entry requirements for foundation courses, they only accept students aged 17 years and above, and the *gaokao* score, or completion of the final year of high schooling are both acceptable criteria for entry. (University of London, 2023). Foundation course assessments are conducted throughout the study period and students are also assessed by unseen written exams. The students who pass all four module assessments are awarded a certificate with a classification of pass, merit, or distinction.

Second, Chinese students seeking to enrol in UK universities can apply directly to a university using their *gaokao* score. The *gaokao,* also known as China's National College Entrance Examination (NCEE), is a compulsory admissions test for final-year high school students in China wishing to gain entry to a Chinese university (Liu and Wu, 2006). Students need to take three compulsory subjects: Chinese, Maths, and a foreign language (which may include English, Japanese, French, German, Spanish or Russian). In addition, students need to take a comprehensive exam combining three subjects: chemistry, biology, and physics for science pathway students; and geography, history, and politics for arts pathway students

(UCAS, 2015). A student's *gaokao* score is the sum of the scores of these four exams. Although a majority of Chinese students take the *gaokao* to gain access into Chinese universities, some students also use their *gaokao* score to apply to overseas universities. Some UK universities recognise the *gaokao* score as proof of a student's academic performance. For example, students applying to the University of Birmingham must gain a minimum 80% *gaokao* score and other English language and additional academic requirements to be considered for entry (University of Birmingham, 2023).

Third, Chinese students may enter UK undergraduate study through taking A-Levels. A-Levels are subject-based school leaving qualifications in the UK accessed by exams. They are the main pathway for local and international students in the UK who aim to get access into UK undergraduate study (UCAS, 2023). In terms of Chinese students, there are two main ways to take A-Levels: studying A-Levels in the UK; or studying A-Levels in an international school in China or other countries. Generally, most students would spend over two years and choose three or four subjects to study at A-Level (UCAS, 2023).

Finally, studying in an international school is another pathway to gain access into UK universities. There are two kinds of qualifications that participants in this study took at international schools: the International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma, and the Canadian high school diploma. The IB diploma is a two-year educational

programme assessed by exams. IB diploma programme students are required to study six subjects (UCAS, 2023). Specifically, students would select one subject from each of five groups including two languages, Maths, experimental sciences, and social sciences. In addition, students need to select either an arts subject, or another subject from groups one to five (UCAS, 2023). In terms of the Canadian high school diploma, there is no unified qualification for higher education entry in Canada; education is the responsibility of the provinces (UCAS, 2015). Therefore, there may be differences between provinces. However, to gain a high school diploma in most of the provinces of Canada, students need to take five subjects and use their Grade 12 examination score to apply for undergraduate study in Canada or overseas (UCAS, 2015).

The choice of some educational routes, such as foundation courses, seems to be also influenced by educational agents. Agents act as professional educational counsellors and advisers for students, guiding them through the application process. They therefore also play an important role in international higher education marketing (Feng and Horta, 2021). Specifically, agents are regarded as powerful links between international students and potential host universities. On the one hand, they exercise an influence on students' study abroad decisions, their educational pathways, their choice of university, and choice of specific course (Pimpa, 2003). On the other hand, agents also provide international higher educational institutions with a regular and reliable source of international students.

According to an OBHE (Observatory on Borderless Higher Education) survey (2014), a majority of popular host countries such as the US, the UK, Australia, and Canada have cooperation agreements with private educational agents. The main reason why both prospective international students and overseas universities are prepared to pay for the services provided by agents is, according to Feng and Horta (2021), information asymmetry. By this they mean that international students and potential host universities may not be familiar with different countries' higher education admissions processes and qualifications systems. It is suggested that although educational agents' duty is to serve the needs of students and universities, their goals may not necessarily coincide with the interests of their clients (Nikula and Kivistö, 2020). It seems, therefore that agents' practices have the potential to be either helpful or unduly biased, depending on whose interests they prioritise – their own, their partner universities' or those of the students who are influenced by their advice (Feng and Horta, 2021).Whichever is the case, it appears important to take into account that some prospective international students are likely to be dependent on agents' services and influenced by their recommendations (Feng and Horta, 2021).

Section summary

It is important to recognise that the routes taken to UK university entry may vary from student to student. Increasingly, foundation courses have been promoted

both by universities and by private educational organisations. However, it is also important to understand that there are different routes into a UK university, and that the route taken may affect choice of destination, university and subject choice. In the first place, the choice of educational route might shape students' choices of destination country because some routes will be recognised in some countries but not in others. Second, for those taking A-Levels and foundation courses in particular, subject choices for undergraduate study may be limited by the subject choices made before taking their particular educational route (since students need to choose a specific subject area before they take a foundation course or A-Levels). Furthermore, the university choices of students who take a foundation course route may be limited by the cooperation agreements in place between their foundation programme organisation and specific universities. Finally, it appears important to consider the role of agents as advisors and key informants in the process of international students' choice making around their educational pathway, destination, university, and course.

Conclusion

The above section has explored the context for international mobility from three points of view: the trends in international student and Chinese student mobility over the past decade; the policy contexts in China and the UK; and the diverse range of educational pathways available to international students seeking to gain

access into UK undergraduate study. It appears that the trend of Chinese student mobility is continuously upward, and that this trend has been supported by Chinese and the UK higher education policies. Under the current wave of Chinese student mobility, the educational pathways to access into UK undergraduate study appear to have become more diverse to meet the needs of both Chinese students and of UK universities. However, the choice of educational pathways may also affect students' further decision making in relation to destination, subject, and university for their undergraduate study. Therefore, investigating the individual differences in Chinese undergraduates' study-abroad decision making seems important to understanding the aspirations and intentions of Chinese students.

Outline of the study

In the following section, the background to, and the purpose of conducting this study is presented, and I explain how my personal experiences inspired me to focus on identifying the key factors appearing in Mainland Chinese undergraduates' study abroad decision making processes and how these factors, individually or in combination, influenced Chinese undergraduates' study abroad decisions. In addition, I outline my research questions, and explain how I conducted this research. The central question for the study was: 'How do Mainland Chinese undergraduates make their study-abroad decisions?' In order to address this question, a qualitative approach to data collection was applied, based on the

use of semi-structured interviews. I then briefly outline the main findings of the study and the general structure of this thesis, which is divided into six chapters. The overall conclusion arrived at through the process of undertaking this study, is first, that Chinese undergraduates' study abroad decision making is multifactorial and complex, and there is no clear-cut phase of decision making process in study abroad decisions. Second, decision making appears to be shaped by the earlier educational pathways taken by individuals. Third, awareness of educational competition, access to information sources, and the role of parental advice also shapes students' whole decision making process.

Background to the study

My research focused on students from Mainland China. I use the term 'Mainland China' to refer to all provinces (such as Sichuan and Guangdong), and municipalities (such as Beijing and Shanghai) in China, excluding the two special administrative regions of Hong Kong and Macau (see map below). My reason for including only Mainland Chinese students was because Mainland China and Hong Kong/Macau have different educational systems. To include students from Hong Kong and Macau would not have enabled a comparison between the decision-making processes of students from broadly similar educational backgrounds. However, it is important to note (and it will become apparent to the reader as this thesis progresses) that there are still considerable regional differences within Mainland China, and particularly between urban and rural areas. The participants

in my study were from a total of 16 provinces/municipalities (Sichuan, Shandong, Beijing, Jiangsu, Fujian, Anhui, Shanghai, Xinjiang, Heilongjiang, Tianjin, Shenzhen, Hebei, Guangdong, Jilin, Zhejiang, and Hubei).

Map of China

Source: Reach to Teach Recruiting (2023)

As an international student from Mainland China undertaking my doctoral studies in the UK, the issue central to this study was of personal interest, particularly as I also took my undergraduate and Master's degrees in the UK. During my study abroad life, I made friends with a number of Mainland Chinese students. When we met for the first time, I often talked with them about our study abroad decisions

and previous educational pathways as a way of getting to know them. This inspired me to think about why and how Mainland Chinese students made their study abroad decisions, what were the most important considerations for them, and what role had been played by friends, family and others in influencing their decisions. From the outset of the research, therefore, I was aware of the need to pay attention to, and avoid as far as possible, potential biases which might be entailed in studying an issue so close to my own experience and interests. On the other hand, however, my own study abroad experiences and my personal conjectures about study abroad decision making had the potential to offer fresh insights to enable me to interpret potential participants' descriptions of their decision making.

Research questions

The following overall research question guided the research: *How did Mainland Chinese undergraduates studying at UK universities describe their study abroad decision making processes?*

Three supplementary questions arose from this:

a) Who or what influenced their decision to study at a UK university?

b) Who or what influenced their choice of a particular UK university?

c) Who or what influenced their subject choices in the UK?

Approach to this study

Qualitative research methods were applied in this study. More specifically, individual semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, because my research purpose was to investigate the individual experiences of participants in depth. The participants in this study were Year One and Year Two Mainland Chinese undergraduates studying at UK universities, between March 2021 and July 2021. Thirty-four interviews were conducted, either online or in person. All the interviews took place while participants were back in China, as a result of the international travel restrictions brought about by the Covid-19 Pandemic.

Key findings and claims

The key findings indicated that participants' study abroad decision making processes were multifactorial and complex. There seemed to be no clear-cut phases in a student's decision making process. Four strong themes emerged as shaping decision making: educational competition (pursuing a university place and navigating *neijuan*), the influences of differing educational pathways, access to information sources, and the role and nature of parental advice. Specifically, students' awareness of the competitiveness of the higher education sector and the future job market and the complexity of decision making appeared to be the two key themes emerged from their study abroad decision making. Second, the

findings highlighted that students' pre-university pathways (a foundation course, the *gaokao*, A-Level, or international school) seemed to have a significant influence on students' initial study abroad decision making and subject and university choice making. Third, the findings also throw light on the importance of reliable information sources in informing the decision making process. Finally, parents appeared to play a range of roles at different points in the whole process.

The findings of this study threw a light on the processes entailed in Mainland Chinese students' study abroad choice making and added to the understanding of how individual Mainland Chinese undergraduate students weigh different factors to make their study abroad decisions.

Structure of the thesis

In the introductory chapter above, I have presented the context for this research – in particular, the policy and economic contexts for international student mobility, and in particular the movement of young people from China to study in the UK, and the general educational routes to apply for UK undergraduate study. The second chapter, the literature review, discusses previous research which has explored the factors influencing the study abroad decision making of both international students in general and Chinese students in particular. It appears that the majority of past studies have applied quantitative or mixed methods research designs to identify the influential factors or to explore the relative importance of

specific factors in international students' study abroad decisions. To date, few studies have applied a qualitative approach to explore in greater depth how different categories of factors work together in Chinese undergraduates' study abroad decision making. The third chapter is divided into three sections and describes the methodology, research design, and approach to data analysis adopted for the study. In particular, it explains why individual, semi-structured interviews in the Chinese language were conducted, as a means of gathering data on the perceptions of Mainland Chinese undergraduates studying at UK universities. It also explains how the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic impacted upon the process of data collection. Chapter Four, the first findings chapter, describes how participants' initial study abroad decisions were arrived at, and the ways in which different pre-university pathways impacted on these decisions. In Chapter Five, the data presented illustrates the complex range of factors which influenced students' subject and university choices. The main finding emerging from these two chapters was that the decision making processes of Chinese undergraduates in the UK seemed to be complex, different for each individual, and shaped by a number of factors at different stages in the process. Overall, decision making was also strongly influenced by the previous educational pathway taken by the individual. The sixth, and final, chapter presents a discussion of the findings and their implications. I also discuss what I have learned myself from undertaking the research and how my findings may be of value to others involved in this field.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter is divided into the six following sections:

- Human capital in higher education
- Confucianism in Chinese education
- The application of the 'push and pull factors' model in international students' study abroad decision making;
- Chinese students' initial study abroad decisions;
- factors influencing international students' choice of overseas university;
- factors influencing international students' choice of subject.

I have divided the literature review into six sections for several reasons. First, because human capital and the influence of Confucianism appear to be two key concepts commonly applied in studies of international student and Chinese student mobility. Second, because the 'push and pull factors' model of international student choice-making seems to be the model which has dominated discussion of international student mobility. I have placed a discussion of this in this section because I want to offer an overview of our current understanding of international students' study abroad decision making processes, and especially international students' initial study abroad decision making. In this section, the 'push' and 'pull'

factors influencing international student decision making, drawn from various studies, are summarised, and three such studies, applying different research methods, are evaluated in detail. The following three sections represent phases which have been identified in the decision making process: initial study abroad decisions; university choice making; subject choice making. In the fourth section, I specifically consider Chinese students' initial study abroad decisions because there already exists a literature which focuses on Chinese international students. In this section, the literature which discusses Chinese international students' initial study abroad decision making is categorised into two sub-sections: the decision to study abroad; and the choice of host country.

Section five discusses studies related to the factors influencing both international and Chinese students' university choices. There are three groups of studies in this section: studies exploring the university choices of international students in general; studies investigating the perspectives of particular groups of international students, including those from China; and studies exploring the perspectives of Chinese students specifically.

In the sixth and final section, studies focused on the factors influencing both international students' and Chinese students' subject choices are presented and evaluated. Since most of literature deals only with initial study abroad decisions

and university choices, but does not deal with subject choice making, I have dealt with subject choices in the final section. This is not intended to imply, however, that this is necessarily the final stage in the choice making process; only that there is a less extensive body of literature on this topic.

Human capital in higher education

Human capital theory has been applied by some writers in this field in an attempt to explain the study abroad decisions of international students in general and Mainland Chinese students in particular (Lowe, 2007; Fong, 2011; Wu, 2014; Cebolla-Boado, 2017). In the field of education, human capital theory has been employed to examine the relationship between education and economic gain. Writing as early as 1902, Schultz referred to human capital, asserting that investment in education influenced the growth of a nation's economy. Specifically, human capital in the field of education refers to the advantages which certain holdings of capital bestow on an individual or a society. These advantages appear to increase the competitiveness of individuals and, in turn, help them to improve their own economic returns. Although human capital theory may, in part, explain students' initial study abroad motivations it may not fully take account of the complexity of decision-making and the non-economic factors at play. However, theories of, and about, human capital's role in education are important since it is clear that future career and economic factors do play a part in university decision-

making (Chen, 2007; Lowe, 2007; Liu, 2010; Wu, et al., 2010).

According to Bourdieu (1986), competition in the social world entails the employment of various forms of capital in order for the individual to compete for power, status and wealth. Bourdieu (1986) referred to three types of capital in relation to education: economic, social, and cultural capital. Specifically, economic capital was defined as money and forms of property rights. Social capital was defined as the social networks and resources to which education (and particularly higher education) gives access. Cultural capital, was defined by Bourdieu as access to various cultural activities and artifacts (for example those in the Arts), but also to educational qualifications - which enable people more easily to take part in high status cultural activities. For Bourdieu, however, the accrual of economic capital was the root of, and the key to, all other kinds of capital, since it could be transformed into both cultural and social capital. According to Bourdieu (1986), individual self-interest drives competition for all these forms of capital. In respect of my study, therefore, it is important to keep in mind the potential for the accrual of Bourdieu's 'forms of capital' to be a motivating factor in study abroad decision-making.

Study abroad, as an approach to enhancing educational capital, has been discussed in a number of previous studies (Fong, 2011; Wu, 2014; and Cebolla-

Boado, 2017). According to Fong (2011), the accrual of capital in its various forms could be regarded as a driving force behind the desire to ensure future competitiveness. Wu (2014), on the other hand, has argued that, in relation to higher education and international mobility, human capital has three dimensions: scholastic (the knowledge acquired), social (social networks developed), and cultural (prestige gained) (Wu 2014; Lowe, 2007; Bourdieu & Nice, 2001). Cebolla-Boado's research (2017) also explored the social and cultural dimensions of higher education, citing university prestige, cultural distinctiveness and social networks as key factors in decision-making. Their study drew on 2014 Higher Education Statistics Agency data to conclude that these three factors were the most influential factors influencing Mainland Chinese students' study abroad motivations.

The literature related to human capital and international higher education suggests that studying abroad may, to some extent at least, be driven by motivations related to economic and other forms of capital. However, such studies tend to focus exclusively on study abroad motivations from a human capital perspective. In my research, I focus on students' actual study abroad decision making processes and broaden the focus beyond economic and social competitiveness to explore individual, familial and social – as well as economic – motivations.

The influence of Confucianism on Chinese education

Confucianism is not a religion, but a philosophy (Ryan, 2019). Confucianism originated 2500 years ago and has had a widespread influence on Chinese society up to the present day. In essence, Confucianism involves ideas about moral values, derived from the 'true teachings' of Confucius and other scholars (Ryan, 2019). Specifically, these ideas are related to ritual practices in the daily life of the family, to moral education and to the administration of the state (Gardner, 2014). Confucianism focuses on personal ethics and development, family values, and social order (Ryan, 2019).

The widespread reverence for Confucianism in Chinese culture appears to relate to its multidimensional impact on individuals, families, and society (Chang, 2013). Aspects of Confucian thought are still important today and influence thinking, including thinking about education and family. Since family and education are two important elements in my research, it is worth focusing on what Confucianism says about education and about family or 'filial piety', in particular. While some of the literature may over-emphasise the influence of Confucianism (Qun and Devine, 2018), it is still important to recognise its potential impact on Chinese students' study abroad decision-making processes.

Confucian values emphasise xiao (filial piety) as a means of successfully

maintaining the household and a cohesive family. In essence, filial piety requires children not only to obey their parents, but also to prepare themselves for following independent moral lives in the future. According to the Canon of Filial Piety (Xiaojing), the foundation of filial piety is respect for one's parents; the second level of respect is respect for one's rulers, and the ultimate end is the development of oneself (Goldin, 2015). However, current understandings of filial piety seem to focus on the relationship between children and parents (Chow, 2007; Lee and Kwok, 2005; Zhan, 2004). Some studies which have explored the current reality of filial piety have suggested that it may be regarded as encompassing intergenerational relationships and support exchanges between children and parents (Mao and Chi, 2011; Zhan, 2004; Wang et al., 2010). Specifically, it has been argued that there are three aspects to filial piety: financial support, emotional support, and showing respect for one's parents (Treas and Wang, 1993). The studies conducted in this area have tended to focus on parents' perspectives on filial piety – for example on how parents perceive children's filial piety and what their expectations are in this regard. However, there appear to be only a limited number of studies (for example, Chen and Wong 2014, Qun and Devine 2018, Lee and Morrish 2012) focusing on how filial piety works from the perspective of young people themselves.

Striving to get good grades is said by Chen and Wong (2014) to be a commonly

accepted way in which children show filial piety. This appears to be particularly important in respect of educational decision-making, since parents frequently invest substantial sums of money in facilitating their children's educational progress (Chen and Wong, 2014). Qun and Devine (2018), have explored the importance of filial piety in Chinese students' doctoral study abroad decisions. Their study suggests that the relationship between parents and their student offspring has a strong influence on students' educational pathways and their further career choices. Qun and Devine's findings support Lee and Morrish's (2012) argument that high parental spending on children's education is a common phenomenon in Chinese society and that Chinese parents seem willing to sacrifice their own standard of living and lifestyle for their children because of the perceived importance of higher education credentials.

However, it has been argued that educational credentials may not be the only reason why parents invest heavily in their children's education (Bodycott, 2009). Gaining higher social status for the family may also be a reason why parents are keen for their children to show filial piety in their educational decision-making. More specifically, it has been suggested that 'face' (or social standing) plays a very important role in Chinese interpersonal interactions. Thus, parents may feel that their own honour is at stake and is reflected in their children's academic achievement (Lee and Morrish, 2012). Furthermore, filial piety may not solely

apply to obeying parents' wishes in educational choices. It also may also have implications concerning the offspring's willingness to care for their parents in later life, and to consider their needs and wishes as important factors in any decision (Tu, 2016).

Both Qun and Devine (2018) and Lee and Morrish (2012) contend that Confucius's teaching on filial piety is an influential factor when parents and children weigh up their educational choices. According to both writers, parents also appear to take 'honour' or 'later life care' into account when they consider their children's educational decisions. Correspondingly, they suggest, students seem to pay attention to their parents' wellbeing in later life when they make education decisions. However, one potential criticism of such studies is that they tend to assume, in advance, that filial piety is a factor influencing decision-making rather than allowing research participants to explore and express their views about influential factors, uninfluenced by the assumptions of the researcher. In my study, I have attempted not to assume that filial piety plays an influential role in Mainland Chinese international undergraduates' study abroad decisions; rather I sought to enable participants themselves to identify the key influences on their decision-making.

The application of the 'push and pull factors' model in international students'

study abroad decision making

A ‘push and pull’ model has been widely applied to analyse the processes of international study-abroad decision making, particularly in relation to decisions about whether to study abroad and where to go (Fam and Gray, 2000; Hiu, 2001; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Zhao and Guo, 2002; Bass, 2005; Hung et al., 2005; Li, 2007).

The push and pull model was first proposed by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) to evaluate the factors influencing students’ decisions to study abroad and their related decision making. The model holds that there are three stages in the process the initial choice to study abroad. The first stage involves students being influenced by ‘push’ factors originating in the home country. According to this model, after applicants have decided that they wish to study overseas, the next stage in their decision making is governed by ‘pull’ factors. Hung and Yen (2020) defined ‘pull’ factors as those considerations that lead a student to see the potential host country as more attractive than the home country. The final stage in this model is the selection of an institution in an overseas country. For advocates of this model, choosing an institution is primarily influenced by ‘pull’ factors that frame one institution as more attractive than others.

Building on the push and pull model, some writers have categorised ‘push’ factors in terms of:

- educational factors, including lack of access to a satisfactory domestic university or subject, or perceived unsatisfactory education systems and teaching methods (Chen, 2007; Liu, et al., 2012);
- political and economic environmental factors in the home country (Chen, 2007; Wu, et al., 2010; Dong, 2012);
- personal perceptions and preferences, such as the desire to understand the West, becoming a more developed person, or wanting to study in other countries (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Lowe, 2007; Lu, et al., 2009; Wu, et al., 2010);
- career-related aspirations such as gaining better job opportunities or salary (Chen, 2007; Lowe, 2007; Liu, 2010; Wu, et al., 2010).

Similarly, 'pull' factors have been categorised by researchers in this field. Four types of 'pull' factor have been thus identified:

- educational factors, including the quality of education offered, and the type of programme and the length of the programme of study (Chen, 2007; Chen, 2008; Wilkins and Huisman, 2011; Bodycott and Lai, 2012; Rudd, et al., 2012; Wu, 2014; Manns and Swift, 2015);
- the language environment, in particular the preference for English as the language of study (Chen, 2007; Wilkins and Huisman, 2011; Wu, 2014);
- career considerations (Chen, 2007; Chen, 2008; Wu, 2014);

- safety considerations – for example the perception of whether a particular country will be a safe learning environment, free from threat or marginalisation (Manns and Swift, 2015; Gong and Huybers, 2015)

A range of methodologies have been applied to the study of 'push and pull' factors in international student choice making. For example, Mozzarol and Soutar (2002), conducted a quantitative research study across four countries, (China, Taiwan, Indonesia and India) utilising questionnaires to explore the influential factors in students' decision making around study abroad destinations. The participants in their study came from a range of different educational backgrounds including high school, vocational education, pre-sessional English language courses, and both undergraduate and postgraduate study. The questions in their survey were mainly about the reasons why participants chose a particular study abroad destination. As for 'push' factors, Mozzarol and Soutar (2002) suggested that participants believed that the courses offered in destination countries were better than the courses offered in their home countries/regions. Another key 'push' factor identified by the study's authors was a desire to learn about 'western culture'. The 'pull' factors identified were related to the ease of finding information about the host country, the level of knowledge about the host country, the perceived quality of education in the host country, and the recognition and reputation of the host country's qualifications. However, the factors identified in the study were, in many instances, not clearly specified or defined. For example, factors such as 'overseas course

better than local', 'western culture' and questions about whether the overseas education offered was 'better' than the education in participants' home country were not clearly explained for those participating in the study. For this reason, since the researchers pre-selected and defined the factors they included in their study, participants' answers might have been based on different interpretations of the meaning of these factors. Another limitation of the study related to the relationship between the push and pull factors model and advice from key informants. The researchers seemed to regard the advice from key informants as a 'pull' factor in this study: a factor shaping students' choices of study-abroad destination. However, advice from key informants might not only influence the choice of host country; it might also shape students' initial decision to study abroad. This suggests that there might be common factors at every phase of study abroad decision making, not only 'pushing' students to study abroad but also 'pulling' them to a host country. The push and pull factor model might therefore only offer a partial explanation of the process of decision making.

Building on Mozzarol and Soutar's (2002) research, Rembielak et al. (2020) focused on developing an understanding of 'push' and 'pull' factors among undergraduate and postgraduate students from Poland who were studying in the United Kingdom. Their study employed qualitative research methods, using focus groups as the data collection tool to explore the factors influencing students' initial study abroad decision making. Forty participants, including both undergraduate

and postgraduate students studying in UK universities, participated in the study. Five ‘push’ factors were identified as shaping these Polish participants’ study abroad decisions: a weak Polish economy; lack of innovation to course structures in Polish universities (concerning various programme offerings and the flexibility in choosing modules); poor customer service in Polish higher education institutions (related to the relationship between lecturer and student); high recognition of UK degrees in Polish businesses; and willingness to leave family and become more independent. Four factors were identified as ‘pulling’ participants towards UK universities: a multicultural environment; geographical proximity between Poland and the UK; advanced English language skills among Polish students; and positive impressions of the UK. The qualitative, exploratory nature of Rembielak et al’s. study expanded and deepened understanding of the nature of the ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors identified in Mozzarol and Soutar’s work (2002). For example, a key ‘push’ factor identified by Mozzarol and Soutar (2002) was ‘overseas education better than local’; however, Rembielak et al (2020) more specifically identified educational ‘push’ factors related to a perceived lack of innovation in the course structures of Polish universities; a sense of there being a poorer level of ‘customer service’ in Polish higher education institutions; and a recognition of the higher value assigned to a UK degree among Polish employers. However, the authors of this study did not appear to take account of the potential influence of information sources in students’ initial study abroad decision making – such as advice from

key informants or from the Internet. Furthermore, although the existence of a relationship between ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors was briefly mentioned in the report of this study, what was not revealed was how a wide range of ‘push’ or ‘pull’ factors worked together in a real-life decision making situation.

Hung and Yen (2020) also analysed a particular group of international students’ motivations using a push and pull factors framework. Their research explored why Vietnamese students chose to study abroad in Taiwan and the relationships between study abroad and future career plans. They applied mixed research methods that involved both semi-structured interviews and surveys. Firstly, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 Vietnamese undergraduate and postgraduate students to identify key influential factors in the decision to study in Taiwan. Second, the themes identified through these interviews were drawn upon in order to create a questionnaire, which was then administered to more than five hundred Vietnamese students, including both undergraduate and postgraduate students who planned to study abroad in Taiwan. The push and pull factors model was applied to identify and analyse the factors influencing participants’ study abroad motivations. The authors suggested that multicultural experiences (including exploring Taiwanese festivals and cultural knowledge and scenery), personal growth (involving gaining a recognised degree and improving academic skills), and language skill (such as a low entry requirement in terms of language ability and improving language fluency) were key factors that ‘pushed’ students to

study abroad (Hung and Yen, 2020). In terms of 'pull' factors, Hung and Yen (2020) identified: location (referring to the short distance between Vietnam and Taiwan, and ease of adaptation to the climate), economic considerations (such as living and tuition costs), the educational context (which referred to a good educational environment in Taiwan and the possibility of experiencing a different educational environment), career considerations (such as job opportunities in both the home and host country), and the quality of medical services (such as advanced health care services in Taiwan). Although this study applied mixed methods which perhaps offered greater depth and definition of the key factors involved (Rembielak, et al, 2020), the findings were broadly similar to the other studies cited above. However, there was also a similar limitation to this study in that sources of information and advice were not taken into account; nor was there any discussion of how these factors worked together in students' decision making processes. And while both studies threw light on the 'push' and 'pull' factors influencing a particular group of international students in a particular country/region (Rembielak, et al, 2020; Hung and Yen, 2020), their findings might not be applicable to the sizable population of Mainland Chinese international students studying, or planning to study, in the UK. It is likely that the social contexts of both home country and host country significantly influence the factors which 'push' or 'pull' students to make their study abroad decisions.

Summary

This section has presented previous research studies which suggest the 'push' and 'pull' factors that may influence international students' study abroad decisions and has analysed in detail three studies that applied three different research methods (quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods), suggesting the strengths and drawbacks of each research approach. Specifically, all these studies added to our understanding of some of the factors which may influence study abroad decision making. However, Mozzarol and Soutar's (2002) study failed to clearly define these factors. While both Rembielak et al, (2020) and Hung and Yen (2020) made up for this limitation by assigning multiple meanings to the various push or pull factors identified, neither study revealed how different factors worked together in reality and at different stages in students' decision making process.

Furthermore, it is possible that the influence of key informants, such as parents, teachers and educational agents might be present at every phase of students' study-abroad decision making, but this issue was not explored in the studies. In my study I explore each phase of the decision making process more specifically and investigate how different influential factors shaped students' choices at each phase of the decision making process.

Chinese students' initial study abroad decisions

A section of the literature of international student mobility focuses specifically on

Chinese students' study abroad intentions and experiences. This literature suggests that initial study abroad decision making involves two steps: the first, general decision to study abroad and the second, a more focused choice of study abroad destination (Bodycott, 2009; Counsell, 2011; Zwart, 2012; Wu, 2014; Gong and Huybers, 2015; Cebella-Boado, et al, 2017; Lu, et al, 2018; Wang and Crawford, 2021). From this literature, a number of key factors emerge as influencing Chinese students' initial study abroad decisions:

- The quality of education (Bodycott, 2009; Counsell, 2011; Wu, 2014; and Gong and Huybers, 2015);
- University ranking and prestige (Zwart, 2012; Gong and Huybers, 2015; Cebeolla-Boado, et al., 2017; Lu, et al., 2018; and Wang and Crawford, 2021);
- The opportunity to learn English (Counsell, 2011; Wu, 2014; and Cebeolla-Boado, et al., 2017);
- The opportunity to gain international experience (Bodycott, 2009; and Wang and Crawford, 2021);
- The attractions of social and cultural life overseas (Cebeolla-Boado, et al., 2017; and Wang and Crawford, 2021)
- The desire to study, work and live overseas (Lu, et al., 2018; and Wang and Crawford, 2021).

This section of the literature review is divided into two sub-sections. The first sub-

section discusses studies of initial decisions to study abroad and the choice of destination country. The second sub-section discusses studies which specifically focus on the decision to study abroad in the UK.

Chinese students' decision to study abroad

A number of mixed methods and quantitative studies have analysed the factors that affect Chinese students' decisions to study overseas and their choice of destination country (Bodycott, 2009; Lu, et al., 2009; Zwart, 2012; Gong and Huybers, 2015; Wang and Crawford, 2021). The earliest of these studies focus on identifying individual key factors shaping Chinese students' study abroad decisions, but later studies aimed to categorise groups of factors influencing Chinese students' choices. For example, Bodycott (2009) tended to identify the most important among various factors, whereas, more recently, Wang and Crawford (2021) tended to divide multiple factors into different groups.

Mixed research methods have been commonly applied in this type of study (Bodycott, 2009; Zwart, 2012; and Gong and Huybers, 2015). Bodycott (2009), for example, used a combination of questionnaires and focus group interviews. Bodycott (2009) examined how 251 Chinese parents and 100 Chinese students weighed different factors in deciding on a study abroad destination. Participants were approached at education exhibitions in China. However, the level of study of

these 100 Chinese students was not revealed. Bodycott (2009) first used a survey to identify key information sources, and the 'push' and 'pull' factors which were influential in participants' study abroad decisions. Focus group interviews were then employed to explore in greater depth the reasons behind participants' study abroad decisions, their ideal study abroad destination, and institution choices. The research threw light on the differences between the perspectives of parents and those of students regarding the decision to study overseas. One of the main findings of Bodycott's study was that Chinese parents and students focused on different factors when they considered study abroad decisions. For instance, students were found to be more attracted by the programme of study and the value of gaining international experience, while parents appeared to be more focused on factors such as future economic and employment prospects, and balanced these considerations against the costs associated with international studies. Although this research compared the different perspectives of parents and students, it did not shed light on how parents influenced students' study abroad decisions and which factors were prioritised in the final decision. The study also suggested that Chinese students' main reasons for studying abroad were their perceptions of the higher quality of education overseas and the desire to have an 'international experience'. However, the authors of the research did not define 'higher education quality'. This may be problematic in that what constitutes a 'better' standard of education and teaching for one person may not be the same

for another. Participants might interpret this factor differently. It is possible, therefore, that exploring such factors without a clear definition of their meaning might lead to inconsistency in interpretation by participants.

Zwart (2012) also applied mixed methods in a study which focused on analysing the factors that influenced Chinese students to study at universities in English speaking countries such as Australia, Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom. Zwart (2012) first used focus group interviews to identify the motivations and desires of thirteen undergraduate students; s/he then administered an online survey to test the key influential factors which had been identified in the focus groups. 305 undergraduate students in three universities in Hangzhou took part in the online survey; thirteen students who were studying in a university in Hangzhou participated in the focus group interviews. Two factors were identified as influencing Chinese students' decisions to study overseas: university ranking, and costs (interpreted as tuition fees and living expenses). This study offered an insight into the individual factors which might influence decision making. However, the study was conducted in three Chinese universities, and it was therefore likely that only a small proportion of these participants would actually choose to study abroad after graduating from their current course. The results therefore seemed merely to throw light on assumptions or hypotheses about the factors influencing study abroad decisions, rather than the actual decision making processes as experienced by participants.

Another study, conducted by Gong and Huybers (2015), also employed mixed methods to identify specific influential factors shaping Chinese students' international higher education choices. The participants involved included both undergraduate and postgraduate students. First, the researchers used focus group interviews to present to participants the influential factors identified in previous studies, and asked them to assess the priority among these factors. For conducting the focus group interviews, 17 Chinese students enrolled in Australian universities were approached. Second, questionnaires were used to assess the relative importance of these factors. 308 Chinese university students in Shandong Province were approached to participate. Gong and Huybers (2015) identified three factors that particularly influenced the choices of education destination for these students, namely, the perceived safety of the destination, the global ranking of the university and the perception of education quality. The research adds to our understanding of the influential factors shaping prospective Chinese international students' study abroad decision making. However, the study had a similar limitation to Zwart's study (2012) in that it appeared to be based on participants' assumptions about study abroad rather than the reality of decision making. Furthermore, Gong and Huybers did not categorise participants into different groups according to their level of study. They seemed to assume a commonality which might not exist in reality, and that undergraduate students and postgraduate students would be likely to be influenced by the same factors when they made

their study abroad decisions.

Quantitative approaches have also been applied in previous studies in this area. One study, conducted by Lu et al. (2009), used quantitative methods to identify the key factors influencing Chinese students' initial study abroad decisions. Their research focused on evaluating which factors had the strongest impact on decision making processes. They used questionnaires to collect data from three hundred potential undergraduate and three hundred postgraduate students in institutions (high school and universities) in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. The questions that participants were asked covered study abroad motivations, key informants, the influential factors in choosing a university, and the information sources drawn on by participants. Lu et al. (2009) concluded that university ranking was considered to be important by both prospective undergraduate and postgraduate students. In addition, they found that Chinese students' decisions to study abroad were also shaped by their desire to live and work overseas. This research threw light on key factors influencing both Chinese prospective international undergraduate students and postgraduate students. However, it appeared that the factors identified in the survey did not include the factors related to the broader context, such as in-country educational policies, or policies in place in China for returning overseas students. The researchers therefore seemed not to take the social context of China into account in their questionnaire design.

Another study, conducted by Wang and Crawford (2021) also applied quantitative research methods, in the form of a survey to investigate the influences acting on Mainland Chinese students' study abroad decisions. Wang and Crawford (2021) aimed to identify 'groups' of influential factors. They collected data from surveys completed by 335 participants, involving both prospective international students and overseas students studying in a number of countries worldwide; however, 71% of participants were prospective students, rather than those who had actually made study abroad decisions. Again, both undergraduate and postgraduate students were included in the survey, and more than half of the participants were postgraduate students. Participants' demographic information, overseas study abroad backgrounds, and socio-economic status were recorded in order to ascertain the relationship between influential factors and these individual background factors. Wang and Crawford (2021) suggested that Chinese students were motivated by the social, cultural and economic environment of a potential host country, and by advice from personal and non-personal contacts. They also found that students from lower socio-economic status families appeared to be more strongly influenced by non-personal factors, in particular, social cultural and economic factors, such as an international environment, a different culture, working opportunities in the study abroad destination country, and gaining higher economic returns and social status. 'Non-personal and personal advice' referred to

information from official websites or social media information about institutional reputation, and recommendations from key informants. This study adds to our understanding of a wider range of considerations involved in decision making than those cited in earlier studies, and on the interaction between them. It also throws light on some of the individual background and social factors which are relevant to study abroad decision making.

Chinese students' decision to study in the UK

Another group of studies have focused on why Chinese students specifically choose the UK as their study abroad destination. Three studies, all of which used mixed research methods, have focused on identifying the most important factors in Chinese students' decision to choose the UK as their host country (Counsell, 2011; Wu, 2014; and Cebeolla-Boado et al, 2017). According to all these studies, quality of education and the desire to learn English seemed to be important factors attracting Chinese students to choose the UK.

Counsell's (2011) study investigated the reasons why Chinese students chose to pursue their education in the UK and their eventual decision of where to live and work, either in China or overseas. Counsell (2011) used questionnaires that involved both closed and open-ended questions, with 83 Chinese undergraduate and 105 postgraduate students in UK universities. Closed questions were used to

identify the importance of specific factors and the main reasons behind study abroad decisions, and open-ended questions were applied to let participants speak for themselves, in order to explain their individual considerations in relation to study abroad decisions. The findings suggested that the perceived higher quality of education and the opportunity to learn English were the foremost factors influencing most participants' study abroad decisions. In this research, the term 'higher quality' referred to participants' view that the quality of higher education in the UK was better than that in China, and that the resources provided by UK universities were also superior. However, it was not clear in what sense the quality of education in the UK was perceived as 'better'. Another limitation of this study was that, again, it did not separate undergraduate and postgraduate participants' rankings; the study seemed to assume that undergraduate and postgraduate students weighed the influential factors similarly. In addition, a problem of asking participants to rank the importance of factors was that even a factor with low ranking might potentially weigh quite heavily in certain circumstances. For example, 'easier to get access into a UK university than a Mainland Chinese university' appeared in this study as a low ranking factor. However, it might be the biggest motivation for some participants, both in their initial decision to study abroad, and also in choosing the UK as their study abroad destination. Choosing a host country inevitably involves a complex set of decisions; it seems unwise to attempt to arrive at a generalisable list of the most important factors involved.

Cebeolla-Boado, Hu and Soysal (2017) also sought to identify the most influential factors motivating Chinese students to enrol in UK universities. Their study employed both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. In terms of quantitative research methods, Cebeolla-Boado et al hypothesised four principal factors, based on a review of the literature: university reputation; marketing; social and cultural life; and costs. First, they applied the data from the 2014 UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) to generate dependent variables (the total number of Chinese students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, in each UK university), and used the Higher Expectations Surveys (an annual survey conducted by the Youth Sight research foundation that approached more than 10,000 students across UK universities to investigate their reasons for choosing their current university and how they evaluated their university) to generate composite indicators, in order then to measure four key predictors. In terms of qualitative research methods, focus group interviews were then conducted with 30 Chinese students studying in a UK university, in order to explore the extent to which these four identified hypothesised predictors were perceived as influencing participants' study-abroad decisions. The research findings suggested that university prestige was regarded as the most important attraction of UK universities, and that social and cultural life was the second most important factor in participants' study abroad decision making. While this study adds something to

our understanding of why Chinese students opt to study abroad in the UK, the researchers did not clarify who the participants of the survey were. For example, they did not indicate whether the participants of the Higher Expectations Survey were domestic students or international students; nor were the percentages of domestic and international students revealed. Local students and international students might evaluate a university according to different standards because they have grown up in different social contexts that might lead them to different ways of thinking about and evaluating their options.

Summary

The studies above explored Chinese students' study abroad choices and their selection of the UK as their specific destination. They applied quantitative or mixed methods approaches to identify the predominant factors in Chinese students' initial study-abroad decisions. These can be summarised as: educational, social, economic and cultural factors, and information from other personal and non-personal sources. Among these, educational factors seemed to be some of the most commonly cited (Bodycott, 2009; Counsell, 2011; Zwart, 2012; Gong and Huybers, 2015; Lu et al., 2018). Such factors included the quality of education and the reputation and prestige of a university, along with other academic factors such as the opportunity to become proficient in a foreign language.

The findings of the first group of studies (which explored Chinese students' decisions to study abroad) showed a wider range of influential factors than the second group (exploring Chinese students' choice of a UK university). This second group of studies seemed to focus on educational factors such as the high quality of education and English language learning, as well as on social and cultural life. Among all the studies cited above there were some common limitations. First, the majority applied quantitative or mixed research methods to explore common influential factors and to rank the importance of these common factors among participants. However, the focus was on individual factors rather than on the whole process of choosing, and the way that factors worked together – or contradicted one another. Second, these studies tended to focus on Chinese students as a whole, rather than differentiating between undergraduate and postgraduate students. Undergraduate students and postgraduate students might have different motivations and evaluations in terms of study-abroad destination because they are at different stages of life. Focusing on a particular group, such as undergraduate students, could help us to understand students' decision making more comprehensively and deeply. My study focuses on a specific group of students in order to add to our understanding of how Mainland Chinese international undergraduates made the decision to study in UK universities.

Factors influencing international students' choice of overseas university

A number of studies have explored the factors shaping international university students' choice of overseas university (Conard & Conard, 2000; Lam et al., 2011; Maringe, 2006; and Briggs & Wilson, 2007: Mazzarol et al., 2001; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; and Maringe & Carter, 2007). However, relatively few studies have investigated the factors influencing their choice of a specific university. Among these studies, factors identified are as follows:

- University reputation (Ruhanen and McLennan, 2010; Wu, 2014; Oliveira and Soares, 2016; Nicholls, 2018; Wu, 2020);
- The quality of education offered (Ruhanen and McLennan, 2010; Wu, 2014; Oliveira and Soares, 2016; Nicholls, 2018);
- The environment and facilities offered by a particular university (Ruhanen and McLennan, 2010; MacEachern and Yun, 2017);
- Costs of study (MacEachern and Yun, 2017; Nicholls, 2018);
- Safety concerns (Nicholls, 2018).

In this section, these studies are divided into three groups: those investigating the views of international students in general; those investigating the perspectives of particular groups of international students, including those from China; and those studies investigating the factors influencing Chinese students only.

Studies of the factors influencing international students in general

A study conducted by Oliveira and Soares (2016) applied qualitative data collection methods to explore how international students went about choosing a particular overseas university. Their research was conducted in a public university in Portugal and was based on semi-structured interviews with sixteen students, which asked them about their study abroad motivations, information sources, and the factors influencing their study abroad decisions. The participants were from seven different countries and their ages ranged from 23 to 41. However, the level at which participants were studying was not made clear in the description of the study. Through using content analysis conducted via NVivo, the themes emerging from the interviews were identified and merged. The findings suggested that academic reputation and the perceived quality of education were identified as the most important factors influencing university choices. According to the authors of the study, ‘academic reputation and quality’ referred to the overall and global reputation of the university, as judged by its international rankings, and the reputation of a particular subject area offered by the destination institution. Participants appeared to judge a university’s reputation through its international ranking. Based on the findings, the study proposed a decision making process model for choosing a particular university. The first phase was ‘need recognition’, that could be defined as the study abroad motivation. The second phase was ‘information search’ that referred to the information sources used to aid decision making. The third phase was ‘evaluation of alternatives’ that could be understood

as the influential factors which emerged from the process of decision making. This study adds to our understanding of how international students evaluate a particular university. However, one of the problems of this study was that the terms ‘academic reputation and quality’ were not clearly defined. First, they were expressed as if they were self-evidently one and the same thing. Second, ‘quality’ did not appear to be clearly defined beyond an interpretation of this as global ranking. Third, it appeared that the global ranking or the reputation of a specific subject area might not necessarily be interpreted as overall academic reputation and quality. For example, where some participants might regard academic reputation and quality to mean global ranking, others might regard it as referring to reputation in the home country or to the perception of suitable course content. This suggests that a study which looks more closely at participants’ perspectives on their own choice making, and which interrogates what they regard as a ‘good quality’ university education may be worthwhile.

Another problem is that it may not be realistic to divide the university choice making process into three straightforward phases. For example, it is quite possible that information search (the second phase) might occur throughout the whole process of decision making – when students first decide to study abroad, when they choose their study abroad destination, and when they evaluate different universities to arrive at their final choice. This suggests that a qualitative study with

a wider range of participants might be called for to show the complexity of students' university choice making.

A later study, conducted by Nicholls (2018), aimed to identify the influences on university choices among international students at Michigan State University (MSU) in the USA. Nicholls used a mixed method, survey based approach to determine how such students considered selecting a specific university. A questionnaire with both open-ended and closed questions was distributed to over a thousand international undergraduate students and a total of 378 responses were returned. Open-ended questions were used to ask about the reasons for choosing MSU, and closed questions asked participants to rate the importance of specific pre-defined factors shaping their university choice. Open-ended responses were analysed by identifying and categorising themes, and closed responses were analysed by SPSS. The study's authors found that the choice of a specific university in the USA was based on the reputation and content of a particular study programme, the general reputation of the university, affordability, the availability of student housing at the university, and the beauty of the campus. Among these factors, the reputation of the programme and university seemed to be the most important factors ranked by participants. This study suggests the most important reasons for international students choosing a particular US university by means of asking participants both open-ended and closed questions in a survey.

However, following the common tendency with this type of questionnaire, the study's author imposed their own labels and implied definitions of key factors with an implicit assumption that everyone would interpret these factors in a similar way. But this is not necessarily the case: for example, participants might interpret 'reputation' differently; some might regard it as the university's reputation in the host country, while others might interpret it as the university's reputation in their home country.

Studies of students from a range of nationalities

In addition to the research investigating the decision making of international students as a whole, a second group of studies has divided participants according to their nationalities (Ruhanen and McLennan, 2010; MacEachern and Yun, 2017). Both these studies applied quantitative research methods, but they were conducted in different countries and their findings differed. Ruhanen and McLennan (2010) focused on postgraduate students' motivations for studying in a particular country, university or programme. Ruhanen and McLennan sought the participation of 101 domestic and international postgraduate students studying tourism in Queensland, Australia. Among these 101 participants, forty two per cent were Chinese students. Ruhanen and McLennan used self-completed questionnaires which asked participants to rank the key factors which influenced them when they made decisions about their study abroad country, their choice of

university and course. The findings of this study suggested that the main reasons that participants gave for choosing the University of Queensland were its reputation, the availability of their chosen subject and course, the quality of the course, and the university's facilities. Data were also analysed according to the nationality of participants. The findings suggested that Chinese participants principally valued the reputation of University of Queensland. Also, the data showed that 'the tourism school's reputation and staff' and 'Group of Eight status' (the group of eight top Australian universities) were important to Chinese students when they considered UQ as their destination university (Ruhanen and McLennan, 2010, p. 48). Compared with domestic students, they valued 'course type' and 'location of university' as two main reasons for choosing to study tourism in UQ. The research threw light on how postgraduate students from different countries weighed a range of factors in choosing a particular programme in a particular university. As with other questionnaire based studies, the meaning of each influential factor cited in the questionnaire, such as 'the tourism school's reputation and staff' was not clarified. Imposing categories or key factors on participants rather than allowing them to emerge through the process of interviewing, has the potential, as suggested earlier in this chapter, to overlook individual or culturally specific factors which may be important in choice making, and of which the researcher may be unaware.

MacEachern and Yun (2017), also investigated the factors influencing international students' university choices and divided international students into two groups: Chinese students and other countries' students. Their research study also applied a paper based survey. They enlisted the participation of 242 international undergraduate students studying at a small higher education institution in Canada. Among these 242 undergraduate participants, 111 were Chinese undergraduate students, and 131 were from other countries. The closed questions included in the survey were mainly focused on three aspects: information sources; the 'pull' motivations when participants decided to choose a particular university; and the factors that shaped participants' choice of current university. Their findings suggested that the university's official website was the most important information source for participants making their university choices, and 'environmental cues and educational facilities' (MacEachern and Yun, 2017. p. 353) were cited as the most important factors influencing choice of university for both Chinese students and other international students. The term 'environmental cues and educational facilities' (MacEachern and Yun, 2017. p. 353) referred to an English language environment, a clean and safe living environment, and the quality of the university's educational facilities. According to MacEachern and Yun, Chinese students ranked 'environmental cues and educational facilities' and 'post-study opportunities' as the most important factors in their choice-making. Specifically, post study opportunities referred to opportunities to stay, work, and gain

permanent residence in Canada. This was in contrast to the other international participants in the study who prioritised 'environmental cues and educational facilities' and 'costs and grants' as two of the most important factors in their decision making. 'Costs and grants' referred to living costs, tuition fees, and opportunities for gaining scholarships. This study served to highlight some of the key factors influencing international undergraduate students' university choices in that it provided a clear definition of the categories employed for analysis. However, there was a tendency to summarise a complex range of factors, for example by assigning the label 'environmental cues and educational facilities' to cover a number of quite different possibilities. It was likely, therefore, that participants would have different understandings or would prioritise different factors which were included within one descriptive term, thus potentially over-simplifying the number of different factors at play for individual participants.

Studies of Chinese students' choice-making

A third group of studies focused specifically on Chinese students (Wu, 2014; Wu, 2020). A 2014 study by Wu explored the motivations and decision making processes of Mainland Chinese students who were pursuing a Master's programme overseas. Again, mixed data collection methods were employed – a survey and semi-structured interviews. 199 Chinese postgraduate students in three UK universities participated in the study. Among these participants, 169 were

approached to take part in the survey, 30 participants were interviewed, and 12 participants were involved in focus group discussions. The questions used to gather data related to the factors considered in choosing to study abroad, choosing to study in the UK, choosing a particular university, and choosing a specific subject. The findings from the survey suggested that Chinese students' choice of a particular university was influenced by ranking of subject and by teaching quality. In contrast, the findings from the interview data indicated that a good reputation and the recognition of the university in China (reflected in a high international ranking), and a 'comfortable environment' (defined in terms of manageable living costs and a comfortable climate) were the most important factors in shaping participants' university choices. Again, the research adds to our understanding of the individual factors influencing Chinese postgraduate students' choice of a particular UK university. However, it did not reveal how the different factors worked in combination. While isolating individual factors in choice-making is useful in throwing light on the salience, for example, of international rankings and reputation for Chinese students choosing the UK, it tells us little about how individual circumstances, educational backgrounds and regional differences impact on choice making. Nor does it reveal how final choices are arrived at over time – and what helps to influence these choices.

Wu (2020) also conducted an exploratory narrative inquiry into the study-abroad

choice-making of three Chinese undergraduate students in a Canadian university. This involved collecting a variety of information about their personal experiences of the decision making process. Semi-structured interviews were utilised to explore these three participants' decision making processes, and a model of the decision making process was identified. The identified model had three phases: deciding to study abroad; deciding on the destination country; and deciding on a particular university. In terms of phase one, deciding on a particular university, it appeared that the university's reputation, ranking and location were viewed as most influential. In addition, it was also identified that the ability to use *gaokao* scores (China's final high school examination) to apply to Canadian universities was attractive to participants. Furthermore, the region where participants came from (such as urban or rural regions, or small cities or first tier cities) influenced how they gained information. This study threw some light on the complexity of Chinese students' decision making process and how the educational policies (for example the *gaokao* and Canadian universities' admissions policies) and personal background factors (such as region of origin) shaped their decision making. However, since the study only involved a small group of participants studying in a single university, it may be difficult to draw any wider conclusions from its findings. This suggests that a larger scale study might reveal a greater range of factors and reveal the impacts of different individual circumstances on the choice making process.

Summary

Previous studies have identified university ranking and reputation as important considerations for those considering studying overseas. In addition, some studies have identified university specific factors, such as the university environment and facilities, as influential, along with broader, area specific, factors such as study costs and perceptions of safety. A common limitation of these studies was that most of them were conducted in only one university (Ruhanen and McLennan, 2010; Oliveira and Soares, 2016; MacEachern and Yun, 2017; Nicholls, 2018; Wu, 2020). This suggests that such studies might not be representative of a wider range of institutions. A study which looks at a wider range of universities might offer a more comprehensive understanding across a range of university types. In addition, while the above studies identify some of the most important factors influencing international students and Chinese students' university choice making, there appears to be little work which explores the relationships between these factors and how these different factors work together to shape international students' university choices at different points in their decision making. Finally, given the lack of studies which focus specifically on Mainland Chinese undergraduates studying abroad – a group which has increased considerably in recent years – it seems that an in-depth investigation of their decision making processes is warranted (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2023). In my study, I only

focus on one group of international students – Mainland Chinese international undergraduate students – by letting them speak for themselves, to show how a wide range of factors work together in decision making processes.

Factors influencing international students' choice of subject

Choosing one's major subject of study at undergraduate level is another critical decision that an aspiring international student will need to consider when planning to apply to an overseas university. However, there are few studies which focus on international students' subject choice making. Those studies which do exist suggest that three groups of factors may influence subject choices:

- Individual factors such as personal inclinations and background (Sugahara et al., 2008; Keshishian and McGarr, 2012; and Pritchard et al., 2018);
- Career expectations, such as a career's social status, job market conditions, and work environment (Pritchard et al., 2018; Sugahara et al., 2008);
- Economic factors, such as the expected returns on studying and anticipated career and employment prospects (Liu et al., 2013; Pritchard et al 2018).

There was some literature exploring the relationship between students' subject choices and individual factors such as personality and creativity (Pritchard et al, 2018; and Sugahara et al., 2008). Pritchard et al. (2018) identified the relationship between personality type and choice of subject major among undergraduate

students in the USA. The purpose of their study was to determine the role played by a student's personality and other influences when selecting a major in a university. 'Other influences' here referred to non-personality influences, for example key informants, career expectations, characteristics of the major subject and specific characteristics of each student. The findings from their study suggested that personality was an important factor determining students' subject choices, and that personality could increase the effects of other influences on students' subject choices, such as key informants, career expectation and characteristics of major subject itself. In addition to this study, a study conducted by Sugahara et al. (2008) also investigated the relationship between the key influential factors and students' choice of accounting as a subject of study in Australian universities. The factors involved students' personal creativity, career expectation factors (such as career's social status, job market condition, and work environment), and their opinions about the accounting profession (such as 'structured', 'procedural', 'precise', and 'static'). Among these factors, the result showed that students' creativity was the most influential. These two studies threw light on the importance of internal, individual factors, such as students' personality and creativity, on subject choices. However, the study did not focus on the process of subject decision making in that the researchers seemed to regard subject choice as a single decision instead of a long term decision with a number of factors working together.

Keshishian and McGarr's (2012) research also studied the factors influencing the undergraduates in one US university, including international students, to study a specific subject – communication sciences and disorders (CSD). They sought to determine the role of background factors in motivating students' choice of CSD as a major, the relationship between these motivating factors and the attractiveness of the major, and the role of motivation in influencing the perceived value of CSD as a major subject. Their approach was survey based; both closed and open-ended questions were used in a questionnaire. The open-ended questions related to participants' specific subject area of study, and the most and least important reasons for choosing CSD. Data were also collected about participants' backgrounds, their future career aspirations, their familiarity with their subject, the importance of their subject choice for their future careers, and the perceived importance of key informants in their decision making. The study entailed the participation of 143 local and international undergraduate students from a range of ethnic backgrounds. In addition, participants' family income level was also recorded. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire about whether they felt that their personal background affected their subject choice of CSD, their motivations for choosing CSD as their major subject, and their perceptions of the value of a career in the field of CSD. Keshishian and McGarr found that participants were most influenced by intrinsic factors (such as interesting work,

interacting with other people and pre-professional experiences). In addition, they found no significant relationship between participants' cultural or ethnic background and their choices of subject. This study suggested a relationship between these undergraduates' background, subject choice making, and future career choices. It also highlighted the importance of intrinsic factors in subject choice making. However, the potential complexity and variety of these intrinsic factors was somewhat overlooked in the study's findings.

Liu et al. (2013) focused specifically on Mainland Chinese students' choice of subject when considering higher education overseas. They took a quantitative approach to exploring the relationship between Chinese students' subject choices and economic factors, such as expected economic returns and employment prospects. They drew on data from a research project entitled: *Seeking Higher Education Abroad: Student Choices and Reasons in China* (Hung et al., 2006). This project involved the participation of almost 13,000 Mainland Chinese third year high school students who were approached about three months prior to their *gaokao* exam in seven cities across the country. The findings of the study suggested that economic factors, such as the expected financial return on graduation and anticipated employment prospects, seemed to be the most important factors influencing these Chinese students' choices of subject, regardless of their personal backgrounds. The study's findings underline the

importance of economic factors in overseas subject choice-making, and, in particular, in attracting participants to choose Business and Engineering as their subject choices. However, two limitations were apparent in this study. First, the participants were all *gaokao* students studying in high school. The study therefore is likely to have included a large proportion of young people who had no intention of studying abroad. Thus, their replies to questions were hypothetical rather than reflecting their actual choice making. Second, the independent variables were assumed in advance by the researchers, rather than emerging from the survey itself. Furthermore, the study design did not take a variety of other possible influential factors into consideration. Simply assuming the influence of only three independent variables seemed to limit consideration of the other possible factors at play in decision making.

Summary

In summary, the literature based on studies of the factors that influence students' choices of major subject has tended to focus on psychological factors such as personality and creativity, and rather than taking into account external factors that might also influence subject choice – such as government policies, current job opportunities, and the social context. There seems to have been less attention paid to the wide range of possible influential factors and the relationship between them. Furthermore, the influence of others – for example family, friends, teachers and educational agents, does not seem to have been taken into account by such

studies.

Second, the majority of studies in this field have applied quantitative approaches which have identified the likely salient factors in choice making in advance of conducting the research. This means that a deeper exploration of factors emerging from participants' own accounts of their choice making processes has not been offered. A more open ended, qualitative approach is likely to surface previously unconsidered factors and suggest the relationships between these factors and their differing importance for students from different backgrounds. To date, few studies have focused on the individual perspectives of international students, and in particular those from Mainland China who now make up a relatively large proportion of international undergraduates.

Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, the relevant literature was grouped and reviewed in six categories: human capital in higher education; the influence of Confucianism on Chinese education; 'push' and 'pull' factors in international students' decision making; Chinese international students' initial study abroad decisions; factors influencing international students' university choices; and factors influencing international students' subject choices. It appeared that more than half of the relevant studies applied quantitative or mixed research methods to focus on specific influential

factors, or on prioritising the factors. Specifically, most studies tended not to look at the interactions between factors and the process of decision making as a whole. Also, most of the studies cited focused on identifying and labelling specific factors or groups of factors influencing study abroad decisions, instead of exploring the subjective meanings and experiences of those involved in the process of making such decisions in real life. Furthermore, only a limited number of studies explored the role of key informants, such as parents, in study abroad decision making, or how the advice from key informants and other factors worked together. For the purposes of my study, I regard each student's experience of choosing a study abroad destination, a university and a subject as a complex decision making process. I therefore focus on exploring the multiple meanings of each emerging factor and how these factors worked together in each phase of the study abroad decision making process. I have also focused on an aspect of decision making which is absent from the literature reviewed above – the context of individual students' study abroad decision making, such as their home regions' educational policies and the influence of the people around them.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology, Design, and Data Analysis for the Study

Introduction

This chapter is in three parts: methodology, designing the research, and data analysis. In the first section, my reasons for choosing an interpretive approach and semi-structured interviews are explained. In the second section, I begin by laying out my research questions and my plans for conducting the research. I then explain in detail how I approached the research participants and how I designed the interview schedule and conducted pilot interviews. I go on to discuss the ethical considerations associated with this study and describe and justify my implementation of the data collection plan. The last section covers the four aspects of the process of data analysis: organising, analysing, interpreting, and presenting the data.

Methodology

Ontology is a fundamental consideration in any research study. Ontological claims relate to a researcher's beliefs about the nature of social phenomena (Blaikie, 2000; Hay, 2002). As a researcher, I recognised that my own view of the world, and what it is to understand reality, shaped the choices I made about the best way to conduct this study. My own perspective is that each of us constructs our ideas differently, based on our different experiences and understandings (Grix, 2002).

There are thus potentially multiple realities. Therefore, my aim was to explore the realities as perceived by individual participants, as opposed to seeking to establish a single universal ‘truth’ about the issue on which I focused my research – undergraduate choice making. My position therefore allied with an interpretive perspective (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

Correspondingly, I believe that knowledge is constructed on the basis of each person’s individual context and understandings (Brinkman 2017). I wanted to understand both the context and the beliefs and experiences that shaped individual participants’ actions in relation to the decision to study in the UK. My aim, therefore, was to describe, understand, and interpret their study abroad decision making, rather than to identify a firm set of predictive or causal factors (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

My decision making regarding how I should conduct my research on a methodological level fell into two phases: choosing an interpretive approach and choosing a qualitative data collection method (semi-structured interviews). In the first part of this section, I explain my understanding of applying an interpretive approach. In terms of the second part, my choice of semi-structured interviews is explained and justified.

Methodology: choosing an interpretive approach

My purpose in this study was to gain insights into how Mainland Chinese undergraduate students made study abroad decisions, and who or what was involved in their arriving at their decisions. Once the focus of the research had been decided, I considered my methodological approach. As a new researcher, I was open-minded about the relative merits of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Babbie (2015) describes the purpose of research as exploring, describing, and interpreting. For me, it seemed to be a process of digging deeply into the topic that I was interested in and uncovering meaning. As a Mainland Chinese student undertaking my doctoral studies in the UK, the issue was of personal interest, particularly as I also undertook my undergraduate degree in the UK. From the outset of the research, I understood that I needed to be aware of the potential biases which might be entailed in studying an issue so close to my own interests. On the other hand, my own study abroad experiences and my personal conjectures about study abroad decision making had the potential to offer unique insights into the question, and optimal access to potential participants in this study.

I started to think about what kind of understanding I would like to bring out from my research because it would determine what kind of methodology I needed to apply. Mills (2014) describes methodology as a way of acting, talking and thinking that acts as a bridge between the discussion of the issue itself and discussion of the

method of investigating it. I was aware that my methodological approach depended on what I wanted to achieve from my research and what kinds of information I wanted to gain. My aim was to approach the research in a way which enabled me to identify the influential factors in students' decision making. I therefore wanted, as far as possible, to enable individual students to speak for themselves and thereby to illuminate their decision making processes, rather than counting or measuring variables and establishing correlations or statistical relationships between factors. In other words, my aim was to describe students' perspectives on their own decision making, and to throw light on their subjective experiences. I therefore opted to take an interpretive approach, which sought to understand the meanings which participants attached to their actions, rather than simply observing their behaviour. As Newman (2014) defines it, the main aim in applying an interpretive approach is to explore the expressed intentions behind participants' actions. An interpretive approach recognises that there is no single reality (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016), but that people's understandings of the world are complex and influenced by multiple, interacting factors. Through my research, I wanted to contribute to the academic understanding of the differences or similarities in the decision making processes of a range of Mainland Chinese undergraduates, who may share some life experiences, but who also differ in a number of respects – for example they might have come from different regions of China, or have taken different educational pathways before undergraduate study. I

saw that an interpretive approach could lead me to explore both the complexity of the issue, and the differences, as well as the similarities, In the factors which influenced participants' decision making.

A qualitative approach: choosing semi-structured interviews

Once I had decided that my overall approach would be an interpretive one, I started to think about research design, and the data collection methods that could help me to collect data about perceptions regarding study abroad decision making. In this way the issue I wanted to investigate determined my methodological approach, and this, in turn, led me to consider the possible range of qualitative research approaches which were available to me, to help me to address 'how' and 'why' questions, and offer insights into personal interpretations of experience. One of the advantages of qualitative research is that it can enable the collection of rich, descriptive data (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016) which has the potential to capture the thoughts and feelings of individuals (Given, 2008). Qualitative research methods were therefore appropriate for my study because they allowed me to gain insight and understanding about people's perceptions, how they constructed their world, and how their world looked to them (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

In choosing a specific data collection method, I considered several qualitative techniques: open ended questionnaires, group interviews, narrative interviews,

and semi-structured interviews. I did not consider observation as my data collection method because students' decision making and undergraduate application processes were not behaviour that could be observed, since they took place over a period of time, and involved much thought, discussion and the weighing up of multiple possibilities.

My reason for rejecting open-ended questionnaires was that they would limit my interactions with participants, and therefore would not help me to achieve my research aim of allowing interviewees to identify the salient factors in their choice making processes themselves. While the use of questionnaires might have increased the number of participants I was able to reach, and so it would have been easier to collect and compare data, I was anxious not to impose my own views on participants in the questions I asked. I therefore started to consider interviews as my data collection method because they would be more conversational and allow participants to have more control of the process of giving their views.

I then needed to decide whether to conduct one-to-one or group interviews, and I eventually decided that one-to-one interviews would be the most suitable technique. Group interviews are useful for developing a discussion between a group of participants (Cohen and Manion, 2018). In this way, I could conveniently

have collected data which reflected a range of views about a particular issue. The main advantage of this approach would have been that participants could be inspired by others when they discussed a topic; the interaction provoked by group discussion might have generated debate about differences and similarities between points of view. However, in the first place I was concerned about the extent to which participants might also be influenced by others' expressions during discussions. It was possible that some might be reluctant to reveal their real intentions behind their decision making, for fear of seeming 'different' from others. Second, group interviews tend to mean that participants may lose opportunities for personal disclosure of unique factors and circumstances which were highly relevant to the research issue being investigated. (Cohen and Manion, 2018). Third, the possible effects of group pressure and of some participants dominating the discussion while others fell silent, also seemed problematic, as it could limit the expression of views. Finally, and from a purely practical point of view, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic meant that group gatherings would be impossible. Therefore, I decided to opt for conducting one-to-one interviews.

I then had to make the choice between narrative (unstructured) interviews and semi-structured interviews. In narrative interviews, the content, structure and order in which data is collected are all flexible (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). This approach can be particularly useful when one is trying to develop an

understanding of a completely new topic that has not been explored before, for example, how *neijuan* (a colloquial term for competition/credential inflation) had influenced Mainland Chinese students' career plans. However, the issues I was investigating were not entirely 'new' in the field of international student mobility (Mozzarol and Soutar, 2002). There were ideas and insights from other studies which might be built on to frame more focused questions; for example, the 'push and pull' factors model (Mozzarol and Soutar, 2002) helped me to develop my interview questions about initial study abroad decisions. Another use of unstructured interviews is in exploring a specific experience which is personal to a particular individual. However, my interest was in exploring a range of influential factors across participants from a range of individual backgrounds. For this reason, the data from unstructured interviews might be unwieldy and difficult to compare. Semi-structured interviews seemed to offer a middle way (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). It would be possible to retain flexibility in the interview process, in the ordering of questions, and in the follow-up questions. However, the issues and questions related to my research aims would provide the guide for the interview. Since the main purpose of semi-structured interviews is to gain rich information related to a specific research focus from multiple interviewees, this technique seemed ideal for my purposes (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). For these reasons, I chose to use semi-structured interviews, supplemented by prompts and follow up questions, as my qualitative data collection method.

Designing the research

In this section, the research questions are shown at the very beginning. Then I explain how I designed the initial plan for conducting the research and how the plan changed due to the impact of the pandemic. Afterwards, the processes of recruiting the participants, designing the interview schedule, and conducting pilot interviews are indicated in detail. Finally, the ethical considerations associated with this research, and the implementation of the data collection plan are shown.

Research questions

My plan for the research was to investigate the decision making experiences of Chinese undergraduates enrolled at a UK university (whether studying on campus, or via distance or blended learning). The following overall research question guided the research: *How did Mainland Chinese undergraduates studying at UK universities describe their* study abroad *decision making processes?*

Three supplementary questions arose from this:

a) *Who or what influenced their decision to study at a UK university?*

b) *Who or what influenced their choice of a particular UK university?*

c) *Who or what influenced their subject choices in the UK?*

Initial plan

After I had decided my research approach and my data collection method, I started to consider my research plan. Initially, I wanted to conduct individual face-to-face interviews with all the participants in the research. The reason for this was to create a private setting in which participants felt comfortable sharing their descriptions of choice making with me, just as they would if it were an informal conversation. Also, I felt that face-to-face communication might help me gain a better understanding of participants' perspectives on the issue being studied. In this way, it might be easier for me to ask deeper and more probing questions during the interviews. Originally, I planned to interview final year international high school students in Beijing who were applying to UK undergraduate courses, since they were currently experiencing the process of making their initial study abroad decisions (choosing their destination country) and subject and university choices. In addition, they were going through the undergraduate application process at that time.

Adapting the plan in the light of Covid-19 pandemic

Those were my ideas when I initially considered the research design. However, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic caused me to change my original plan. There were three reasons for this. First, as a result of safety fears around the pandemic, I could not get access to the international high schools in Beijing, which were not

allowing entry to anyone other than their own students and teachers. I therefore decided to change my participant group, and to invite the participation of undergraduates who were already studying in the UK. This decision meant that I could contact individuals direct, rather than needing to gain access through high schools. Second, flights between China and the UK were banned from the end of 2020 until 2023. If I wanted to fly back to China at the beginning of 2021, I had to find transfer flights for myself. Finally, I booked a transfer flight and flew back to China successfully at the end of January 2021, and spent almost one month in quarantine due to China's travel restriction policy at that time. As a result, my data collection had to be delayed. The third reason for changing my research plan was that the ongoing Covid situation had become an important factor that might influence Mainland Chinese students' decisions to study abroad, or their subject and university choices. For example, the uncertainty of university life due to the impact of the pandemic might influence some participants' initial study abroad decisions, and exam cancellation due to Covid might influence their final choices of university or subject. In this situation, I decided to include consideration of the impact of Covid in my research focus, so I adjusted my interview schedule to include a question about how study abroad decisions and experiences were affected by the pandemic. I therefore decided to change my participant group, delay my fieldwork, and adjust my research focus as a result.

In February 2021, I also revised my research plan. There were two main changes in this revised plan. First, due to the movement restrictions as a consequence of Covid, I decided to conduct most of the semi-structured interviews online instead of face-to-face. The exceptions to this were the interviews with the participants who lived in Beijing, where I was located in 2021, and who were willing to be interviewed in person. One of the advantages of this situation was that online interviews enabled me to interview participants across China and in the UK without changing my location. Furthermore, computer mediated communication tools such as Zoom and Skype offered the possibility of being able to audio- and video-record interviews as they took place (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

Second, since I could not get access to high school students due to the pandemic restrictions, I decided to focus my research on the perspectives of year one and year two Mainland Chinese undergraduate students who were already enrolled in UK universities because they had already made study abroad decisions and were easier to gain access to. Approaching currently enrolled university students instead of prospective students had the advantage of allowing me to collect retrospective accounts of the whole process of students' final study abroad choices and how they experienced the whole application process. All the participants in the research had submitted their UK undergraduate applications through UCAS, the UK's national student application system. This meant that,

regardless of the educational route they had taken, all participants would have gone through a similar application process. This allowed me to compare the experiences of participants taking different qualifications prior to application to university. The reason why I sought the participation of both Year One and Year Two undergraduates was that I wanted to get a sense of the study abroad decision making processes of undergraduates applying to university both before and during the pandemic. I was interested to know whether the pandemic itself had influenced the decisions made by Year One participants (who had enrolled as undergraduates in September 2020). Year Two undergraduates would have made their study abroad decisions before the outbreak. I decided not to interview Year Three students, as the experience of undergraduate decision making would not be likely to be as clear in their memories.

Recruiting participants

Regarding the number of participants, I decided that between thirty and thirty-five would be optimal for a study of this nature, and that they should evenly represent first and second year undergraduates' perspectives. I wanted to make sure I recruited interviewees who were broadly representative of Mainland Chinese undergraduates studying in the UK, in terms of gender, educational route taken, home area, subject of study and UK location of study, and parental occupation (See Table One below). Although, given the small-scale nature of the study, my

participant group could not feasibly be representative of all such students, I endeavoured to seek as wide a range as possible by encouraging participants to introduce their friends who were studying different subjects or in different UK universities.

When approaching prospective group members, a convenience sampling approach was taken (Cohen and Manion, 2018). Convenience sampling is one of the common types of purposive sampling that entails selecting participants based on the availability of individuals or sites (Cohen and Manion, 2018). I planned to seek my first participants from among those undergraduates who were members of the University of Birmingham Chinese Society in Shanghai and who were engaged in the activities90rganizedd by the Chinese Society. Having gained their co-operation, I asked them to 'shoulder tap' other Year One and Two Mainland Chinese students enrolled in different UK universities and introduce them to me.

Table 1 Demographic information on interview participants

Name **Gender**	**University** **Year of study** **Major subject**	**City/** **Region**	**Qualification(s) on access to undergraduate study**	**Parents' occupation/ sector** **F: father; M: mother**
Mintie Female	Birmingham Year 2 Psychology	Sichuan/ Chengdu	Foundation course	F: Lawyer M: Nurse
Lynn Female	Birmingham Year 1	Shandong /Rizhao	Foundation course	F: Self-employed

	Business Management			M: Public sector
Wawa, Female	Birmingham Year 2 Geography/Urban Planning	Beijing	Foundation course	F: Finance worker M: Self-employed
Frank Male	Birmingham Year 2 Accounting/ Finance	Jiangsu/ Xuzhou	Foundation course	F: Construction M: Insurance
Jay Male	Sheffield Year 2 Digital Media	Fujian/ Xiamen	Foundation course	Not disclosed
Roro Female	Birmingham Year 2 Banking/Finance	Anhui, Hefei/ Shenzhen	Foundation course	F and M: Self-employed
Lily Female	Birmingham Year 1 Psychology	Shanghai	Foundation course	F: Human resources M: Education
Helen Female	Kings College London Year 2 Psychology	Shanghai	International school Shanghai	F: Self-employed M: We media
Kelly Female	Birmingham Year 1 Biomedical Science	Jiangsu/ Nanjing	Foundation course	F and M: Self-employed
Queenie Female	University of the Arts London Year 1 Illustration/Visual Media	Shanghai	Canadian high school course China/ UK Foundation course	F and M: self-employed
Yuet Female	Birmingham Year 2 Human Geography	Anhui/ Hefei	Gaokao score	F: state owned enterprise M: civil servant
Faye Female	Birmingham Year 2 Psychology	Xinjiang	Gaokao score	Not disclosed
Young Male	King's College London Year 1 Computer Science	Xinjiang	A-levels	F: banking M: state owned enterprise

Justin Male	Surrey Year 1 Food Science	Harbin	A-levels	F and M: self-employed
Juju Male	Reading Year 1 Business Management	Taiwan/ Tianjin	A-levels	F and M: self-employed
Chuchu Male	Birmingham Year 2 Environmental Science	Shenzhen	International school–- Africa	F and M: self-employed
Jinjin Female	Birmingham Year1 Quantitative Economics	Shenzhen	Foundation course	F and M: self-employed
Lulu Female	University of the Arts London Year 1 Illustration	Shanghai	International school – Shanghai/ Foundation course	F: sculptor M: art teacher
Zizi Male	Glasgow Year 2 Business/ Economics	Shanghai	International school Shanghai/ UK Foundation course	F and M: self-employed
Coco Female	Birmingham Year 1 Economics	Beijing	Foundation course	F: University teacher M: medical company
Chan Female	Glasgow Year 2 Business Management	Hebei Shijiazhuang	Foundation course	F and M: Finance
Fifi Male	Glasgow Year 2 Business Management	Shandong / Dezhou	A-level	F and M: self-employed
Zak Male	Birmingham Year 1 Banking/Finance	Canton/ Dongguan	Foundation course	F and M: self-employed
Ang Male	Edinburgh Year 2 Cognitive Sciences	Beijing/ Shandong / Ecuador	International Baccalaureate	F: Diplomat
Xixi	Birmingham	Jilin/Inner	Foundation course	F and M:

Female	Year 1 Education/Sociology	Mongolia		Quarrying
Zhang Male	Edinburgh Year 1 Computer Science	Canton	A-levels	F and M: self-employed
Yinyin Female	Edinburgh Year 1 Computer Science	Fujian	A-levels	F and M: self-employed
William Male	Birmingham Year 1 Computer Science	Anhui/ Anqing	Gaokao score	F: self-employed M: housewife
Ray Male	Birmingham Year 1 Computer Science	Anhui/ Tongling	Foundation course–-China	F and M: State owned company
Waiwai Male	Birmingham Year 1 Artificial Intelligence	Shandong / Qingdao	Gaokao score	F: self-employed M: teacher
Hanni Female	Birmingham Year 2 Education	Canton	Foundation course	F and M: government workers
Yan Female	Birmingham Year 2 Education	Jiangsu	International school–-China	F: State owned enterprise M: doctor
Hayley Female	Warwick Year 2 Accounting/Finance	Gansu	International school–-China	F and M: self-employed
Ben Male	Nottingham Year 2 International Media	Wuhan/ Hubei	Foundation course–-China	F and M: self-employed

Drawing up the interview schedule

While I was confirming the co-operation of my participant group, I started to draft my interview schedule (See Appendix One). The interview schedule was made up of different types of questions: background questions, experience and behaviour

questions; opinion and values questions; and feeling questions (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). There were six parts to the interview schedule I drew up. First, participants' background information was sought that included age, hometown, university, subject, and year of study. Second, I included questions about the factors influencing the main phases of the study abroad decision making process (initial study abroad decisions; and subject and university choices) and participants' perceptions about these. Third, questions were posed about how students experienced the decision making process and their opinions about their study abroad decisions. Fourth, I enquired about participants' experiences of the application process and their feelings in terms of their undergraduate applications. Fifth, I added a question about the impact of the pandemic both on their decision making and their application processes. Finally, I asked interviewees about their future plans and what advice they would offer to prospective students making the same decisions as they had done. These questions were intended to cover the whole of the participants' decision making, from their initial motivations to their future plans after graduating from undergraduate study. Categorising questions in this way helped me to ensure that I covered all aspects of the process and enabled participants to reflect on it (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe how semi-structured interviews involve both initial open-ended questions and follow-up questions. Each section of my interview

schedule included two to eight initial open-ended questions with several possible follow-up questions which could be posed depending on the answers given. In order to ensure the validity of my interviews, I avoided using multiple questions or questions which were too broad and unspecific (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). For example, I asked several questions about participants' 'dream' universities, the universities they actually applied to, and their final university choice, in order to guide them in describing their decision making processes in detail. In addition, I tried to avoid leading questions which might elicit particular answers on the part of the interviewee. For example, in the fifth section of the interview schedule, (which asked about the impact of the pandemic on decision making), I asked a general question about their experiences of applying to a university during the pandemic, rather than asking directly about the impact of Covid on their undergraduate applications.

Conducting a pilot interview

Before I started to formally interview the participants, pilot interviews were conducted with three undergraduates from Mainland China who were already studying in the UK and who were known to me. According to Cohen and Manion (2018), the function of a pilot interview is to increase and improve the reliability, validity, and practicability of the research. Conducting a pilot interview helped me to check if the interview questions I asked were clear, and whether the order of the

interview questions was logical. As a result of conducting these pilot interviews, I subsequently made two changes to my interview schedule. First, I combined the questions about ‘reasons for choice of universities and courses’ and ‘decision making processes’, since all three of the pilot interview participants answered these questions as if they were one question. It appeared that they could not easily separate out the factors influencing their decision making. For example, some students’ choice making experiences were quite straightforward in that the reasons for their choices and the factors influencing their decision making were the same. Second, I added a question about parents’ occupations into my interview schedule because two of the pilot interview participants mentioned this as being influential in their decision making. It seemed that parents might emerge as key informants, and therefore understanding parents’ occupational and educational backgrounds might be helpful in understanding participants’ decision making.

I also used the pilot interviews to consider the appropriateness of my interviewing technique and the timing of the interviews. Through conducting pilot interviews, I found that participants might find it difficult to answer the question about their ‘decision making process’, so I added a note of clarification referring to the order of making different kinds of study abroad decisions and the order in which different factors shaped these decisions. I felt that such clarification could help participants to understand what I meant by ‘decision making process’.

Ethical considerations

There were two main ethical issues to be considered in the planning of the study. The first was to obtain the informed consent of participants and to make sure that they were voluntarily joining the research and fully understood the nature of the study and what they would be asked to do by way of participation. The second was to reassure participants that they would not be harmed in any way, or exposed to any risk that their interview data would be shared with any third party. The issues involving consent, withdrawal, anonymity, confidentiality and data storage were therefore considered carefully according to the principles above in the ethics review form (see Appendix Two).

In order to ensure that participants were giving their informed consent, information sheets and consent forms (see Appendix Three and Four) were distributed to them all and collected in before each interview was conducted (Bryman, 2006). The information provided included: the research aims; the procedure for conducting the interview and the follow up feedback; and my contact information. The information sheet also explained that the interviews would be audio-recorded and transcribed into Chinese and then translated into English. A consent form was also distributed for them to sign, in order to confirm that they fully understood the information, and their rights in the process. They were assured in writing that their participation in

the study was voluntary, and that they had the right to withdraw from interviews if they felt uncomfortable at any point. Also, having sought their involvement, I gave them two weeks to decide whether to take part in the research or not. If they agreed, I made an individual appointment for an interview with them, either face-to-face or via Zoom. None of the participants withdrew from the interviews.

The participants were not entirely anonymous in that their identities and email addresses were known by me. However, all the data collected was treated as confidential in that individual participants have not been, and will not be, identified in any outputs from the study. Nor were full names or personal information made available to any third parties, including supervisors. All interviewees were assigned pseudonyms in the process of the data analysis and my final writing up. In terms of data storage, each participant was assigned a code to make specific data easier to find during the conduct of the research, and each participant's information was stored with his/her code, and their consent forms were stored separately.

Implementation of data collection plan

The optimal number of participants was recruited in four stages. As explained earlier, the first three participants were recruited via the Chinese Society of University of Birmingham because I was a committee member of that society. I then decided to apply a snowballing technique (Neuman, 2014; Cohen and

Manion 2018) to participant selection. A snowballing approach helped me to reach the potential participants through the current participants' social networks. For the purposes of my study, I first approached a small number of students who were already known to me through my membership of my University's Chinese Society. I then asked them to suggest classmates or friends who were studying as undergraduates in UK universities, and who they thought might be willing to take part in an interview about their study abroad decisions. Usually, they briefly introduced me and my research to their classmates or friends on Wechat (which is equivalent to Whatsapp). If their friends agreed to participate, they would share their Wechat ID with me. I then used Wechat to contact these potential new participants and arrange to interview them. I briefly told the new participants about my research study and asked for their email addresses via Wechat. Formal invitations, including a consent form and information sheet about my research, were sent to volunteer participants by email. Through this means, my Chinese Society colleagues introduced five participants to me. Third, I attended a fresher activity held by the Chinese Society in Shanghai in April 2021. At that meeting, I met a number of other undergraduates studying in the UK and invited them to become interview participants. I approached seven students, five of whom agreed to be interviewed. Fourth, and finally, the remaining participants were introduced by those whom I had already interviewed. During the whole process of setting up the interviews, I approached 36 students in total, and gained the agreement to

participate of 34 Chinese UK undergraduates including 17 year one students and 17 year two students from ten UK universities across England and Scotland.

Although the original plan had been to conduct face to face interviews as far as possible, in the end, only two interviews were conducted in person; the other 32 interviews were conducted online according to the participants' preferences and as a result of the impact of the pandemic. Although there is a possibility that online interviews involved a loss of personal, face-to-face contact, it was more practical from the point of view of cost, and the difficulties of travelling during the pandemic. Since most of the participants had chosen to take part in an online interview, I considered carefully what would be the most appropriate conferencing tool for conducting online interviews. In order to guarantee privacy to all respondents participating, and for the convenience of Mainland Chinese students, I decided to use Zoom to conduct the online interviews because Zoom meetings would not be accessible to anyone other than the meeting participants (Zoom, 2021).

Before each formal online interview began, I usually chatted with interviewees to try to help them to relax and to build rapport with them (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). Building rapport involves establishing a comfortable relationship between interviewer and interviewee. In order to build rapport with the participants I was interviewing, I first introduced myself to them. I then exchanged information with

them about our respective studies and university experiences to date. Only when I was sure that participants seemed comfortable and willing to talk did I commence the formal interview. Once the interview had commenced, I checked that the participants were prepared and started to record. Interviews lasted between one-and-a half and two-and-a half hours.

In terms of conducting the interviews, the language used in all interviews was Mandarin Chinese because all participants were Mainland Chinese speaking students. Mandarin Chinese (Putonghua) could be regarded as the national lingua franca in terms of Mainland Chinese people, and so could be understood by all participants, who would therefore be likely to feel comfortable when they expressed themselves (Li, 2006). In this way, a free flow of discussion could help me gain sufficient data about their perceptions and the reasons behind different kinds of study abroad decisions. However, I was aware that this might create challenges later, as I would need to consider issues about translating the data collected into English.

Organising, analysing, interpreting, and presenting the data

After I had generated a significant amount of data through conducting thirty-four quite lengthy semi-structured interviews, I started to consider how to approach data analysis. The main purpose of conducting my research was to explore the

influential factors in the different phases of the process of students' study abroad decision making, so I decided to analyse the data manually rather than using computer software. The main reason was that computer software would not be helpful in the recognition of the factors that are key in each of the different 'phases' in an accurate way (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Specifically, the participants in the interview might mention the key points related to each phase of the decision making process in a different order, and computer software could not distinguish these different phases automatically and accurately. In this way, the factors in each phase of the decision making process might become confused and difficult to identify. In addition, I knew that using computer software to analyse data would take some time to learn, which would cost me valuable time when I could have been dealing with the data myself in a 'hands-on' way (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

There were four stages in the process of analysing raw data: first, organising the data to make it more manageable; second, identifying the key factors (key points related to research questions) and themes (key categories covering the key points); third, interpreting the data by getting a deep sense of its meaning and finding relationships among themes; and finally, presenting the data in a way which clearly communicated and exemplified the decision making processes revealed during the interviews.

Organising the data

For me, organising the data began with transcribing each interview verbatim. After I completed each interview, I transcribed the audio recordings into Chinese immediately because this helped me to recall what was said, especially those sections of the interviews where participants' responses were less clear. Prompt transcribing of the data therefore helped me to make overall sense of each interview. The other reason for doing this was that the immediate transcribing of the data also maintained the integrity of the research through trying as much as possible to grasp all useful information provided by participants. At this stage, I used a recording pen to help me transcribe interview data in the first place. The use of a recording pen helped me to record the interview data and transcribe it into Chinese automatically. However, I was aware that there could be errors in a recording pen's automatic transcription. I therefore checked each transcript myself to ensure that the expressions or words in transcript were correct and the transcripts were a complete and verbatim record.

The process of transcribing the interview data also helped me to increase my familiarity with data (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). I transcribed the data in Mandarin Chinese first and then translated it into English at a later stage. Again, this enabled me to maintain the integrity of the original data as far as possible, and to avoid any loss or distortion of meaning in the process of translation for as long as possible.

According to Twinn (1998), transcribing interview data in the original language can reduce the difficulties associated with later translation and interpretation. For example, it can reduce the possibility of losing detail from the data in the course of translation; this meant that I could maintain the integrity of the original data at this stage and thus better ensure the accuracy of the subsequent interpretation.

After I had checked each transcript, I saved it to my laptop and assigned a code number to each interview transcript for ease of management. In addition, I kept a record of my written notes, made during each interview, in my notebook; that was intended to help me review the key points from each interview conveniently. I also kept a reflective journal throughout the study in which I recorded my personal views and reactions to what the participants told me, as well as my reflections on emergent ideas and trends in the data. The journal served two purposes. First it helped me to identify and track the themes emerging, at an early stage in the study. This in turn made beginning the process of analysis more straightforward, as I already had recorded my initial insights. Second, from the point of view of ensuring rigour and transparency in the study, my journal offers an ‘audit trail’ of the whole process of the research (Ortlipp, 2008).

During and after each interview, therefore, I made notes about aspects of it which struck me as particularly relevant, interesting or surprising. One reason for doing

this was that it would be essential in helping me to remember each specific interview and my first reactions to it. Another reason was that it helped me to identify key words or terms which were commonly used, or points of particular relevance to the research questions at an early stage. At the end of this first stage, I had thirty-four full transcripts in Chinese, notes of individual transcripts, and a list of key points.

Analysing the data

According to Wolcott (1994), the purpose of data analysis is to identify key factors within each piece of data and to identify differences and similarities between elements of data and the relationships between factors apparent in the data. For me, this included reviewing the transcripts and identifying and categorising key points. By 'key points' I mean words, phrases, or commonly occurring sentences which appeared to throw light on the research questions, or those which seemed to recur across the transcripts. (Wolcott, 1994 p. 12).

First, I reviewed all the interview transcripts and created a summary table of demographic information about the participants that included information about their gender, hometown, parents' occupation, study route and qualification gained to access the UK university, the UK university of study, the year of study, the main subject of study and the location and mode of the interview – whether it was

conducted in person or online (see Appendix Five). This process helped me to familiarise myself with similarities and differences between participants' individual backgrounds.

Second, I re-read all the interview transcripts and my notes on each interview, and identified more than sixty salient points which were cited by participants as influencing their study abroad decisions (see Appendix Six). These factors represented a preliminary summary of the transcripts. The process of identifying key factors in the data and summarising them thematically in such a way that they begin to throw light on the research questions is referred to as coding (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Since I was a new researcher, and therefore quite open to any possible findings, I decided to apply 'open coding' to allow me to identify all the related points in the interview data. According to Neuman (2014), open coding is often used in the first review of data; the researcher carefully reads all the transcripts to identify the emerging concepts or labels. Through applying open coding, I was not trying to fit the key points that I identified into a pre-determined framework. Rather, I recorded all the key points which appeared relevant to the research questions.

Third, I categorised these key points into six preliminary themes which together seemed to summarise the similarities and differences in participants' perspectives.

These initial themes were:

- educational factors
- influences of key informants
- personal preferences
- influences from the Internet
- *neijuan* (which I translated as labour market competition/credential inflation)
- pandemic influences

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), categorisation can be understood as summarising key points or pieces of information. A theme, therefore, can be regarded as a category which may contain a group of related key points. For example, '*gaokao* influences' was a key point emerging from many of the transcripts that could be categorised into the theme entitled 'educational factors'. When I allocated the key points into themes, the theme labels were arrived at, first through the identification of words or expression used commonly across the data set and second, through a comparison with themes identified in the literature in this field (as discussed in Chapter Two). I attempted, where feasible, to keep the original words used by participants that were mentioned several times or had specific or notable meanings, such as *neijuan*. This word was commonly used in China, but it seemed not have an equivalent in English.

Fourth, I went back to the individual transcripts and selected data from interviews which appeared to illustrate the themes identified. Only at this point did I translate the themed data into English. I was the sole translator of the data. My main reason for this was that it was the most practical approach for me. It also guaranteed the privacy of participants' interview data (Sutrisno, et al., 2014). An issue identified as potentially problematic in research involving data translation is that of 'conceptual equivalence'. This term is used to refer to the comparability of ideas, concepts and meanings or between two languages (Neuman, 2014). This was an issue in my study in that some Chinese words mentioned by participants – for example a '*985 211 university'* and the term *neijuan* –seemed not to be directly translatable into English. In such cases I therefore chose to retain the Chinese term or expression and add explanations in English in the course of my discussion of the findings from the data.

Interpreting the data

After I had finished analysing the data according to the identified themes, I started to interpret its meaning. For me, the goal of interpretation was to explore the deeper meaning behind the words used, establish the relationships between the themes identified, and relate them back to the research questions. I compared my initial findings with the existing literature and tried to find relevant theories or concepts that could help me interpret the data more deeply and comprehensively.

According to Wolcott (1994), interpretation transcends description and explores what is made of the data that throws light on the meanings and contexts beyond the previous description and analysis. My approach to interpreting the data involved attempting to identify the rationale behind each participant's perception of the decision making process. It is important to recognise that there is a risk that the researcher's interpretations will be influenced by their own assumptions. I was constantly reminded through supervision of the need to 'stand back' from the data and question my prior assumptions. During the process of writing the drafts of findings, I re-read the data related to different identified themes and tried to get a deeper sense of commonalities and differences between participants' perspectives, based on their different educational pathways and hometowns. I continued developing my interpretation of the interview data until I could no longer add new insights in order to guarantee data saturation (Morse, 1995; Guest et al., 2006). For me, data saturation meant that I could not identify new factors emerging from participants' descriptions of their study abroad decision making. At this stage, I felt that I had developed a comprehensive understanding of my interview data and that no further relationships could be identified between the data and the various themes which had surfaced. I tried to link the identified themes with those in the literature, as suggested by Willig (2014). In particular, I tried to see how themes I had identified related to the 'push and pull' factors framework of international student decision making advocated by Mazzarol and

Soutar (2002), because this framework has been so influential in this field of study. At this point it became clear to me that the 'push and pull factors' framework did not adequately reflect the complex and intersecting nature of the themes emerging (Nichols and Stahl, 2019), an issue which will become apparent in the chapters which follow.

Through constantly re-writing and revising the findings chapters, and through frequent dialogue through critical questioning and discussion during the process of supervision (Gonzalez Ocampo and Castelló, 2018), I arrived at a deeper interpretation of the data.

Presenting the data

For me, presenting the data meant structuring my findings to make them logical in order that readers could easily understand the study abroad decision making process and the relationships between emerging themes. First, I decided to use larger pieces of data to show the overlapping and intersecting nature of students' decision making during different phases of the process and how different contextual and personal factors shaped individual decision making (Wolcott, 1990; Ely et al., 1997). Using large pieces of data enabled me to reflect the decision making process as a whole and give the reader an idea of how different kinds of factors worked together to shape participants' study abroad decisions.

I made the decision to edit some spoken words because this would help the reader understand more clearly (Wolcott, 1994). For example, I removed hesitations and repetitions in participants' expressions. Also, I sometimes re-ordered participants' descriptions in order to emphasise a key theme, or show the rationale behind their decisions. For example, when some participants went on to talk about something that was quite unrelated to the original question, I made the decision to remove unrelated information or put it under the related questions. In the findings chapters the presentation of the analysed data and my interpretation of the overall meaning of the data kept separate. In this way readers can hopefully clearly understand 'what was going on here' (Wolcott, 1994, p.12) through their own reading of larger pieces of data and through evaluating whether my subsequent interpretation was reasonable.

When I drafted my findings chapters, I initially organised them according to different themes. However, I found that this approach did not show how these key themes influenced participants at different phases in their decision making processes; nor did it reveal the overlapping nature of the themes or the differences among participants according to the different pathways they had followed. To make my findings chapters more logical for the reader, I restructured them according to participants' phases of decision making and different educational pathways.

The general phases of the decision making process could be divided into three stages:

- initial study abroad decisions (including the decision to study abroad and the destination country choice)
- subject choice
- university choice.

The different educational pathways identified were: the *gaokao*, A-Level, foundation course, and international school routes. The first reason for presenting data in this way was that my research focus was on the decision making process, and to make clear how different factors shaped different phases of this process. The second was that categorising participants' data into different educational pathways may help readers see how participants' previous educational pathways shaped their subsequent study abroad decisions, and how different factors sometimes influenced participants differently, according to the educational pathway they took to undergraduate study.

Finally, because of the limitations of space, I decided to omit some participants' data that were repetitive or not sufficiently strongly illustrative of a theme, and only selected the most detailed and illustrative data as representative of a particular theme or factor (Sandelowski, 1998). For example, a number of participants mentioned that their initial study abroad decisions were shaped by the *gaokao*, but

not all of them described it in detail.

Ensuring validity in the study

In qualitative studies of this nature, a common criticism centres on their lack of generalisability and reliability (Seale, 1999; Golafshani, 2003). However, it is important to stress that, in this study, I was not seeking to make generalised claims. What I was seeking to do was to develop a deeper understanding of the issues under study, and to offer new insights, based on an in-depth exploration of the perspectives of the participants themselves. Such insights might reveal the complexity of choice making more effectively than previous quantitative studies have been able to do.

Similarly, I make no claim to reliability, in terms of the possibility of replicating the study in the expectation of obtaining the same results (Seale, 1999, Golafshani, 2003). As I have explained above, I was conducting the study with a range of different people, at a particular point in time, recognising that they would have a range of perspectives. If I were to interview another 34 people in six month's time, I recognise that my findings would offer different insights. This is likely to be particularly the case as the context for Mainland Chinese undergraduates studying abroad is constantly changing – and has changed since I conducted my study. However, future qualitative studies may usefully build on the findings of this one.

There is a large body of literature surrounding validity and trustworthiness in qualitative research, and it is this literature that I have drawn on to establish my claims to validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schwandt 1997, Seale, 1999; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Stenbacka, 2001; Davies & Dodd, 2002; Golafshani, 2003). According to Schwandt (1997), validity in qualitative research refers to how the data and findings accurately represent participants' perceived realities concerning a social phenomenon. Validity in qualitative research is not only about whether the research design satisfies the research aims and addresses the research questions, but it also refers to whether the quality of information gathered is good enough to answer research questions at a sufficiently deep level. In respect of this study, the validity question was dealt with by the way I went about the interviews, the language that I used to conduct the interviews, the consistency of my approach, and the fact that I endeavoured to keep the data as 'whole' as possible, for as long as possible in the process of its collection and analysis. The trustworthiness question refers to the detail that I have given to readers about how I went about the whole research process, and the question of an audit trail, my notes and my detailed description of this process (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

In this study, validity related to whether and how I went about the research consistent with the types of questions I was trying to find the answer to. I have drawn on the framework created by Creswell and Miller (2000) to explain what I did in the actual research process to ensure validity. Creswell and Miller (2000)

identify a number of ways of ensuring validity, including triangulation, disconfirming evidence, researcher reflexivity, member checking, prolonged engagement in the field, collaboration, the audit trail, thick and rich description, and peer debriefing. Three of these validity procedures were particularly relevant to my own study: ensuring my reflexivity as a researcher, establishing an audit trail, and creating a thick and rich description of the data.

Researcher reflexivity refers to how researchers manage their assumptions, values, and biases during the research process (Creswell and Miller, 2000). In qualitative research, subjectivity cannot be eliminated completely in that the researcher's initial personal methodological or philosophical positioning influences both the choice of research topic and the approach taken to the investigation. Thus, it inevitably has some impact on the outcomes of the research (Lynch, 1999). In order to minimise the influence of subjectivity and bias in this study, I was encouraged, through supervision, to critically examine my prior assumptions (Davies and Dodd, 2002), in particular about the role of parents and filial piety in choice-making. I came to recognise that while I was a part of the situation (as a Mainland Chinese student in the UK), I needed to focus on eliciting the research participants' own values and understandings rather than my own and to ensure that I did not lead my participants to give particular answers. During the interviews, I asked open-ended questions, and I endeavoured not to push the participants in a particular direction. When I interpreted interview data, I constantly revisited my

interpretations, in discussion with my supervisors, to ensure I was able to ‘stand back’ from the data and avoid making assumptions about the reasoning behind their expressions.

Second, I established an audit trail throughout the research process. This entailed providing a clear explanation of all research decisions I made including my aims, the research context, and my decision making processes (Creswell and Miller, 2000). In order to ensure rigour and trustworthiness, I detailed how I went about collecting and organising the data in order that anybody interrogating my research process could clearly see what I did (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). I divided the whole process of data analysis into four stages: organising, analysing, interpreting, and presenting the data, to make it more logical and able to be checked by others. Also, in respect of the specific steps taken in each stage of the research, I have explained in detail what I did and why. For example, I have indicated the language used at each stage of data analysis and explained why I used Mandarin Chinese in collecting, organising and analysing data. As indicated earlier, I decided to use Mandarin Chinese consistently during the interview process and initial stages of data analysis to maintain the integrity of data (Twinn, 1998) and in order that all participants could understand the interview questions in the same way. Furthermore, by retaining Mandarin Chinese in the initial stage of data analysis I was able to more accurately reflect what participants actually said.

Third, in the chapters which follow, I aim to offer a thick and rich description of the decision making process. The production of a ‘thick’ and ‘rich’ description refers to providing a deep and detailed explanation of research context, the participants, and the themes identified in the data (Creswell and Miller, 2000). The presentation of large pieces of data helps to maintain the integrity of participants’ stories and the contexts in which there were told. Also, readers can access participants’ demographic information to gain a clearer picture of who they are as individuals, how different their backgrounds are, and how various personal and demographic factors interacted to influence their decisions. Hopefully, this not only makes the findings more detailed and vivid for the reader, but also helps audiences to decide whether my findings appear authentic and are applicable to other studies with a similar focus (Creswell and Miller, 2000).

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings: Initial study abroad decision making

Introduction

This chapter describes how the participants made their initial decisions, the reasoning behind their decisions to study abroad and to choose the UK as their host country, and the different kinds of influential factors shaping these decisions. The interview data was analysed according to the different influential factors identified. Analysis of the data suggested that participants fell into four groups, based on the educational route taken to undergraduate study: foundation course, the *gaokao*, A-Levels, or the international school route. There were 14 participants undertaking a foundation course, 6 taking A-Levels in the UK, 4 using their *gaokao* score, and 10 who had studied at an international school outside the UK, undertaking international qualifications such as A-Levels, International Baccalaureate, or the Canadian High School Diploma. Among the 10 participants from an international school, it is worth noting that 6 of them also undertook a foundation course and eventually used the grades they earned there to apply to UK universities. Only 4 of them applied for UK undergraduate study by using the international qualifications they took in international school. All the four groups were Year One or Year Two students in UK universities when I interviewed them. In summary, the initial decision making process around studying abroad seemed to be divided into two stages: deciding whether to study abroad and deciding the

destination country. The different educational routes taken by participants in the run-up to applying to university seemed to influence their decision making processes and initial study abroad decisions. From the analysis of participants' decision making processes, it appeared that two types of influences shaped these initial decisions: educational considerations, and key informants. In this section, the decision making stories of participants taking different educational routes are presented and analysed. The analysis reveals that students' initial study abroad decisions were complex and shaped by different kinds of influences working in combination. It was apparent that, for most participants, there was more than one factor shaping their study abroad decisions at the same time. For example, it will be evident from some of the excerpts from the interviews, presented below, that both educational factors and advice from key informants played an important, and simultaneous, part in informing participants' decision making.

Deciding to study abroad

Whether to study overseas or not seemed to be the first consideration in participants' initial study abroad decision making. The interview data suggests that this decision could be a complex one. For example, some participants appeared not only to consider the perceived uneven regional distribution of educational opportunities, but also weighed parental advice as important when they made initial study abroad decisions. In deciding whether to study abroad or not, four

kinds of influences emerged from the interview data. The first three consideration are educational in nature, the fourth related to advice given by others:

- *Gaokao* influences
- Ideas about the study environment and course structure of overseas universities
- Perceived uneven regional distribution of educational opportunities in China
- Parental influences

In this section, participants' decision making stories and how these four factors influenced different groups of students' decision making around study abroad are presented and discussed.

Gaokao influences

The *gaokao* is the national university entrance examination of Mainland China that Chinese high school students need to take in June of their final year in order to gain access to universities in Mainland China. Generally, most students are under 18 when they take the *gaokao.* In other words, the *gaokao* is the academic assessment of the whole three years of high school study, and the principal source of evidence of students' academic performance in high school. Therefore, the *gaokao* is one of the determining factors in students' future university and subject choices in Mainland China. The *gaokao* score is the only university entry requirement for local students. Different provinces may have different *gaokao*

exam papers, and the *gaokao* score requirements of individual universities in different provinces may also vary. Most school pupils only take the *gaokao* once, after their three years of high school study. If students want to retake the *gaokao*, they must wait a whole year to do so, and they have to leave school and take it as external students. Both the opportunity and the time costs tend to mean that Chinese students take the *gaokao* very seriously (Liu & Wu, 2006; Liu, 2013). It was clear from this study too, that the participants regarded the *gaokao* as an essential consideration when they made their study abroad decisions. In terms of my research, it appeared that the *gaokao* exerted different kinds of influence for each of the four categories of participants' decision making, as will be discussed below. In this section, I first present the data, then I go on to discuss the *gaokao* influences according to the different pre-university educational pathways taken.

Gaokao influences: foundation course students

'Foundation course students' in this study refers to participants who enrolled in a foundation course prior to applying for UK undergraduate study. A foundation course is regarded as a one-year preparation course that helps participants to meet the academic requirements of overseas undergraduate study (Mathias et al, 2014). Most of the foundation course students interviewed for this study took their courses in the UK, although some chose to take a foundation course in a Chinese university. UK universities, private education groups cooperating with UK universities, and Chinese

universities were the main institutions chosen by these students. In this section, decisions to study abroad of four participants (Chan, Coco, Lynn, and Ray) are presented and analysed.

Chan

Chan was a second-year student from Hebei province studying Business Management, and she chose to enrol on a foundation course in the UK before applying to undertake undergraduate study. She stated that the main motivation for doing her preparatory study abroad was related to her prior assumptions about the *gaokao*: she believed it was not worthwhile to spend a long time preparing for the *gaokao* exam.

> *I didn't want to study for the gaokao. On the one hand, I didn't think taking it was meaningful if I could not get offers from top universities in China, so I didn't want to spend much effort and time on preparing for it. In my high school, all the knowledge was taught in the first two years. As for the last year of high school, the whole year was used for preparing for the gaokao. Finally, I gave up my third-year high school study and the gaokao to study abroad earlier. In this way, the fastest way for me to get access into a top university was to apply for foundation courses*.

> *On the other hand, I didn't want to take the gaokao because I thought I could not afford the pressure brought by it. It was so stressful. Also, it was very difficult to get access to top universities through the gaokao. Study abroad for an undergraduate degree might be a bridge that could help me fit into the western education system. In other words, it might be a preparation for studying on a postgraduate course in a top western country.*

After Chan's parents and Chan had weighed up the chances of gaining access into top universities in China and whether it was worth taking the *gaokao*, she decided to study abroad for an undergraduate degree. Chan made her study abroad decision in the second year of high school, and in the end, she chose to take a foundation course in the UK because that was the fastest way for her to get access into an undergraduate course there.

Coco

Coco was a first year student from Beijing studying Economics. She had studied in a top Beijing high school. Based on her high school experience, she worried about the difficulty of the *gaokao*, so finally she decided to study on a foundation course abroad to gain access to an undergraduate course:

I planned to take the gaokao exam initially, but I found that the science related subjects in Grade 11 became much harder. For this reason, I could not get good grades in the gaokao and get the offer from my target university in China. I decided to study abroad for an undergraduate degree, so I talked to my parents about my thoughts and feelings. After I discussed this with my parents, they agreed for me to study abroad first to get access into the university I liked.

Lynn

Lynn was a Year One undergraduate from Shandong province studying Business Management, and she studied for the *gaokao* before she decided to study abroad and undertake a foundation course in the UK. She explained that she could not get access to her target university in China due to receiving an unsatisfactory *gaokao* score and an unsatisfactory university offer:

I didn't get a good grade in the gaokao. When the result was released, I felt very disappointed because I knew I could not dream about my target university any more. Also, I had worked very hard for the gaokao, so I thought this result didn't reflect my effort. That was why I felt so sad. To be honest, if I could have got access into a good university in China, I would have stayed in China.

The main trouble Lynn met was her unsatisfactory *gaokao* score and consequent limitations on her choice of Chinese university. To help Lynn deal with this, her parents suggested that she study abroad:

> *My dad didn't want me to be sad, so he suggested I apply to overseas universities. Actually, my parents really wanted me to get into a top university in order to find jobs in top tier companies and use my overseas degree to settle in Beijing, so they wanted me to study abroad. Also, my parents didn't want me to study at university for too many years. In order to save time, they wanted me to study abroad as soon as possible. Finally, I accepted their suggestion and started to prepare the applications immediately and chose to take a foundation course because I could apply to it directly.*

Ray

Ray was from Anhui province. He was a first year undergraduate in a UK university studying Computer Science, but he began his undergraduate study in a Chinese university before he took a foundation course in the UK. He mentioned that the main reason for his decision to study abroad was his unsatisfactory *gaokao* score and consequent limitations on his choice of Chinese university:

I didn't get good grades in the gaokao and I didn't want to spend a whole year retaking it, so I got access into a university from the second batch. However, the second batch of universities in China was not good enough to find good jobs in big cities, so I decided to study abroad for my undergraduate study. To be honest, if I could get access into a university from the first batch, I would not have chosen to study abroad. Finally, I decided to take a foundation course in a Chinese university as a first step, then study abroad for my undergraduate degree.

Discussion: Gaokao influences on foundation course students' study abroad decisions

It appeared that prior assumptions about the difficulty of the *gaokao* and the receipt of unsatisfactory *gaokao* results were influential factors shaping initial study abroad decisions for the participants who undertook foundation courses before entering a UK university. Some participants who decided to study abroad after Grade 11 seemed to hold prior assumptions about the difficulty of the *gaokao* and the efforts which needed to be expended on it. They weighed these prior assumptions against the possible gains from the *gaokao* before deciding to study abroad. Other former foundation course participants did not like the *gaokao* course structure. Their study abroad decisions seemed to suggest silent resistance to the *gaokao* policy. As for

the participants who took the *gaokao* before deciding to undertake a foundation course, they seemed to make this decision because their *gaokao* results did not satisfy their academic ambitions and their self-positioning, so they changed to another educational pathway in order to access their preferred universities and subjects. Also, it appeared that they associated unsatisfactory *gaokao* scores with unsatisfactory future careers. In other words, their initial study abroad decisions were career oriented.

Parental suggestions related to the *gaokao* also shaped the former foundation course students' study abroad motivations. Lynn's parents, for example, appeared to have played an important role in offering solutions to specific difficulties. Studying abroad appeared to be a form of academic capital, to be invested in helping Lynn to get into a top university and, thus, to access a job in a top company and settle in Beijing. For Lynn, accessing a top overseas university not only solved her difficulties in getting good grades in the *gaokao*, but was also a way to help her achieve the ultimate goal: settling in Beijing. The policy for giving preference to returning Chinese international students to settle in Beijing (the *hukou* policy) was an incentive for her and her parents to make the decision to study abroad.

Gaokao influences on 'the gaokao students'

The term '*gaokao* students' here refers to those participants who studied for the *gaokao* and used their *gaokao* score to apply direct to UK universities. Only two of the participants who took the *gaokao* route mentioned the influence exerted by the *gaokao* on their initial study abroad decision making. Faye is typical of those among this group of participants, and she described her decision making in detail.

Faye

Faye, a Year Two student from Xinjiang province, studying Psychology, described how her initial study abroad decision was shaped by her unsatisfactory *gaokao* results:

> *I was not satisfied with my gaokao score and the university I got in to, so I decided to use my gaokao score to apply to overseas universities. Although the US was also my preferred study abroad destination, most of the US universities with good rankings didn't accept the gaokao score. So I passed over this choice, and made new priorities for my undergraduate application. The first choice was to apply to top universities in Hong Kong because their world ranking and reputation was very strong, and I liked Hong Kong very much. My second choice was to apply to UK universities because I could use my gaokao score to apply to universities in the top 100 QS world ranking list. However, my gaokao score didn't achieve the*

entry requirement of universities in Hong Kong and Singapore because their requirements were as high as the requirements of top universities in Mainland China. As a result, I started to focus on UK universities and got the offer from the University of Birmingham.

Faye mentioned another reason why she gave up her offer from a Chinese university:

Actually, I didn't like my high school classmates. They worked very hard for the gaokao, but I thought they were too competitive and ambitious. Most of them got access into top universities in Beijing and I also got an offer from one of the top universities in Beijing, but I thought the study environment in Beijing universities must be as competitive as in my previous high school. I hate that competitive environment, and I didn't want to study with classmates like my high school classmates. The competitive environment made me dislike not just the universities in Beijing but even the city. I don't want to live in a competitive city after I graduate from university. That was also the reason why I decided to decline the offer from the university in Beijing.

Faye's unsatisfactory *gaokao* score 'pushed' her to study abroad, and she

considered university choices after she decided to study abroad rather than first deciding her study abroad destination.

William

William was a first-year student from Anhui province who studied Computer Science in the UK, and he described a similar decision making process as Faye, in that he did not satisfy entry requirements with his *gaokao* score:

> *I used to want to choose Computer Science as my major subject for undergraduate study, but my gaokao score was not high enough to apply to do Computer Science because it was a very popular subject in China. As a result, I was allocated to study Communication Engineering, but I didn't like it. I decided to use my gaokao score and Year One score in my previous university to apply to do a Computer Science course in the UK or the US. Finally, I chose to go to the UK because I heard that the University of Birmingham accepted the gaokao score.*

An unsatisfactory *gaokao* score initially propelled William to study a subject that he did not like, in a Chinese university. As a result of his unhappiness with this situation, William gave up his academic studies in China and decided to study abroad where he could pursue his preferred subject choice.

Discussion: Gaokao influences on gaokao students' study abroad decisions

The common factor driving participants who used their *gaokao* scores to seek access to UK universities was that they were not satisfied with their *gaokao* scores. This was even the case with those who had achieved relatively good scores. They seemed to have higher ambitions with regard to their choice of university, so they gave up their offers from Chinese universities, in order to pursue these ambitions. In the main, their study abroad decisions seemed to be the result of weighing up offers from overseas universities against an offer from a Chinese university. Furthermore, it appeared that this group of students prioritised studying at a 'top' university over the actual destination. For example, both Faye and William appeared to be university prestige oriented, and the status of universities around the world appeared to be important in their decision making. Being eager to prove themselves in a 'top' university overseas, they decided to apply directly to 'top' universities anywhere in the world. Yet Faye also mentioned that she had rejected the offer from a Chinese university because she did not like her high school classmates who got access into Beijing universities, or the competitive environment which she anticipated would carry over from school into Beijing university life. William also seemed aware of the competitiveness in subject choice in Chinese undergraduate admissions. The awareness of (and sometimes reluctance about) being in a highly competitive educational environment 'pushed'

Faye and William to study abroad. In terms of William's decision making, it also indicated that he made his study abroad decision and subject decisions simultaneously, rather than in distinct stages.

Gaokao influences: A-level students

The *gaokao* also influenced the former A-level students in this study. 'A-level students' here means the students who studied for A-levels in the UK and then continued on to undergraduate study in the UK. Excerpts from Justin's and Zhang's interviews show how their conceptions about the *gaokao* motivated them to study abroad.

Justin

Justin was a year one undergraduate from Heilongjiang, studying Food Science and Nutrition. Heilongjiang province is the north-easternmost province in China. Justin decided to study abroad at an early point in his school career. His reason for studying abroad was based on his prior assumptions about his likely *gaokao* results; he felt he was not good at some of the subjects included in the *gaokao*:

> *In high school, I always got good grades in Maths, but I was not good at Chinese and Physics. Physics was an optional subject in the gaokao, but Chinese was the compulsory subject. In this way, I had to take the Chinese*

gaokao exam. I knew I would not get a good grade in Chinese. It would be very tough for me. I didn't like the teaching methods and assessment in my high school. However, the gaokao was a must for getting access into Chinese university, but I was afraid of taking the gaokao. So finally, I started to think about whether I should study abroad and apply to overseas top universities to make up for my weakness in high school in China.

When Justin realised his 'weakness' he asked for his parents' advice, and they encouraged him to study abroad.

When I expressed my worries about the gaokao, my parents fully understood me and suggested I study abroad. Actually, they had wanted me to study abroad from as long ago as primary school in order to let me learn about western culture and practice English, but they thought the schoolwork in western primary and middle schools was too easy and relaxed, so they did not tell me before. But at this time, they thought it was a good time to let me study abroad because 'study abroad' also came into my head. After our discussion, we decided to study abroad for high school.

Zhang

Zhang, a Year One undergraduate from Guangdong province, studying Artificial

Intelligence and Computer Science, also took A-levels in the UK. He expressed a similar view to Justin: he could not drop the subject he was not good at in the *gaokao*, so he believed he could not get into China's top universities:

> *I was not good at Chinese and Chemistry in high school, so it would be very difficult for me to get access into top universities in China. However, I thought going to a top university for undergraduate study was a must, so I decided to finish my high school study abroad and apply to overseas top universities to make up for my weakness in high school in China.*

Finally, Zhang's assumption about the results of his admission to a Chinese university made him decide to study abroad.

Discussion: Gaokao influences on A-level students

The six participants who studied for A-levels in the UK before applying to study abroad, appeared to have made their initial study abroad decisions relatively early – around the time of middle school graduation or in their first year of study in high school. The primary study abroad motivation of these students was based on their prior assumptions about the difficulties of the *gaokao* in terms of specific subjects. The A-level students did not experience the *gaokao* themselves, but they appeared to be influenced by the imagined difficulty of taking it. Specifically, for former A-level

students, some participants, such as Justin and Zhang, mentioned that it appeared difficult for the students to keep a balance between different subjects. Also, it seemed that their academic performance in some subjects could not match their desire to get good grades in the *gaokao*. For Justin, the compulsory subjects in the *gaokao, which* combined both arts and science subjects: the combination of Chinese, English and Maths, was a deterrent. For those who saw themselves as being outstanding in one or two subjects, the lack of scope for specialisation in the *gaokao* was a problem. However, it could be perceived as an advantage in other countries. For example, they had the option of choosing to study only the subject they performed best in at A-Level. Studying abroad was seen as enabling them to fully play to their strengths. From a Chinese perspective, however, it is possible that Chinese universities might lose some students who are outstanding in specific subjects.

Gaokao influences: International school students

There was one former international school student (Yan) who realised the potential difficulties of the *gaokao* when she was studying in middle school. This 'pushed' Yan to leave her hometown and she made her study abroad decision at an early stage.

Yan

Yan was a second-year undergraduate from Jiangsu province studying Education, who had previously studied at an international school in Shanghai. She also explained that her main motivation for studying abroad was her prior assumption that it was too difficult to get into top universities via the *gaokao,* so she was afraid to take that pathway:

> *I'm from Jiangsu province. the gaokao in Jiangsu province is very famous because every Chinese knows our gaokao is much more difficult than in other provinces. It also means it's very difficult for the students from Jiangsu province to get a high score in the gaokao. The stress of taking the gaokao is huge. Everyone wants to get access into top universities, but the quotas are always limited. As a result, I gave up the idea of taking the gaokao and decided to study abroad when I graduated from middle school. I thought study abroad could help me get access into a 'better' university than the university I could get into through the gaokao in China.*

Yan said that she had told her parents what she thought about the *gaokao*, and her parents agreed to let her go to an international school for her high school study:

> *I told my parents about my thoughts of the gaokao, and I also expressed*

my willingness to learn English. My parents totally understood me and agreed with my idea of studying abroad. Finally, I went to an international school in Shanghai for my high school study and started to prepare for study abroad after high school graduation.

Yan was from Jiangsu province, a province with a high economic level which is close to Shanghai. The difficulty of the *gaokao* exam papers in Jiangsu province is widely recognised in China; this appeared to make it more difficult for Yan to get high scores in the *gaokao.*

Discussion: Gaokao influences on international school students' study abroad decisions

There was one former international school student who expressed dissatisfaction with the *gaokao* policy. The *gaokao* papers in each province might vary, as might also the *gaokao* score requirements in each province. Therefore, the difficulty of the *gaokao* exam papers and the difficulty of getting access into a Chinese university seemed to act as a deterrent. In some cases, this has led to immigration into big cities: the *gaokao* exam papers in Beijing and Shanghai are perceived as easier than those in the provinces, and therefore it has been suggested that students from these cities might get access into top universities more easily (Hamnett et al. 2019). Hamnett et al. have also explained that regional inequalities in education were not

the sole reason for disparities in undergraduate admissions, but also a consequence of such disparities. Specifically, they suggest that the resources, funding, and the quality of education vary across Chinese regions, potentially leading to both regional inequality in education and the uneven distribution of admission quotas. This perceived unfairness in the *gaokao* system may shape patterns of mobility among Chinese young people, including their decisions to study abroad. Jiang (2014) has also explored this relationship between higher education and human capital mobility. It appears, from the data analysed here, that the problem of regional disparities, and the unequal number of undergraduate admissions under the *gaokao* system may be a factor in initial study abroad decision making.

Conclusion

The decision making stories above showed that the *gaokao* appeared to be an important study abroad motivation among all four categories of participants. It appeared that prior assumptions about the *gaokao* and unsatisfactory *gaokao* results influenced their initial study abroad decision. Attitudes to the *gaokao* and parental advice seemed, together, to shape participants' study abroad decision making in different ways, depending on the educational routes they took prior to applying to university. Participants who took the foundation course route were influenced by both their prior assumptions about the *gaokao* and by unsatisfactory results if they had actually taken it.

Those participants who did take the *gaokao* seemed to have a more straightforward decision making process than those taking the other three educational routes. 'More straightforward' decision making here means that they tended to skip some of the early steps in the initial study abroad decision making process: deciding to study abroad in the first place and then choosing a host country. They confirmed their decisions to study abroad through weighing up their home country's university offer against that of an overseas university. For example, Faye decided to study abroad because she thought that the offer from an overseas university would be better than her offer from a Chinese university. In other words, the process of former *gaokao* students deciding to study abroad was the process of making comparisons between different 'top' university offers. Those participants who had taken the A-level or international school routes to university appeared to have similar kinds of study abroad decision making processes; their study abroad decisions were shaped by their assumptions, either about the assumed difficulties of the *gaokao*, specific subjects within the *gaokao,* or perceived differences between regions in terms of the difficulty of the *gaokao* and the chances of the gaining access to the best universities in China. Furthermore, the former A-level and international school students' decisions seemed to be strongly influenced by parental advice. It appeared that the different routes taken by participants and the different amounts of time available to make initial study abroad decisions were influenced by *gaokao* considerations.

The point at which participants realised the potential impact of the *gaokao* on their undergraduate university choices seemed to determine the educational route they took. For example, participants who realised that they might encounter difficulties with the *gaokao* could choose to take A-levels or enrol in an international school. On the other hand, participants who only later encountered difficulties with the *gaokao* could choose to take a foundation course after high school or opt to continue along the *gaokao* route. The educational route taken to university appeared to determine participants' later study abroad decisions and their subsequent subject and university choices. For example, for some, taking the *gaokao* route determined the range of university choices which could be made. Furthermore, former A-level students' choice of A-level subjects would determine their future subject choices for undergraduate study.

Where issues with the *gaokao* were raised, parental advice seemed to play an important role in participants' decisions and considerations. Those who took the foundation course, A-level and international school pathways all mentioned that their parents had helped them to make study abroad decisions. Some foundation course students, such as Chan and Coco, came up with the idea of studying abroad first, and then tried to persuade their parents to agree with their decisions. On the other hand, others, (such as Lynn) did not consider studying abroad before they took the *gaokao* – it was their parents who shaped their thinking on this.

Unexpected *gaokao* results seemed to be a circumstance which 'pushed' these students towards an alternative route – that of a foundation course. In this case too, parents seemed to be influential in suggesting that they should study abroad. The former A-level and international school students were usually younger than students taking other routes to university when they decided to study abroad. This decision was often made after middle school study, or during the first year in high school. In this case, parents seemed to participate strongly in shaping these younger participants' study abroad decisions, for example by helping them to think about the most suitable educational routes and discussing it with them.

Finally, the importance of university status and competition in swaying the decisions of these participants also emerged from *gaokao* influences. Because participants were aware of the competitive environment in China, they placed emphasis on university prestige. Participants' pursuit of university prestige was a prominent study abroad motivation. Their study abroad decisions could be regarded as a strategic response to deal with possible challenges brought about by a competitive educational environment.

Seeking the ideal study environment and course structure

Participants' personal preferences and assumptions about the learning environment and course structure of their future undergraduate university emerged as another

influential ‘push’ factor (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002) propelling them away from higher education in China and towards studying abroad. A perceived unsatisfactory study environment or course structure in Chinese universities – such as what one of those interviewed referred to as a ‘useless’ course structure and others saw as an inflexible and competitive system, seemed to lead some participants to seek their ideal study environment and course structure overseas. In this study, only two groups of interviewees mentioned this as an influential factor in their initial study abroad decision making process: those who took foundation courses before their undergraduate study, and those who used their *gaokao* scores to apply direct to UK universities. In this section, I show how the former foundation course and *gaokao* students weighed the importance of study environment and course structures.

Zak

Zak was a Year One undergraduate, originally from Canton province, who was studying Business Management. He decided to study on a foundation course in the UK when he was nineteen, having previously started at a Chinese university. He disliked the course structure of Chinese undergraduate study:

> *I studied in a university in China for Year One, but I didn’t like the course structure. It was because all Year One undergraduate students in China had to learn many ‘useless’ courses (such as some political courses) that*

were not related to their specialist subject. I thought those courses wasted too much time. They made me really tired. The Year One study bored me and reduced my interest in university life in China. It was the main reason why I gave up my undergraduate study in China and applied to universities in the UK.

Eventually, Zak gave up his first year of study in China and decided to apply to a foundation course in the UK. He then re-took his first year of undergraduate study in the UK.

Mintie

Mintie was a second-year undergraduate from Sichuan province who was studying Psychology. She studied on a foundation course in the UK when she was seventeen. She explained her decision as having been based on her prior assumptions about learning in Chinese universities:

I wanted to study in a university with a relaxed environment, so I decided to study abroad. I used to study in a boarding school and I disliked my study life there. I thought it might be similar to domestic university life. Living with many students and having a lot of rules were not what I expected for university life. Also, the teaching methods and study

surroundings in Chinese universities were not suitable for me. In Chinese universities, the courses were not varied enough for us to choose. The time schedule would not be as flexible as in Western countries. This kind of surrounding was not relaxed and free enough for me.

Mintie drew on her prior assumptions about both Chinese universities and the universities in 'Western' countries to make her study abroad decision.

William

William was a first-year undergraduate from Anhui province studying Computer Science. He had studied for a year at a Chinese university before he decided to study abroad:

I completed one year of study in a Chinese university, and I didn't like the environment. Many students had competed for postgraduate recommendations because the top universities' quotas for postgraduate recommendations were very limited. Many students tended to join research projects in university to compete for postgraduate recommendations, because they might gain a place in the quota if the research project had good achievements. I joined a research project, together with an older schoolmate, but he dropped the research project because he got into the quota of

postgraduate recommendation, and he didn't need to do the research any more. Our professor of the research project was very angry with him for this, so he dropped all undergraduate students and only kept postgraduate students in his project.

This kind of competitive surrounding was not suitable for me. I didn't like the way students competed for the quotas. It made me feel unhappy and very stressed, so I wanted to study abroad and go to a top university without the competitive surroundings.

He decided to use his *gaokao* score to apply to an overseas university because he thought that overseas undergraduate study might be closer to his ideal conception of university life.

Discussion

The evidence above suggests that some participants taking the foundation course and *gaokao* routes decided to give up their studies in China because they did not like what they regarded to be the unrelaxed study surroundings in Chinese universities, and the requirement to study courses unrelated to their interests. Their personal experiences of learning in Chinese high schools and universities therefore 'pushed' them to study abroad. While it might have appeared a risky

choice for Zak to give up Year One study in China without being fully informed about the course structure of an overseas university, his personal study experiences in a Chinese university and his preconceptions about overseas universities impelled him to make what may have seemed like a gamble. William, like Zak, made study abroad decisions according to his previous experiences and personal preferences. He was not happy about the Chinese postgraduate recommendation system. The 'postgraduate recommendation' in China refers to the fact that undergraduate universities have the right to recommend a limited number of undergraduates to access their preferred postgraduate universities by virtue of the students' performance during their undergraduate studies. Students recommended in this way do not have to take China's national postgraduate entry exam. For William, this created a stressful environment which deterred him from progressing in his undergraduate studies in China and led him to decide to study abroad. From William's perspective, he had left his hometown and had come to a good university in Jiangsu province with great expectations, but had experienced a highly competitive environment which he disliked. This led him to give up studying in China and decide to study abroad.

Others, like Mintie, made their study abroad decision based on their previous high school experience. She seemed to believe that her experiences of Chinese higher education would be similar, and that this was not what she wanted from

undergraduate study.

In summary, participants' previous study experiences in China were a 'reference point' for making judgements about Chinese universities, which were then compared to an imagined idea about the environment of universities in other countries. Seeking the ideal study environment and course structure was viewed as a key consideration in study abroad decision making. Some participants held negative views about university life in China, while at the same time making positive assumptions about undergraduate study environment in the UK. According to Wu (2014), a comfortable study abroad environment was a key 'pull' factor that attracted Chinese students to study abroad in the UK. However, it seemed that, in this study, the comparisons being made were between an actual study experience in China and an assumed study environment in UK universities.

An uneven regional distribution of educational opportunities in China

A further in-country factor influencing study abroad decisions was the perceived uneven distribution of educational opportunities across the country. From the perspective of the participants who lived there, educational opportunities in Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Gansu province (see Appendix Seven) seemed to be limited; this appeared to 'push' them to leave their hometown and study abroad. Participants in all four of the identified pathway groups (a foundation course, the

gaokao, A-levels, and international school) mentioned their concerns about the limited educational opportunities within their hometown or region when they talked about their initial study abroad decisions. In the following section, I present data from four participants, one from each 'pathway' to indicate how the uneven regional distribution of educational opportunities influenced their initial study abroad decisions.

Xixi

Xixi, who came from Inner Mongolia, was a Year One undergraduate studying Education who had taken a foundation course. She pointed out the difficulties related to undergraduate admissions in Inner Mongolia. This was the main factor behind her initial study abroad decision:

> *I come from Inner Mongolia. The educational resources are not as good as in the big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. Although it's much easier for the students from Inner Mongolia to get access into 'the first batch of universities', it was really hard for us to get offers from the universities of Projects 985 and 211. It's because the universities of Projects 985 and 211 might think the educational level in our province was not high enough. Most of our good students would get access into Inner Mongolia University because they could not get access into good*

universities in other provinces. For example, Fudan University's admission quota for western Inner Mongolia was nearly zero in 2019 [Fudan is in Shanghai]. To get access into top universities, I decided to study abroad for undergraduate study even if I needed to take a foundation course first.

Xixi told her parents about the situation of undergraduate admission in Inner Mongolia:

My parents worried about the safety issues for study abroad initially, but they changed their minds when they learnt about the current situation of undergraduate admission. Afterwards, my relatives persuaded my parents successfully to let me study abroad.

Eventually, Xixi studied abroad after the second year of high school and chose to take a foundation course in the UK. However, when the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in 2020, Xixi's parents asked her if she would like to give up her overseas study and take the *gaokao* to secure access to a Chinese university, but Xixi rejected this idea and insisted on continuing to study abroad.

Faye

Faye, a former *gaokao* student, explained why she thought that some *gaokao* students gave up the idea of applying to Chinese universities and decided to use their *gaokao* score to apply to overseas universities. She was a second year undergraduate who came from Xinjiang province, studying Psychology, and she described her initial study abroad decision making process as follows:

> *Although it was difficult to get into top universities from Xinjiang province, I was in a top class in a top high school in Xinjiang and many of my classmates got access into top universities in Beijing. My purpose was not only to get access into a top university, but also in my preferred subject. I wanted to learn Psychology, but it was very difficult for a student from Xinjiang province to get access into that area. This subject was not that popular in China, so there were not many good universities offering psychology. The quotas for psychology in Chinese universities were much fewer than the quotas in UK universities. For example, there are about 300 students in my psychology group now, but a group of that size would not be possible in China. As for Xinjiang, the good universities that offered psychology didn't recruit students from Xinjiang every year. For example, I checked that Beijing Normal University's psychology undergraduate course didn't recruit any students from Xinjiang in 2018. I thought that using my gaokao score to apply to overseas universities would give me more chances*

to get access into a top university, even if it was not in China.

Finally, Faye made the decision to study abroad before she took the *gaokao* and used her *gaokao* score to apply to UK universities directly after the release of the scores.

Young

Young, who had taken A-levels, was also from Xinjiang province, and he had been Faye's classmate in high school. He was a Year One student who studied Computer Science. He expressed the view that the educational resources in Xinjiang province were limited:

The educational resources in Xinjiang province were not very good, and I had the idea of studying abroad at an early point in time. There were not many international high schools in Xinjiang. I used to study in an international school in Xinjiang, but the school didn't divide students into different groups according to their study abroad destination country. The course structure was not suitable for the students who wanted to apply to UK universities because the course structure better fitted the students who wanted to apply to US universities. Most of my classmates used the year three of high school study to prepare for ACT (American College Testing) that was not suitable for me.

On the other hand, I wanted to go abroad for high school study in the UK.

Finally, Young gave up his high school studies in Xinjiang, and went to the UK to take an A-level course. He eventually gained access into a top UK university.

Hayley

Hayley was second year student studying Accounting and Finance. She had previously studied at an international school. She came from Gansu province, and she also stated that the limited educational opportunities in her hometown were the main reason behind her decision to study abroad:

I grew up in Lanzhou. Although Lanzhou is the capital city of Gansu province, the educational level was not as good as in other big capital cities, so it was difficult to get access into top universities in China. In order to get access into top universities, my parents and I decided I should study abroad for my undergraduate level. I wanted to study for the international qualification in high school, however, there was no good international school in Lanzhou at that time. Also, there were not many study abroad agents in Lanzhou and I didn't trust their qualifications, actually.

As a result, Hayley decided to go to an international school in Shanghai, and

successfully gained access to a UK university.

Discussion

The main regional factors identified as 'pushing' participants to study abroad were their perceptions of an uneven undergraduate admissions quota distribution, and an uneven regional distribution of international education opportunities. All three of the provinces mentioned above, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Gansu, could be regarded as remote areas of Mainland China. Specifically, Xinjiang and Gansu provinces are located in Northwest China, and Inner Mongolia is located in the far north. The limited admissions quotas of top universities in China and limited local educational resources appeared to 'push' these participants to give up the idea of undergraduate study in China and, instead, to study abroad (as has also been noted by Hamnett et al, 2019).

Several terms need to be clarified here: 'the first batch of universities' and '*Projects 985 and 211'*. The first batch of universities represents tier one universities in China whose *gaokao* score requirements are higher than the second batch. Although it comprises tier one universities, the number of first batch universities is huge and includes the universities of *Projects 985 and 211*. As explained earlier, *Project 985* refers to the 39 universities in which the Chinese government chose to invest in 1998. *Project 211* is similar to *Project 985* and comprises more than a

hundred universities nominated in 1995 to strengthen the development of Chinese higher education (Costa & Zha, 2020). Both groups are regarded as the top universities in Mainland China.

Illustrative of the perspectives of participants who took a foundation course before entering a UK university, Xixi gave a specific reason why students from some provinces said it was difficult to get access into top universities in China. Xixi, it appeared, was dissatisfied with the situation regarding undergraduate admissions in Inner Mongolia, and she seemed shocked by Fudan University's 2019 admission quota. Fudan University is a well-known top university of *Project 985* in Shanghai. Its admission quota in 2019 in Inner Mongolia was eleven students. This quota was the second lowest among all provincial level administrative regions in China, except for Hong Kong and Macau (Fudan University, 2019). This seemingly uneven distribution of educational opportunities led Xixi to give up the idea of undergraduate study in China. This decision appeared to strengthen her study abroad motivation in that she was willing to spend one year on a foundation course before beginning her UK undergraduate study.

For Xixi, taking the *gaokao* in Inner Mongolia would have given her access into the first batch of universities. However, from her point of view, the top universities such as the universities of *Project 985* did not recognise the 'quality' of students from

Inner Mongolia. The uneven distribution of admissions quotas among different regions was inevitable since the *Projects 985* and *211* universities were unevenly distributed in China: a large proportion of them are situated in the big cities of Eastern China such as Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing. Hamnett et al (2019) have observed that the distribution of a small number of top-tier universities in China is regionally unequal, and the competition for the entry quotas of the top universities seems to differ between provincial-level administrative regions. The distribution of the top universities' admission quotas therefore seemed to benefit students from big eastern cities and provinces and disadvantaged students from less developed regions. Liu (2015) has explored geographical inequality in higher education access in China, especially how political and institutional arrangements for undergraduate admissions promote geographical inequalities in access to top universities. He concluded that the devolution of admissions powers to local government and universities increased geographical stratification. As a result, students from less well resourced western regions appeared to have fewer opportunities to shape their destinies and increase their social status through the *gaokao*. Although the regional distribution of undergraduate admissions quotas is intended to support economic development and geographical mobility, it may intensify geographical inequality (Liu, 2015). My findings accord with the literature (Liu, 2015) which suggests that limited educational opportunities as a result of regional disparities may impact on the educational routes taken by young people.

Parental influences also appeared in Xixi's account of her study abroad decision making process. It appeared that Xixi's parents also realised the limitations caused by the regional disparities. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic seemed to lead Xixi's parents to regret their decision to agree to her studying abroad. This suggests that they may not have been completely happy about her study abroad decision in the first place. On the other hand, studying abroad seemed to offer the chance for her to build educational capital in a situation where regional disparities might have otherwise been a limiting factor. As others have suggested (for example Fong, 2011), the opportunity of studying abroad appeared to offer students the potential to compete on an equal footing with the students from big cities or less remote regions.

As a former *gaokao* student, Faye expressed the view that the limited quotas for undergraduate admissions to her preferred subject in top universities in her hometown compelled her to find other opportunities to get access into top universities elsewhere. Studying abroad seemed to be a 'back-up plan' for Faye that helped her to increase the possibility of getting offers from top universities internationally. From her point of view, in Xinjiang, it appeared that the best high school education resources were concentrated in one high school and one city. This, for her, meant that students in her high school class were differentiated

according to their academic performance. It appeared that limited educational resources, and the practice of dividing students into different levels early on, made it harder for some students to get good grades in the *gaokao*. For Faye, the limited undergraduate admission quota was a factor: the root cause was the lack of good educational resources. On the other hand, it appeared that Faye thought that the unequal level of recognition of some subjects in China meant that these subjects might not be so highly valued in Chinese universities as elsewhere. Therefore, the number of places for subjects, such as Psychology, might be limited. Faye's study abroad decision might therefore also be regarded as subject oriented.

Similarly, Young, a former A-level student, saw limited educational opportunities as a problem in Xinjiang and took action early on. However, the aims of these two participants in planning to study abroad were slightly different. Faye's study abroad motivation was to get access to her favorite subject in a 'top' international university, but Young wanted to take A-levels in the UK because he felt that the school he attended in Xinjiang did not pay enough attention to students who were going to study abroad. This led Young to study abroad early on. After he had weighed up his experience of an international school course in Xinjiang and his perceived ideas about an A-level course in the UK, he decided to study abroad.

As a former international school student, Hayley's study abroad decision was also

shaped by the limited educational resources in Lanzhou, Gansu province. Although Lanzhou is the capital city of Gansu province and is viewed as a second tier city, its level of educational development was not regarded as being as high as other second tier cities in China. Hayley indicated that she did not feel confident in Lanzhou's education system or its approach to international education. She recognised the superiority of international education opportunities available in bigger cities. Her conceptions about international school resources in different regions seemed to be a reason for her to move out from her hometown and decide to study abroad. Of these four participants above, only Hayley, the international school student, and Young, the A-level student, made initial study abroad decisions very early on in their high school careers.

Although some participants decided to use study abroad to bypass regional disparities in educational resources, their specific problem solving approaches varied. There seemed to be three approaches: to opt to study abroad at high school level, to study at an international school in Shanghai, or to use their *gaokao* score to apply directly to overseas universities. As for the pros and cons of these approaches, the participants who took the first and second approaches had to give up the opportunity of gaining access to universities in China directly, but those who took the third approach could chose to apply to both Chinese and overseas universities. The perceived uneven regional distribution of educational

opportunities not only caused some participants to feel that they had fewer chances of getting access into top universities in China, but it also made them consider their personal educational pathways and prepare early in order to increase their chances of accessing a high status university, or a preferred subject choice.

Conclusion: deciding to study abroad

Four prominent influential factors emerged from the data related to participants' decisions to study abroad: *gaokao* influences; ideas about the study environment and course structure of overseas universities; the perceived uneven regional distribution of educational opportunities in China; and advice from parents. Across the data, moreover, and at a deeper level perhaps, two other issues emerged: an awareness among participants of the competitive nature of the higher education environment, and the importance to them of the status of potential universities. University status and prestige have been identified in past studies as influencing students' study abroad decisions (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Cebeolla-Boado, et al, 2017). However, to date, an awareness of the current competitive higher education environment seems not to have been explicitly highlighted.

Again, the data suggests that participants' considerations about studying abroad are influenced by more than one factor at a time. For example, both considerations

about the *gaokao* and parental influences might be weighed up by participants simultaneously. Furthermore, the point at which participants realised the importance of particular factors, or emerging problems, appeared to influence the educational route they took. Their later decision making then appeared to be differently shaped by these early choices.

It also appeared that there were no linear and straightforward stages in study abroad decision making processes. The initial decision to study abroad was rarely made in isolation from other aspects of decision making. Often it was made in concert with other choices, such as what subject to study, and at which university. This finding seems to be at variance from the clear decision making phases identified in previous studies (for example by Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002 and Wu, 2020). The findings from this study suggest that students' study abroad decision making was both multifactorial and complex.

Deciding to study in the UK

After the in-principle decision to study abroad, choosing the study abroad destination country was a further decision that students needed to make. The data suggests that a combination of factors influenced decisions to apply to a UK university. Personal educational preferences and key informants' concerns and advice shaped their choice of the UK as host country. Three kinds of influence

emerged from the data:

- Course duration and structure
- Educational considerations around ‘obstacles to admission’
- Parental concerns about safety issues
- Parental advice when participants had no firm preference.

In this section, participants are divided into two groups: in the first group were those who chose the UK because it was their preferred destination from the outset; in the second group were those who initially had no clear preferences about their choice of host country, but who eventually applied to study in the UK. The way in which the four factors highlighted above shaped the decision making process of these two groups of students is presented and analysed below.

Course duration and structure

As well as there being in-country reasons which seemed to be ‘pushing’ participants to continue their studies abroad, rather than staying in China, there were positive educational attractions, or ‘pull factors’ to studying specifically in the UK. The course structures of UK universities seemed to be one of the most important factors in this respect. Features of UK universities’ course structure mentioned by the those interviewed related to the length of the UK undergraduate degree and the specialised nature of courses. Three groups of participants mentioned the UK universities’ attractions when they made their initial study abroad decisions: one

foundation course student, and the *gaokao,* and international school students.

Jay

Jay was a second year student from Fujian province studying Digital Media and Society, and he took a foundation course in the UK after his Grade 11 study. He preferred the short duration of undergraduate study in the UK:

> *I wanted to study abroad in the UK because my best friend was there. However, my parents agreed with my decision because they thought the length of UK undergraduate degree was shorter than in China and it would save time for me. The undergraduate course in China is four years. It's only three years in the UK. My parents didn't want their child to stay abroad for too long a time.*

Hanni

Hanni was a second year student from Canton province who was studying Education following on from a foundation course. She decided to study abroad after the *gaokao*. In our discussion, she compared the course structure of Education Studies in the UK and in Mainland China, and she also expressed her preferences about course selection and the study environment:

I like the course structures and curriculum of UK universities. I checked the course structure and curriculum for Educational Studies in both China and the UK. In China, universities would decide your time schedule and most of the specialised courses of your subject, but in the UK, you could choose the specialised courses for your subject and choose your own essay topics according to your own preferences. I wanted to choose what to study myself instead of the university doing it. I thought the course and the study environment of UK universities would be more relaxed and free.

Hanni also explained her considerations about other study abroad destination countries, and how the fierce competition of applying US top universities made her give up this idea:

I also considered the US as my study abroad destination because USC (The University of Southern California) was my dream school, but taking the Scholastic Assessment Test was essential if I chose to apply to the top US universities. I was not good at Maths, so it was not possible for me to get good grades in the Maths part of SAT. That was the reason why I gave up the idea of applying to US universities. Finally, I chose to go to the UK for undergraduate study because I thought it might be easier to get access into top universities in the UK.

Faye

Faye was a second year student from Xinjiang province studying Psychology, who applied to UK universities using her *gaokao* score. She had similar preferences about course structure to the participants mentioned above, in that she preferred to spend more time studying her preferred subjects. She compared the course structures in Mainland China and the UK:

> *I prefer the course structure of UK undergraduate study because it includes the specialised courses in programmes, and all the courses I learn are related to my major subject. In Mainland China, all students have to learn general courses in year one and start to learn specialised courses in year two. Also, the fourth year of undergraduate study is used to do internships in Mainland China. In this way, I would only have two years to learn specialised courses if I studied in Mainland China. The time for studying specialised courses was too short.*

Lulu

Lulu, a year one student from Shanghai, studying Illustration and Visual Media, who had studied at an international school, also expressed her preference for undergraduate study on subject-related courses, and she compared course

structures in the US and the UK:

> *When I considered study abroad destinations, I compared the course structures of universities in the US and the UK. As for the US, there are more general courses that are not related to your subjects in year one and year two. But in the UK, all the courses are specialised courses, so finally I chose to go to the UK.*

Discussion

The course duration and structures of UK universities seemed to be one of the most important attractions to 'pull' students to the UK. Features of the UK universities' course structures mentioned by the participants related to the length of the UK undergraduate degree and the specialised nature of courses.

The short length of UK undergraduate courses was a key factor attracting the former foundation course students to the UK. These foundation course students would have spent an additional year in the UK prior to starting their undergraduate study. It is possible, therefore, that the length of a course was particularly important to them – having already expended an additional year on pre-university study. The length of an undergraduate degree in China (four years) seemed to be a reference point for Jay to compare with a UK undergraduate degree. Although Jay had to take a foundation

course in the UK, he could take it after he had completed the second year of high school in China. It also appeared that the relatively short length of UK courses attracted the parents of these participants.

In terms of the availability of specialised courses related to students' preferred subject, the data suggests that foundation course, *gaokao*, and international school pathway students wanted to take more focused, specialist subject-related courses in their undergraduate study. They tended to want to avoid 'wasting' time on other, more general courses. In other words, they seemed to be 'subject-oriented' when they considered their study abroad destinations. It appeared that these participants compared the different study abroad destination countries through carefully researching course structures in different countries.

Overall, these students' conceptions about course duration and structure indicated that they seemed to make their decisions by comparing Chinese universities with UK universities. Only Lulu made her choice of host country by comparing UK and US universities because her high school qualification was recognised by many Western countries. It appeared that studying in an international school and having an international qualification gave her more opportunities to apply to universities in different countries and to weigh the choices more broadly.

Educational considerations around the 'obstacles to admission'

In addition to the UK, another three popular host countries were mentioned by the participants as potential study abroad destinations: the USA, Canada, and Australia. It appeared that how the participants evaluated the difficulties of making undergraduate applications in these three host countries shaped their decision to go to the UK.

Coco

Coco from Beijing, a first year student studying Economics at a UK university, who had undertaken a foundation course, explained why she gave up the US as a choice of study abroad destination:

> *I used to consider the US and the UK as my preferred study abroad destinations, but there were so many exams and materials that I had to prepare if I wanted to apply to top universities in the US. However, I didn't think I had enough time to prepare the materials and get good grades in those exams such as TOEFL and the Standardised Admissions Test. I thought that applying for US undergraduate study was most competitive and difficult. I just decided to study abroad in Grade 11. As for the US applications, all applicants have to have all the exam results, their personal statements and other essays completed before the end of Grade*

11 if they want to apply to top universities in the US. That was too stressful for me.

In the end, Coco decided to give up the idea of going to the US and chose the UK as her study abroad destination.

Chuchu

Chuchu, from Shenzhen, was a second year student studying Environmental Science in the UK. He mentioned that he had been concerned about the recognition of A-level qualifications in the US:

I was studying for A-levels in an international school in Africa, and I wanted to go to the US and the UK for their undergraduate study initially. The US has strong national power, and its university ranking is very high. It was hard to use A-level scores to apply to top US universities. However, I gave up applying to the universities in the US because I didn't prepare for SAT. On the other hand, I liked the UK culture and its weather because I didn't like the weather in Africa. Finally, I decided to use my A-level score to apply to UK universities.

Queenie

Queenie, a first year student from Shanghai, studying Illustration and Visual Media, explained her conception of the difficulties of getting access into Canadian universities that led her to believe that getting access to one of the top UK universities was easier than in Canada, because most of the UK universities had foundation courses:

> *I studied on a Canadian diploma course in my high school in Shanghai, but I didn't get good grades in the Canadian graduation assessment and my score didn't achieve the entry requirement of my dream universities in Canada. However, I knew that many universities in the UK had their own foundation courses and the academic requirement for a foundation course was much lower than for an undergraduate course, so it would be easier to get access into top universities in the UK than other countries. Finally, I decided to go to the UK in order to go to a top university.*

Kelly

Kelly, a first year student from Jiangsu province studying Biomedical Science, explained why she chose the UK rather than the USA or Canada:

> *I used to consider Canada, US, and the UK as my study abroad destinations, but I don't like the US and I thought that the academic*

requirements of Canadian undergraduate study were quite low. Because many of my classmates who weren't hardworking in my class got offers from top universities in Canada such as The University of Toronto and the University of British Columbia, I would not go to Canada for undergraduate degree.

Finally, Kelly decided to go to the UK, and to take a foundation course initially, before applying for undergraduate study there.

Young

Young, a Year One student from Xinjiang province, studying Computer Science, expressed the view that that a lower entry requirement for undergraduate applications in Australia was a factor that led him to give up the idea of studying in Australia and choose the UK:

Australia and the UK are my two favourite countries and my study abroad destinations, but it's said that the universities in Australia are 'watery' – that the academic requirements of the universities in Australia are lower than in other western countries such as the US and the UK. At that time, I was afraid that the low requirements might influence the reputation of graduates from Australia, so finally I chose to go to the UK.

Finally, Young decided to study on an A-level course in the UK in order to get access into UK undergraduate study.

Discussion

Participants' considerations about the admissions requirements of specific countries' universities were of two types: worries about a high admission bar and worries about a low admission bar. The data suggests that the USA's undergraduate admissions requirements were regarded as high, while Australian undergraduate admissions requirements seemed to be regarded as relatively low. During the process of weighing up the merits of different host countries, participants seemed to be attempting to maximise their chances of gaining access into 'top' universities, realistically appraising their likely academic achievements, compared with those of other students, as well as the perceived obstacles to undergraduate admission in different host countries. These considerations about the difficulty of getting access into top universities in different countries seemed to shape participants' decisions to apply to study in the UK.

The USA was commonly cited as a potential study abroad destination by the participants. However, they explained why they had given up their US undergraduate applications due to its fierce competition, complex application

requirements, limited time for exam preparations, and the low possibility of getting access into the 'top' US universities. For Coco and Chuchu, the perceived lower academic requirements for UK undergraduate applications led them to choose the UK as their study abroad destination. While Coco recognised the USA's position in the international academic rankings, she seemed to believe that the US 'top' universities did not match her own assessment of her academic abilities and her self-positioning. She therefore assumed that she would not get access into any of the USA's top universities. On the other hand, Chuchu considered that A-levels and the SAT both had their limitations in terms of applying to overseas 'top' universities, because they were only recognised in their own country's universities. These limitations led him to focus on applying to universities in only one country, the UK. The choice of the UK, for some participants, was only made once the United States had been dropped as a possibility. An influential reason behind their decisions appeared to be that they regarded getting access into top universities as the priority, rather than choosing a preferred study abroad destination.

Two issues emerged from participants' accounts of their conceptions about Canada and Australia. First, the quality of student resources seemed to be a concern, and second, this appeared to be linked to the difficulties in gaining admission. Queenie and Kelly had different opinions about Canadian undergraduate applications. Queenie's decision was based on her own application

experience, and Kelly's was based on the experiences of others. In addition, Young said that the lower academic requirements 'pushed' him to give up the idea of studying in Australia. The idea of 'lower' academic requirements seemed to be double-edged. When it was felt that to get access into a university was easy, there was a perceived future risk of others questioning their academic level and ability. It also appeared that they had been aware of the likelihood of future competition among peers. Despite these challenges, Kelly and Young seemed keen to rely on the host country's academic reputation to cope with future competition among peers. However, Kelly and Young perceived a status difference between studying in Canada or Australia and studying in the USA or the UK. It did not appear to fit with their self-identity to be seen as Chinese international students in Australia or Canada (an issue also noted by Liu et al., 2022). Personal experience and judgements about undergraduate admissions requirements in Canada and Australia seemed to determine their final choice of study abroad destination.

Parental concerns about safety

Some participants suggested that, as well as offering positive advice about possible study abroad destinations and courses, their parents' advice could limit their choices. This was particularly the case with concerns about personal safety. A relatively high proportion of participants' parents were reported as having excluded the USA from the possible destination list.

Jinjin

Jinjin, a first-year student from Shenzhen studying Quantitative Economics and Statistics, who had completed a foundation course in the UK, spoke of her parents' concerns about safety issues when she weighed up different host countries:

> *When I considered where to go, I only considered the US and the UK because their education systems are strong, and most students choose them as their study abroad destinations. But my parents didn't allow me to apply to a university in the US due to security reasons, and because the relationship between China and the US was not good at that time. Finally, we decided I should go to the UK.*

Jinjin decided to take a foundation course in the UK and, by this means, gain access into UK undergraduate study.

Juju

Juju was a first year student studying Business Management. He was from Tianjin, a city near Beijing. He had spent time in the USA when he was thirteen. He described choosing his study abroad destination:

My parents chose the study abroad destination for me. They only considered the UK and the US. Actually, I liked the US pretty much because I once joined a camp in the US and had a great time there. But my parents thought that the US was too dangerous for foreign students, so they decided to choose the UK. Also, my brother was studying in the UK as well, so my parents wanted us to go to the same country for safety.

Finally, his parents chose a UK boarding school for him, and he took both his GCSEs and A-levels in the UK. He later gained access to a UK university and studied Business Management.

Yuet

Yuet was a second year student from Anhui province, and she was studying Human Geography. She suggested another reason for choosing to study abroad in the UK:

I only considered the UK and the US as my study abroad destinations. My parents really worried about the safety in US because there are shooting incidents in the US. They thought the UK was much safer than the US, so they didn't want me to go to the US and let me apply to UK universities.

Yuet decided to accept her parents' suggestions and only applied to UK universities, to study Human Geography.

Discussion: parental safety concerns

Safety was cited as a key consideration for a number of participants when they discussed a choice of study abroad destination with their parents. For some, like Jinjin, this concern was also linked to the uncertainty brought about by difficult diplomatic relations between the USA and China. The stability of diplomatic relations between home country and host country seemed to be a factor determining the chosen country of study. Juju's parents played an important role in shaping his choice of study abroad destination country. For Yuet, an environment that allowed the use of guns seemed not to be acceptable to her parents. Parental concerns about safety issues in the USA seemed to be an important influential factor for some. This finding supports those of some earlier studies. According to Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), for example, the safety of the host country was regarded as one of the 'social cost' issues likely to be considered when international students made their country choices. It is worth noting here that, in all other instances, parents appeared to act as advisors and supporters of participants' decision making. Only in the case of safety concerns did they appear to 'veto' choices.

Parental advice when participants had no firm country preference

Parents seemed to be key advisors, particularly where participants had, at the time that they were about to make decisions, no preference as to their initial study abroad destinations. Below I draw on the contributions of four participants, one from each of the preparatory pathways taken, as examples which show how students deferred to their parents in making initial study abroad decisions. The four participants mentioned their aspirations to study abroad but said that they had not been able to decide exactly where they wanted to go.

Wawa was from Beijing. She was a second year undergraduate in the UK, studying Geography and Urban Planning, and she deferred to her father's suggestions about a study abroad destination at an early age when she had no idea about where to go:

> *I wanted to study abroad when I was in high school, but I was not sure where I wanted to go. My dad recommended the UK and took me to travel there. After this, I accepted my dad's suggestion. Finally, I decided to choose the UK as my first study abroad destination. That's it.*

Wawa completed foundation course and got access into undergraduate study in the UK.

Fifi, a year two student from Shandong province, studying Business Management, described a process whereby his parents influenced his choice of study abroad destination (again at an early age) and his father also took him to the UK to get to know the country:

> *My father really wanted me to study abroad in the UK when I was in middle school because he believed that the traditional UK boarding school was the best choice for me. At that time, I wanted to study abroad as well, but I didn't know what I liked and what I didn't like. In order to persuade me to study abroad in the UK, he brought me to travel in the UK. After this trip, I began to like this country and accepted my dad's suggestion of choosing the UK.*

Fifi completed both GCSE and A-level study in the UK.

Ang, a former international school student in Ecuador, at the time of his interview was a second year student at the University of Edinburgh, studying Cognitive Science, and he was advised by his parents about his study abroad destination as a result of an unexpected problem. He said:

> *I wanted to study abroad in the US and applied to an Ivy League university*

originally, but I didn't get offers from the Ivy League. I felt so sad that I wanted to give up and apply to domestic universities because I didn't have any other preferred destinations. However, my parents didn't want me to give up and encouraged me to apply to the universities in Europe especially UK universities because they thought the UK was the best choice for study abroad apart from the US, due to its history and international status. Finally, I decided to focus on applying to UK universities.

Afterwards, he received an offer from a top university in the UK and studied Cognitive Science.

Waiwai, a first-year student from Shandong studying Artificial Intelligence and Computer Science, who had taken the *gaokao*, experienced difficulties gaining offers from universities in his country of choice. His mother had encouraged him to study abroad in the UK as an alternative:

I wasn't satisfied with my gaokao score, and I didn't get an offer from Zhejiang University. Afterwards, I decided to study abroad. I wanted to go to the US before because my dream schools were there, MIT and UCB. However, I couldn't use my gaokao score to apply to them because they wouldn't accept it, obviously. So I was not sure where I wanted to go. At that

time, my mom suggested that I use my gaokao score to apply to UK universities because she used to study abroad in the UK. Finally. She told me that I didn't have to worry about finding a study abroad agent, and that she could help me apply to UK universities directly because she knew the application process well as she had applied to UK universities by herself. I will apply for MIT and UCB for my postgraduate study, definitely.

Waiwai accepted his mother's suggestion and applied to UK universities.

Discussion

Parents appeared to be important sources of advice and encouragement in relation to study abroad destinations in two types of circumstances. The first was when participants did not have any clear preference for study destinations. In this situation, some participants' parents (as in the case of Wawa and Fifi) took them to the UK in order to encourage them to consider the UK as their study abroad destination. Travelling in the UK was one approach to shaping students' expectations about living and studying in the UK. Travelling before studying abroad could be regarded as a way of building these young people's knowledge about a host country through learning about the culture and lifestyle. The second situation was when participants met with unexpected setbacks, for example when they were dissatisfied with their *gaokao* score or did not succeed in gaining their

preferred university offers and did not know what to do. In these cases, it seemed that studying abroad in the UK was a ‘back up plan’, and their parents’ suggestions of study abroad in the UK could be regarded as an educational investment and a way of compensating for, or getting around problems which arose, such as unsatisfactory admission results or the lack of a clear personal preference for a destination country. In addition, for Waiwai, some top US universities, such as the US Ivy League institutions, had such prestige that he regarded getting access into MIT and UCB for postgraduate study as the ultimate goal, and studying as an undergraduate in the UK as just a ‘stepping stone’ to this goal. In other words, university prestige seemed to weigh more heavily than study abroad destination. Waiwai’s description about his choice of destination country also suggests that parental educational background may help to shape students’ educational pathways. On the whole, the participants in this study reported that they tended to trust their parents’ choices and follow their suggestions when they had no particular preference about destination.

Conclusion: destination country choice making

Four factors emerged from the interview data as shaping participants’ choice of destination country: course duration and structure; educational considerations, in particular ‘obstacles to admission’; parental concerns about safety issues; and parental advice when participants had no firm preference. There appeared to be a

link between parental influences and students' host country choices. Parents might be regarded as acting as supporters when participants experienced unexpected circumstances such as unsatisfactory admission results, or as advisors when participants had no personal preference about the host country. However, parents might be regarded as exercising a right of veto when safety issues were apparent in participants' destination choices. In addition to parental influences, participants appeared to focus on the reputation of the possible host country and university, and they considered future competition among peers when they weighed up different host countries. Reputation of the host country and university prestige have also been identified as influential factors in initial study abroad decisions in previous studies (for example, Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Cebeolla-Boado, et al, 2017), but the likelihood of future competition among peers seemed not appear in such studies.

Chapter conclusion: different educational pathways, competition and status

There were generally two phases in these participants' initial study abroad decision making: the first was deciding whether to study abroad, and the second was deciding on the specific study abroad destination. In terms of the first phase, participants seemed to go through slightly different decision making processes depending on the earlier educational pathways they had chosen. The decisions of the former foundation course students appeared to be shaped by *gaokao*

influences; preferences about the anticipated study environment and course structure; and the perceived uneven regional distribution of educational opportunities in China. Furthermore, parental influences shaped their decisions to study abroad. As for the former *gaokao* students, the three educational factors mentioned above also dominated their study abroad decisions. For both former A-Level and international school students, educational factors – *gaokao* influences and the perceived uneven regional distribution of educational opportunities in China – along with parental advice, influenced participants initial study abroad decisions.

Some common influences emerged from all four categories of participants' interviews. First, the *gaokao* policy seemed to be problematic for some due to its regional disparities in undergraduate admissions and the limitations presented by the *gaokao* exam itself. Students who could not score well in all subjects might lose the opportunity to access top universities in China. When students' *gaokao* results did not fit their self-positionings, they might feel 'pushed' to study abroad. Second, some participants tended to make study abroad decisions by drawing on their previous experiences in Chinese education and then comparing these to their imagined ideas about potential host countries. Third, a sense of the uneven distribution of educational opportunities appeared in both stages of decision making. 'Top' universities in China were viewed as having a fixed view of students

from ‘less developed’ regions, ‘pushing’ them towards the decision to study abroad. Fourth, some students were career- and subject-oriented, in that they linked the outcome of their *gaokao* admission results to their future directions. Fifth, some parents appeared to have been willing to invest in their children’s education to help them overcome their unsatisfactory *gaokao* results or the uneven regional distribution of educational opportunities, or simply to broaden their horizons. In addition, participants’ awareness of the competitive educational environment and their pursuit of university status seemed to influence their choice making. To sum up, participants’ decisions to study abroad seemed complex and multifactorial. Educational factors and parental influences did not exist in isolation. They were inter-related in shaping the overall initial study abroad decision.

In the second phase of initial decision making – deciding on the particular study abroad destination – two tendencies were notable: one for participants who already had a personal preference for a host country; another for those who had no prior preference. For those who already had a preference for the UK, their choice of destination country was shaped by three factors: the attractions of the relatively short course duration in the UK and the opportunity to specialise, considerations about the admissions criteria of different host countries, and parents’ safety concerns. Although participants in all four pathways were influenced by admissions requirements and by their parents’ expressions of concern about the safety of the

host country, the nature of these concerns seemed to differ according to participants' pre-university educational pathways. For example, no former A-Level students mentioned their concerns about UK course structures and duration. For participants taking the other pathways, some mentioned that they had researched course structures and options, comparing them with the options available in China and the US.

Second, the undergraduate admissions criteria of different host countries were an important consideration. University prestige was viewed as being more important than the study abroad destination country. The perceived difficulties of admissions tests and processes (in particular the SAT in the USA) led some participants to rule out, not only that country, but also the chance to attend the universities with the highest status. On the other hand, some participants avoided choosing a host country which they perceived as having a relatively low admissions bar; they seemed unwilling to take the risk of others questioning the quality of their degree. It appeared that participants endeavoured to avoid going to a host country with relatively low admission requirements in order to be competitive, but not so competitive that they ruled themselves out from studying in a highly competitive country. They were aware of the importance of university status and of weighing this against an assessment of their likelihood of success.

Third, the USA was the host country that participants' parents were reported to be most concerned about. Political issues such as diplomatic relations between home country and host country seemed to be a subject of family discussions. Parents were reported as having a right of veto when safety issues emerged. In previous studies, safety issues have also been identified as a high priority for parents when they considered a destination country for their children (Bodycott, 2009). Specifically, parents seemed to be more concerned about the level of crime and discrimination in a host country than students (Bodycott, 2009). Parents seemed to also act as advisors and supporters when their offspring failed to satisfy the offer made by their preferred university or when they did not have a preferred university in the destination country.

In conclusion, initial study abroad decision making was both complex and multifacterial. It was clear that participants were not only considering educational factors such as the *gaokao* or reginal disparities in educational opportunities. They were also taking parental advice into account. This again suggests that decision making was a more complex process than individual factors and priority order of factors identified in previous studies (for example, Bodycott, 2009; Zwart, 2012; Gong and Huybers, 2015; Lu et al, 2018; Wang and Crawford, 2021). As such, the findings of this study do not fully reflect the 'push and pull', single factor frameworks proposed by others. However, there did appear to be educational

factors ‘pushing’ participants away from their home country and a ‘pull’ from the educational attractions of UK universities (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002).

It also appeared that there were no clear-cut phases in participants’ decision making process. For example, some participants made their decisions to study abroad and their subject/university choices together. This is in contrast to the specific decision making phases identified by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) and Wu (2020). Furthermore, participants’ initial study abroad decisions seemed to vary depending on the pre-university pathway taken. This, in turn, shaped subsequent subject and university choices.

Finally, the findings of this study suggest that it is not simply a question of young people being ‘pushed’ from one host country and ‘pulled’ towards another; the pros and cons of other host countries, their preferred university positionings and their awareness of competition among peers were also factors taken into consideration.

CHAPTER FIVE

Findings: Subject and University Choices

Introduction

This chapter describes how the participants made their undergraduate subject and university choices, the factors influencing their choices and how these factors shaped their final decision to study in the UK. No clear or commonly experienced stages were identified in the determination of subject choices. However, two stages were identified in the process of choosing a university: the first was arriving at a shortlist of potential universities to be applied to; second was confirming the final choice of university. The analysis of participants' decision making processes revealed that they tended to make their subject and university choices together, and that three factors shaped their decision making: educational factors, social factors, and the advice of key informants, such as family members and teachers. Concerns about future career choice making also ran through many of the accounts of participants, and *neijuan*, and occupational competition seemed to be highly influential in subject and university choices.

Subject Choices

The range of participants' subject choices mentioned by participants was wide and included the arts, sciences and humanities (See Appendix Five). These choices were influenced by educational considerations, personal preferences, and the

advice offered by key informants such as parents and teachers. Six key factors emerged from the interview data as influencing choices in this area:

- *Neijuan*: credential inflation/labour market competition
- Perceived current and future career trends
- The proportion of Chinese students studying a particular subject
- Subject limitations in pre-university study
- Parental advice about occupational opportunities
- Teachers' judgements about subject requirements

In this section, interview data is presented which illustrates the six influential factors listed above. This is followed by an analysis of how these factors shaped subject choices individually, and in some cases, how several factors worked together to shape decision making.

Neijuan: credential inflation/labour market competition

Neijuan is a term widely used in Mainland China to describe the competitive nature of Chinese society which requires great efforts to compete for limited opportunities (Mulvey and Wright, 2022). It is reflected in the existence of admissions quotas for particular subjects. In the field of education, *neijuan* also refers to credential inflation – to the process by which credentials or qualifications lose their value as more people gain that particular credential (Van de Werfhorst & Andersen, 2005). However, according to Li (2021), *neijuan* also refers to increasing educational

competition which is, ultimately, not productive. For example, students may realise they are operating in a competitive environment and therefore decide to pay for extra tutoring to increase their ranking in class; however, their ranking may not improve because all their class colleagues are taking the same steps – they are merely burdening themselves with more study. *Neijuan,* in the sense of credential inflation, appeared to influence participants' decision making in this study. It was particularly noteworthy in specific subjects such as Finance. It was also referred to in discussions about future job market opportunities. Three participants' points of view about the influences of *neijuan* on subject choices are presented below in relation to three different subject areas.

Justin: Neijuan in the finance industry:

Justin was a Year One student who came from Heilongjiang province (Northeastern China). He chose to study Food Science and Nutrition for his undergraduate degree, and he explained that *neijuan* was the one of the key reasons for him to choose this subject, aside from his own personal inclination:

> *Finance and Economics are 'neijuan' subjects, and that's why I didn't choose them as my major. Good job positions in the finance and banking field are very competitive and they only take very top students from top universities. However, most students cannot get access into those top universities. If you want to get into top universities in the world, you have*

to be elites and compete with the elites from all over the world. Such serious neijuan in Finance would not be beneficial to graduates' future careers, so I thought avoiding such a neijuan subject and choosing the subject I liked was very important for me. Finally, I decided to study the subject I like: Food Science and Nutrition.

From Justin's point of view, the attraction of good job positions in the field of Finance and Economics has made these two subjects too popular among students. In his eyes, only elites were in a position to choose these two subjects, and he did not think he was one of them. He therefore chose to avoid *neijuan*. However, although he tried to avoid *neijuan* in the finance and economics industry, he may have been drawn to an area of potential new *neijuan* – the *neijuan* prevalent in the catering industry in future.

Zhang: Neijuan in Computer Science:

Zhang came from Canton province, and he was a Year One undergraduate. He expressed the view that the existence of credential inflation in China strengthened his plan to study Computer Science abroad, rather than at home:

I decided to study computer science when I was in middle school, but I found this subject was too 'neijuan' in the gaokao and that the gaokao score

requirement for computer science in Shenzhen University is around 620. This score can even get you into unpopular majors in Sun Yat-sen University [a top 10 university in China]. You can tell that CS has become more and more popular in China.

From Zhang's perspective, the computer science related industries were popular in China and the entry requirement for this subject in the *gaokao* seemed, to him, to be much higher than for other subjects. But *neijuan* in Computer Science in Chinese universities simply strengthened his determination to study that subject. However, he did not take the *gaokao* route, as he predicted that he could not achieve his goal through the *gaokao* due to the impact of *neijuan*. In order to face *neijuan* and study Computer Science, changing the educational pathway seemed to be the only option. It appeared that studying his preferred subject was the main factor in Zhang's study abroad decision making. It also appeared that Zhang prioritised subject choice above both an initial study abroad decision, and above university choice.

Queenie: neijuan in the job market

Queenie was a Year One undergraduate from Shanghai, and she was studying Illustration and Visual Media. She decided on her subject direction when she was young, but the influence of *neijuan* on job market opportunities seemed to impact

on her final choice of undergraduate course:

> *I have really liked illustration since I was young and I like painting as well, so I decided to study an illustration-related subject early on. But choosing my current joint subject was based on some considerations which I took into account in high school. When I was in high school, many of my classmates and I worried about finding jobs in the future. There was too much 'neijuan'. More and more top students are fighting for one position. At that time, I thought I should choose a subject with a strong emphasis on technical ability or skill, not just 'fine art'. Studying Illustration and Visual Media would have involved taking courses about Photoshop and Artificial Intelligence. It might be helpful in the future, so finally I chose to study Illustration and Visual Media.*

For Queenie, *neijuan* meant that the job market in the area of the arts was too competitive, and that candidates must have more than one skill in order to find a good job. She seemed to realise the importance of computer science in the job market, and the potential difficulty of finding a job, at an early point in her education – at high school. It also appeared that Queenie's anxiety and about *neijuan* influenced her final subject decision. She made her decision not only to deal with the credential inflation in the job market, but also to follow developing

trends in her chosen field of specialism.

Discussion

The interview data suggests that participants realised that they needed to face perceived current and future challenges due to *neijuan*, and this awareness appeared to affect some participants' choices of subject major. For example, Economics, Finance, Computer Science and Visual Media were seen as popular majors with high entry criteria and a strong emphasis on future careers. However, different attitudes towards *neijuan* were apparent, and these attitudes shaped participants' subject choice decision making. Two strategies were identified to address the problems brought about by *neijuan*. One was simply to follow the trend of *neijuan* by, for example, choosing the subjects which were strongly affected, such as Computer Science or Visual Media, which were likely to develop vocational skills and knowledge which would in turn enhance one's chances in a competitive labour market. Another strategy was to avoid *neijuan* entirely by rejecting subjects which were seen as highly competitive, such as Economics, Finance and Computer Science. However, both strategies suggest that *neijuan* was an important factor in some participants' decision making. The interview data reveals the nature of *neijuan* as a perceived competitive environment. Furthermore, this study suggests (as does Li, 2021) that participants were 'passively' subjected to the forces of competition. *Neijuan* seemed not to be

subject to individuals' will, but competition could be. Moreover, it appeared that participants' subject choices involved long-term decision making that combined personal preferences with consideration of future career direction and the likely job market. This study suggests that participants' attitudes towards *neijuan* determined their career considerations and, therefore, their subject choices. Awareness of, and assumptions about *neijuan* appear not to have been taken account of in previous studies.

Considerations of future career opportunities

Participants considered their future careers when they made subject choice decisions. The predominance of the technology-related industries in the decision making of participants was apparent. All those who mentioned future career prospects decided their subject choices according to their assessment of the needs of the future labour market. In this section, data from four interviews is presented and discussed.

Jay

Jay was a second year undergraduate from Fujian province. He decided his subject area before applying for his foundation course, but he made his final subject choice while he was on the foundation course, and he explained why choosing Digital Media as his major subject was related to career opportunities:

The Internet industry is very popular, and I want to learn media initially, so I chose Digital Media as my major. This subject was related to technology, and I thought this course could follow the current trend of industry.

Ben

Ben was a Year Two undergraduate from Wuhan. He also chose Digital Media as his major, but he made his subject choice before entering onto his foundation course. He saw social media as a new trend in employment:

I thought about employment when I made my subject decision. The job market was not very good. The Internet was the developing trend in current employment. We have to follow this trend, so I decided to choose an Internet-related subject. Everyone uses social media apps now, and there are many job opportunities in this field. Specifically, many companies use Tiktok and Wechat official accounts for marketing and branding. Various industries need to rely on social media to do marketing now.

Zhang

Zhang, a first-year undergraduate from Canton, decided to study Artificial

Intelligence and Computer Science before he took A-Levels in the UK. He pointed out that both he and his parents realised the importance of computer science:

> *My parents and I believe that the development of artificial intelligence is the fourth industrial revolution. Artificial intelligence and computer science have a great influence in current society. My parents also agreed with this, because they knew that artificial intelligence and computer science appeared in the national 14th Five Year Plan. So, learning AI and CS won't be a bad choice of career in future.*

Young

Young was a first year undergraduate from Xinjiang province, and he made his subject choice during his A-Level studies. He was also studying Computer Science, and gave the reason for choosing his subject major:

> *My father suggested to me to study Economics when I was studying for A-Levels, but afterwards he found that Computer Science seemed to be better because his boss's son used to study computer science in the US and got a good job opportunity in California. Also, artificial intelligence and computer science are the basic instruments of many kinds of industries, and it has a great influence on our lives.*

Discussion

Current career trends and considerations about their future careers shaped these four participants' subject choices differently. Jay appeared to choose the subject area according to his personal interests and chose a specific course according to his estimation of future career opportunities in the media industry. As for Ben, changes in the media industry suggested new directions for job hunting. The traditional paper media industry faded from Ben's considerations about subject and career choices. From his point of view, what attracted him was not the media industry itself, but the shift towards the increasing use of social media. Zhang appeared to recognise the status of AI in today's world. He mentioned the Chinese government's 14th Five Year Plan in his account of subject decision making. This plan emphasises the importance cultivating talent in AI as a goal for the Chinese government (Xin, 2021). When Zhang chose his subject, he and his parents undertook in-depth research, including interpreting China's national Five Year Plan to ensure that the chosen subject fitted the direction of future developments in China. They referred to national policy to verify that their assumptions about the direction of future development of China were correct. Young seemed to have a more practical perspective, regarding AI and CS as basic tools for employment. He did not identify a particular industry that he wanted to join. It appeared that his purpose in choosing AI and CS was to enable him to find jobs in a potential range

of industries and improve the flexibility of his employment possibilities. On the one hand, Young was not only considering his future career but also was taking parents' suggestions into account. On the other hand, he still had a wide range of choices of subject area for undergraduate study even though he had already made subject choices for A-Levels.

In summary, participants believed that employment in the technology-related industries, or industries requiring AI and CS would be the future career trend among Chinese graduates. In making their undergraduate subject choices they were strongly career oriented. The influences of career considerations have also been identified in previous studies; career expectations including career status, job market conditions, and the work environment seemed to be evaluated when subject choices were made by prospective students (Pritchard et al., 2018; Sugahara et al., 2008).

Another emerging factor was that educational routes taken in pre-university study seemed to determine when participants made their subject choices and the range of subjects they could choose from. Those who took a foundation course usually needed to make their choices of undergraduate subject area before they studied abroad. The former A-Level students seemed to still have opportunities to choose their subject area during A-Level study. The interview data also highlighted the

presence of more than one factor in participants' subject considerations – a combination of parental judgements about career directions and personal judgements about a specific subject's future development seemed, together, to shape these students' subject choices.

Subject limitations in pre-university study

Other educational factors also appeared in participants' subject choices. Three such challenges were identified which related to subject choice:

- Subject limitations during foundation course applications: whereby some participants applying for foundation courses beginning in January noted that their choice was limited to Business Studies.
- Subject limitations during undergraduate applications: whereby participants had not been aware that they needed to have previously studied specific subjects as a requirement for entry to their preferred course.
- High entry requirements in particular undergraduate courses.

In this section, data from four of the interviews is presented to show how these three challenges influenced final subject decisions.

Lynn: foundation course pathway

Lynn was a first year student from Shandong province, studying Business Management, and she made her subject choice after she had decided to study abroad in the UK. The limited subject choices in her foundation course seemed to shape her future undergraduate subject options:

> *At that time, studying Business was the only choice for me because I wanted to register on the foundation course which started in January instead of September. There were not many subject choices for January; Business was the only subject they had. However, I didn't want to waste a whole year to register in September, so I finally chose to study Business. Actually, I didn't have any preferred subject, and all I wanted was to study abroad immediately. Afterwards, I continued to study Business at undergraduate level; I had to choose business-related subjects due to my foundation course's subject. If I wanted to apply for other subjects, I would have had to retake the foundation course or accept a university with a low ranking.*

Business seemed to be the only subject choice Lynn could make, given that she regarded 'studying abroad early' and 'university ranking' as more important than 'having more subject choices'. If she had applied to start a foundation course in September instead of January, she would have graduated from university one year

later than her peers. For her, studying abroad as soon as possible was a priority, given that she had not done well in the *gaokao*. Furthermore, she regarded going abroad to study as her main target and therefore subject choice seemed to be secondary to going abroad to study.

Wawa: Subject limitations during the undergraduate application process

Wawa was a second year undergraduate studying Geography and Urban Planning, and she made her subject area choice after deciding to study abroad. She said that her undergraduate subject choice had been influenced by the limitations imposed by her subject of study in her foundation course. She had to choose a subject related to Arts and Humanities because UK undergraduate courses required students to have previous study related to their chosen major subject:

> *My foundation course was in London, and I really wanted to apply to universities in London as well, but my foundation course only had cooperation with the City University of London, the University of Liverpool and the University of Birmingham. Although City University of London was in London, this university's ranking and reputation was not very impressive apart from its Cass Business School. I had wanted to go to Cass Business School, but the subjects I chose for my foundation course were related to Arts and Humanities instead of Business. So, I couldn't*

apply to do a business course for undergraduate study. Finally, I gave up studying Business in London.

Wawa had made a wrong subject choice early on, and this had limited her undergraduate course options. In Lynn's case, it appeared that she did not clearly know the subject requirements for pre-university study in UK. She, like a number of other participants, seemed to prioritise university ranking. Since Wawa had chosen the 'wrong' subject in her foundation course, her choices of university and subject at the undergraduate stage had been greatly reduced, and she could not choose a university and subject according to her preferences. For Wawa, university choice and subject choice were made together.

Yinyin: High entry requirements for particular undergraduate subjects

Yinyin, a first year undergraduate studying computer science, had studied for A-levels in the UK. She explained why she gave up her plan to apply to study Medical Science and how the difficulty of getting good grades in A-level Biology changed her mind:

I wanted to study Medical Science before, but A-level Biology was really difficult – much more difficult than Maths and Chemistry. As for learning A-level Biology, I had to learn so much knowledge and so many words, and

its homework and assignments were much harder than other subjects. As a result, I didn't get a very good grade in A-level Biology, so I had to drop Biology to make sure that I had three A's in my final A-levels. Although Biology was interesting for me, it was too difficult for foreign students to learn. So I gave up studying medical science.

Yinyin predicted that she could not achieve the entry requirements of Medical Science in a UK university because she had difficulty in studying Biology. Medicine related subjects had higher and additional academic requirements that made Yinyin feel unable to compete with local students. Also, Yinyin seemed to believe that the admissions criteria favoured local students due to language difficulties. This situation seemed to limit Yinyin's subject choices.

Jay: High entry requirements for particular undergraduate subjects

Jay, a second-year student studying Digital Media, mentioned that his choice of subject for undergraduate study in the UK was shaped by both the high entry requirements of BA Journalism Studies at Sheffield and his teacher's advice about his subject choice:

I originally wanted to study Journalism at undergraduate level, but I gave up this thought afterwards. It was because my foundation course

belonged to the University of Sheffield and entry to Journalism Studies at the University of Sheffield was very competitive in the UK. My teacher told me that getting access into a BA in Journalism studies at the University of Sheffield would be very difficult for me. Every year, only one or two students in our foundation course got offers for Journalism Studies. However, my foundation course was related to Media, so finally I chose another media related subject, Digital Media. Its entry requirements were friendlier to international students, so the possibility of getting an offer for Digital Media was higher. On the other hand, I thought that the undergraduate admissions officers might think that a BA Journalism Studies was not suitable for international students to study due to the language barrier.

Jay eventually had to adjust his subject choice, on the advice of his teacher, and because he seemed to believe that the UK university admissions systems treated local and international students differently, especially those applying with foundation course grades. He accepted his teacher's advice without question. Moreover, Journalism Studies' high language requirement made applying seem more difficult for him, as an international student. He weighed up a choice of preferred university against choice of preferred subject, and eventually prioritised university choice.

Discussion

Subject limitations were experienced particularly by former foundation course and former A-level students, all of whom had studied abroad prior to their undergraduate studies. These participants needed to make their subject choices early on, when deciding on their pre-university educational pathway. They then had only a limited opportunity to change direction. This appeared to be particularly the case for former foundation course students. Furthermore, participants tended to make their decisions regarding subject area after deciding to study abroad. In this way, their choices of subject area seemed to be shaped by their previously decided, educational pathways. While educational routes appeared to determine whether participants would experience subject limitations, they also determined, to some extent, that the subject decision could not be made separately from the initial study abroad decision. It is worth noting that, to date, there is a limited literature which explores international students' subject choices and their study abroad decisions together (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Wu, 2014; Nicholls, 2018; Wu, 2020).

There appeared to be three strategies which participants adopted to deal with the subject limitations which they experienced in their application for undergraduate studies: to maintain the subject, to change the subject area, or to change the

subject or course. Specifically, Lynn and Wawa did not change from their foundation course subjects in order to get access into a university with a high ranking. Yinyin completely changed her undergraduate subject area due to the subject limitations and the high academic requirements of her preferred subject. Jay did not change his preferred subject area but changed his course according to his teacher's judgement about subject requirements in order to get access into one of the top universities. It appeared that the participants' subject choice strategies corresponded to the perceived challenges of applying for specific subjects. Final subject decisions were also driven by how the participants weighed up the relative importance of university versus subject choice. The participants above tended to prioritise their university choice. Thus, while studying abroad may have increased the possibility of getting access into overseas top universities, it also limited the range of subjects that participants could choose.

The proportion of Chinese students studying a particular subject

The perceived proportion of Chinese students studying on a particular course or subject also seemed to be a factor influencing participants' subject choice. There were two participants who stated that they did not want there to be too many Chinese students on their chosen course. This is illustrated here by Roro and Justin.

Roro

Roro was a second year undergraduate from Anhui province, and she expressed her rationale for choosing to study Banking and Finance based on her expectation that there would be a low proportion of Chinese students:

> *The reason why I chose Banking and Finance as my final choice was because my teacher in the foundation course told me that this course was the most difficult one in the business school, combining many business-related subjects, and that this course did not have many Chinese students. If I studied on this course, I would have more subject choices for postgraduate study. For example, if I chose Accounting and Finance for undergraduate study, my future postgraduate subject choice would be limited because Accounting and Finance did not have the courses about metrology and advanced Maths, and that would be a weakness when I applied for a postgraduate course in future. On the other hand, another attraction of this course was that it did not have many Chinese students. I don't want to say that I don't want to study with Chinese students, but I think a more international study environment would help me learn something useful for the future.*

Justin

Justin was a Year One student from Heilongjiang province, and he was studying Food Science and Nutrition. He explained his considerations about the proportion of Chinese students when he talked about his choice of subject:

> *Too many Chinese students want to learn Finance and Economics, so it's more difficult to apply to top universities to study finance. The quotas of top universities are limited. It's obvious that students who did not get into top universities would have more limited career pathways in the Finance industry.*

The perceived proportion of Chinese students studying a particular subject appeared to influence subject choices for some. Roro wanted to be able to identify herself as an international student instead of a Chinese student when she chose her subject, and to have a 'normal' student experience. Roro seemed to want to make full use of this opportunity to become familiar with a new cultural environment. Justin was of the opinion that applying to study a popular subject would be highly competitive and he did not want to compete with the large number of Chinese students who might choose to study Finance or Economics. Moreover, it also appeared that Justin was career-oriented and was considering credential inflation when he made his subject choice.

The two examples from the data above illustrate possible reasons why some

participants chose to avoid courses with a high proportion of Mainland Chinese students – a desire for a more 'international' experience, and a desire to avoid competing within a 'crowded' subject field. The importance of an international experience has also been identified in previous studies which have suggested that gaining intercultural understanding and studying in an English language environment are influential in the initial decision to study abroad (Bodycott, 2009; Wu, 2014). This study reveals that the desire for an international experience may also extend to influencing subject choice.

Parental advice about occupational opportunities

Participants referred to their parents' concerns about future job prospects. However, gendered assumptions about some occupations seemed to play a part in some of the suggestions made by parents, with some female participants being advised to choose the subjects that were 'suitable for girls'. In this section, four female participants describe how their parents' preferences shaped their subject decision making.

Xixi

Xixi was a first year undergraduate from Inner Mongolia, studying Education and Sociology. She was a former foundation course student. Although she made the choice of her subject area before studying on the foundation course, she decided

on her final subject choice during her foundation course studies. Xixi's parents held different opinions from herself about subject choice, but finally she chose a subject which appeared to offer a compromise between her own and her parents' preferences:

> *I wanted to study Sociology, but my parents didn't allow me to choose Sociology as my major. They wanted me to study Education because they thought teaching was a good occupation for girls and being a teacher or working in the education industry was stable for girls. I'm the second child in my family, and my parents are old. So I could understand that they wanted me to find a stable career. Finally, I negotiated with them and they agreed that I could choose to study 'Education and Sociology'.*

Roro

Roro, a Year Two undergraduate from Anhui province, studied Banking and Finance. She also made her initial subject choice after deciding to study abroad and her final choice of course during the foundation course. She mentioned that her parents' occupational stereotypes influenced her to exclude particular subjects:

> *I used to want to study Media for my undergraduate degree, but my dad strongly disagreed with me studying Media. The main reasons were that*

he thought that working in the media industry was laborious and 'the water in the media industry was very deep'. He said the jobs in the media industry were busy and the working environment was tough sometimes. Also, he didn't want me to get close to entertainment circles as well because he thought that entertainment circles were too complex. You must know that. It was not a good choice for a girl. I didn't have other preferred subjects, so my family suggested business related subjects to me. Many students learn this kind of subject, so it shouldn't be a wrong choice. Finally, I accepted their suggestion.

Hanni

Hanni was a second year from Canton, and she was studying Education. She made her subject choice after deciding to study abroad, and before applying to a foundation course. She mentioned that her parents believed that studying education and a teaching career was a good choice for girls:

My parents are from the Chaozhou-Shantou region, and there is a stereotype there that teaching is the best occupation for girls. My parents had the same stereotype, so they asked me to choose education as my major. There was no second choice for my major.

Lynn

Lynn was a first-year undergraduate from Shandong province. She also made her subject choice after deciding to study abroad, and before her foundation course study. She was studying Business Management, and she also expressed the view that her parents had limited her choice of major according to their conceptions about what constituted a 'good occupation':

> *I used to like Biology, but my parents didn't want me to choose Biology as my major because studying Biology would take me many years. My parents were not good at studying, and they did not want me to study for too many years either. You know we are from Shandong. The most important thing for a Shandonger was to be a government worker, teacher, police officer, or doctor. So finally, I didn't choose biology in both domestic and UK university admissions, and I chose to study Business Management.*

Discussion

On the one hand, it appeared that parental advice was important for some participants when they were making subject choices. Xixi seemed to understand that her parents wanted her to choose an occupation that played to her strengths 'as a female' and because it might be difficult to achieve equality in other

occupational areas. She said too, that her parents believed that teaching was a stable job with low risk. And although Xixi insisted on her preferred subject, she was still influenced by her parents and did not want to offend them. Xixi's final subject choice also appeared to show her desire to meet the expectations of both parents and herself. Roro was attracted to a future in the media but seemed not very well informed about it. When her father gave her negative feedback about the media industry, she accepted his view in the absence of any other information sources. Hanni and Lynn made their subject choices based on what their parents viewed as good occupations in their home regions. They appeared quite accepting of their parents' advice and did not seek to question it or draw on other sources of advice in making their subject choices.

On the other hand, it seemed that participants tended to make choices of subject area after deciding to study abroad and deciding the educational routes they would like to take. Again, the importance of including subject choice making into the investigation of international students' study abroad decision making process seemed to be highlighted.

Conclusion: subject choice decision making

Participants' subject choices were shaped by educational and social factors as well as by personal perceptions, and advice from teachers and parents. *Neijuan* –

credential inflation – and the likely future labour market were also important in subject decision making. Participants were aware of the competitive environment in which they were making their educational decisions, and they expressed both positive and negative attitudes towards *neijuan*. *Neijuan* seemed to offer advantages for educational and job mobility, but it also forced some participants to give up popular subjects such as Finance. They were strongly career-oriented, taking into account not only the current state of the labour market, but also anticipated future employment trends and economic returns, which they sometimes prioritised above their personal interests. Although participants' subject choices were influenced by *neijuan* passively (Liu, 2021), *neijuan* also seemed to spark their personal initiative and positively encourage them to consider their future careers more carefully.

In terms of personal perceptions, some participants reported having avoided choosing a subject likely to have a large proportion of Chinese students enrolled, either because they wanted to study in an international environment or in order avoid competing with other Chinese students in a particularly sought-after industry. The desire to gain more international experiences has been identified in other studies (Bodycott, 2009; Wu, 2014). However, this study suggests that participants' desire for international experiences also shaped their subject choice making. Also, it highlights the importance of subject choice making in the whole

process of study abroad decision making.

As for educational factors, subject limitations in pre-university study seemed to reduce some participants' choice of undergraduate subjects and the educational pathways taken towards university. There was also a sense, for some, that specific subjects' entry requirements were not accessible to international students. Again, it is suggested that students' initial study abroad decisions, including the educational routes they take, are strongly linked to students' later subject choices. Another issue which emerged was that participants tended to make subject choices after deciding to study abroad. Subject choice seemed to be secondary to the determination to go abroad to study. This issue tends to have been overlooked in earlier studies (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Wu, 2014; Nicholls, 2018; Wu, 2020).

The advice of parents, and of foundation course teachers in the UK, appeared to exercise an influence students' subject choices. Parents were reported as tending to recommend stable occupations according to their own occupational and educational backgrounds, conceptions about 'good' occupations for girls and considerations about the social status of some occupations in the family's hometown.

These participants' subject choices were shaped by the above factors, but in

different ways. *Neijuan* and future career opportunities seemed to be considered by participants when they initially considered subject choices. At the same time, parental perceptions seemed to be an important influence. Some participants' subject choices were strongly guided or limited by their parents, and some changed their subject choices according to their parental preferences, even though they had their own preference. Finally, the former foundation course and A-level students found that their subject choices were constrained by subject limitations in pre-university study or were influenced by their teacher's judgements during the undergraduate application process. In this situation, they tended to weigh their university choice as more important than subject choices in order to get access into higher ranking universities.

Overall, earlier studies have suggested that subject choice making was primarily a matter of individual inclination, personality or personal choice, combined with labour market consideration (Sugahara, 2006; Keshishian and McGarr, 2012; Liu et al, 2013; Pritchard et al, 2018). However, the findings of this study suggest that prospective undergraduates might need to consider a range of constraints which 'push' them towards or away from their personal preference. In particular, it appeared that their subject choice often seemed to be constrained by pre-university educational pathways and current social and economic context such as *neijuan*.

Choosing a university

This section presents and discusses the factors shaping the participants' choice of a specific UK university, and the role of key informants, such as family members and educational agents, in helping participants to reach a decision about which universities to apply to. As in the previous chapter, the interview data reveals that participants' university choices were to some extent influenced by the different educational routes they had taken to UK study. Participants tended to make their university choice after their subject choice, or to make subject and university choices at the same time. There appeared to be two stages in students' university decision making: choosing target universities to apply to and making the final university choices. Participants relied both on agents and the personal experiences of others to identify universities which might be worth applying to. However, their final choice of university appeared to be influenced by:

- Challenges of applying to UK universities in the light of the pre-university study pathway taken
- Factors related to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020
- The influence of web-based information and social media
- Considerations about finding a future life partner

In this section, the data relating to participants' university decision making is

presented according to the above factors and a discussion follows.

Advice from agents

Educational agents' influence was evident not only in participants' choices of university, but also in their choices of type of course. Not all participants had agents to help them to apply to UK universities, but most did. It appeared that these agents operated in Mainland China, the UK and other countries such as Singapore, depending on where the young person had studied at high school. Agents appeared to have a role in the whole decision making process – not only in university choice but also in the choice of the type of course – suggesting the influential position of agents. Four illustrations from the data are selected and presented below to show the range of ways in which agents influenced participants' university choices.

Coco

Coco, a Year Two undergraduate from Beijing studying Economics, said that her Beijing based agent had provided advice about choosing a university for her foundation course, and that she and the agent chose target universities together:

> *I told my agent my preferences about choosing a university. The first was that I preferred to study in a big city, because the life would be more convenient*

and I could make more friends. The second was that the subject of Economics in a university had to be famous or strong. According to my preferences, my agent gave me a list of universities that she thought suitable for me. My agent and I chose the target universities that I could apply to together. My parents didn't have many suggestions about university, so they agreed with my decisions.

After Coco had completed her foundation course at a UK university, she chose to continue her undergraduate study at the same university. According to Coco's description, the agent could be regarded as a bridge between UK universities and herself, helping her to fill an information gap. Coco's agent not only provided advice, but also participated in the whole process of choosing a university. In Coco's case the agent's advice appeared to be critical in shaping her ideas about the range of suitable universities she could get access to. Eventually, she chose to study in the same university for undergraduate study that she had taken her foundation course in.

Lynn

Lynn, a Year One student from Shandong studying Business Management, said that her agent had suggested specific foundation programmes to her. Her agent's suggestions about foundation courses then appeared to influence her further

choice of undergraduate university:

I chose Manchester INTO Foundation Course programme when I decided to study abroad after the gaokao. My agent only recommended foundation courses to me, and they only suggested me to apply to the cooperative foundation courses (in different universities) which were all in the INTO group because my IELTS score was not very high and I wanted to study abroad as soon as possible. Finally, my agent suggested that I take a pre-sessional course before my foundation course study, and to choose an INTO group foundation course since its academic requirement was not high. Among these INTO foundation courses, I chose the INTO Manchester foundation course programme because I wanted to go to the University of Manchester. Actually, the pass rate for this kind of foundation course was very low because they weren't affiliated to particular universities. However, I didn't know that before. Only about 10% of students in my foundation course class could get access into the University of Manchester. Most of the students, including me, could not achieve the entry requirements of the undergraduate course set for the INTO Manchester foundation course. Sixty per cent of the students would get access into 'not very good' UK universities. Fortunately, I'm not one of them. I went to another 'not bad' university for undergraduate study.

Lynn's agent had a relationship with a private foundation course provider, and this appeared to prevent her from gaining more comprehensive and accurate advice from the agent and thereby limited her range of university choices. In Lynn's case, the agent seemed to limit her choice of both foundation course and undergraduate university. As a result, Lynn wrongly predicted the pass rate on her foundation course and chose a foundation course which then limited her final undergraduate university choice.

Zizi

Zizi was a second year student studying Business and Economics. He had previously studied at a Canadian international school in Shanghai, and he said that he was influenced by his agent's inaccurate guidance when he applied to UK universities:

> *I studied in a Canadian international school in Shanghai, so most of my teachers and classmates were only familiar with the Canadian education system. However, I decided to apply to UK universities, so I had to find an agent who was familiar with the UK education system. Unfortunately, the agent I found didn't know how to use the Canadian diploma to apply for UK undergraduate study, so she asked me to apply for a foundation*

course. Actually, I could have applied for UK undergraduate study directly. Also, if I had wanted to apply for a foundation course, I could even have applied to top universities' foundation courses, such as UCL.

Zizi's undergraduate university choice was thereby limited by the advice he received from his agent. Eventually, he went to the University of Glasgow.

Wawa

A similar situation affected Wawa, a second year undergraduate from Beijing studying Geography and Unban Planning:

I found an agent in Singapore to help me apply to the UK universities. That was a big mistake. It was because they were not familiar with the UK education system and they asked me to apply to a foundation course. In fact, I could have applied to Year One directly because I had graduated from a Singaporean high school. In addition, I thought my agent had a cooperative relationship with Kaplan; they highly recommended the Kaplan foundation course – this foundation course was in London and was recognised by the University of Birmingham and many other universities in big cities. I therefore decided to choose Kaplan foundation course.

Wawa finally got access into the University of Birmingham for undergraduate study after she had completed the Kaplan foundation course programme.

Zizi and Wawa seemed to face a similar situation when they made their university choices, in that their agents influenced their choices of type of course and university. These two students' educational pathways were unusual (studying for a Canadian qualification and then applying to UK universities; and studying for a Singaporean qualification and then applying to UK universities). This situation perhaps made them more heavily reliant on an agent's advice. It also appeared that some foundation courses in the UK may not have taken account of whether an international student already had the requisite qualifications for university entry, without needing to undertake a foundation course. For example, Zizi had already met the entry requirements for undergraduate entry.

To sum up, those participants who had used educational agents to help them to make a choice of university appeared, in some cases such as Zizi, to hand considerable control to the agent in the process of decision making. Moreover, they also ran the risk that the agent's advice would either be erroneous or else influenced by the partnerships which the agents had with specific overseas universities. For the four participants above, it appeared that agent influences in

terms of the foundation course also impacted on their undergraduate university choices. Their agents seemed to be the only information source to guide the choice of educational route and a specific foundation course. The biggest gap seemed to be a lack of information concerning how to evaluate an educational route and a foundation course. It offered agents a potential opportunity to guide students to choose the educational pathways or foundation courses that were profitable for agents.

Given that a considerable proportion of the participants in this study made use of educational agents, it suggests that there may be a danger that inaccurate advice or agent affiliations to particular education providers could lead applicants along paths which were ultimately not in their own best interests. The position of educational agents seemed to be biased towards the foundation course institutions with which they already had partnership arrangements. According to Feng (2021), agents may receive commission fees from their partner universities or colleges if their students eventually enrol into these partner institutions. As a result, agents' guidance about educational pathways and university choices could have strong link with students' final undergraduate university choices. Although agents may well aim to serve participants' best interests, their professional goals might not completely coincide with those of their clients. The profit-driven nature of agents has the potential to prevent them from recommending the most suitable

universities to students (Nikula and Kivistö, 2020).

Drawing on the personal experiences of family members

Family members' own experiences of higher education in the UK appeared to be important in informing some participants' university choices. First, they might be able to suggest alternative ways to apply to a UK university, such as through UCAS (the Universities Admissions and Clearing System). Second, some participants were able to draw on their parents' direct experience of studying in the UK.

Juju

Juju, a Year One student from Tianjin (a city nearby Beijing) studying Business Management, pointed out that his mother had suggested that he try another application route (UCAS clearing) to increase the possibility of getting access into his ideal university:

> *Due to the impact of Covid-19, many international students were deferring their offers. My mom thought it might be a chance for me to get into a better university, so she asked me to try the UCAS clearing system. My mom knew more about the UK university application process than me because she took part in helping with my elder brother's application.*

Fortunately, I got two offers from UCAS clearing, and I chose the University of Reading because its business school was famous.

Juju's mother seemed to have turned the unusual circumstances caused by the Covid pandemic into an opportunity to apply to better universities. Juju made full use of his mother's application experiences and understanding of the UCAS application system, and he gained access into his preferred university.

William

William, a Year One undergraduate from Anhui province studying Computer Science, mentioned that his sister had helped him to make the final choice of university:

My sister is five years older than me and she used to study abroad in the UK, so she knew the UK universities very well. She gave me her opinions and feelings about different universities. Also, she helped me contact her former friends who used to study in different UK universities to ask them about their study experiences and their universities' reputations in terms of the job market. Based on my sister and her friends' study abroad experiences and opinions, we decided to choose the target universities together.

William listened to his sister's account of her recent UK application experiences, and used her social networks to gain first-hand information about Chinese students' evaluation of different UK universities. His sister seemed to be an important channel for him to learn about UK universities. From William's point of view, his sister was neutral, and therefore a good source of information; she did not recommend specific universities but gave him access to the assessments of others as well as herself.

Waiwai

Waiwai, a first year undergraduate from Shandong province, studying Artificial Intelligence and Computer Science, also explained that he had not had any preference among the UK universities, and that his mother had helped him to choose, based on her own direct experience:

> *My mom used to study abroad in the UK, so she helped me choose three universities to apply to, according to her own study abroad experiences and her perceptions about university, and also helped me make the final decision. To be honest, I didn't participate fully in the application process, and my mother helped me apply to all three universities. It was because I didn't have any dream school in the UK, all my overseas dream schools*

were in the US.

Waiwai's mother seemed to have taken the initiative in choosing a university for Waiwai, and Waiwai seemed to accept her suggestions without question. When Waiwai was forced to give up his favorite universities in the USA, he seemed to lose interest in other options. Eventually, his mother helped him make all his study abroad decisions.

Chuchu

Chuchu was a second year student from Canton, studying Environmental Science. He expressed the view that his father had helped him to make subject and university choices when he obtained unsatisfactory admission results and did not have any other clear preferences about university and subject:

I wanted to study Economics previously, so I applied to do Economics in my UCAS application. However, I did not get an offer from my preferred universities. At that time, my father suggested that I should try UCAS Clearing to apply to high-ranking universities. Therefore, I searched for possible universities and courses through UCAS Clearing, and I wrote them down and discussed them with my father. We both thought that the University of Birmingham was the most suitable university because of its

ranking, reputation, and campus. On the list of all the subjects in University of Birmingham that I could apply to in UCAS Clearing, we thought that Environmental Science was the best one.

Finally, Chuchu successfully applied to the University of Birmingham through the UCAS Clearing scheme. Chuchu's father seemed to be the key advisor when he experienced unexpected difficulties. His father suggested a new idea – that of applying through Clearing, rather than suggesting a particular university or subject directly. In Chuchu's case, it appeared that he made his subject choice and university choice together. The university choice seemed to be more important to him than subject choices.

Discussion

Although their ways of influencing the participants' university choices varied, parents and other family members mentioned above were referred to as drawing on their direct personal study abroad application experiences, or their own ideas, to help the participants make decisions. Where it was available, the participants above took full advantage of their family members' understanding of UK universities and the application process.

Parental university recommendations could be regarded as 'hot' knowledge.

According to Ball and Vincent (1998), ‘hot knowledge’ refers to information acquired from an individual’s social network which includes first-hand or second-hand recommendations or lessons based on direct experiences. Hot knowledge seemed to be highly trusted and acted upon by participants in this study.

In addition, it was apparent that there were no clear or separate stages in participants’ university decision making. University decision making could not easily be separated from subject decision making and some participants weighed up their university and subject choices at the same time.

The educational challenges in determining university choices

Four kinds of challenge were mentioned by the participants when discussing the educational factors influencing their choice of university:

- The pass rates and marking criteria of foundation courses;
- The recognition of particular foundation courses by universities;
- The limited time available for making UCAS applications to UK universities;
- Lack of knowledge about the UK undergraduate applications process.

A number of the former foundation course students particularly mentioned the first three challenges during their application processes. Below, I present examples of how these educational factors impacted on decision making and influenced

participants' final university choices.

Zak

Zak was a first year undergraduate from Canton province studying Business Management, and he was also a former foundation course student in the UK. He expressed his confusion about the pass proportion of the foundation course he had undertaken, and he thought the low pass rate influenced his final university choice:

> *I didn't pass the English exam of my foundation course, but I was confused about it because the teachers only told us the final grade without showing us the proportion that each exam and assignment made up. I thought it was not very reasonable that the teachers could control our final grades, because they didn't show us the final exam papers after the release of the final score. We had too many students in my class, so the pass rate of my foundation course was low that year. Also, the time to prepare undergraduate applications was quite limited for us, and we could not apply to some popular subjects because they were already full when we applied. There were not many choices for me at that time.*

Zak expressed the view that the marking criteria of the final grades of foundation course were not transparent, and he doubted the accuracy of the final grades.

From Zak's point of view, he was not given any 'right' to know the feedback on final exam papers and the proportion of marks allocated to each exam and assignment. Zak also appeared to believe that the foundation course programme was to blame for his failure to achieve entry to his preferred universities.

Wawa

Wawa, a second year student from Beijing studying Geography and Urban Planning, was also a former foundation course student in the UK. She mentioned that the relatively low recognition of her foundation course by other universities influenced her university choices when she applied to undergraduate programmes in the UK:

> *I think the recognition of my foundation course is not very high; it only has cooperation with a few universities in the UK, and all of them are not kind of top universities such as G5 institutions or other top ten universities. When I applied to do undergraduate study, I really wanted to apply to King's College London and the University of the Arts in London. However, they didn't have cooperation with my foundation course, so I couldn't apply to them.*

Wawa was not satisfied with the extent of recognition of her foundation course and did not seem willing to take the risk of applying to universities which were not

linked to her foundation course provider. She attributed her failure to gain entry to her preferred universities to the low recognition of her foundation programme. It highlighted that the limited cooperation with universities seemed to narrow down her university choices seriously.

Xixi

Xixi, a year one student studying Education and Sociology, similarly experienced some difficulty in applying to top universities in the UK using her foundation course grades:

> *My foundation course had cooperation with University of Birmingham, and all my classmates on this foundation course went to the University of Birmingham. That was one reason for me to stay. Another reason was that one of my classmates had tried to apply to other UK universities, but she had failed. I thought our grades in the foundation course were not recognised by other universities. Finally, I chose to stay.*

Although Xixi eventually chose to stay in her foundation course university, she had considered applying to other universities. Other classmates' failed application experiences led her to believe that applying to other universities was not likely to be a successful strategy.

Lynn

Lynn, a first year student from Shandong studying Business Management, said that she did not have enough time to prepare applications to other universities due to the late release of final exam results from her foundation course. She was of the view that this limited the time available for her to prepare applications and thus limited her potential choices of university:

> *My final foundation grade was released at the end of July. They just gave us the final grades of the whole foundation course without telling us the actual grades of our final exams. It was quite late because my foundation course started in January 2020 rather than September 2019, so our grade release was later. Due to the late grade release date, I didn't have enough time to argue over the exam results with teachers in my foundation course, because I didn't achieve the entry requirements of my foundation course university and I needed to use this score to apply to other universities through UCAS as soon as possible. By that time, there were not many choices of university and course for me because the applications deadline for many popular courses and universities had been closed by UCAS.*

Lynn was hampered by the time schedule of her foundation course and by her lack

of clear understanding about application processes and timescales.

Young

Young was a first year student from Xinjiang studying Computer Science, and also a former A-level student in the UK. He was not familiar with the differences in applications processes between some universities:

> *I didn't know that the University of Durham and Imperial College London had their own admissions test in the application process, and my teachers in my high school in the UK didn't tell me about this. As a result, I failed the admissions test of these two universities because I didn't even prepare for them. Afterwards, my teacher told me that I could have started to prepare for this kind of admission test since my first year of study in high school, but I didn't know that before. My high school teachers did not pay much attention to the need to prepare for admissions tests because there were not many students needing this.*

There appeared to be an information gap in Young's knowledge about application processes. From Young's point of view, the advice available in his high school was geared to the majority of students rather than just to 'top students'.

Discussion: the educational challenges of determining university choices

Four challenges were identified by participants as affecting their final choices of university:

- Lack of clarity about pass rates and marking criteria of foundation courses;
- Limitations to the recognition of foundation courses across different universities;
- Time limitations for making UCAS applications;
- Lack of knowledge about UK undergraduate applications processes.

The first three of these educational challenges only affected those participants who took foundation courses before undergraduate study, and they shaped these students' final university choices. Most of the foundation courses referred to above were organised by specific universities and education organisations. This meant that their course structures, marking criteria, and undergraduate applications schedules might vary. This issue seemed to make the former foundation course students' university choice making processes variable and unpredictable. It also appeared that their choices tended to be based on their choices of foundation course programme. Lack of information and the ability to compare the strengths and drawbacks of each foundation course programme before they applied influenced these participants' undergraduate choices. Finally, it appeared that students' university choices were also influenced by a lack of UK undergraduate

application knowledge. Again, too, different educational pathways seemed to determine participants' final university choices, with foundation course students being particularly affected.

A lack of reliable information sources to learn about university choices or foundation courses was cited as the main challenge for the participants above. They seemed to have only limited awareness of information about their pre-university courses and undergraduate admissions processes. They therefore were not always clear about the pros and cons of different routes and choices. According to Wu (2020), information channels may exercise a considerable influence on international students' study abroad decision making processes. For Wu, as with others interviewed for this study, it appears that the presence of accurate and reliable information sources is important in ensuring that students make the right decisions for them.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on university choice making

The global outbreak of the Covid pandemic in late 2020 had an impact on some of the participants' choices of undergraduate university. One problem cited was the cancellation of A-level and IELTS exams that year. This in turn affected the university choices of some. The interview data also indicated that the assessment of the final year's A-level grades had changed from a relatively objective unified in-

person exam to a relatively subjective evaluation of academic performances in 2020. Specifically, the UK government cancelled A-level exams in the summer of 2020. The final A-level results were determined by the calculated grade (Department of Education, 2020). However, this was controversial and there were accusations of grade inflation (Department for Education, 2020). The effects of the disruption were referred to by a number of the Year One participants.

Juju

Juju, a Year One student from Tianjin studying Business Management, mentioned that his high school teachers had helped him to improve his final A-level predicted grades due to the effects of Covid:

> *My final year's A-level exam was cancelled due to Covid, but my final grades at A-level were much better than I expected because my teachers in high school helped me increase the grades of my final year by submitting the higher predicted grades. It really helped me get offers from my preferred university in UCAS clearing, and changed my final university choice.*

Juju seemed to regard the A-level exam cancellation as an opportunity to try to gain access to a high ranking university. On the other hand, he seemed to think that he was awarded grades higher than his performance had merited.

Justin

Justin's experience was different. He was a first year undergraduate from Heilongjiang province, studying Food Science and Nutrition, and he was not satisfied with the final result of his A-levels:

> *I thought my A-level result was affected by the impact of Covid. The first reason was that A-level exams were cancelled, and the school submitted our previous grades to the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation, and they would determine our final grade. However, most of my classmates and I thought that the final predicted grade they received was not accurate because the grades submitted did not reflect our academic performance in the final year. The second reason was that I thought that our teachers controlled the final A-level grades and they seemed not to judge the academic performance of every student reasonably and fairly. Some of my classmates' final predicted grades were higher than I expected. For example, I was good at Maths, and I used to get the prize in Maths competitions previously, but my final predicted score was lower than some of my classmates who were not very good at Maths and were not hardworking. They got As in A-level Maths, but I got a B. It was not fair. Also, these predicted final A-levels influenced my final choice of university more or less.*

Justin, was unhappy with his final A-level grades. He believed that his final grade did not reflect his self-positioning, and that the pandemic influenced his final A-level grades, and thus his final choice of university.

Zak

Zak, a first year student from Canton province studying Business Management, explained that he was able to take another English language exam to meet the English requirement, following the IELTS cancellations:

> *IELTS exams were cancelled in China due to Covid, and I decided to take the Duolingo exam because I thought it was easier. After I took the Duolingo exam, I did feel Duolingo was easier than IELTS. Another reason I chose Duolingo was because Duolingo's results were released faster than other exams and I didn't have much time to prepare for a language exam. However, not many universities accepted Duolingo at that time, but I found that the University of Birmingham accepted the Duolingo score. So finally, I went to the University of Birmingham.*

For Zak, the possibility of taking an alternative English test brought new opportunities, but also limited his final university choice.

Zizi

Zizi, a second year student from Shanghai studying Business and Economics, explained that he gave up his preferred offer due to the cancellation of the IELTS exams:

> *After I completed the foundation course at the University of Glasgow, I got an offer from King's College London, and I was very excited about it. However, all the IELTS tests were cancelled in China last year due to Covid, so I had to give up this offer because I didn't have any chance of taking IELTS tests. Also, I didn't want to adapt to a new university again after Covid, so I decided to stay at the University of Glasgow.*

The university of Glasgow's offer seemed, originally, to have been a back-up plan for Zizi. The cancellation of IELTS was only a part of the reason why he gave up KCL's offer; he also reported that his attitude to risk had changed due to the pandemic, causing him to want to stay with what was familiar.

Discussion

To conclude, the Covid-19 pandemic led to exam cancellations, and, for participants taking A-levels or IELTS tests, it indirectly or directly affected their final

choice of university. The impact of the pandemic appeared to be double-edged. For some, the changes due to Covid also changed their final university choices and helped them get access into their target universities more easily. However, for others, because their grades were not as they had hoped, this limited their final choices of undergraduate university.

In fact, the pandemic's impact on exams not only shaped international students' university choices but also those of the local students (Department of Education, 2020). In terms of all A-level students who applied to UK undergraduate study in 2020, exam cancellation due to the pandemic seemed to be a cause of uncertainty over their undergraduate admission results. UK universities also realised the challenges faced by A-level students in 2020, and some of them decided to reduce the pressure on prospective applicants. For example, the University of Birmingham was the first university to announce that 'it will be introducing additional flexibility around its admissions approach this year. This will involve reducing the entry requirements across the majority of its undergraduate degree programmes by one grade.' (University of Birmingham, 2020). In addition, The University of Surrey also reduced its entry requirements for prospective undergraduate students in 2021 (BBC, 2020). In fact, it has been suggested that adjusting the entry requirement to attract more undergraduate applicants was potentially another way to make up for UK universities' financial losses caused by the reduction in accommodation,

catering, and international students' tuition fee income during the Covid-19 outbreak (Ahlburg, 2020). In this case, applicants might benefit from the drop in foreign student numbers and gain opportunities to enrol in a higher ranking university due to the impact of the pandemic (Ahlburg, 2020).

The influence of web based information and social media messaging on choice-making

Some participants specifically mentioned the influence of social media messages on their university choice making. Information gained from the Internet appeared to help participants to find out more about their target universities and courses. Chinese social media apps, such as Zhihu, Redbook, Weibo, and Douban, were the main platforms participants used to locate information about study abroad and university choices.

Coco

Coco, a first year student from Beijing studying Economics, said that searching for information on Zhihu and Douban had helped her learn more than her agent had been able to tell her about her future study life in university and make her final university choice:

> *My agent circled some universities and gave me an introduction to these*

universities, then I researched them through Zhihu and Douban to see comments about each university, and how their alumni evaluated the universities. I decided to go to the University of Birmingham because I found some alumni said that its library and their experience and lives in Birmingham were great. These comments can represent a university's reputation in China more or less.

Coco used both Douban and Zhihu to help her make her university choice. Zhihu and Douban are two Chinese social media apps where users can not only send posts to share their opinions but also see others' opinions. It appeared that Coco wanted not only the 'official information' on UK universities, but also 'unofficial information' to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the situation. Coco seemed to want to get a rounded view about UK universities, including negative views. Coco tended to trust the evaluations of the alumni who had study abroad experiences in the UK. Moreover, she could gain current and first-hand information that she could not gain from the official channels such as a university website. These relatively subjective social media messages seemed to help Coco to determine the university she wanted to go to.

Zhang

Zhang, a second-year undergraduate from Canton, studying Artificial Intelligence

and Computer Science, expressed the view that social media messages helped her see how experts commented on a university or a course:

> *I liked to use Zhihu to search for how experts commented on the universities I chose. I found that one professor from Tsinghua University said that computer science at the University of Edinburgh was very strong. Also, I searched for the University of Edinburgh on LinkedIn, and I found that many alumni were also from Project 985 universities [a top Chinese university league].*

Although Zhang did not know the Tsinghua University professor in person, he still highly regarded this evaluation of the UK university due to Tsinghua University's high reputation and the social status of professor. Afterwards, he verified the professor's evaluation through social media. Specifically, he tested the quality of the University of Edinburgh's computer science programme by verifying the alumni's first qualifications.

To conclude, a number of the participants mentioned the use of social media as a factor when they made decisions about university choices. Specifically, they were interested in current students' and experts' feedback about universities. They valued the information provided in social media messaging about study abroad

experiences, the reputation of the university and the subject. Participants also placed considerable weight on how Chinese people evaluated a UK university, checking on an overseas university's reputation in China during their decision making process. The influence of social media on educational decision making has also been explored in the existing literature (Galan et al, 2015) which suggests that international students tend to use social media to learn about student life and current students/alumni's reviews about their target universities when they made university choices. It is argued that social media provides a platform for individuals to learn about a university's reputation and helps prospective international students to avoid meeting an information barrier in educational decision making.

An emerging theme: considerations about finding a future life partner

Six of the participants mentioned future relationships or the maintenance of current relationships when they made their decisions about choice of university. Among these six participants, four participants were female, and two were male. Five of them were Year Two undergraduates, when interviewed, and one was in Year One. Four of the six participants expressed their concerns about finding a future life partner in respect of further postgraduate study, and two mentioned this as a consideration at undergraduate level. However, the prospects of finding a life partner did not appear to be a 'make or break' consideration. Rather, the prospects for future relationships seemed to help these participants to confirm their final

choice of choice of university. The two examples below illustrate the different degrees of importance placed on maintaining or making personal relationships.

Ben

Ben, a Year Two male undergraduate from Hubei, studying international media and communication, described his current relationship as influencing his choice of university, and he emphasised that he had not spent a lot of time considering his choice of university:

> *One of the reasons why I didn't apply to other universities was because I had a girlfriend at that time, and she didn't want me to go to other universities, and I didn't want to leave her as well. But I have to say, I didn't think too much about choosing a university, I had good experiences in my foundation course, so I thought it wasn't necessary to change the university.*

Ben's current relationship, coupled with his satisfaction with the university where he had completed his foundation course, made his choice of university a relatively straightforward one.

Wawa

Wawa had particularly strong views about the prospects of finding a partner, and

these weighed more heavily on her decision-making, influencing her ideas about future study locations. She was a Year Two student from Beijing, studying Geography and Urban Planning. She had completed a foundation course in London two years earlier. Reflecting on her experiences in London, she expressed her view about deciding on her undergraduate university and her potential future postgraduate destination:

> *I would like to stay in a big city because it would be easier to make friends and find a boyfriend. London was my first choice, but there was no suitable university for me there. My father told me that Birmingham is the second largest city in the UK. Also, many friends on my foundation course decided to go to Birmingham. So finally, I decided to go to Birmingham.*

Wawa seemed to be regretting her undergraduate university choice:

> *Studying in Birmingham was very boring, and it was quite difficult to make friends or find a boyfriend. I won't continue postgraduate study in the UK because I only love London, but most boys in London are playboys, just like the boys in Birmingham. Also, many of the handsome boys in London don't like girls. But I think the boys in Manchester and Liverpool are fine, because these cities are not very fancy and the University of Manchester has strong*

science subjects, which means that there might be more boys. Also, the boys who study science subjects are my type.

So, I want to apply to do a Master's degree in a US university no matter its university ranking, because I want to find a good boyfriend. There are too many girls in the UK universities. Chinese boys prefer to study in the US instead of UK, Europe, and Australia. And I would like to choose the places in the US that might have more Chinese boys. For example, California is my first choice because many universities in California are good at science and engineering subjects, which means there will be more Chinese boys in the universities. On the other hand, New York City is not a good choice because there are many 'Bai fu mei' [faired-skinned, rich, pretty girls] in NYC. It will be difficult to find a boyfriend.

For Wawa, the possibilities for making relationships with members of the opposite sex were important considerations. Furthermore, she drew heavily on her past experience, the views of others, and her own assumptions about 'Chinese boys' to plot a path towards future study.

Yinyin

Yinyin was a Year One student from Fujian province studying computer science.

She also expressed her considerations about seeking a future life partner when she talked about her current university choice and future postgraduate university choice:

> *There are many pretty girls in the University of Edinburgh, but not many handsome boys. The quality of boys in the University of Edinburgh is lower than in my high school in the UK. In order to find a matched boyfriend, I want to apply to universities in London for postgraduate study.*

Like Wawa, Yinyin drew on her personal impressions and assumptions about 'the quality' of possible future partners, as she considered where to locate herself geographically.

Discussion

Both female and male participants considered future relationship possibilities when they made their decisions about university choices, both at undergraduate level and when thinking about future postgraduate study.

However, there were differences between participants in the weight they placed on the importance of relationships. For Ben, there was an understanding with his current partner that it was best to remain studying together. For Wawa and Yinyin,

future relationships were a very important consideration. Having been disappointed in the prospects for finding a partner on their undergraduate courses, they appeared more determined than previously to prioritise this in their choices of postgraduate location and university.

It appeared that Year Two students and female students paid more attention to seeking a future life partner at postgraduate level study. They seemed to reflect on their current experience of undergraduate study to think about the future. It also appeared that these participants viewed this as a more pressing issue if they had not identified a 'life partner' in the course of their foundation undergraduate studies. In summary, there seemed to be limited evidence that finding a life partner was a major factor in choice of undergraduate study. However, it did appear to become a more serious consideration when Mainland Chinese international students began to think about postgraduate study.

Conclusion: university choice making

Six kinds of influence emerged from the data above and it appeared that there were two stages in choosing a university: choosing target universities and choosing the final university itself.

In terms of the first stage, advice from agents and drawing on the personal

experiences of family members emerged as factors shaping the participants' decisions about the range of target universities. Agents' advice seemed to influence the former foundation course and international school students in particular. However, the need for agents to ensure profitability and limited access to reliable information sources for participants seemed to present some problems for decision making students (Feng, 2021).

In addition to agents, family members' own experiences seemed to influence students' choices of target universities. Participants said they were particularly reliant on family members when they did not have specific ideas about choosing universities. Advice from family members may be regarded as 'hot knowledge' informing university decision making, and participants seemed to highly trust the hot knowledge offered by family members (Ball and Vincent, 1998). However, the availability of hot knowledge is likely to depend on an individual's family background and social status (Slack et al, 2014). In other words, social background may have shaped university choice making.

In terms of the second stage of university choice making, four factors emerged as influential in shaping final choices: the educational challenges impacting on university choices, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic – particularly the cancellation of exams, the influence of web-based information and social media

messaging, and considerations about finding a future life partner.

Participants' final university choices were, to some extent, affected by the educational routes they had taken prior to applying to university. A number of the former foundation course students felt afraid of taking the risk of applying to other universities than the ones in which they had taken their foundation studies. In addition, some former foundation course students interviewed were critical of the attention paid to some students' needs in that course structures could create choice limitations. The former A-level students seemed to rely on help from their high school teachers. When this was not found to be forthcoming, they stood the risk of missing out on their 'dream' universities. The main reason cited for this was lack of reliable information sources in respect of possible educational routes and further undergraduate admissions procedures (Wu, 2020).

As for Covid-19 influences, these seemed to be double-edged. Changes related to Covid-19 not only brought new opportunities to some, but also made undergraduate admissions criteria in 2020 seem more subjective. Participants' final university choices were less predictable when the situation in the wider environment changed. Changes in the wider environment shaped educational policy, which, in turn shaped universities' admissions policies and thus students' university choices. The social context and changing government policy seemed to

be a significant factor influencing these international students' study abroad decision making (Mok et al, 2021; Wu, 2020).

In terms of the influences of social media messaging, participants valued being able to find out about target universities, and they were influenced by the study abroad experiences of alumni, information about the reputation of universities and the subjects and the career paths of past alumni when they made final choice of university.

In terms of the considerations about finding a life partner, some participants appeared to reflect on their current experience of foundation and undergraduate studies to think about seeking a partner. However, there is little evidence to show that participants weighed this factor as an essential issue to consider in their university choice making.

The findings suggest, first, that participants' final university choices were linked to their pre-university educational pathways. Second, that educational environment and social and family backgrounds were influential in university choice-making, as was the availability of useful and reliable information sources. Finally, the university choice making process, like the earlier decisions made by participants described in the previous chapter, appeared complex, and they needed to take

both university choice and subject availability into account. There was no clear cut sequence in the decision making process. Among the four categories of participants, the former foundation course students' university choice making was less straightforward and predictable than those of other categories of participants.

Chapter Conclusion: subject and university choices - complex and contingent

In this chapter, participants' subject and university choice making were explored. In terms of participants' subject choice making, six factors emerged as influential:

- *Neijuan*;
- future career considerations;
- subject limitations in pre-university study;
- personal considerations about the subject;
- advice from parents, and teachers' judgements about the subject.

Among these factors *neijuan*, future career considerations, and parents' advice seemed to be central to their decision making and could shape or change their initial perceptions about subject choices. For former foundation course and A-level students, subject limitations in pre-university study and teachers' judgement about particular subjects influenced their final decisions of subject. Also, these two groups of students tended to consider their university and subject choices together, and they seemed to weigh getting access into to a high-ranking

university more heavily than choosing their preferred subjects.

There were two main steps in the university decision making process: making several choices of target university and confirming the final decision of university. In the first step, key informants such as agents and parents played an important role in shaping their decisions about target universities. The advice of agents seemed to influence the target university choices of former foundation course students and international school students the most. In addition, when participants had no preferences about university, their parents' advice appeared to be the key factor in guiding their eventual choices. In the second step, three factors appearing to shape participants' final choice of university: the educational challenges of applying to a particular UK university due to the previous educational pathway taken, the uncertainties which arose as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak, and the information gained from social media. Overall, the former foundation course students' university choices seemed to be less predictable and straightforward than the students taking other educational pathways.

Several issues emerge from the above discussion. First, the study findings reveal perceptions of educational and future job market competitiveness as being an important influence on decision making. This awareness of competition with peers was not only a key motivation for deciding to study abroad; it was also a challenge

when participants weighed up their subject choices. Second, pre-university educational routes seemed to limit the range of available undergraduate subject and university choices, due to the fact that most participants made these choices after having decided to study abroad.

Third, both ‘broad’ and ‘narrow’ contextual factors seemed to shape participants’ subject choices. ‘Broad’ contextual factors included labour market trends in Chinese society, which appeared to be essential influences on subject choices. They also included the impact of the 2020 pandemic which influenced university choices. ‘Narrow’ contextual factors, were those which were closer to home, and included participants’ family backgrounds, which could limit, or broaden the scope for choice making.

Fourth, the nature and accuracy of information sources were seen as determining participants’ subject and university choices. For some participants, reliable neutral information was difficult to access, and therefore they were reliant on parents’ or agents’ advice. Participants seemed to trust ‘hot knowledge’ from key informants, especially those with first-hand experience of studying in the UK. Parents seemed to play a range of roles in different situations. They were viewed as acting as supporters or advisors when participants experienced unexpected setbacks, such as unsatisfactory admissions outcomes or poor exam results. However, they might

also ‘veto’ participants’ destination choices if they were concerned about safety issues or participants’ subject choices. Finally, the findings presented in this chapter highlighted that subject and university choice making was complex and involved consideration of a range of factors being weighed up simultaneously.

CHAPTER SIX

Discussion: choice making in a complex and competitive environment

Introduction

My original aim for this study was to explore how Mainland Chinese undergraduate students made their study abroad decisions. I wished to investigate who or what influenced their initial decision to study abroad; and who or what influenced their choice of the UK as a destination country, their university, and subject of study. As well as identifying the salient factors in choice making, I was concerned to understand how these emergent factors worked, separately or together, to shape final choices.

The purpose of this chapter is to summarise the main findings of this study, to establish the connections between my study's findings and those of earlier studies, and to outline the contribution which my study makes to theoretical knowledge in the field of international (particularly Mainland Chinese) student choice making. I conclude that an in-depth qualitative approach to data collection has the potential to yield a more complex picture of choice making than has been suggested by earlier contributions to the literature.

Across the three aspects of choice making – the initial decision to study abroad in the UK, the choice of subject of study and the choice of university – two strong

themes emerged as influencing participants' decisions. These were:

- Educational competition as a driver of decision making
- The complex and intersectional nature of the decision-making process

In the section on educational competition, I discuss two key strategies which emerged from participants' descriptions: the pursuit of university status and the need to navigate *neijuan*. These two strategies suggest the influence of human capital considerations in their decision making.

I then go on to explain that my findings in this regard go beyond what has been suggested in the literature to date, in that they reveal the multifactorial nature of decision making, the intersections and overlaps between different factors and the overall complexity of the process of deciding, eventually, to study in a UK university. In particular, I use two examples to argue that prior education, gender and parental advice interact in determining participants' study abroad decision making.

Educational competition as a driver of decision making

Competitiveness was a strong theme emerging both from participants' accounts of their initial study abroad decision making and their subject and university decisions. Two strategies were apparent by means of which they attempted to ensure their competitiveness in the higher education sector and the future job

market: the pursuit of the highest possible university status and the desire to successfully navigate *neijuan*. Overall, human capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986)– the pursuit of higher education success – as a means of labour market, and thus economic, advancement – seemed to be relevant to this analysis of student decision making processes.

Pursuing university status

Entry to a university with a strong global ranking and international status was regarded by participants in this study as an important way of ensuring competitiveness (Brown, 2016). This was particularly the case when they felt that they might 'fail' in educational competition in their home country, or that they already had. But it was also apparent in a less tangible way – as an 'imagined' sense of competition. That is to say that while most participants had not actually experienced, or failed in, concrete competition for university places, they had worried about future competition and were concerned about whether they would 'come out on top' in competitive situations.

Studying in a reputable overseas university was regarded as a primary way of ensuring access to high status education. This tendency has also been noted in previous literature on international students' initial study abroad decision making (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Zwart, 2012; Gong and Huybers, 2015; Brown, 2016;

Lu et al, 2018; Cebeolla-Boado, et al, 2017). Indeed, according to Cebeolla-Boado et al. (2017), the desire to gain a 'world class education' (p.4) may become the goal itself, rather than an approach to achieving longer term future career aims.

While previous studies have focused specifically on international students, the findings from my study suggest that participants' pursuit of top universities includes both overseas universities and domestic universities. For participants who were unable to achieve their dream of attending a high status university in China itself due to an unsatisfactory *gaokao* result, the high value they placed on university status led them to look beyond their home country and pursue the possibility of studying overseas. Again, this finding differs slightly from those of earlier studies in that students appeared to give up the idea of studying in their home country because they did not feel able to meet expectations set by themselves. They seemed to have had a strict self-positioning in terms of university, and their pursuit of university status both reflected this and their desired future social status. This point resonates with the work of Liu et al. (2022) who suggest that that students highly value the social 'distinction' offered by higher university status. According to Liu et al. (2022), participants in their study built their own 'halos' (p.7), which entailed dismissing students from outside their 'halos' – students who were not from elite universities, such as Peking University and the Ivy League group in the USA. It is possible, therefore, that studying abroad at highly ranked universities is

an approach to constructing status boundaries. Several participants in my study mentioned the USA Ivy League or other ‘top’ universities, and also weighed up the challenges they might need to overcome in order to apply and gain access to these institutions. It appeared that participants’ study abroad decision making entailed a quest to find their ‘ideal position’ in education and society.

Navigating neijuan

Participants in this study seemed to be aware that they were navigating *neijuan* in respect of their higher education choices in order to ensure their future competitiveness. *Neijuan* was mentioned by a considerable number of participants to describe the current competitive environment in higher education entry and in the job market in China. *Neijuan* is not a new word in the educational field. In the context of this study, it is best understood as credential inflation – the idea that students need to be ‘over-educated’ in order to find a place in the job market (Van de Werfhorst and Andersen, 2005). From a human capital perspective, it is suggested that the growing importance of higher education credentials offers a competitive advantage for students in the labour market (Becker, 1964). Credentials may be regarded as positional goods, which affirm social status, enhance future job opportunities and offer better economic returns (Tomlinson and Watermeyer, 2022; Van de Werfhorst, 2009). However, credential inflation may also have negative outcomes, leading young people to feel the need to take action

to cope with fierce competition for jobs. Participants in my study therefore seemed to have taken credential inflation into account when they made their higher education decisions.

My study's findings suggest that *neijuan* (in the sense of credential inflation) was also influential in participants' study abroad decisions in terms of their subject decision making. They took into account both likely future career trends and their understanding of *neijuan* in the job market at that time. While some participants attempted to position themselves to compete successfully, others – concerned perhaps that they might lose out in the fiercest areas of competition (for example the highest status Mainland Chinese or United States' universities, or the most popular subject area) – sought to avoid *neijuan*.

This awareness of *neijuan* appeared to push participants to think about solutions to cope with it before they actually experienced it. While studying abroad was the option eventually chosen by all participants, there appeared to be two distinct strategies to cope with *neijuan*. One was to follow the anticipated trend of *neijuan* to ensure their high competitiveness in future: either by using *neijuan* to test their subject choice, or by making themselves as competitive as possible. The other one was to avoid *neijuan* by deliberately opting for less competitive educational pathways, countries, or subjects of study. Their different attitudes towards *neijuan*

seemed to shape their eventual study abroad decisions.

To date, there appears to be a limited literature which discusses the impact of *neijuan* on Chinese higher education students, though Li (2021) and Mulvey and Wright (2022) have addressed the issue. According to Mulvey and Wright, *neijuan* in respect of Chinese undergraduate students is characterised by perpetual competition and anxiety about future career prospects. Mulvey and Wright (2022) suggest that social class may determine the extent to which undergraduates assume themselves to be involved in educational and career competition. For example, 'urban elite' students may have the option of studying abroad, in order to avoid having to take Chinese university postgraduate entry examinations. In this way, they can navigate national competition and, instead, participate in global educational competition. However, Mulvey and Wright argue that 'urban non-elite' students who are less able to afford to study abroad, are restricted to involvement in national competition. Participants in this study could be regarded as members of 'urban elites' in terms of their regional and family backgrounds. Their descriptions of *neijuan* seemed not to suggest anxiety (as described by Mulvey and Wright). This was possibly due to the fact that they were in a position to improve their competitiveness by choosing to study abroad; they could also avoid '*neijuan*' subjects and choose their preferred subject of study. For them, *neijuan* seemed not to represent perpetual competition and anxiety, but rather they felt able to

make judgements about current and future competition and take action where necessary.

The close link between competition and the concept of *neijuan* in higher education has been emphasised by Li (2021). However, Li has argued that *neijuan* could not be regarded as synonymous with competition due to *neijuan's* specific characteristics, which he summarised as: 'passivity in motivation' (p.1030); 'non-differentiation in aim' (p.1031); 'disproportionality in result' (p.1032).

Li (2021) has suggested that *neijuan* is essentially 'passive' in nature, in that individuals are subject to its forces, but not willing participants in it. This point appears to be borne out in the findings of my study, in that participants drew attention to *neijuan* as an aspect of the social and economic environment in China, and they were aware that they needed to take it into account when they made their subject decisions. However, involvement in *neijuan* did not appear to be part of their original purpose, rather they needed to identify approaches to choice making which would help them ensure their competitiveness.

Li (2021) has also suggested that there is homogeneity (or non-differentiation) in *neijuan*, inferring that people tend to share similar goals and desires. This, Li (2021) argues, may lead them to choose the most reliable pathway – such as

seeking to gain access to the most highly ranked universities, going on to access postgraduate study, or working in a state-owned company. In other words, for Li (2021), *neijuan* is the result of going with the current economic and social 'flow'. The findings from this study appear to differ in some respects from those of Li (2021). Participants in my study appeared to have formulated different goals or desires when they felt they were involved in *neijuan,* and they would re-set their goals in order to find new pathways based on their judgement of the likely impact of *neijuan on* their individual hopes and plans.

Furthermore, according to Li (2021), 'disproportionality' in *neijuan* refers to disproportionality in the number of participants and winners in a competition – such as the competition to gain admission to undergraduate or postgraduate study in China. This was reflected to some extent in my study, in that participants appeared aware that the end result of taking part in *neijuan* would not necessarily repay their efforts. Therefore, they found themselves 'pushed' to great lengths to ensure they would be highly competitive in the future job market and, sometimes, to deliberately choose less preferred educational routes in order to achieve their goal of future career success and financial well-being.

The findings illustrate that *neijuan* may push Chinese students to adapt their goals. In addition, they emphasise the importance of university status and students'

awareness of the competitive nature of the higher education environment. Finally, they reveal how these students pursued university status in their study abroad decision making, navigating *neijuan* in order to ensure their individual competitiveness.

Considerations of human capital in decision making

Human capital theory has been applied in previous studies as a way of understanding study abroad motivations and revealing the relationship between educational investment and economic gain (Lowe, 2007; Fong, 2011; Wu, 2014; and Cebolla-Boado, 2017). In my study, human capital considerations seemed to emerge, particularly in respect of students' initial study abroad decisions and their subject choice making.

In making their initial study abroad decisions, it appeared that participants were driven primarily by educational factors such as the nature of Gaokao, the uneven regional distribution of educational opportunities, and the desire to find the 'ideal' study environment and course structure. The evidence presented in Chapter Four suggests that the accrual of educational capital, demonstrated by high university status in particular, was a primary aim of initial study abroad decision making. Although participants did not specifically mention the importance of future economic gain in their initial study abroad decision making, seeking to accrue

educational capital (Bourdieu, 1986) seemed to be regarded as a key to gaining economic capital in future.

With regard to subject choice making, participants highlighted their awareness of labour market competition and made subject choice calculations based on their understanding of the likely future economic and career returns to specific subjects of study. From a human capital perspective, their choices of subject and course could be regarded as their desire to gain the educational capital which would enable them to compete with others in the future. Hence, making the right educational choices seemed to be viewed an instrument for optimising future economic chances.

However, human capital considerations only seemed to apply to these two aspects of decision making – the initial decision to study abroad, and the choice of a specific subject of study. Student decision making could not be understood in terms of human capital theory alone. Other, complex and overlapping issues also emerged and played a role in the final decisions made. Specifically, other contextual and individual factors, such as the impact of the COVID pandemic, or particular subject limitations, which were linked to pre-university educational pathways, could not be attributed to human capital considerations.

The complex and intersectional nature of the decision-making process

The data presented in the finding chapters reveals the complex and intersectional nature of the decision making process. A more complicated, multifactorial and individual picture emerged than that suggested by either human capital theory or by 'push and pull' and other study abroad decision-making models, identified by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), Cubillo, et al., (2006), Rudd, et al. (2012), and Wu (2020). There are two main differences between my findings and those of earlier studies. The first is that there are relationships between the factors – they do not operate in isolation from each other, nor according to a clear order of priority. The second is that the various phases in decision making are not clear cut or linear in nature.

Previous contributions in this field have tended to identify and, in some cases group, the factors regarded as salient to international, or Chinese, students' study abroad decisions (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002, Cubillo, et al., 2006; Rudd, et al., 2012). Specifically, the 'push and pull' model identified in Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) categorises identified factors into two groups: one related to the home country, the other to the host country. A number of follow-up studies have applied this push and pull model to identify and categorise these and other influential factors (Bodycott, 2009; Rudd, et al,.2012; Wu, 2014, Gong and Huybers, 2015). However, a limitation of these studies is that they ignore the 'process' of decision

making; that is how, in reality, these factors worked, singly or severally and over time, to shape study abroad decisions. Although the push and pull factors model has usefully drawn attention to the issues and priorities of students and, in some cases, has identified simple relationships between these factors, the decision making processes of participants in my study seemed to be much more complex.

Push and pull frameworks are useful in offering an overview, or ‘macro-’ perspective on the issue. But they may be regarded as a simple or ‘ideal’ portrayal of its reality. This reality suggests that decisions are not simply made according to individual preferences, motivations or indeed, family aspirations. Rather the prospective international undergraduate is likely to experience a range of interlocking challenges, or be affected by the information they gather and receive from others, and also by factors in their social and economic environment. Some of these factors will present themselves as challenges during the process of high school study, or in the university preparation phase of education, or at the point of application itself. I would argue therefore, that taking an individual or ‘micro-’ perspective, as I have done in this study, helps us towards a better understanding of the aspirations and needs of Mainland Chinese students who aspire to international educational mobility.

The clear phases of students’ study abroad decision making identified in a number

of past studies (Cubillo, et al., 2006; Rudd, et al., 2012, Wu, 2020) do not in reality seem so clear-cut. According to Cubillo, et al. (2006) and Rudd, et al. (2012), the individual factors that shaped international students or Chinese students' study abroad decision making can be categorised as: personal issues, country image, city image, institution image, and programme image. Furthermore, both these writers suggest a particular order in the process: choosing the host country, city, institution, and programme. Wu (2020) also identified the specific phases in Chinese students' study abroad decision making processes, suggesting three clear-cut stages: the decision to study abroad, the choice of destination country, and the choice of university. In all these studies, subject choice was overlooked.

However, I have identified no clear-cut phases in decision making. In some instances, country and university choices were made together; in others university and subject choices were combined. In particular, some of the *gaokao* route participants needed to make their university choice and decision to study abroad at the same time because they had received offers from both a domestic university and an overseas one. Some students who used the UCAS clearing system also made their university and subject choices simultaneously. Clearly, simple linear models do not adequately explain the complexity of the situation for aspiring overseas undergraduates. A more nuanced and complex understanding appears to be required.

Intersectionality in relation to higher education may be understood as the overlapping and interlinked nature of social identities mediated by factors such as gender, ethnicity, social status, or place of residence (Nichols and Stahl, 2019), and their impact on educational decision making and progress. While theories of intersectionality may not be straightforwardly applied to this study, there appeared to be three key factors which did intersect in different ways to shape participants' decision making:

- Prior educational experience
- The role and nature of parental advice
- Gender

In this section, I draw on data from two participants (Xixi and Lynn) mentioned in Chapter Four and Five to illustrate the complexity of decision making and how multiple factors may, in combination, shape an individual decision. I use these examples from the data to offer detailed accounts that map, explain, and theorise meaning-making across the process of decision making.

Prior educational experience

Educational factors, such as the perceived quality of an educational offering or the ranking and prestige of a particular university seem to be commonly cited influences on international students' study abroad decisions (Bodycott, 2009;

Counsell, 2011; Zwart, 2012; Wu, 2014; Gong and Huybers, 2015; Cebella-Boado, et al, 2017; Lu, et al, 2018; Wang and Crawford, 2021). While the term 'educational factors' may be rather vague and differently defined in such studies, in this study, I am referring to the specifics of the Chinese or British education systems – for example the role and importance of *Gaokao*, the standard course duration or structure, or the regional distribution of educational opportunities in China. It is important to recognise, however, that the evidence from this study shows that these factors are not easily separable into discrete individual points. Rather, they themselves overlap and interact. For example, *Gaokao* influences and uneven regional distribution of educational opportunities in China appear to be inter-related. An example of this inter-relationship of influences may be seen in the evidence gathered from Xixi. She was a Year One undergraduate studying Education and Sociology who had taken a foundation course. She mentioned the difficulties related to undergraduate admissions in Inner Mongolia. This was the main cause behind her initial study abroad decision:

> *I come from Inner Mongolia. The educational resources are not as good as in the big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. Although it's much easier for the students from Inner Mongolia to get access into 'the first batch of universities', it was really hard for us to get offers from the universities of Projects 985 and 211. It's because the universities of*

> *Projects 985 and 211 might think the educational level in our province was not high enough. Most of our good students would get access into Inner Mongolia University because they could not get access into good universities in other provinces. For example, Fudan University's admission quota for western Inner Mongolia was nearly zero in 2019 [Fudan is in Shanghai]. To get access into top universities, I decided to study abroad for undergraduate study even if I needed to take a foundation course first.*

Xixi's study abroad motivation was mainly related to issues around Chinese undergraduate admissions policies and practices, and it involved a number of overlapping considerations, such as the difficulty of *Gaokao* and the specific higher education admissions policies applied to different regions. The difficulties described by students from remote areas, such as Inner Mongolia, reveal a sense of the regional disparities in higher educational opportunities.

In addition, the data reveals that key informants added a further element of complexity to the process of decision making. For example, Lynn, a Year One student from Shandong province who studied Business Management, took the *Gaokao* before she decided to study abroad and undertake a foundation course in the UK. Lynn described her initial study abroad decisions as being shaped by both

Gaokao and parental influences:

> *I didn't get a good grade in the Gaokao. When the result was released, I felt very disappointed because I knew I could not dream about my target university anymore. Also, I had worked very hard for the Gaokao, so I thought this result didn't reflect my effort. That was why I felt so sad. To be honest, if I could have got access into a good university in China, I would have stayed in China.*

To help Lynn deal with her disappointment with her *Gaokao* score, her parents suggested that she study abroad:

> *My dad didn't want me to be sad, so he suggested I apply to overseas universities. Actually, my parents really wanted me to get into a top university in order to find jobs in top tier companies and use my overseas degree to settle in Beijing, so they wanted me to study abroad. Also, my parents didn't want me to study at university for too many years. In order to save time, they wanted me to study abroad as soon as possible. Finally, I accepted their suggestion and started to prepare the applications immediately and chose to take a foundation course because I could apply to it directly.*

Subsequently, Lynn's choice of subject was influenced by her foundation programme and the subject limitations it placed upon her:

> *At that time, studying Business was the only choice for me because I wanted to register on the foundation course which started in January instead of September. There were not many subject choices for January; Business was the only subject they had. However, I didn't want to waste a whole year to register in September, so I finally chose to study Business. Actually, I didn't have any preferred subject, and all I wanted was to study abroad immediately. Afterwards, I continued to study Business at undergraduate level; I had to choose business-related subjects due to my foundation course's subject. If I wanted to apply for other subjects, I would have had to retake the foundation course or accept a university with a low ranking.*

Lynn's unsatisfactory *Gaokao* score seemed to be only one factor behind her initial study abroad decision; another key driving force was the support of her parents. It appeared that educational and key informant factors worked together. That is to say, it is difficult to separate and attribute weight to specific, discrete influential factors. In terms of her subject choice making, it appeared that her educational

pathway, along with other educational factors, such as undergraduate admission requirements, were inter-related in shaping Lynn's final subject choice. Lynn's decision to study abroad and her undergraduate subject choices were also linked in that her subject choice revolved around her decision to study abroad. To conclude, educational factors, including *Gaokao* influences, the uneven distribution of educational opportunities, the educational pathway taken to university, the search for an 'ideal' study environment and course structure, were interlinked, and were influenced, too, by the advice of others, particularly parents.

The role and nature of parental advice

Parents seemed to be an important information source in terms of both participants' initial study abroad decisions and their subject and university choices. My study's findings reveal that parents played a range of roles at different points in students' study abroad decision making. First, when problems arose, such as unsatisfactory *Gaokao* results or the uneven regional distribution of educational opportunities, parents seemed to act as supporters of participants in their initial study abroad decision making, helping them to overcome the unchangeable circumstances and suggesting ways in which they could make themselves more competitive. Second, parents seemed to also act as advisors in participants' university choice making when participants had no specific preference about which university to apply to. In such cases, parents tended to help their children to apply

to universities, drawing on their own experience or the experience of others.

Sometimes, but only occasionally, there seemed to be generational differences between participants and their parents, in that parents might hold different views about subject or university choice. In such cases, parents might be seen as imposing their views on participants' choice making. For example, parents might 'veto' participants' subject choices, suggesting that they choose a particular subject which fitted their own idea of a 'good' future career. Alternatively, in a few cases they were said to have 'vetoed' participants' host country choices if they were concerned about safety issues. This was the case with choosing the USA as a destination country.

Earlier studies have also highlighted the importance of parental influences on their children's study abroad decision making (Bodycott, 2009). Many have referred to the concept of 'filial piety' in this respect (Qun and Devine, 2018). Bodycott (2009) compared Chinese prospective students' and their parents' perspectives on study abroad decisions, and analysed which factors were prioritised when they considered studying abroad. Bodycott (2009) emphasised the differences between how parents and students rated the importance of specific influential factors. However, my study suggests that, in the main, parents and prospective undergraduates worked together to make decisions and address difficulties as

they arose.

As mentioned above, in much of the earlier literature on this topic, filial piety has been identified as an important factor shaping Chinese students' study abroad decision making (Qun and Devine, 2018). The term 'filial piety' is used to refer to the Confucian idea of respect for, and deference to, one's parents (Lee and Morrish, 2012). Filial piety seems to be a part of Confucianism rooted in Chinese traditional culture, revealing the relationship between two generations as a kind of support exchange (Chow, 2001; Miller, 2004; Zhan, 2004; Mao and Chi, 2011; Lee and Morrish, 2012). Qun and Devine (2018) emphasise the influence of filial piety, maintaining that it remains a strong ethic influencing Chinese doctoral students' decisions to study abroad. However, Qun and Devine's study did not reveal how participants weighed filial piety alongside other influences in their real study abroad decision making. In such studies, the influence of filial piety seems to have been a prior assumption; such an assumption might drive an over-emphasis on the relationship between study abroad decision making and filial piety.

This study, however, suggests that Confucianism and the filial piety related to it did not play particularly strong roles in participants' study abroad decision making. Although the data revealed that advice from family members frequently influenced participants' decision making, it would perhaps be a mistake to interpret this as

‘filial piety’. Indeed, parents appeared to influence students’ decision making only when students felt they needed help; they were not seen by participants as imposing their ideas. Only rarely, and in quite specific instances, did parents appear to exercise their power of veto. However, attributing parental advice and influence to the Confucian concept of filial piety seems unwarranted, and it was not alluded to by interviewees.

On the other hand, parental advice could, in some cases, be regarded as ‘hot’ knowledge if parental first-hand or second-hand experience enabled them to make recommendations which were particularly helpful (Ball and Vincent, 1998). The importance of hot knowledge has been emphasised in that students seemed to trust such information if it came from trusted people in the individual’s social network (Slack et al., 2014). The findings of my study suggest that family members, and in particular parents, tended to use their experience to help participants to make decisions, and that their hot knowledge was highly trusted and generally accepted unconditionally.

Differences in students’ family backgrounds and in the social contexts in which they live are likely to affect the type of information they receive from parents. In this study, it was apparent that some participants had parents who had themselves studied at a UK university. In these cases, the advice that they were able to offer

was highly respected and was likely to over-ride, or substitute for, the information of educational agents. This suggests that the social and educational backgrounds of prospective undergraduates may also shape their study abroad pathways and possibilities. For example, for those in my study coming from relatively remote areas, the 'hot knowledge' from parents tended to be related to the limited educational opportunities in the local area, rather than the possibilities of overseas study. For the purpose of this study, I did not categorise participants' income backgrounds, because it was challenging to find a recognised set of indicators with which to evaluate the social status of participants from different provinces or cities in Mainland China. However, it did appear that different family backgrounds and social contexts – and certainly regional disparities – may contribute to inequalities in international mobility, in terms of the choices which seemed to be available.

To conclude, the findings of this study demonstrate the value of parental advice, from the perspectives of these Mainland Chinese students, as they made their study abroad decisions. It shows too, the roles which parents played at different stages in the process It also suggests, however, that differences in family background and geographical location may impact of the quality and type of information offered to students by family members.

The influence of gender in decision making

Gender-related issues also emerged from the data, especially in discussions around subject and university choices. First, gender issues with regard to the desire to seek a life partner appeared in participants' considerations university choices. However, there were no apparent differences between female and male participants in the extent to which this was a consideration. However, in respect of subject choice, it appeared that some female participants' were swayed by their parents' gendered perceptions about occupational opportunities. For example, Xixi, whose interview data is referred to above, explained that her parents had different preferences from herself about her subject choice, and that they weighed gender as an important issue; ultimately, she struck a compromise between her own and her parents' preferences:

> *I wanted to study Sociology, but my parents didn't allow me to choose Sociology as my major. They wanted me to study Education because they thought teaching was a good occupation for girls and being a teacher or working in the education industry was stable for girls. I'm the second child in my family, and my parents are old. So I could understand that they wanted me to find a stable career. Finally, I negotiated with them and they agreed that I could choose to study 'Education and Sociology'.*

This issue has been identified in other studies (Lease and Dahlbeck, 2009;

Hassan, et al., 2022; Zhu, et al., 2023; AlJameel, et al., 2024). According to Lease and Dahlbeck (2009), for example, parental influences have a greater impact for female students' career decision making than for males. AlJameel, et al., (2024) also suggest that female students experience higher levels of stress, in terms of career decision making, compared with male students. Both studies suggest that parental influence on career decision making is stronger for female than male students. Furthermore, Zhu, et al., (2023) argued that female students perceive higher stability or comfort expectations from parents when making career choices. My own study revealed no such differences between female and male participants.

Chapter Conclusion

Overall, this study throws light on two key aspects of choice making for Mainland Chinese international students. First, an awareness of educational and future labour market competition appeared to exercise a strong influence on the decision making process. Second, while perceptions of *neijuan,* credential inflation and job competition were strongly influential, other complex and overlapping factors, specific to each individual's situation, were also weighed in the balance. This therefore suggests that over-simplified 'factor-based' models of choice making (such as the 'push and pull' factors model) are not sufficient to explain student decision making. I would argue that a more considered approach is needed, which takes into account a range of factors, including pre-university educational routes

and experiences, regional disparities, gender differences and the advice available from family, friends and educational professionals. The implications of these findings will be discussed in the concluding chapter.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion

Introduction

This study has added to our understanding of how Mainland Chinese students, who take different pre-university educational pathways, go about making their initial study abroad decisions and their subject and university choices. First and foremost, it differs from many of the prominent studies that are already published in this field. It has portrayed the decision making process as complex and multifactorial, with no clear-cut phases. In addition, the importance of *neijuan* – or educational and labour market competitiveness, has been strongly foregrounded, and demonstrated through participants' desire to gain acceptance by high status institutions – whether in China or overseas. To date, the concept of *neijuan* has been little used in studies of this nature. Furthermore, the importance of the specific educational route taken to undergraduate study has also been highlighted in a way in which other studies have not hitherto done.

There are three sections in this chapter:

- The contribution of the study to our practical understanding of choice making
- The implications for those involved in the process of decision making
- Lessons from the research

Also, I explain what I have learned from the process of undertaking this research

study. In addition, I point out what further research might add to this understanding.

Contribution to our practical understanding of choice making

In this first section, I discuss the contributions of this study for our practical understanding of student choice making related to educational pathways and information sources, and the implications for those involved promoting access to university to Mainland Chinese undergraduates – and potentially to other international students. I focus particularly on the ways that universities appear to publicise themselves, and how this matches with the types of information that international students require.

The study has revealed that information about educational issues gained from different channels seems to be important in shaping decision making. The impact of taking differing educational pathways and the apparent inconsistency of access to information sources seem to be two practical issues to which attention needs to be paid. . Below, I discuss the strengths and drawbacks of different educational pathways. I then discuss the importance of clear and consistent information sources.

Different pathways, different choices

The findings emerging from the data, both on initial study abroad decision making and subject and university choices, highlight the influence of pre-university educational pathways on students' whole decision making process. Four distinct pre-university pathways appeared in the interview data: the foundation course route, the *Gaokao* route, the A-Level route, and the international school route. The educational pathways taken by participants seemed to determine the amount of time available for them to make initial undergraduate study abroad decisions. For example, students taking A-Level or international school routes usually made their decisions to study abroad at the point at which they graduated from secondary school or in the early stages of their high school studies. On the other hand, participants taking the *Gaokao* or foundation course routes commonly made their decisions to study abroad at the end of their high school studies, or after taking *Gaokao*. It therefore appeared that pre-university educational pathways shaped participants' initial study abroad decisions. The findings further suggest that different educational pathways may shape later (and in some instance, limit) subject and university choices. In this section, I compare how the different educational pathways identified above influenced students' further undergraduate decision making.

Subject decision making

The subject decision making processes of participants in the study seemed to vary

to some extent, dependent on the different educational pathways they chose after high school. Those who took the foundation course pathway appeared to be most affected by educational restrictions and obstacles which they had not been fully aware of before embarking on their preparatory courses. For example, the range of undergraduate subject choices open to participants who took the foundation course route seemed to be more limited than for those taking other educational routes, and participants often needed to make their subject decisions before applying to a foundation course. Participants who took an A-Level route also, in some cases, experienced subject limitations. However, their A-level course selections did give them some scope to choose their eventual undergraduate subject(s). In contrast, students who took the international school route (for example the International Baccalaureate Diploma or the Canadian High School Diploma) and those who took the *Gaokao* route seemed to have a wider range of subject choices. In particular, the range of subjects covered in international school and *Gaokao* courses appeared to be wider than those available in foundation courses and A-Levels. As discussed in Chapter One, both the *Gaokao* and international qualifications tend to cover a broad range of fields of study, including arts, sciences and language studies. Those pre-university educational routes which covered a wider range of subjects offered participants greater choice in their subject decision making.

University decision making

Participants who took a foundation course route to undergraduate study appeared to need to take into account a number of quite specific factors when making their choice of UK university. Notably, all the participants who took the foundation course route eventually chose to continue their undergraduate studies either at the university where they had taken their foundation course, or else at a partner university of their foundation course provider. Their undergraduate university choices were therefore limited, at the outset, by their choice of educational pathway. In addition, students who took the *Gaokao* route also experienced limitations in their university choices because not all UK universities accepted the *Gaokao* score as evidence of an applicant's academic performance and ability to study in a UK university. However, those who took the *Gaokao* route did have the possibility of gaining access to some overseas universities as well as to Chinese universities. In contrast, those who took the A-Level and international school routes seemed to have a broader range of options in that the qualifications for which they had studied had currency in the UK, and were well suited to the UK structure of undergraduate study.

To conclude, taking a foundation course in order to gain access into UK undergraduate study seemed to be the most difficult pre-university educational route in that it tended, by its nature, to close down some choices for applicants to

undergraduate study. The international school route, on the other hand, seemed to offer the widest range of both university and subject choices for undergraduate study. It is worth highlighting that study abroad decision making processes involved a long journey which, in some cases began with decisions made early in secondary school. To date there appears to be an absence of studies which have looked at the differences between Chinese students taking different pathways. Previous studies have tended to regard Chinese students as if they all arrive at overseas universities by similar routes. However, it is clear that potential international students may come by a variety of pathways. In addition, the pathway they take is likely to influence their experience of the application process and the choices they are able to make. Specifically, final subject and university choices seemed to be shaped by previous educational decisions and transitions, and the rules and regulations behind these educational decisions and transitions. Every step which participants took appeared to influence the options which would be open to them at the point of applying to university.

Inconsistency of access to information sources

The findings of this study reveal the importance of information sources in informing participants' study abroad decision-making. By 'information sources', I am referring to the means by which participants collected, received and reviewed relevant information when they made their study abroad decisions. The two principal

sources of information identified in the study were key informants and social media. ‘Key informants’ included parents, family members, teachers, and educational agents. In referring to ‘social media’, participants talked about Chinese applications such as Zhihu, Redbook, Weibo, and Douban. The importance of information sources has also been mentioned in the previous literature (for example, Bodycott, 2009; Wu, 2014; Cebolla-Boado, et al., 2017; Wu, 2020). According to Bodycott (2009), educational exhibitions were found to be an important information source for both Chinese parents and prospective university students. This was confirmed by Wu (2020) who asserted that the ‘educational fair’ was one of main ways in which students learned about overseas universities. ‘Online’ information, including social networking tools such as chat forums and blogs, and web-based information, such as an official university website, have also been identified as valuable tools supporting students’ initial study abroad decisions and their university choices (Bodycott, 2009; Wu, 2014; Wu, 2020). Interacting with other people online or in person to collect information is one way in which students may learn about overseas universities (Cebolla-Boado, et al., 2017). My own study’s findings concur with those of others in this regard.

The findings of the studies mentioned above, however, seem to refer to the ways in which prospective students actively seek out and collect information relevant to their choice making. In addition to this, though, my own study suggests that some

participants were also ‘passive recipients’ of information through channels such as educational agents. Agents might provide participants with information; in such cases, participants were obliged to accept information that had been already ‘filtered’. For those participants who took the foundation course or international school pathways to undergraduate study, agents’ advice appeared to exercise considerable influence on their decision making processes. As revealed in Chapter Five, educational agents’ advice could be problematic for some of those who took a foundation course in the UK, as it also was for the one participant who studied for a Canadian High School Diploma. In a number of instances (and particularly in the case of the Canadian High School Diploma), incorrect or incomplete information provided by educational agents appeared to impact negatively on subsequent subject and university choices. And, as has already been noted, the tendency for educational agents to limit a participant’s choice of university to those with which the agent, or foundation course provider was in co-operation, could seriously limit the choice making possibilities.

Information barriers have been identified elsewhere as having a crucial negative impact on study abroad decision making (Wu, 2020). In my study, a key issue appeared to be that of inaccurate or limiting advice on the part of agents. It is also important to bear in mind here that educational agents and foundation course providers earn money from providing services to both students and universities

(Feng, 2021; Nikula and Kivistö, 2020). Wu (2014) suggested the ‘agent information gap’ is likely to be driven, in part at least, by the need for agents to serve the interests of their partner institutions as much as those of students.

It seemed apparent from this study that participants were not always well informed about how to choose foundation courses, or the implications of doing so. However, there seemed to be no single, unbiased official channel available to prospective students. This may leave them at the mercy of the market when making crucial choices about their future education.

In summary, access to reliable information sources is important for international students in making their study abroad decisions. However, it appears that this is not consistently available. Establishing a reliable information channel would allow prospective international students to gain a clearer understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of each pre-university educational route, as well as their undergraduate application processes. This, it may be suggested, would have a positive impact on both prospective international students’ undergraduate applications and universities’ undergraduate recruitment.

Implications for aspiring undergraduates, their advisors, and those responsible for their admission

There are three lessons emerging from the study that might inform UK undergraduate admissions advisors, UK universities, and prospective international students. First, at the policy level, there needs to be an independent and non-profit making advisory body or organisation which is able to provide reliable information about international undergraduate applications. In this way, prospective international students could gain comprehensive and unbiased information and advice, thus avoiding meeting information barriers in relation to their undergraduate study abroad decisions. This might not just be of benefit to international undergraduates; it might also enhance the international reputation of the UK higher education system.

Second, at the university level, individual UK universities would be well advised to ensure that they have clear undergraduate applications guidance for international students on their official websites. Most frequently, on current official university websites, the general entry requirements in terms of different educational routes are shown, but the timelines and guidance for undergraduate applications from different pre-university educational pathways seem to be overlooked. However, this information is of the utmost importance to international students' study abroad decision making. It would assist them in understanding undergraduate applications processes in respect of different pre-university educational pathway and what challenges they might experience during the application process. Furthermore, it

would not seem advisable to close down the options of destination country, subject, and university early on. Instead, the study suggests that prospective international students should seek educational pathways which leave their options as open as possible.

The third lesson is at the level of potential applicants. My study suggests that prospective international students need to make their study abroad plans quite early on, comparing the pros and cons of different pre-university educational pathways before making their initial decision to study overseas. The study also suggests the value of 'hot knowledge', and emphasises the importance of gathering information from as wide a range of sources as possible.

Lessons from the research

Through conducting this study, I have learned what it is to be an academic researcher and to confront the practical and theoretical challenges of conducting a qualitative study. I have also learned that there is a need for the researcher to respond flexibly to unforeseen challenges which occur in the course of a study – in this case the Covid pandemic, which presented a threat to the whole study. In addition, I have concluded that this study suggests possibilities for future research – undertaken by myself or others.

The lessons from the research process

This study has demonstrated the value of qualitative studies, which examine issues from the perspectives of those affected by them, rather than working on the basis of assumptions about the salient factors in choice-making and then testing those assumptions. I have attempted to take an open-minded approach to this study, while being aware of my own preconceived ideas, particularly those which I was convinced by when I first started out on my research. As a result, I have come to the view that the process of choice making is much more complex than I had initially believed it to be, and than has been suggested by earlier studies.

This study has also drawn attention to the value of myself, as a researcher originating from and normally resident in Mainland China, exploring Chinese students' decision making. My understanding of the language and the national context has enabled me to surface and take account of concepts such as *neijuan* and their meaning in the higher education sphere, which might not be surfaced by 'outsider' researchers. While a researcher's insider status can, in some instances be seen as problematic, I would argue that it has been an advantage here (Court and Abbas, 2013).

In conducting this study, I aimed to let Chinese students speak for themselves, rather than imposing possible meanings and categories in advance of collecting

data. Each individual participants' story was, in its own right, complex, involving multiple considerations, personal feelings, challenges, and solutions. My role was to encourage them to tell these stories, which I then interpreted with their help. And because of the importance of encouraging participants to tell their own stories, reinforced the argument and value of interviewing Chinese participants in their own language. During the process of analysing interview data, I endeavoured to retain the data in Chinese for as long as possible. In this way, I felt better able to manage to 'keep hold of' important emerging ideas and concepts, rather than losing them in translation at an early stage. As a result, the study has illustrated the importance of local contextual factors such as *neijuan* and regional differences within China which have not been emphasised in other studies.

The lessons for myself as a researcher

As a novice researcher, the most important lessons which I take from conducting this study have been how to deal with unforeseen circumstances in a research project (in this case the Covid-19 pandemic), how to approach and conduct interviews with strangers, and how to analyse a complex issue.

In early 2020, the whole of my original research project had to be revised due to the impact of the pandemic. I re-configured my research plan and redrafted my ethical review application in order to ensure that the research could be conducted

smoothly in spite of the impact of the pandemic. This has helped me to understand that every research decision may potentially be influenced by unforeseen factors. My experience has taught me to take unforeseeable events and environmental factors into account in future research decision making.

The second lesson I have learned from the research is how to conduct effective interviews with strangers by establishing rapport with interviewees (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). I learned how to consider the commonalities between the interviewee and myself and to use these as a way of creating a comfortable atmosphere for interviews. In this study, I was already aware that we had common educational experiences and therefore, I used this as the starting point for each interview. I also shared my personal experiences or opinions about studying overseas with interviewees after they described their decisions or expressed an opinion about a decision they had made. Although it was important to maintain a neutral stance towards what interviewees told me, I also wanted to make sure they felt at ease in sharing their decisions and opinions with me (Patton, 2015). The communication skills I developed in the process of interviewing did, I believe, help me to establish rapport with interviewees and gain richer responses from them (Patton, 2015).

Furthermore, I have learned from this study how to analyse a complex issue – in this case a decision-making process. When I began my study, I was convinced that Chinese students' study abroad decisions were mainly related to parental influences. During the process of conducting interviews, I realised that on the contrary, students' study abroad decision involved a number of factors, sometimes operating simultaneously. I have realised the importance of systematically analysing interview data, keeping a constantly open mind and recognising that the answers to research questions are rarely straightforward or simple.

Students' decision making is rarely influenced by just one single thing. Even those excellent studies which have identified a range of factors have not taken into account how complex and long the process of decision making is for a potential applicant and how decisions made very early on in the process can positively or negatively influence the outcome.

Building on the research

The outcomes of this study suggest a number of future research possibilities. First, the influence of *neijuan* on international mobility seems to be an area that is relatively under-researched and therefore worthwhile for researchers to explore in future. In this study, *neijuan* has emerged as a theme from the data. It was not the focus of the research originally. Future studies might usefully apply qualitative

research methods to explore how *neijuan* influenced the study abroad decisions of different groups of students, such as those at different levels of higher education – undergraduate and postgraduate – students studying different subjects, or students taking different pre-university educational pathways. In this way, the meanings of *neijuan* in the field of international mobility might be more comprehensively understood.

Second, Chinese students' undergraduate study abroad decisions seem to represent a significant life transition, with implications not only for educational pathways, experiences and outcomes, but also for future careers. The findings from this study highlight the influence of future competition in the job market and on career planning on current study abroad decision making, even though these have yet to be encountered. Future studies might usefully apply longitudinal methods to explore the relationship between study abroad decision making and later career decision making by investigating the impact of study abroad decisions on students' actual career pathways. Such studies could provide a more complete picture of how study abroad decisions and career choices mutually influence each other.

References

Ahlburg, D. (2020) Covid-19 and UK universities. *The Political Quarterly, 91*(3), 649-654

AlJameel, A., et al. (2024) Perceived stress among dental students and role of parental influence in career decision-making. *Journal of dental education, 2*.

Altbach, P. (2004) Globalisation and the university: Myths and realities in an unequal world. *Tertiary Education and Management, 10*(1), 3–25.

Altbach, P., and J. Knight. (2007) The Internationalization of Higher Education: Motivations and Realities. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 11* (3–4), 290–305.

Babbie, E. (2015) *The Practice of Social Research.* Beijing: Tsinghua University Press

Ball, S., and Vincent, C. (1998) 'I Heard It on the Grapevine': 'hot' knowledge and school choice, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *19*(3), 377-400

Bass, M. (2005) 'The issue of permanent residency'. *Campus Review*, *15*(47), 6.

BBC (2020) Covid: University of Surrey lowers entry grades to 'relieve anxiety'. Available: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-55112800 (Accessed 20 Sep 2023)

Becker, G. S. (1964) *Human capital: Theoretical and empirical analysis (with special reference to education).* New York: National Bureau of Economic Research.

Blaikie, N. (2000) *Designing Social Research*. Cambridge: Polity.

Bodycott, P. (2009) Choosing a higher education study abroad destination: What mainland Chinese parents and students rate as important. *Journal of Research in International Education, 8*(3), 349-373.

Bodycott, P., & Lai, A. (2012) The influence and implications of Chinese culture in the decision to undertake cross-border higher education. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 16*(3), 252-270.

Bourdieu, P. (1986) 'The forms of Capital'. In Richardson, J. G. (eds) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, pp. 241-258. New York: Greenwood Press.

Brown, P. (2016) 'The transformation of higher education, credential competition, and the graduate labour market.' In Cote, J. and Furlong, A. (eds) *Routledge Handbook of the Sociology of Higher Education,* pp. 197-207. London: Routledge.

Bryman, A. (2006) Integrating quantitative and qualitative research: How is it done? *Qualitative Research, 6*(1), 97–113.

Campbell, A. (2010) Developing generic skills and attributes of international students: The (ir)relevance of the Australian university experience. *Journal of Higher Education Policy & Management, 32*(5), 487–497.

Cebolla-Boado, H. Hu, Y. & Soysal, Y. (2017) Why study abroad? Sorting of Chinese students across British universities. *British Journal of Sociology of*

Education, 39(3), 365-380

Chang, C. (2012) *Confucianism: A Modern Interpretation.* Singapore: World Scientific Pub.

Chen, L. H. (2007) East-Asian students' choice of Canadian graduate schools. *International Journal of Educational Advancement, 7*(4), 271-306.

Chen, L. H. (2008) Internationalization or international marketing? Two frameworks for understanding international students' choice of Canadian universities. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education, 18*(1), 1-33.

Chen, W. W., & Wong, Y. L. (2014). What my parents make me believe in learning: The role of filial piety in Hong Kong students' motivation and academic achievement. *International Journal of Psychology*, 49(4), 249–256.

Chow, N. (2001) The Practice of Filial Piety Among the Chinese in Hong Kong. In: Chi I, Chappell NL, Lubben J, (eds) *Elderly Chinese in Pacific Rim Countries: Social Support and Integration*, pp. 125-136. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Chow, N. (2007) Aging and the Family in Hong Kong. *International Journal of Sociology of the Family*, 33(1), 145–155.

Cohen, L., & Manion, L. (2018) *Research Methods in Education.* New York: Routledge

Collins, F. L. (2012) Organizing student mobility: Education agents and student

migration to New Zealand. *Pacific Affairs, 85*(1), 137–160.

Costa, D. & Zha, Q. (2020) Chinese Higher Education: The role of the economy and Project 211/985 for system expansion. *Ensaio, 28*(109), 885-908

Counsell, D. (2011) Chinese Students Abroad: Why they Choose the UK and How They See Their Future. China: An International Journal, *9*(1), 48-71.

Court, D. and Abbas, R. (2013) Whose Interview Is It, Anyway? Methodological and Ethical Challenges of Insider–Outsider Research, Multiple Languages, and Dual-Researcher Cooperation. *Qualitative Inquiry, 19*(6), 480-488

Creswell, J. W. & Miller, D. L. (2000) Determining validity in qualitative inquiry. *Theory into Practice, 39*(3), 124-131.

CSC (2023) Introduction of the National Study Abroad Fund in 2023. Available: https://www.csc.edu.cn/article/2613 (Accessed 31 Aug 2023)

Cubillo, J.M., Sanchez, J. and Cervino, J. (2006) 'International Student's decision-making process.' *International Journal of Education Management, 20*(2), 101-115.

Davies, D., & Dodd, J. (2002) Qualitative research and the question of rigor. *Qualitative Health research, 12*(2), 279-289.

Department for Education (2020) Taking exams during the coronavirus (Covid-19) outbreak. Online. Available: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-cancellation-of-gcses-as-and-a-levels-in-2020/coronavirus-covid-19-

cancellation-of-gcses-as-and-a-levels-in-2020 (Accessed 15 Feb 2023)

Dong, W. (2012) Upon the construction of fuzzy evaluation system for studying abroad. *Journal of Ningbo University (Educational Science Edition), 34*(5), 72-75.

Ely, M., Vinz, R., Downing, M. and Anzul, M. (1997) *On writing qualitative research: living by words*. Falmer: Routledge.

Fam, K. S. and Gray, B. (2000) 'Asian values and education promotion: an empirical study'. *Marketing in a Global Economy Proceedings*, 431–38.

Feng, S. and Horta, H. (2021) Brokers of international student mobility: The roles and processes of education agents in China. *European Journal of Education, 56*(2), 248-264

Fong, V. L. (2011) Paradise Redefined: Transnational Chinese Students and the Quest for Flexible Citizenship in the Developed World. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Fudan University (2019) Undergraduate admission quotas in 2019. Online. Available: https://ao.fudan.edu.cn/89/cf/c36332a494031/page.htm (Accessed 30 Aug 2023)

Galan, M., Lawley, M., and Clements, M. (2015) Social media's use in postgraduate students' decision-making journey: an exploratory study, *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education, 25*(2), 287-312

Gardner, D. (2014) *Confucianism: A Very Short Introduction.* New York: Oxford University Press

Given, L. M (Eds.) (2008) *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications

Golafshani, N. (2003) (2003) Understanding reliability and validity in qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report, 8*(4), 597–607.

Gong, X., and Huybers, T. (2015) Chinese students and higher education destinations: Findings from a choice experiment. *Australian Council for Educational Research, 59*(2), 196-218.

Gonzalez Ocampo, G. and Castelló, M. (2018) Writing in doctoral programs: examining supervisors' perspectives. *Higher Education, 76*(3), 387-401

Green, M.F., & Olsen, C.L. (2003) *Internationalizing the campus: A user's guide.* Washington, DC: American Council on Education, Center for Institutional and international Initiatives.

Grix, J. (2002) Introducing students to the generic terminology of social research. *Politics*, 22(3), 175–186.

Guest, G. et al. (2006) How Many Interviews Are Enough? An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability. *Field Methods, 18*(1), 59-82.

Hamnett, Shen & Liang (2019) 'the reproduction of regional inequality through university access: the Gaokao in China', *Area Development and Policy*,

4(3), 252-270.

Hassan, M. et al. (2022) Investigating the parental and media influence on gender stereotypes and young student's career choices in Pakistan. *Original Research, 13*

Hay, C. (2002) *Political analysis: A critical introduction.* Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave.

HES (2014) Higher Expectations Surveys: an annual survey conducted by the Youth Sight research foundation. Available: https://www.youthsight. com/expertise/higher-education-research/higher-expections/ (Accessed 10 Apr 2016)

HESA (2014) the total numbers of Chinese international students (undergraduate and master's) in each university in Britain. Available: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/ data-and-analysis/students/international-study (Accessed 10 April 2016)

HESA (2023) Where do HE students come from? Available: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from (Accessed 31 Aug 2023)

HESA (2023) Who's studying in HE? Available: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he (Accessed 31 Aug 2023)

Hiu, L. (2001) 'Chinese cultural schema of education: implications for

communication between Chinese students and Australian educators', *Issues in Educational Research*, *15*(1), 17–36.

Hung, F.S. et al. (2005) 'A report on the export potential of Hong Kong's education services', *A Consultancy Study for the Hong Kong Trade and Development Council*. Hong Kong.

Hung, F.S. et al. (2006) "Seeking Higher Education Abroad: Choices and Reasons of Students in Mainland China", Research project funded by University Grants Committee of Hong Kong (Research Grants Council).

Hung, N. and Yen, K. (2020) The Role of Motivation and Career Planning in Students' Decision Making Process for Studying Abroad: A Mixed-Methods Study. *Revista Argentina de clinica psicologica., 29*(4), 252-265.

Jiang, Y. (2014) 'Potential Spatial Labor and Human Capital Mobility in China: Evidence from College Admissions Under the National College Entrance Examination System', *Emerging Markets Finance & Trade, 5*0, 107–121.

Kaplan (2023) Who we are. Available: https://www.kaplanpathways.com/who-we-are/ (Accessed 31 Aug 2023)

Keshishian, F. and McGarr, N. (2012) Motivating factors influencing choice of major in undergraduates in communication sciences and disorders, *International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, *14*(2), 174-182

Knight, J. (2003) Updated internationalization definition. *International Higher Education, 33*, 2–3.

Knight, J. (2008) Internationalization: A decade of changes and challenges. *International Higher Education, 50*, (Winter), 6–7.

Knight, J. (2013) The changing landscape of higher education internationalisation – for better or worse?, *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education, 17*(3), 84-90

Knight, J. (2014) Is internationalisation of higher education having an identity crisis? In A. Maldonado-Maldonado and R.M. Bassett (Eds.), *The forefront of international higher education: A Festschrift in honor of Philip G. Altbach (pp. 75–87)*. Dordrecht: Springer Science+Business Media.

Lease, S. and Dahlbeck, D. (2009) Parental influences, career decision-making Attributions, and self-efficacy: differences for men and women? *Journal of Career Development, 36*(2), 95-113.

Lee, C. and Morrish, S. (2012) Cultural values and higher education choices: Chinese families*. Australia Marketing Journal*, 20(2), 59-64*.*

Lee, W. and Kwok, H. (2005) Differences in Expectations and Patterns of Informal Support for Older Persons in Hong Kong: Modification to Filial Piety. *Ageing International,* 30(2), 188-206.

Li, C. (2006) Chinese as a Lingua Franca in Greater China. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 26*, 149-176

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985) *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Liu, H., & Wu, Q. (2006) Consequences of college entrance exam in China and

the reform challenges. *KEDI Journal of Education Policy*, *3*(1), 7-21.

Li. M. (2007) ‘Mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong and Macau’. *International Higher Education, 46*, 15–16.

Li, M. (2021) ‘Nei Juan’ in Exam-oriented Education in China. *The Journal of Literature and Art Studies, 12* (11), 1028-1033

Liu, J. (2010) The changing body of students: A study of the motives, expectations and preparedness of postgraduate marketing students. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning, 28*(7), 812-830.

Liu, Y. (2013) Meritocracy and the Gaokao: A system study of higher education selection and socio-economic participation in East China. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *34*(5-6), 868-887.

Liu, Y. (2015) ‘Geographical stratification and the role of the state in access to higher education in contemporary China’, *International Journal of Educational Development*, *44*, 108-117

Liu, Y., Hung, F. S., and Chung, Y. P. (2013) Chinese students' choice of major when considering higher education abroad: The case of mainland China. *China: An International Journal*, *11*(1), 94-112.

Liu, Y., Kong, F., and Zhong, Y. (2012) Our high school students to study abroad at their own expense willingness research - seven city-based sample survey data. *Education Research, 10*, 59-63.

Liu, Y. et al. (2022) ‘Building Halos: How do Chinese elites seek distinction through (mis) recognising studying abroad?’, *International Journal of Educational Development, 91*, 102589

Lowe, J. (2007) *Decision Making by Chinese Students Choosing UK and Chinese Universities: Full Research Report*. ESRC End of Award Report, RES-000-22-0911. Swindon: ESRC.

Lu, Y., Mavondo, F. T., and Qiu, L. L. (2009) *Factors Influencing the Choice of Overseas Study by Undergraduate and Postgraduate Chinese Students*. Paper presented at the Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy Conference, Melbourne.

Lynch, K. (1999) Equality Studies, the Academy and the role of research in emancipatory social change. *Economic and Social Review, 30*(1), 41-69

MacEachern, M. and Yun, D. (2017) Exploring factors influencing international students’ decision to choose a higher education institution, *International Journal of Educational Management*, *31*(3), 343-363.

Manns, Y., and Swift, J. (2015) Chinese postgraduate choices when considering a UK Business and Management programme. *Higher Education Quarterly*, *70*(1), 3-23.

Mao, W. and Chi, I. (2011) Filial piety of children as perceived by aging parents in China, *International Journal of Social Welfare, 20*(2), 99-108.

Mathias, J, et al. (2014) Challenging the Western stereotype: Do Chinese international foundation students learn by rote? *Research in Post-Compulsory Education, 18*(3), 221-238.

Mazzarol, T., & Soutar, N. (2002) 'Push-pull factors influencing student destination choice'. *International Journal of Education Management, 16*(2), 82–90.

Merriam, S., & Tisdell, E. (2016) *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Brand

Miller, E. (2004). Filial Daughters, Filial Sons: Comparisons from Rural North China. In: Ikels C, (eds). *Filial Piety: Practice and Discourse in Contemporary East Asia,* pp. 34-52. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Mills, J. (2014) Methodology and methods. In Mills, J., & Birks, M. *Qualitative Methodology: A Practical Guide* (pp. 31- 47). London: SAGE Publications

Ministry of Education of PRC (2020) The Opinions on Accelerating and Expanding the Opening up of Education in the New Era. Available: http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/s271/202006/t20200617_466545.html (Accessed 31 Aug 2023)

Mok, K. H., Xiong, W., Ke, G., & Cheung, J. O. W. (2021) Impact of Covid-19 pandemic on international higher education and student mobility: Student perspectives from mainland China and Hong Kong. *International Journal of Educational Research, 105*, 101718.

Morse, J. (1995) The significance of saturation. *Qualitative Health Research 5*, 147–49.

Mulvey, B. and Wright, E. (2022) Global and local possible selves: Differentiated strategies for positional competition among Chinese university students. *British Educational Research Association, 48*(5), 841-858.

Neuman, L. (2014) *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches.* Harlow: Pearson

Nicholls, S. (2018) Influences on International Student Choice of Study Destination: Evidence from the United States. *Journal of International Students. 8*(2), 597-622.

Nichols, S. and Stahl, G. (2019) Intersectionality in higher education research: a systematic literature review. *Higher Education Research & Development, 38*(6), 1255-1268.

Nikula, P.-T., & Kivistö, J. (2020) Monitoring of education agents engaged in international student recruitment: Perspectives from agency theory. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 24*(2), 212–231.

Observatory on Borderless Higher Education. (2014) The agent question: Insights from students, universities and agents. Available: http://www.obhe.ac.uk/documents/view_details?id=953

Oliveira, D. and Soares, A. (2016) Studying abroad: developing a model for the decision process of international students. *Journal of Higher Education*

Policy and Management, *38*(2), 126-139

Ortlipp, M. (2008) Keeping and Using Reflective Journals in the Qualitative Research Process. *The Qualitative Report, 13*(4), 695-705

Patton, M. (2015) *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Pimpa, N. (2003) The influence of peers and student recruitment agencies on Thai students' choices of international education. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 7*(2), 178–192.

Pritchard, A, Fudge, J., Crawford, E. & Jackson, J. (2018) Undergraduate choice of major and major satisfaction: an expanded role for personality measures. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education, 28*(2), 155-174

Qun, D. & Devine, N. (2018) Exploring the implications of filial piety for Chinese doctoral students' international mobility: A study in the New Zealand Context. *Knowledge cultures, 6*(1), 62-78.

Reach to Teach Recruiting (2023) Map of China. Available: https://www.reachtoteachrecruiting.com/guide-to-china-map.html. (Accessed 21 Sep 2023)

Rembielak, G., Rashid, T. and Parlinska, A. (2020) 'Factors Influencing Students' Choices and Decision making Process: A Case Study of Polish Students Studying in a British Higher Education Institution.' *Acta Science Pol Oeconomia, 19*(3), 85-95.

Robson, S. (2011) Internationalization: a transformative agenda for higher education?, *Teachers and Teaching*, *17*(6), 619-630.

Rudd, B., Djafarova, E., and Waring, T. (2012) Chinese students' decision making process: A case of a Business School in the UK. *The International Journal of Management Education, 10*(2), 129-138.

Ruhanen, L. and McLennan, C. (2010) 'Location, Location, Location' — The Relative Importance of Country, Institution and Program: A Study of Tourism Postgraduate Students. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, *17*(1), 44-52.

Ryan, J. (2019) *Education in China.* Cambridge: Polity Press

Sandelowski, M. (1998) Writing a good read: Strategies for re-presenting qualitative data, *Research in nursing and health, 21*(4), 375-382.

Schwandt, T. A. (1997) *Qualitative inquiry: A dictionary of terms.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Seale, C. (1999) *The quality of qualitative research.* London: Sage

Slack, K, et al. (2014) 'Hot', 'cold' and 'warm' information and higher education decision-making, *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 35*(2), 204-223

Stein, S, et al. (2016) Towards Different Conversations About the Internationalization of Higher Education, *Comparative and International Education / Éducation Comparée et Internationale, 45*(1), Article 2.

Stein, S. (2017) Internationalization for an Uncertain Future: Tensions, Paradoxes, and Possibilities. *The Review of Higher Education, 41*(1), 3-33.

Stenbacka, C. (2001) Qualitative research requires quality concepts of its own. *Management Decision, 39*(7), 551-555

Sugahara, S., Boland, G. & Cilloni, A. (2008) Factors Influencing Students' Choice of an Accounting Major in Australia, *Accounting Education: an international journal, 17*(1), 37-54

Sutrisno, A, et al. (2014) Incorporating translation in qualitative studies: two case studies in education. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 27*(10), 1337-1353.

The Guardian (2023) Fifth of UK universities' income comes from overseas students, figures show. Online. Available: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/jul/14/overseas-students-uk-universities-income (Accessed 30 Aug 2023)

Tomlinson, M. and Watermeyer, R. (2022) When masses meet markets: credentialism and commodification in twenty-first century Higher Education, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 43*(2), 173-187

Treas, J. and Wang, W. (1993) Of Deeds and Contracts: Filial Piety Perceived in Contemporary Shanghai. In: Bengtson, V. (eds) *The Changing Contract Across Generations*, pp. 87–98. Hawthorne, NY, Aldine De Gruyter.

Tu, M. (2016). Chinese one-child families in the age of migration: Middle-class

transnational mobility, ageing parents, and the changing role of filial piety. *Journal of Chinese Sociology*, 3(15), 1–17.

Twinn, S. (1998) An analysis of the effectiveness of focus groups as a method of qualitative data collection with Chinese populations in nursing research. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 28*(3), 654–661.

UCAS (2015) International Qualifications: For entry to university or college in 2015. Available: https://www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/2015-international-qualifications.pdf (Accessed 31 Aug 2023)

UCAS (2023) Qualifications you can take: A-levels . Available: https://www.ucas.com/post-16-qualifications/qualifications-you-can-take/levels (Accessed 30 Aug 2023)

UCAS (2023) Qualifications you can take: International Baccalaureate (IB). Available: https://www.ucas.com/further-education/post-16-qualifications/qualifications-you-can-take/international-baccalaureate-ib (Accessed 30 Aug 2023)

UK Department for Education and UK Department for Trade (2019) *International Education Strategy: global potential, global growth.* Available: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/international-education-strategy-global-potential-global-growth (Accessed 30 Aug 2023)

UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2023) Number and rates of international mobile students (inbound and outbound). Available:

http://data.uis.unesco.org/index.aspx?queryid=3806# (Accessed 31 Aug 2023)

UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2023) Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students. Available: http://uis.unesco.org/en/uis-student-flow (Accessed 31 Aug 2023)

University of Birmingham (2020) University of Birmingham to reduce entry requirements for 2021 by one grade in recognition of impact of Covid-19 on A-level students. Available: https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/news-archive/2020/university-of-birmingham-to-reduce-entry-requirements-for-2021-by-one-grade-in-recognition-of-impact-of-covid-19-on-a-level-students (Accessed 26 Aug 2023)

University of Birmingham (2023) GAOKAO Undergraduate Entry. Available: https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/International/students/country/China/GAOKAO.aspx (Accessed 31 Aug 2023)

University of London (2023) International Foundation Programme. Available: https://www.london.ac.uk/international-foundation-programme-structure (Accessed 31 Aug 2023)

University UK (2023) International students boost UK economy by £41.9 billion. Online. Available: https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/latest/news/international-students-boost-uk-economy (Accessed 31 Aug 2023)

Van de Werfhorst, H. &Andersen, R. (2005) Social Background, Credential Inflation and Educational Strategies. *Acta Sociologica, 48*(4), 321-340

Van de Werfhorst, H. (2009) Credential inflation and educational strategies: A comparison of the United States and the Netherlands. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility, 27*, 269–284

Walker, P. (2014) International student policies in UK higher education from colonialism to the coalition developments and consequences. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 18*(4), 325–344.

Wang, D. et al. (2010). Older People's Belief of Filial Piety in China: Expectation and Non-Expectation. *Clinical Gerontologist*, 33(1), 2–38.

Wang, Z., & Crawford, I. (2021) Factors motivating destination decisions of Chinese study abroad students. *International Journal of Educational Management, 35*(2), 408-425.

Welch, A. (2002) Going global: Internationalizing Australian universities in a Rome of global crisis. *Comparative Education Review, 46*(4), 433–471.

Wilkins, S.,and Huisman, J. (2011) International student destination choice: the influence of home campus experience on the decision to consider branch campuses. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education, 21*(1), 61-83.

Willig, C (2014) Interpretation and analysis. In Uwe, F (ed) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis* (pp. 136-150). London: SAGE Publications.

Wolcott, H. (1990) On Seeking– and Rejecting–Validity in Qualitative Research. In Eisner, E. and Peshkin, A. (eds) *Qualitative Inquiry in Education: The*

Continuing Debate, pp. 121–52. New York: Teachers College Press

Wolcott, H. (1994) *Transforming Qualitative Data.* London: Sage.

Wu, Q. (2014) Motivations and decision making processes of mainland Chinese students for undertaking Master's programmes abroad. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 18*(5), 426-444.

Wu, Z., Shu, L., and Xie, W. (2010) Analysis of the situation and reason of Chinese students studying abroad. *Economic and Trade Update*, *24*, 282.

Wu, H. (2020) Decision making Process of International Undergraduate Students: An Exploratory Narrative Inquiry into Reflections of Chinese Students in Canada. *Review of Education, 3*(2), 254-268

Xin, M. (2021) 'Grasping the logic of New Development during the 14th Five Year Plan Period', *China Economic Transition. 4*(2), 33-41

Zhan, H. (2004) Willingness and Expectations: Intergenerational Differences in Attitudes Toward Filial Responsibility in China. *Marriage and Family Review, 36*(1–2), 175–200.

Zhao, J. and Guo, J. (2002) 'The restructuring of China's higher education: an experience for market economy and knowledge economy'. *Educational Philosophy and Theory. 34*(2), 207–20.

Zhu, J., et al. (2023) To be successful and/or comfortable? Parental career expectations and Chinese undergraduates' career indecisiveness across

gender. *Journal of Career Development, 50*(3), 674-689.

Zoom (2021) *Truth behind Zoom Myths.* Available from: https://blog.zoom.us/zh/truth-behind-zoom-myths/ (Access 20 July 2023)

Zwart, J. (2012) Study Abroad Choices of Chinese Students: Factors, Influences and Motivations. *Quarterly Journal of Chinese Studies*, *2*(2), 68-90.

APPENDICES

Appendix One

Interview Schedule

The study will explore the reasons for Mainland Chinese students deciding to study at a particular UK university, their decision making process of choosing a university and what to study, and the process of gaining entry to a UK university. It will also explore the current experiences of Mainland Chinese students and the influence of the Covid pandemic on these experiences.

Background:

1. Age
2. University
3. Year 1&2
4. Course
5. Hometown
6. Parents' occupation

Reasons for initial study abroad decisions, university choice and what to study:

1. Why did you want to study as an undergraduate in the UK?
2. Which universities did you apply to for your undergraduate study and why?
3. If you applied to more than one university, what was your preferred institution, and why did you prefer it?
4. What were your reasons for choosing your current university?
5. What was your planned course of study?
6. What did you want to study?
7. What were your reasons for choosing your current course?
8. Tell me more about how you made your choice of university and course.

Decision making processes:

1. How did you go about choosing your current university?
2. How did you go about choosing your current course?
3. What was most important to you, the institution of study or the course of study? And why?
4. Did anyone guide or influence your choices (parents/agent/classmates/friends/teacher)? How did they influence your choices?

Experiences of applying:

1. How did you experience the process of gaining entry to a UK university?
2. What are the main difficulties or dilemmas you have experienced in your decision making process and application process?
3. Have you managed to overcome these difficulties or challenges? If so how?
4. Tell me more about your university application.

Reflections on the impact of the Covid pandemic on studying at a UK university:

1. What are your experiences of applying to or studying at a UK university in the light of the Covid pandemic? Has your experience changed in the past year? If so in what ways?
2. Have you experienced any difficulties or dilemmas in your current study abroad experiences as a result of the pandemic? If so, what were they, and how have you managed them?

Future plans and advice:

1. Are you currently studying in the UK? If not, when do you plan to go to the UK to study?
2. What are your future plans for study/work after you graduate?

3. How, if at all, have these been influenced by your experiences of studying in the UK over the past 1/2 years?
4. What advice would you give to future students considering undergraduate study in the UK or overseas?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you!

Appendix Two

Application for Ethics Review Form (ERN_20-0355A)

Guidance Notes:

What is the purpose of this form?

This form should be completed to seek ethics review for research projects to be undertaken by University of Birmingham staff, PGR students or visiting/emeritus researchers who will be carrying out research which will be attributed to the University.

Who should complete it?

For a staff project – the lead researcher/Principal Investigator on the project.
For a PGR student project – the student's academic supervisor, in discussion with the student.

Students undertaking undergraduate projects and taught postgraduate (PGT) students should refer to their Department/School for advice

When should it be completed?

After you have completed the University's online ethics self-assessment form (SAF), **IF** the SAF indicates that ethics review is required. You should apply in good time to ensure that you receive a favourable ethics opinion prior to the commencement of the project and it is recommended that you allow at least 60 working days for the ethics process to be completed.

How should it be submitted?

An electronic version of the completed form should be submitted to the Research Ethics Officer, at the following email address: aer-ethics@contacts.bham.ac.uk.

What should be included with it?

Copies of any relevant supporting information and participant documentation, research tools (e.g. interview topic guides, questionnaires, etc) and where appropriate a health & safety risk assessment for the project (see section 10 of this form for further information about risk assessments).

What should applicants read before submitting this form?

Before submitting, you should ensure that you have read and understood the following information and guidance and that you have taken it into account when completing your application:

- The information and guidance provided on the University's ethics webpages (https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/finance/accounting/Research-Support-Group/Research-Ethics/Ethical-Review-of-Research.aspx)

- The University's Code of Practice for Research (https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/university/legal/research.pdf)

- The guidance on Data Protection for researchers provided by the University's Legal Services team at https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/legal-services/What-we-do/Data-Protection/resources.aspx.

Section 1: Basic Project Details

Project Title: An exploration of Mainland Chinese international students' choice making processes and subsequent study experiences in UK universities.
Is this project a:

University of Birmingham Staff Research project ☐

University of Birmingham Postgraduate Research (PGR) Student project √

Other (Please specify below) ☐

Click or tap here to enter text.

Details of the Principal Investigator or Lead Supervisor (for PGR student projects):

Title: Dr
First name: Marion
Last name: Bowl

Position held: Senior Lecturer
School/Department School of Education

Telephone: Click or tap here to enter text.
Email address: m.bowl.1@bham.ac.uk

Details of any Co-Investigators or Co-Supervisors (for PGR student projects):

Title: Dr
First name: Tracy
Last name: Whatmore

Position held: Senior Lecturer
School/Department School of Education

Telephone:
Email address:

Details of the student for PGR student projects:

Title: Miss
First name: Huaer
Last name: Zhu

Course of study: PhD in Education
Email address: hxz881@student.bham.ac.uk

Project start and end dates:

Estimated start date of project: 03/04/2019
Estimated end date of project: 03/03/2023

Funding:

Sources of funding: Self-funded

Section 2: Summary of Project

Describe the purpose, background rationale for the proposed project, as well as the hypotheses/research questions to be examined and expected outcomes. This description should be in everyday language that is free from jargon - please

explain any technical terms or discipline-specific phrases. Please do not provide extensive academic background material or references.

The proposed research will focus on student mobility in higher education, and in particular, the access to overseas higher education, and the decision making processes of international students studying in the UK. The study will explore the reasons for Mainland Chinese students deciding to study at a particular UK university, their decision making processes in relation to university and subject of study, and their experiences of gaining entry to a particular UK university. The study will also investigate the experiences of Mainland Chinese students who subsequently enrol at a UK university (whether on campus or via blended learning). The research will consider the impact of Covid on all the above, including students' actual experiences compared with their prior expectations. Mainland Chinese students remain one of the largest groups of international students in the UK The spread of Covid-19 is likely to have had an impact (as yet unknown) on both their choice-making and on their actual experience on enrolment. A number of previous studies have analysed the reasons for Chinese students choosing overseas universities; however, to date, their decision making processes under the impact of Covid has not been investigated.
The study will focus on following questions:

1. Why do Mainland Chinese students choose a particular UK university and subject?
2. What are the decision making processes of Mainland Chinese students choosing a particular UK university and subject?
3. How do Mainland Chinese students experience the process of gaining entry to a UK university?
4. How do Mainland Chinese students' experiences on enrolment compare with their expectations?
5. How do Mainland Chinese students' UK university experiences influence their future study/work plans?
6. Based on their experiences, how would Mainland Chinese students studying at a UK university advise others considering undergraduate study in the UK or overseas?

Section 3: Conduct and location of Project

Conduct of project

Please give a description of the research methodology that will be used. If more than one methodology or phase will be involved, please separate these out clearly and refer to them consistently throughout the rest of this form.

Qualitative methods will be adopted in the research. More specifically, semi-structured interviews will be applied since the research aims to investigate the individual experiences of participants in depth. Participants will be current Year One and Year Two Mainland Chinese undergraduates studying at UK universities.

Geographic location of project

State the geographic locations where the project and all associated fieldwork will be carried out. If the project will involve travel to areas which may be considered unsafe, either in the UK or overseas, please ensure that the risks of this (or any other non-trivial health and safety risks associated with the research) are addressed by a documented health and safety risk assessment, as described in section 10 of this form.

It is anticipated that the interviews will be conducted via Zoom, in China or in the UK, depending on where the students and the researcher are located at the arranged time of interview. I have chosen to delay my fieldwork until 2021 due to the current instability in international student movement as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Setting a target date in 2021 to collect data allows for some of the current uncertainties to be clarified for prospective students. As stated earlier, however, no face-to-face data collection will be conducted if restrictions remain in force and equivalent; non-face-to-face methods will be used.

Section 4: Research Participants and Recruitment

Does the project involve human participants?

Note: 'Participation' includes both active participation (such as when participants take part in an interview) and cases where participants take part in the study without their knowledge and consent at the time (for example, in crowd behaviour

research).

Yes
If you have answered NO please go on to Section 8 of this form. If you have answered YES please complete the rest of this section and then continue on to section 5.

Who will the participants be?

Describe the number of participants and important characteristics (such as age, gender, location, affiliation, level of fitness, intellectual ability etc.). Specify any inclusion/exclusion criteria to be used.

The sample will be made up of current Year One and Year Two Mainland Chinese undergraduates studying at UK universities. All participants will be aged 18 or over. I estimate that the number of participants taking part will be in the region of 30.

How will the participants be recruited?

Please state clearly how the participants will be identified, approached and recruited. Include any relationship between the investigator(s) and participant(s) (e.g. instructor-student). Please ensure that you attach a copy of any poster(s), advertisement(s) or letter(s) to be used for recruitment.

The aim will be to recruit around 30 participants – 15 Year One and 15 Year Two students. The participants will be recruited via the Chinese society of one UK University (of which the researcher is a member). Invitations to participate in the research will be sent to society members by email. If this yields insufficient volunteer participants, further potential volunteers will be contacted through other networks of Chinese students studying at the same University. If the participants agree to participate, individual interviews will be arranged with them. Interviews will be conducted either face-to-face or via Zoom depending on the Covid restrictions in place at the planned time of data collection and also the preferences of participants. The interviews will be audio recorded and conducted in Mandarin Chinese; they will subsequently be translated into English by the researcher.

Section 5: Consent

What process will be used to obtain consent?

Describe the process that the investigator(s) will be using to obtain valid consent. If consent is not to be obtained explain why. If the participants are under the age of 16 it would usually be necessary to obtain parental consent and the process for this should be described in full, including whether parental consent will be opt-in or opt-out.

(1) Potential participants will be contacted/approached via email and will be sent information about the research project and consent forms. All participants will be aged 18 or over.
(2) Participants will have two weeks to decide whether to take part in the research or not. If they agree, I will make individual appointments for interviews with them, either face-to-face or via Zoom.

Please be aware that if the project involves over 16s who lack capacity to consent, separate approval will be required from the Health Research Authority (HRA) in line with the Mental Capacity Act.

Please attach a copy of the Participant Information Sheet (if applicable), the Consent Form (if applicable), the content of any telephone script (if applicable) and any other material that will be used in the consent process.

Note: Guidance from Legal Services on wording relating to the Data Protection Act 2018 can be accessed at https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/legal-services/What-we-do/Data-Protection/resources.aspx.

Use of deception?

Will the participants be deceived in any way about the purpose of the study?

No

If yes, please describe the nature and extent of the deception involved. Include how and when the deception will be revealed, and the nature of any explanation/debrief will be provided to the participants after the study has taken place.

Click or tap here to enter text.

Section 6: Participant compensation, withdrawal and feedback to participants

What, if any, feedback will be provided to participants?

Explain any feedback/ information that will be provided to the participants after participation in the research (e.g. a more complete description of the purpose of the research, or access to the results of the research).

I will offer to provide a summary of my findings to all interviewed participants once I have completed data analysis and begun writing up. I will remind the participants that the research will be completed by the end of 2023 and that no individual participant will be identifiable from the published results. They can receive an electronic copy of the final thesis if they request it.

What arrangements will be in place for participant withdrawal?

Describe how the participants will be informed of their right to withdraw from the project, explain any consequences for the participant of withdrawing from the study and indicate what will be done with the participant's data if they withdraw.

In this study, participation is voluntary. Participation in the interviews will be entirely voluntary and data will not be identifiable by anyone but myself.
If participants withdraw from the study, they will not be contacted again. If participants decide to withdraw from the study, they will be asked whether they are happy for their data to be used. If not, any information that they have provided in the interviews will be removed from the study and destroyed.

Please confirm the specific date/timescale to be used as the deadline for participant withdrawal and ensure that this is consistently stated across all participant documentation. This is considered preferable to allowing participants to 'withdraw at any time' as presumably there will be a point beyond which it will not be possible to remove their data from the study (e.g. because analysis has started, the findings have been published, etc).

Participants can withdraw without having to justify their decision within two weeks after their participation in the interviews.

What arrangements will be in place for participant compensation?

Will participants receive compensation for participation?

No

If yes, please provide further information about the nature and value of any compensation and clarify whether it will be financial or non-financial.

Click or tap here to enter text.

If participants choose to withdraw, how will you deal with compensation?

Click or tap here to enter text.

Section 7: Confidentiality/anonymity

Will the identity of the participants be known to the researcher?

Yes

Will participants be truly anonymous (i.e. their identity will not be known to the researcher)?

Participants' identities and email addresses will be identifiable by me, the researcher, but by no-one else, as identifying information will be removed from the data.

In what format will data be stored?

Will participants' data be stored in identifiable format, or will it be anonymised or pseudo-anonymised (i.e. an assigned ID code or number will be used instead of the participant's name and a key will kept allowing the researcher to identify a participant's data)?

During the conduct of the research, each participant will be assigned a code/pseudonym to make data analysis easier. Participants will be assigned pseudonyms in all write-ups of the findings. Participant information will be stored under his/her code/pseudonym and their consent form will be stored separately.

Will participants' data be treated as confidential?

Will participants' data be treated as confidential (i.e. they will not be identified in any outputs from the study and their identity will not be disclosed to any third party)?

Yes

The participants will not be identified in any outputs from the study and their

identities will not be revealed to any third party.

If you have answered no to the question above, meaning that participants' data will not be treated as confidential (i.e. their data and/or identities may be revealed in the research outputs or otherwise to third parties), please provide further information and justification for this:

Click or tap here to enter text.

Section 8: Storage, access and disposal of data

How and where will the data (both paper and electronic) be stored, what arrangements will be in place to keep it secure and who will have access to it?

Please note that for long-term storage, data should usually be held on a secure University of Birmingham IT system, for example BEAR (see https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/it/teams/infrastructure/research/bear/index.aspx).

When interviews have been conducted, digital data will not be stored in my personal laptop, but will be transferred into a secure University of Birmingham server (BEAR). Having finished one interview, data will be translated by myself and transferred into BEAR DATA SHARE. When I work with these data, Research DATA Store will be used. Only my supervisors and I will have access to it.

Data retention and disposal

The University usually requires data to be held for a minimum of 10 years to allow for verification. Will you retain your data for at least 10 years?

Yes

If data will be held for less than 10 years, please provide further justification:

Click or tap here to enter text.

What arrangements will be in place for the secure disposal of data?

I will delete all data in BEAR DATA SHARE after 10 years.

Section 9: Other approvals required

Are you aware of any other national or local approvals required to carry out this research? NO

E.g. clearance from the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS), Local Authority approval for work involving Social Care, local ethics/governance approvals if the work will be carried out overseas, or approval from NOMS or HMPPS for work involving police or prisons? If so, please provide further details:

Click or tap here to enter text.

For projects involving NHS staff, is approval from the Health Research Authority (HRA) needed in addition to University ethics approval? NO

If your project will involve NHS staff, please go to the HRA decision tool at http://www.hra-decisiontools.org.uk/research/ to establish whether the NHS would consider your project to be research, thus requiring HRA approval in addition to University ethics approval. Is HRA approval required?

Yes ☐

No ☐

Please include a print out of the HRA decision tool outcome with your application.

Section 10: Risks and benefits/significance

Benefits/significance of the research

Outline the potential significance and/or benefits of the research

The findings of this study could add to understanding of how current Mainland Chinese students make their decisions about studying at UK universities. It will also be possible to gain a better understanding of the impact of Covid on students' choice-making and their subsequent study experiences.

Risks of the research

Outline any potential risks (including risks to research staff, research participants,

other individuals not involved in the research, the environment and/or society and the measures that will be taken to minimise any risks and the procedures to be adopted in the event of mishap.) ***Please ensure that you include any risks relating to overseas travel and working in overseas locations as part of the study, particularly if the work will involve travel to/working in areas considered unsafe and/or subject to travel warnings from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (see*** https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice)***. Please also be aware that the University insurer, UMAL, offers access to RiskMonitor Traveller, a service which provides 24/7/365 security advice for all travellers and you are advised to make use of this service (see https://umal.co.uk/travel/pre-travel-advice/).***

The outlining of the risks in this section does not circumvent the need to carry out and document a detailed Health and Safety risk assessment where appropriate – see below.

Participating in the research is not anticipated to cause participants any disadvantage or discomfort. The potential physical and/or psychological harm or distress will be the same as any experienced in everyday life. Participants will be offered breaks to relax during interviews.

University Health & Safety (H&S) risk assessment

For projects of more than minimal H&S risk it is essential that a H&S risk assessment is carried out and signed off in accordance with the process in place within your School/College and you must provide a copy of this with your application. The risk may be non-trivial because of travel to, or working in, a potentially unsafe location, or because of the nature of research that will carried out there. It could also involve (irrespective of location) H&S risks to research participants, or other individuals not involved directly in the research. Further information about the risk assessment process for research can be found at https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/hr/wellbeing/worksafe/policy/Research-Risk-Assessment-and-Mitigation-Plans-RAMPs.aspx.

Please note that travel to (or through) 'FCO Red zones' requires approval by the University's Research Travel Approval Panel, and will only be approved in exceptional circumstances where sufficient mitigation of risk can be demonstrated.

Section 11: Any other issues

Does the research raise any ethical issues not dealt with elsewhere in this form? NO

If yes, please provide further information:

Click or tap here to enter text.

Do you wish to provide any other information about this research not already provided, or to seek the opinion of the Ethics Committee on any particular issue?

If yes, please provide further information:

Click or tap here to enter text.

Section 12: Peer review

Has your project received scientific peer review?

No ☐

If yes, please provide further details about the source of the review (e.g. independent peer review as part of the funding process or peer review from supervisors for PGR student projects):

Click or tap here to enter text.

Section 13: Nominate an expert reviewer

For certain types of project, including those of an interventional nature or those involving significant risks, it may be helpful (and you may be asked) to nominate an expert reviewer for your project. If you anticipate that this may apply to your work and you would like to nominate an expert reviewer at this stage, please provide details below.

Title: Click or tap here to enter text.
First name: Click or tap here to enter text.
Last name: Click or tap here to enter text.
Email address: Click or tap here to enter text.
Phone number: Click or tap here to enter text.

Brief explanation of reasons for nominating and/or nominee's suitability:

Click or tap here to enter text.

Section 14: Document checklist

Please check that the following documents, where applicable, are attached to your application:

Participant information sheet Yes
Consent form Yes
Questionnaire Yes

Please proof-read study documentation and ensure that it is appropriate for the intended audience before submission.

Section 15: Applicant declaration

Please read the statements below and tick the boxes to indicate your agreement:

I submit this application on the basis that the information it contains is confidential and will be used by the University of Birmingham for the purposes of ethical review and monitoring of the research project described herein, and to satisfy reporting requirements to regulatory bodies. The information will not be used for any other purpose without my prior consent. ☐✓

The information in this form together with any accompanying information is complete and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief and I take full responsibility for it. ☐✓

I undertake to abide by University Code of Practice for Research (https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/university/legal/research.pdf) alongside any other relevant professional bodies' codes of conduct and/or ethical guidelines. ☐✓

I will report any changes affecting the ethical aspects of the project to the University of Birmingham Research Ethics Officer. ☐✓

I will report any adverse or unforeseen events which occur to the relevant Ethics Committee via the University of Birmingham Research Ethics Officer. ☐✓

Please now save your completed form and email a copy to the Research Ethics Officer, at aer-ethics@contacts.bham.ac.uk. As noted above, please do not submit a paper copy.

Appendix Three
Information Sheet for Participants

An exploration of Mainland Chinese international students' choice making processes and subsequent study experiences in UK universities.

What is this research for?

The aim of my doctoral research study is to explore the reasons for Mainland Chinese students deciding to study at a particular UK university, their decision making process of choosing a university and what to study, and the process of gaining entry to a particular UK university. It will also explore the current experiences of Mainland Chinese students and the influence of the Covid pandemic on these experiences. The findings of this study could add to understanding of how current Mainland Chinese students make their decisions about studying at UK universities and choice of major subject. It will also be possible to gain a better understanding of the impact of Covid on students' choice-making and subsequent study experiences.

This is a postgraduate research project conducted by myself as a student at The University of Birmingham, School of Education and supervised by Doctors Marion Bowl and Tracy Whatmore.

What will happen if I agree to participate?

I will ask for your permission to interview you to learn about your reasons for choosing your current university, and your decision making process of choosing the university and subject, and your experience of gaining entry to your university. The interview will be conducted in early 2021.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. Your real name will not be used in connection with the study and any information you share will be changed to avoid you being identifiable by others. Your interview will take about one hour and will be audio recorded and then transcribed into Chinese and English. If you request it, I

will send you a copy of the transcript for approval or amendment.

After the transcript for each interview has been sent to you, you will have two weeks in which to review it, amend it and/or indicate that you are happy for me to use it in my analysis. You can withdraw information you have shared at this time and it will not be included in the analysis. After this period, it will not be possible to withdraw your individual contribution, as your information will have been incorporated into the study.

Summaries of the data may be seen by my supervisors and other assessors of my work and extracts from the data collected may appear in publications reporting my research. However, readers of the research will not be able to connect the data with you as an individual.

Keeping in touch

If you have any questions about the research, or about participating in it, please contact me:

hxz881@student.bham.ac.uk

Appendix Four

Consent Form

University of Birmingham, School of Education United Kingdom

An exploration of Mainland Chinese international students' choice making processes and subsequent study experiences in UK universities.

Researcher: Huaer Zhu, PhD Student, University of Birmingham UK
Please note that any information provided by you as a participant in this study will be used only for purpose of this study and will not be shared with any third party.
Please tick in the box provided to confirm

1.	I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study.	
2.	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time before and during the research, and have two weeks to withdraw after I complete the interviews.	
3.	I agree to take part in the study.	
4.	I agree to the interview being audio/audio-visually recorded.	
5.	I agree to the use of anonymous quotes in the final report.	

Name of Participant	Date	Signature
Name of Researcher	Date	Signature

Appendix Five

Table of demographic information on interview participants

	Name	Gender	University	Year of study	Main subject of study	Hometown	When went abroad	Qualification(s) on access UK university	Parents' occupation/or the sector they work in
1	Mintie	F	University of Birmingham	2	Psychology	Sichuan, Chengdu	After graduating from high school	Foundation course: Kaplan	Father: lawyer Mother: Nurse
2	Lynn	F	University of Birmingham	1	Business management	Shandong, Rizhao	After Gao Kao	Foundation course: Manchester INTO	Father: Self-employed business operator Mother: Public sector worker
3	Wawa	F	University of Birmingham	2	Geography and Unban Planning	Beijing	After Year 10 (in high school), and study abroad in Singapore for high	Foundation course: Kaplan	Father: Finance worker Mother: Self-employed business operator

							school		
4	Frank	M	University of Birmingham	2	Accounting and Finance	Jiangsu, Xuzhou	After graduating from high school (a Canadian international school in Shanghai)	Foundation course: Kaplan	Father: Construction industry worker Mother: Insurance industry worker
5	Jay	M	University of Sheffield	2	Digital Media and Society	Fujian, Xiamen	After graduating from high school (a Canadian international school in Shanghai)	Foundation course: Sheffield	Not disclosed
6	Roro	F	University of Birmingham	2	Banking and Finance	Anhui, Hefei or Shenzhen	After Gao Kao	Foundation course: Birmingham	Father and mother: Self-employed business operators
7	Lily	F	University of Birmingham	1	Psychology	Shanghai	After Gao Kao	Foundation course: Birmingham	Father: Human resource worker Mother: Education worker

8	Helen	F	Kings College London	2	Psychology	Shanghai	After graduating from high school (a Canadian international school in Shanghai)	International school: Canadian high school course	Father: self-employed business operator Mother: We media
9	Kelly	F	University of Birmingham	1	Biomedical Science	Jiangsu, Nanjing	After Gaokao	Foundation course: Birmingham	Father and mother: Self-employed business operator
10	Queenie	F	University of the Arts London	1	Illustration and visual media	Shanghai	After graduating from high school (a Canadian international school in Shanghai)	Canadian high school course, and Foundation course in the UK	Father and mother: self-employed business operators (construction)
11	Yuet	F	University of Birmingham	2	Human Geography	Anhui, Hefei	After Gaokao	Gaokao score	Father: state owned enterprise Mother: civil servant
12	Faye	F	University of Birmingham	2	Psychology	Xinjiang	After Gaokao	Gaokao score	Not disclosed
1	Young	M	King’s	1	Computer	Xinjiang	After year	A-levels	Father: banking

3			College London		Science		10		Mother: worker in state owned enterprise
14	Justin	M	University of Surrey	1	Food science and nutrition	Harbin	After year 10	A-levels	Father and mother: self-employed business operators
15	Juju	M	University of Reading	1	Business Management	Taiwan or Tianjin	After graduating from primary school	A-levels	Father and mother: self-employed business operators
16	Chuchu	M	University of Birmingham	2	Environmental Science	Shenzhen	After graduated from primary school	International school in Africa	Father and Mother: self-employed business operators in Africa
17	Jinjin	F	University of Birmingham	1	Quantitative Economics and statistics	Shenzhen	After year 11	Foundation course: Birmingham	Father and mother: self-employed business operator
18	Lulu	F	University of the Arts London	1	Illustration and visual media	Shanghai	After graduated from high school (a Canadian internationa	International school in Shanghai, and Foundation course: UAL	Father: sculptor Mother: art teacher

							l school in Shanghai)		
19	Zizi	M	University of Glasgow	2	Business and Economics	Shanghai	After graduated from high school (a Canadian internationa l school in Shanghai)	International school in Shanghai, and Foundation course: Glasgow	Father and mother: self-employed business operator
20	Coco	F	University of Birmingham	1	Economics	Beijing	After graduated from high school	Foundation course: Birmingham	Father: university professor Mother: medical company employee
21	Chan	F	University of Glasgow	2	Business Managemen t	Hebei, Shijiazhuang	After year 11	Foundation course: Glasgow	Father and mother: Finance sector workers
22	Fifi	M	University of Glasgow	2	Business Managemen t	Shandong, Dezhou	After primary school	A-level	Father and mother: self-employed business operators
23	Zak	M	University of Birmingham	1	Banking and Finance	Canton, Dongguan	During year 1 in Chinese university	Foundation course: Manchester INTO	Father and mother: self-employed business operators
24	Ang	M	University of Edinburgh	2	Cognitive Sciences	Beijing or Shandong or	3,4 years old	International Baccalaureate	Father: Diplomat

						Ecuador		(international school in Ecuador)	
25	Xixi	F	University of Birmingham	1	Education and Sociology	Jilin, inner Mongolia	After Year 11	Foundation course: Birmingham	Father and mother: Quarrying industry
26	Zhang	M	University of Edinburgh	1	Artificial Intelligence and Computer Science	Canton	After Year 10	A-levels	Father and mother: self-employed business operators
27	Yinyin	F	University of Edinburgh	1	Computer Science	Fujian	During middle school	A-levels	Father and mother: self-employed business operators
28	William	M	University of Birmingham	1	Computer Science	Anhui, Anqing	After Year one in Chinese university	Gaokao score	Father: self-employed business operator Mother: housewife
29	Ray	M	University of Birmingham	1	Computer Science	Anhui, Tongling	After Gaokao	Foundation course: in a 211 Chinese university	Father and mother: State owned company workers (cement)
30	Waiwai	M	University of Birmingham	1	Artificial Intelligence and Computer	Shandong, Qingdao	After Gaokao	Gaokao score (already offered t access to a	Father: self-employed business operator Mother: teacher

					Science			985 C9 Chinese university)	
31	Hanni	F	University of Birmingham	2	Education	Canton	After year 11	Foundation course: Kaplan	Father and mother: government workers
32	Yan	F	University of Birmingham	2	Education	Jiangsu	After graduated from high school	International school in China	Father: director of a state owned enterprise Mother: doctor
33	Hayley	F	University of Warwick	2	Accounting and Finance	Gansu	After graduated from high school	International school in China	Father and mother: self-employed business operator
34	Ben	M	University of Nottingham	2	International media and communication	Wuhan, Hubei	After graduated from high school	Foundation course in China	Father and mother: self-employed business operators

Appendix Six

Basic themes from interview data

1. British culture (Building, TV series; travel; car; history; British personality; soccer; novels
2. Safety
3. Location (country; university)
4. Friend influences (classmates and local friends' recommendation; following friends' decision)
5. Sports influences (find strong Basketball team; injured students with sports specialism can't get access to Chinese university)
6. Parental influences (university/ courses/career recommendation; their career; reconstituted family/divorce; example education
7. Sexual consideration (percentage of M/F in courses; find boy friend
8. Quality of education
9. Agent influences (limited university list, recommendation; misguide students; high charge
10. Professional's recommendation (professional people; professional occupation test)
11. Subject requirement limitations/ Limit subject choices in foundation
12. Personalities
13. Self-discipline
14. Percentage of Chinese students in a university
15. Gaokao (failure of Gaokao; used Gaokao score to apply)
16. Low pass proportion of foundation course
17. Beautiful name of a university (name preference; 'food chain' of a university's colleges)
18. Regional impact (hometown: Shandong, Wenzhou)
19. Relationship between China and US
20. Ranking (university; subject)

21. Career plan
22. G5 universities, Oxbridge
23. The relationship between subjects in undergrad and postgrad study, and between subject and career
24. Limited social networks
25. High school influences (international schools in Shanghai; West Africa; Ecuador)
26. Sister/Brother influences
27. University first or subject first? (social network; employment)
28. Exam equity during Covid (exam in university; A-level exam)
29. Short length of UK degree
30. Career trend (Internet industry
31. Social media influences (Zhihu, Redbook, Facebook, Instagram, chat group in Wechat)
32. Weather
33. Recognition of foundation course/Canadian course
34. Teacher's influences (guide students; limit students)
35. Personal interests; (don't have any interests)
36. Curriculum
37. Covid influence their decision and lives or not? (accommodation; flight; bad experiences of online study abroad; small social network; lower academic requirement; really influenced the student who comes from Wuhan)
38. University Reputation
39. The relationship between Employment and subjects/universities
40. Long duration of application/exam score release/enrolment
41. Low recognition of Australia: watery?
42. Neijuan

43. Tuition fee (high foundation tuition in London; Arts tuition fee; apply Year 1 directly)
44. Improve English
45. Immigration (Beijing; Shanghai; Canada; UK; US)
46. Lecture or Google?
47. UCAS Clearing
48. What are HR in China looking for? (university ranking)
49. PSW visa
50. Open social network: Join CSSA or Chinese (Chinese students and Scholars Association or Chinese society)
51. University Alumni influence (social status)
52. Visit universities before application
53. Application requirement (UK; US; HK; Australia)
54. Language requirement (IELTS; English test in foundation; Duolingo; O-level English; IGCSE English)
55. Influences from Parents' friends and relatives and neighbours
56. Distribution of Educational Resources in China (Xinjiang; Inner Mongolia; Jiangsu province Gaokao)
57. Strong faculty (Edinburgh CS)
58. Postgraduate recommendation in universities in China
59. Dream schools: USA top universities
60. Increasing reputation of 'Ningbo Nottingham University' and 'Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool university' (International campus branch and sino-cooperation university)
61. Conformity in choosing countries, universities, and courses, and employment