

Going off the Beaten Track: Exploring Chinese International Students' Motivations for Selecting Regional Australian Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Following the Australian state of Tasmania's adoption of its international education policy, *Tasmania's Place in the Asian Century White Paper* (Tasmanian Government, 2013), an increasing number of Chinese international students have enrolled at the state's sole university, the University of Tasmania (UTAS), which is a regional Australian university. This is a variation in trend from the choice of majority of Chinese international students who attend universities in Australian metropolitan contexts. This study aims to understand the motivations of Chinese international students who have made this different decision. Based on positivist and interpretivist stances and underpinned by grounded theory, this study analysed data from 456 (valid) questionnaires and 23 semi-structured interviews with UTAS Chinese international students. This research indicated that the primary motivators for the UTAS choice were: more competitive tuition fees, a larger number of scholarships, quicker and easier offers, cooperative courses, specialist courses, ease of graduation, acceptance of credit transfer, immigration prospects, and recommendations. These identified motivations were inclusive and could be interpreted in four more explicit dimensions: strategic competition with other Australian universities, attractions for students with diverse backgrounds, regional advantage, and specific promotion.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Australia and Chinese international students are two key elements of international higher education. On the world scene, Australia plays an increasingly significant role in international higher education. According to the latest data from the OECD's (2015) *Education at a Glance 2015*, Australia was the world's third largest host country for international higher education, following the United States and the United Kingdom. This is an increase since 2014, when Australia was only ranked at No.5 globally as an international higher education student destination country (Department of Education, 2014). Within the Australian context, international education has been the third largest export for Australia; it was worth AUD 19.4 billion to the Australian economy in 2015 (Department of Education and Training, 2016d), mainly from onshore international students (Department of Education and Training, 2016b). Compared to 2014, the number of international students in Australia grew by approximately 10 per cent in 2015 (Wells, 2016). Amongst all the international students in Australia, 52 per

cent study in the higher education sector (Department of Education and Training, 2016d). Chinese students are prominent amongst the international students in Australian higher education. Australia is one of the top three most popular education destinations for outgoing Chinese students (Department of Education and Training, 2016a).¹ Chinese international students remain the largest share (e.g. 38.66 per cent in 2015) of all international student enrolments in Australian higher education institutions, which is far head of other countries (Department of Education and Training, 2016f). In 2015, 57 per cent of all Chinese international students in Australia were in higher education (Department of Education and Training, 2016c).

In terms of location preferences, however, the majority of Chinese students tend to undertake international higher education courses in Australian metropolises, such as Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane rather than study at regional Australian universities. The most recent statistics from the Australian Government Department of Education and Training indicated that approximately 5 per cent of the total enrolments of Chinese international students in 2015 were in regional Australian areas, and over half (54 per cent) of international students enrolments in regional Australia were in higher education sector (Department of Education and Training, 2016g).

1.2 Definition of Regional Australian University

The definition of “regional Australian university” is quite complex, with no single agreed definition and no official list of regional Australian universities, so it seems to be largely a matter of self-definition. There is an alliance of six regional Australian universities under the Regional Universities Network (RUN)², but many other regional Australian universities are not members of this Network. It is quite understandable that there is no agreed definition of “regional Australian university”: there are over 70 regional university campuses in Australia (Eversole, 2016), and 99.9 per cent of Australia’s land mass can be classified as regional (Department of Education and Training, 2016e). In this study, regional Australian university was taken to refer to a university in Australia whose main campus is located outside a major Australian metropolitan centre. According to this definition, the University of Tasmania (UTAS) may be considered as a regional Australian university, since its main campus is in Hobart which, while a capital city, is in a regional area.

1.3 Influencing Policies

International education, especially international higher education, has made a significant contribution to the Australian regions. It has provided social and economic opportunities, as well as global connections, and has created cultural and linguistic diversity in Australian regional areas. Chinese international students form the majority of international students and so their impact on the Australian regions should not be overlooked. In 2012, the Australian Government released the *Australia in the Asian Century White Paper* in which various targets for Australia to the year 2025 were set in reponse to the influence of Asia’s rise. This White Paper also specifically highlighted the opportunities which Chinese international students could bring to Australian international higher education.

¹ According to the statistics in 2016 from Australian Government Department of Education and Training, the USA, the UK, and Australia were the three most popular study destinations for outgoing Chinese students (Department of Education and Training, 2016a).

² The current RUN members are Central Queensland University, Federation University Australia, University of Southern Queensland, Southern Cross University, University of New England, and University of the Sunshine Coast (Regional Universities Network, 2016).

The State of Tasmania is also aware of the opportunities and challenges of the Asian century. Building on the Australian Government's White Paper, in 2013 the Tasmanian Government commissioned its own White Paper on *Tasmania's Place in the Asian Century* for establishing the policy framework to support Tasmania engagement with Asia over the next 10 years. Surprisingly, the Tasmanian Government was the only State Government to commission a State Government response to the Australian Government's paper. The policies of international education and the Chinese international student markets are identified as key sectors in the (Tasmanian) White Paper. This White Paper also highlighted that China was the top Asian country for international students coming to Tasmania, and that the Tasmanian Government also believed that international education would become increasingly significant to Tasmania. Furthermore, the White Paper indicated that the University of Tasmania had plans to double its international student intake over the next five years (Tasmanian Government, 2013).

1.4 Increase in Chinese International Students Enrolments at the University of Tasmania

Under the impetus of these proactive policies, an increasing number of Chinese international students in recent years have made the decision to "go off the beaten track" by undertaking higher education courses at the University of Tasmania, a regional Australian university, rather than follow the majority of their compatriots to universities in the larger Australian cities. This trend can be seen in the enrolment numbers of Chinese international students on the university's Tasmanian campuses: the most recent figures (to 26 September, 2016) show a steady increase from 1,056 in 2014 to 1,136 in 2015 to 1,446 in 2016 (University of Tasmania, 2016).

1.5 Literature Review

As Chinese international students are a key factor in Australian higher education, numerous studies (e.g. Ballard, 1987; Cuthbert *et al*, 2008; Robertson *et al*, 2000; Zheng *et al*, 2004) have been undertaken with the primary aim of attempting to understand Chinese and other Asian international students' experiences in Australia, the challenges they may face in the Australian education system, and the outcomes of these international education experiences. However, the main focus of these studies has been to access Chinese international students' perceptions of their Australian education experiences after they have started their overseas study journey, rather than assessing their motivations and expectations prior to departure from China. Additionally, little attention has been paid directly to the experiences of Chinese international students in a regional Australian higher education context.

Many investigations (e.g. Duan, 1997; Li and Bray, 2007; Pimpa, 2002; Wilkins *et al*. 2012) have studied the motivations which have influenced international students' choice of international study destination. Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) push-pull theory has been widely employed to develop an analysis of the two motivational influences: "'push' factors operated within the source country and initiated a student's decision to undertake international study" and "'pull' factors operated within a host country to make that country relatively attractive to international students" (p. 82). However, the theory does not account for individual preferences and personal characteristics, and focuses largely on the forces external to the individual. It also only takes into account the push factors of the source country and pull factors of the host country; thus, ignoring the potential pull factors from the source country and the push factors from the host country.

Similarly, while the previous literature has focussed substantially on the motivations and perceptions of international students studying in metropolitan universities, much less attention has been paid to international students enrolled in regional universities. There is a need

therefore to build clearer understandings about what motivates this latter group of international students to make their different decisions.

1.6 Theoretical Framework

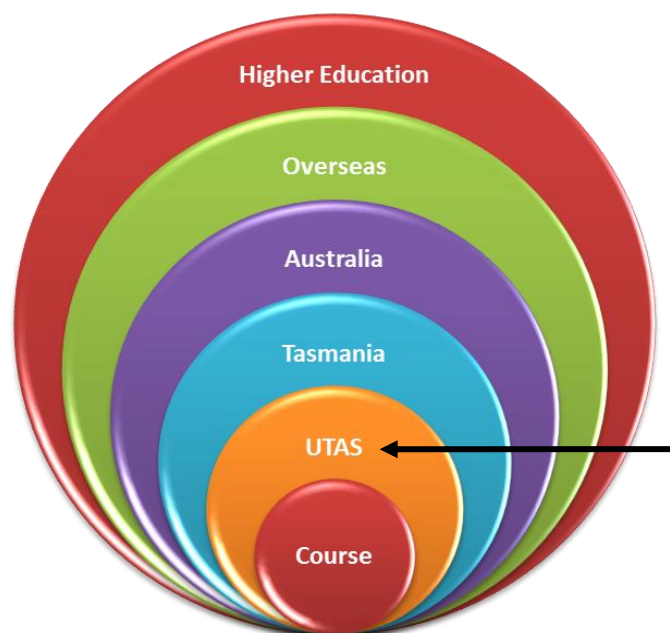
Clearly, as with much other decision-making, the decision as to whether to study at a regional Australian university is often complex and multi-faceted. It is therefore highly important to identify motivations underlying the choice. There is substantial literature (e.g. Duan, 1997; Jenkins, 2007; Lawley, 1997; Pimpa, 2002; Stafford, 2010) which demonstrates that international students' decision-making about higher education is not a one-step process, but encompasses a series of choices. From a cognitive approach, Duan (1997) and Pimpa (2002), respectively, elaborated the major choices that Asian international students made in selecting Australian higher education institutions. Both researchers found the common choices were: to study abroad, country, city, academic course, and university. However, to undertake higher education was another choice in the research of Duan (1997).

In the present study, which was based on Duan's (1997) six choice model, Chinese international students' motivations for selecting regional Australian higher education were examined from six major and distinct choices. These were (1) to choose to progress to higher education, (2) to choose to study overseas, (3) to select the country (Australia) to study, (4) to select the state (Tasmania), (5) to select the regional Australian university (UTAS), (6) to select the particular course to study (Figure 1).

These six choices are also underpinned by a logical process, from making the most general choice (to undertake higher education), to the most specific choice (to choose a particular course). It was found that there was a range of motivations of Chinese international students underlying each choice.

It should also be mentioned that, given the regional university focus, this paper will be on the motivations relating to just one of the six choices, the choice of a particular regional Australian university, UTAS (the arrow in Figure 1).

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework



1.7 Research Aim and Question

The aim of this study was to investigate Chinese international students' motivations influencing the choice of regional Australian university in the decision-making process of seeking Australian international higher education prior to departure from China. The study was conducted in an attempt to explore this motivational dimension about regional Australian higher education, and contribute to this relatively under-researched area.

Thus, the research question related to the research aim was: What motives Chinese international students to choose the University of Tasmania (UTAS), a regional Australian university, in the decision-making process of seeking to undertake Australian international higher education?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Case Study

The research is a case study. UTAS was chosen as the location of this case study. The population for this study was all international students from China mainland, Hong Kong, or Macau, who were undergraduates or postgraduates in semester 1, 2015 of UTAS on UTAS Tasmanian campuses. More detailed, the population size was 835 Chinese international students.³ The population did not include any Chinese students at the Sydney campus of UTAS, offshore Chinese students, and Chinese graduates from UTAS. In light of Creswell's (2012) sampling approaches, this research employed sampling with convenient and purposive characteristics. The selection of UTAS was because UTAS is a typical regional Australian university, this project was a vital part of a current UTAS Ph.D. research, and therefore it had the convenience of access to UTAS participants. More importantly, the Chinese international student population at UTAS is smaller than those at mainland Australian universities: only 0.9 per cent of all Chinese students enrolled in Australian education study in Tasmania in 2015 (Department of Education and Training, 2016a). The small number of the group probably results in a more complete, well-organised picture of this unit (Huxley, 1995). Accordingly, this is the suitable case in Australia to provide a comprehensive and overall situation of motivations of Chinese international students at one regional Australian university.

2.2 Methods and Paradigms

This study adopted a convergent mixed methods design to concurrently gather both qualitative and quantitative data, and then to merge the data to develop a deeper understanding of the research question (Creswell, 2012). The survey employed in the quantitative stage was to offer an overview of the general situation of Chinese international students' motivations by examining a certain amount of variables across a large sample. On the other hand, the semi-structured interview was used to explore the individual factors further and deeper, through investigating a small number of interviewees across a large number of variables (Huxley, 1995). Because of their complementary and non-overlapping strengths, this mixed methods research potentially provides a more comprehensive and broader insight into Chinese international students' motivations to select regional Australian higher education than either method by itself (Creswell, 2012; Johnson and Turner, 2002).

The orientation of this study aligns with both positivism and interpretivism philosophical paradigms. Believing the nature of the reality which is out there and waited to be studied, captured, and understood (Guba, 1990), positivism centres on a scientific method built on empirical evidence and adopts a deductive approach (Sciarrà, 1999). The positivism stance in

³ This statistic was provided by the UTAS international student advisor in the beginning of 2015.

this study was embodied in survey as well as interview schedule design via analysing literature and preliminary study. Differing from the positivist statement, interpretivism focuses on “participants’ views of the situation being studied” (Creswell, 2003, p. 8). Thus, a theory can be inductively generated (Creswell, 2003). Guided by an interpretivist paradigm, instead of stemming from theories, the other part of this research underpinned by the systematic grounded theory was an inductive contributor to identify motivators on regional Australian higher education selection from different interviewees’ views. These two paradigms facilitated to tease out the influencing factors by focusing on Chinese international students’ choice making of their regional Australian university.

2.3 Data Collection

Data collection methods of this study encompassed questionnaire and semi-structured individual interview, which were conducted simultaneously in semester 1, 2015 of UTAS.

In terms of survey, the questionnaire using was designed by the researcher, based on the research question and theories reviewed from relevant literature, through three steps: initial design, pilot study, and finalizing. The final questionnaire included participants’ demographic information, and seven reasons to select to study at UTAS, as well as an open-ended section for the respondents to add more factors. A 5- point Likert Scale (Likert, 1932) was employed to explore the importance level of all seven factors. The final number of responses to the questionnaire was 501, of which 456 were valid, accounting for 54.61 per cent of the whole population size (835). Adopting Fowler’s (2009) table to determine sample size with $\pm 4\%$ confidence interval, a confidence level of 95%, and a 50/50 chance that the sample includes, the estimated sample size was 350. The actual sample size of this research, 456, bigger than 350 was thus seen as robust, considerable and reasonable. The numerical data and the textual data were collected from questionnaire.

At the same time as questionnaire data was being collected, interviews were carried out. On the basis of the six choices of theoretical framework, the interview schedule was prepared with one demographic question and six choice-related questions to investigate motivations of selecting a regional Australian university by Chinese international students. Again, this study only paid attention to the question, “Why did you choose to study at UTAS”. 23 participants voluntarily took part in the semi-structured individual interviews. Those students were expected to recall their initial orientation to choose regional Australian higher education. Those interviews were conducted face-to-face at the Hobart campus and at the Launceston campus. All interviews were recorded by digital voice devices with the permission of the participants. Mandarin was the language adopted in all interviews. Transcripts were produced from interviews as the textual data.

2.4 Data Analysis

After the data collection, data from questionnaires was analysed using the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 22 and Excel 2010. In SPSS, for the 5-point Likert scale, “very important” (VI in Table 1) was assigned the value 1, value 2 was corresponded to “important” (I in Table 1), value 3 and value 4 were separately indicated “unimportant” and “very unimportant” (UI and VUI in Table 1), and the value of “never considered” (NC in Table 1) was defined as 5. The significant motivators were identified from questionnaire data analysis.

In addition, data collected from semi-structured interviews was analysed via adopting a Systematic Grounded Theory allied with Strauss and Corbin (1990) and the NVivo 10 software as a platform. The principle of the grounded theory fits this research for the strategy engaging in this research was from an inductive and exploratory approach rather than a

theory-down research. To further discuss, compared with two other grounded theories, Emerging Grounded Theory and Constructivist Grounded Theory, the Systematic Grounded Theory was considered to be the most appropriate approach of this research, and to guide the whole process of interview data analysis on the grounds that it is an approach widely employed in educational research, and centres on procedures utilised to generate a theory that explains a process or an interaction (Creswell, 2012). This research emphasised data analysis steps of open, axial, and selective coding, and the development of a logic paradigm of the theory generated (Creswell, 2012). In the process of qualitative analysis, what to motivate interviewees to choose UTAS were found out.

A later stage of the analysis seamlessly combined qualitative data and quantitative data through finding the extent to which the two datasets yielded similarity or dissimilarity, and identifying any determinants. This stage analysis enabled the research question to be answered holistically and multi-dimensionally.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Profiles of Respondents

Of those who completed the survey, the proportion of males to females was almost equal (51 per cent females, males 49 per cent). 98 per cent of them were born in the 1980s and 1990s. In terms of the faculty distributions, more than half (51.7 per cent) of the survey respondents were studying in the Tasmanian School of Business and Economics, followed by the second largest population in the Faculty of Science, Engineering and Technology (21.8 per cent). The third faculty was the Australian Maritime College (9.6 per cent). These three groups accounted for 83.1 per cent of Chinese international students at UTAS. Considering degree distributions, the largest questionnaire response was from those undertaking Master Degree programs (50 per cent). Next were Bachelor Degree courses (38.2 per cent).

The 23 interviewees consisted of 13 males and 10 females, all of whom were born in 1980s or 1990s. Seven of them were undertaking courses in the Tasmanian School of Business and Economics, and an equal number were studying in the Faculty of Science, Engineering and Technology. The number of participants from Australian Maritime College was five. Interviewee degree distributions were: 11 enrolled in Bachelor Degree programs, nine undertaking Master Degree courses, and three Doctoral candidates.

3.2 Motivations

Chinese international students were asked to rate a list of seven factors motivating the selection to study at UTAS, a regional Australian university. The Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics summary of survey motivation data.⁴ The reasons in the Table 1 were listed based on sequence of their mean values. The smaller mean value of a reason stood for the greater importance of this reason, while a reason with the bigger mean seemed to be less important.

Reasons in the Table 1 are the starting point to be discussed in this section supplemented with evidence and additional key factors collected via interviews.

⁴ SD = Standard Deviation; VI = Very Important; I = Important; UI = Unimportant; VUI = Very Unimportant; NC = Never Considered.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics Summary of Questionnaire Data⁵

Reasons	Mean	SD	VI	I	UI	VUI	NC
	2.12	0.53					
Low tuition costs	1.88	0.77	31.6%	44.3%	16.2%	2.2%	5.7%
Availability of scholarships	1.99	0.81	27.4%	38.8%	20.4%	2.9%	10.5%
Easier/ faster to get an offer of enrolment compared with other Australian universities	2.08	0.80	23.2%	40.6%	24.6%	2.9%	8.8%
The qualification is recognized in China	2.23	0.84	17.1%	36.2%	26.3%	5.0%	15.4%
University reputation/ ranking	2.24	0.73	12.3%	46.7%	27.0%	3.3%	10.7%
Accept transfer credits	2.25	0.81	15.8%	31.6%	28.9%	3.3%	20.4%
Parents/ relatives/ an education agent/ friends recommended it	2.26	0.84	15.1%	33.3%	25.4%	5.0%	21.1%

a) More Competitive Tuition Fees

The motivation to pick UTAS was driven by the direct finance factor, more competitive tuition fees. Low tuition costs of UTAS were rated by students in their questionnaire responses to be the most important influencing factor (mean of 1.88) among all seven reasons. Also this motivation was highlighted by six out of 23 participants in interviews. The majority of Chinese international students coming to study overseas were self-funded, thus the cost of education was a great concern. It was consistently agreed from the responses of survey and interview that cheaper tuition fees of UTAS compared with mainland Australian universities advantaged UTAS. Some interviewees mentioned their UTAS tuition fees were almost only half of tuition costs of mainland Australian universities, and the tuition costs of member universities of the Group of Eight⁶ were much higher than UTAS. One interviewee who was undertaking a Master Degree program at UTAS indicated her concern about the cost of tuition fees for overseas study, "If I had not cared about tuition cost, I would have a Bachelor Degree in Australia first rather than gained a Bachelor Degree from a Chinese university". The cost concern may explain that the reason why 50 per cent of survey respondents were studying Master courses at UTAS rather than Bachelor programs was shorter study length. Potentially regional Australian universities can make use of the advantage of low tuition fees to compete with metropolitan Australian universities in order to attract more international students. The cost of tuition fees was also discovered to be a factor in the study of Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) push-pull theory. However, differing from this reason discussed by Mazzarol and Soutar in the context of country destination, this study discovered it as an influencing factor for the choice of a higher education institution. More competitive tuition fees of UTAS was a big attraction for Chinese international students, thus UTAS became their affordable choice.

⁵ Please notice that values of Mean and Standard Deviation (SD) for each reason calculated and showed in Table 1 don't include participant whose answer was Never Considered (NC).

⁶ The Group of Eight (Go8) is a coalition of leading Australian universities, intensive in research and comprehensive in general and professional education.

b) A Large Number of Scholarships

A large number of scholarships were another driving force behind the UTAS choice in the financial facet. This motivation ranked the second most important (mean of 1.99) among all seven reasons by survey respondents. Also, one third of interviewees mentioned this point. Besides benefiting from lower tuition fees, interviewees pointed out that students who had good academic records could easily get 25 per cent of tuition fee discount scholarship. Even if they did not gain a scholarship when applying for UTAS, this scholarship was still available for them after they commenced their UTAS courses if their UTAS marks were over 80 per cent. Doctoral candidates paid more attention to the availability of scholarships than cheap tuition fees. Extending this point, one Ph.D. candidate interviewee indicated that for those students graduated from UTAS, it was quite easy to successfully get UTAS full scholarships if they would like to further study Ph.D. programs. In addition to those scholarships which were commonly obtained by Chinese international students, a large number of other scholarships were available when applying for UTAS, and after having enrolled at UTAS. This finding is in alignment with Andressen (1991), that is, the availability of scholarships may have a significant bearing on the choice of university destination. By and large, combining factors of low tuition fees and a large number of scholarships, if choosing to study at UTAS, a regional Australian university, Chinese international students could have fewer expenses compared to study in mainland Australia, so UTAS for them was a quite economical choice.

c) Quicker and Easier Offers

One of the most curious and interesting findings of this research was that it was easier and faster to get offers from UTAS compared with other Australian universities. A considerable number of questionnaire respondents chose this reason, and hence this factor had a relatively high mean of 2.08. In addition, within the semi-structured interviews, four Chinese international students further commented that they applied for a few Australian universities at the same time, but UTAS offer was the earliest one. Furthermore, UTAS gave offers very quickly after Chinese international students submitted their applications. They were not sure whether they would get other offers from mainland Australian universities, so they easily accepted the earliest offers from UTAS. The strategy effectively pulled Chinese international students to enrol at UTAS. There appear to be no precedents for this cause to be found in the relevant literature.

Apart from this, the lower entrance requirements made Chinese international students easier to get an offer from UTAS compared with metropolitan Australian universities. One interviewee would like to undertake a program in Master of Accounting in Australian higher education, but “if you want to be enrolled into Master of Accounting in University of XXX, a metropolitan Australian university, you need a Bachelor Degree related to accounting, but mine is not”. However, UTAS did not require a Bachelor Degree related to accounting as a prerequisite to be eligible for the offer of Master of Accounting, so Chinese international students got an offer of Master of Accounting course more easily. This may explain why many Chinese international students enrolled in the Master of Accounting at UTAS. Lower entrance requirements also were mentioned by other interviewees. Existing literature (e.g. Lee, 2013) examined the possibility to meet the entrance requirements among universities in different countries, but there is little discussion about entrance requirements distinctions between regional Australian universities and universities in metropolitan Australia. Thus, quicker and easier offers secured a place for UTAS in the competition with metropolitan Australian universities to pour Chinese international students’ attention.

d) Cooperative Courses

Cooperative courses were a significant nexus to lead Chinese international students to study at UTAS. In this context, a cooperative course refers to a cooperative academic program between a Chinese university and an Australia university in which students completed their studies first in China and then in Australia, emerging with qualifications from both institutions. There were eight interviewees out of 23 who were from cooperative courses between China and Australia. All of them spent a large amount of time in elaborating on their cooperative courses and believed this was the dominant factor for them to study at UTAS, a regional Australian university. Lots of interviewees were from “2+2” Bachelor Degrees cooperative courses which entailed two-year courses in Chinese universities and then two-year courses in UTAS. When they were in those cooperative courses in China, they had classes from UTAS lecturers and also some Chinese universities required them to adopt UTAS online learning system, so those helped Chinese international students develop a comprehensive understanding of UTAS studying before they came to UTAS, and left a very good impression on UTAS. Plus, English language training as part of those programs in China helped them meet English entrance requirements of UTAS. Thus, they eventually came to UTAS to study after completing the initial Chinese part. Additionally, some of them recognized that UTAS seemed to be the only choice for them if they attempted to obtain two degrees at the end of the cooperative program. Also, there were other forms of cooperative courses where interviewees enrolled between Tasmanian TAFE and UTAS, or between Chinese vocational tertiary education (similar features as TAFE in Australia) and UTAS. The further reasons to select cooperative courses for initial study interviewees mentioned were they had a desire to study overseas, but still would like to use the results of Chinese university entry exams to apply for higher education, and also had a financial consideration. Nevertheless, the location of UTAS, regional Australia, was never considered by them, as long as it is a part of Australia. Relevant literature (e.g. Bodycott, 2009) usually provides valuable insights into the decisive function of cooperative courses when international students chose certain higher education institutions. However, the importance of cooperative courses is a new finding contributing to the influencing factor on choosing a regional Australian university. Generally, of which had direct and effective characteristics, cooperative courses was a key official route mixed with a range of factors for Chinese international students to study at UTAS.

e) Specialist Courses

Specialist courses functioned as a powerful driving force behind the UTAS choice made by Chinese international students. Chinese international students, especially those who intended to study specialist courses, such as maritime courses, would choose UTAS, since those courses in Australia were only offered in Australian Maritime College (AMC), and AMC is a part of UTAS. Apparently, the particularity of those courses limited their choice of Australian higher education institutions. All five interviewees undertaking courses from AMC revealed that this was the main cause of selecting UTAS. Most interviewees did not mind that those courses were in a university located in the regional Australia when making the decision to study at UTAS. Also, interviewees noted they were keen to undertake those specialist courses because of personal interests. Seen from this point, specialist courses was the extrinsic motivation to the UTAS choice underlain by the intrinsic driver, interests. Specialist courses as a motivation to pull Chinese international students to study in a regional Australian university are apparently an under-studied area. In conclusion, similar as the cooperative courses, those specialist courses were a direct and effective approach to attract Chinese international students who had special interests in those course fields to choose UTAS as their study destination.

f) Ease of Graduation

The motivation of ease of graduation from UTAS greatly influenced Chinese international students to choose regional Australian higher education. Three interviewees in this study reflected that after collecting available resources and comparing relevant information concerning ease of graduation from different Australian universities, UTAS was comparatively easier to graduate. This played a vital role in the process of selecting UTAS, though this was not a dominant motivation interviewees indicated. Interviewees accessed this information from education agency, experienced acquaintances, or the internet. This motivation mainly was for the purpose of smooth graduation from Australian university, but it was attributable to two different potential reasons for two different sorts of students, poor academic records and ease of changing majors. This reflected Chinese international students' choice of regional Australian higher education through "pragmatic rationality considering their circumstances, their personal ability and the possibility of their desire and expectations" to form a strategic choice (Lee, 2013, p. 331). All in all, ease of graduation was a major motivation for Chinese international students under the pragmatic strategy.

g) Acceptance of Credit Transfer

Acceptance of credit transfer was a crucial factor from the side of UTAS to enrol more Chinese international students. A mean of accepting credit transfer, 2.25 in the analysis of questionnaire, stood for the quite high importance, although it only ranked at the sixth of all seven reasons for Chinese international students to select to study at UTAS. What's more, roughly half of interviewees (11 out of 23) chose UTAS due to the credit transfer acceptance in UTAS. Besides nine interviewees who transferred their credits of previous Chinese university programs to UTAS on the basis of the above mentioned cooperative courses, another two transferred their diploma credits to progress a Bachelor degree of UTAS. Interviewees noted that they would only chose higher education institutions which could accept their transferred credit, and UTAS had a wide inclusiveness to credit of institutions and was flexible in relation to study pathways from different countries and different education levels. This was also a reason for them not to apply for some metropolitan Australian universities since they did not accept their previous credits. Supplementing this direct motive, interviewees also preferred credit transfer as a time-saving and money-saving approach. Past research did not pay much attention to the importance of acceptance of credit transfer on investigating international students' decision-making to choose certain higher education institution, but it was a underlying motivation for some Chinese international students to choose UTAS.

h) Immigration Prospects

In terms of the regional feature of UTAS, immigration prospects were a significant motivation for Chinese international students to choose UTAS as their study destination. A number of studies (e.g. Bodycott, 2009; Li, 2007; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002) identifies immigration prospects after graduation as the factors influencing Chinese international students' decision of an overseas study destination. Immigration prospects were fairly unique and special among all factors to motivate Chinese international students to choose UTAS, regarding the special geographic location of UTAS, regional Australia.

Five interviewees considered that this was a significant motivation for them to choose UTAS, and also further explained that for them who planned to immigrate to Australia after completing their courses, UTAS was a wise choice, because UTAS is in regional Australia. When they apply for immigration, they have potential to be nominated by the state government and receive extra five points if they have lived and studied in regional Australia

for two years. Immigration prospects were the only and central motivation to choose UTAS for two interviewees. For those Chinese international students who had a strong immigration desire, they not only picked the special location, regional Australia, but also attempted to enrol into immigration courses. Immigration courses refer to courses of which related occupations were in the Skilled Occupations List in the Australian Government Department of Immigration and Border Protection. Once they gained those course degrees when graduating from UTAS, it would be easier for them to immigrate to Australia. This also could explain why most survey participants at UTAS are from Tasmanian School of Business and Economics, and Faculty of Science, Engineering and Technology on the ground that the majority of immigration courses at UTAS were in those two faculties. Hence, the preferential immigration treatment from UTAS, a regional Australian university, was the best driver for Chinese international students who intended to immigrate to Australia after graduation.

i) Recommendations

Recommendations from education agencies, friends, relatives, and parents played a significant role in motivating Chinese international students to study at UTAS. There has been considerable investigation (e.g. Duan, 1997; Pimpa, 2002) into the referents on international students' choice of international higher education in existing researches. However, there has been little, if any, recent research into the role recommendations in the context of regional Australian higher education. Recommendation of parents/relatives/an education agent/friends scored highly, with a mean value of 2.08 in the survey. Some interviewees laid emphasis on the role of education agencies about information provision and persuasion. Having close partnerships with Australian institutions, a large number of education agencies in China assisted Australian institutions to recruit Chinese international students. Chinese international students did not need to pay agencies any counselling fee in institution selection and application making, because if Chinese international students finally enrolled at UTAS following the agency recommendation, agencies would get bonus from UTAS. In addition, interviewees also stated a preference to enrol at UTAS because of friend, relative and parents recommendations. These were not factors controlled directly by UTAS. One interviewee noted that recommendations to choose UTAS were from his friends and colleagues who had UTAS study experience, and also he came to UTAS to study with his friends together. Another interviewee stated that her relative who studied and was working at UTAS recommended UTAS as a suitable choice for her. Well-educated family members' suggestions were almost always accepted by Chinese international students. Chinese parents had a significant influence on their child's international higher education, but few interviewees pointed out that a particular Australian university, UTAS was their parents' recommendation. Conversely, Chinese parents did not make the choice of UTAS for their child. Therefore, in summary, it can be seen that the word-of-mouth referral from education agencies, friends, relatives, and parents had a great influence on Chinese international students' choice of UTAS.

j) Other Motivations

Investigation in this study also discovered other motivations, important in some individual cases, but insufficiently important when viewed against sample summaries. Interestingly, recognition of UTAS qualification in China scored a mean of 2.23 in the analysis of survey data still showed somewhat significance, but it was not mentioned by any interviewee. Although the previously-mentioned and widely used push-pull theory examined the high importance of the quality of education in a host country (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002), it is not clear that their study is relevant to the present research: specifically (in this case) regional Australian higher education and awareness from home country, China.

Additionally, another motivation listed in the questionnaire, university reputation/ranking was important by looking at its mean, 2.24. But interviewees have incompatible opinions towards this motivation. Some interviewees provided diverse examples of UTAS reputation or ranking captured their attention, including that UTAS is a four-star university in Australia, and a state university, and that UTAS founded in 1890 with a long history must be a prestigious university. From the other point of view, however, other interviewees mentioned that they never considered or cared UTAS ranking. Interestingly, reputation and profile of institution was identified in the push-pull study of Mazzarol and Soutar (2002). However, in summary, UTAS reputation or ranking was a small motivation for some Chinese international students to choose UTAS, but not for others.

4. DISCUSSION AND OUTLOOK

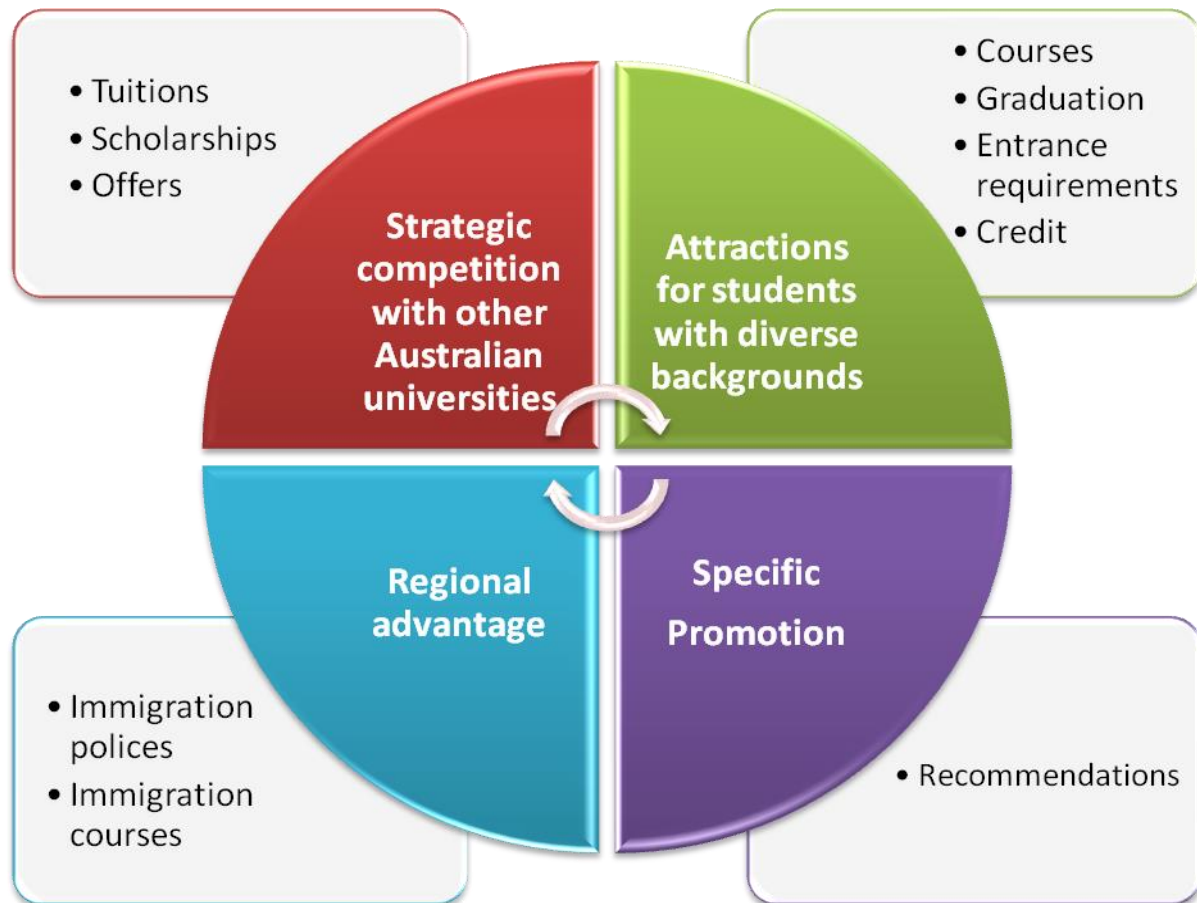
4.1 Consolidation

In order to explore why an increasing number of Chinese international students, perhaps almost certainly under the guidance of the international education policy in *Tasmania's Place in the Asian Century White Paper* (2013), “go off the beaten track” to enrol at UTAS, a regional Australian university, instead of following the majority in attending metropolitan Australian universities, this research analysed the UTAS choice of Chinese international students through identifying underlying motivations. This study has addressed the critical question of what motives Chinese international students to choose the UTAS, a regional Australian university, in the decision-making process of seeking to undertake Australian international higher education.

From the research, Chinese international students' core motivations were categorised into four dimensions (Figure 2): (1) strategic competition with other Australian universities; (2) attractions for students with diverse backgrounds; (3) regional advantage; (4) specific promotion. First, Chinese international students generally realised the strengths of UTAS in competition with other Australian universities. Thus, they were motivated in three aspects: lower tuition costs, a large number of available scholarships for future and current international students, and quicker offers of enrolments as well as lower entrance requirements. Second, diverse types of Chinese international students commonly were attracted by UTAS's universal inclusiveness. Cooperative courses were an official and core approach to bring students from Chinese universities to study at UTAS. Students who were interested in special fields were greatly driven to undertake those specialist courses at UTAS. If Chinese international students had poor previous academic records or would like to transfer to other majors to study, UTAS welcomed them by sending out the signal of ease of graduation. For those Chinese international students who had thoughts to change their majors, lower entrance requirements were also a strong attraction from UTAS. Credit transfer acceptance from UTAS was a crucial motivation for Chinese international students in cooperative courses between Chinese universities and UTAS, and those who had different study pathways from different countries or education levels. Third, when it comes to the advantage of regional Australia where UTAS was located, immigration prospects benefiting from immigration policies and immigration courses, became a very significant motivation for Chinese international students who intended to immigrate to Australia after graduation from UTAS. Four, UTAS promoted itself via two types of groups: education agencies; and friends, relatives and parents. Recommendations from those two groups motivated Chinese international students to select UTAS, although UTAS was not able to control all referents in those two types of groups. In addition, other small-scale motivations were also identified in this study, but they either lacked sufficient evidence to show their importance in making the choice of regional Australian higher education, or participants in this study held different

views on those motivations. Motivations from the above four dimensions were not mutually exclusive, instead, different types of Chinese international students enrolled at UTAS were only possibly motivated by one of those factors, or could be attracted simultaneously to a bunch of them.

Figure 2: Motivations of Chinese International Students for Selecting Regional Australian Higher Education in a Multi-dimensional Exploration



4.2 Contributions

This study makes both theoretical and practical contributions. At the theoretical level, this research identifies Chinese international students' motivations for regional Australia higher education. This will probably be the first study in this under-researched field to identify reasons underlying Chinese international students' choice to undertake regional Australian higher education. Existing literature focused primarily on the reasons why Chinese international students choose to study in Australian universities, rather than specifically in the context of the regional Australian higher education. Furthermore, this research constructs a useful model in developing understandings of motivations for other five choices (to choose to progress to higher education, to choose to study overseas, to pick Australia, to come to Tasmania to study, to study the course) in the decision-making process of seeking Australian regional higher education for Chinese international students based on the above mentioned theoretical framework. Furthermore, this research is a potential foundation in the further

formation of Chinese international students' decision-making paradigm in selecting regional Australian higher education.

In terms of the practical contributions, the findings of this research benefit different stakeholders of Chinese international students' choice of UTAS, a regional Australian higher education. For UTAS, this study facilitates developing insights of where Chinese international students' motivations came from and what they expected towards UTAS in order to understand Chinese students market better and to attract the larger number of Chinese international students to study at UTAS. Eventually, it is possible that this study will help UTAS achieve its five-year goal of doubling its international student intake. In relation to other regional Australian higher education institutions, this research could be potentially useful to help them understand their own development mechanisms in international higher education market so that get a larger share of international students in the competition with metropolitan Australian universities. As regards the Tasmanian government, this research will hopefully provide a worthwhile reference to update state international higher education policies in the future. Considering future Chinese international students, this research will hopefully offer information about current Chinese international students' motivations, and then help them make better-informed decisions in seeking overseas higher education. Concerning the Chinese government and the Australian government, the findings of the motivation understanding of Chinese students might potentially benefit the development of the Australian international higher education industry, deepen the Sino-Australian higher education rapport, and thereby realise the globalisation and the internationalisation of higher education.

4.3 Parameters and Future Research

While hopefully providing valuable understandings and insights into this topic, this research is not without parameters. Two aspects of them are worthy of exploration in future research. First, the data collected was ex post facto. In other words, participants who were studying at UTAS recollected what motivated them to select UTAS, a regional Australian university before coming to Australia, so pre-departure motivations in their memories were perhaps distorted by their UTAS experience. The point, motivations before coming to UTAS, had been underlined in the instructions of the questionnaire, and also was repeatedly emphasized in interviews, in attempts to avoid, or minimise responses being influenced by their latter UTAS experiences. A better approach will be to investigate Chinese students prior to, or immediately upon, their arrival in Australia. Second, this research is a snapshot of motivations from Chinese international students so far. However, the Australian international higher education market is changing rapidly. Offering similar specialist courses from other Australian universities, or altering Tasmanian immigration policies and so on, will almost certainly directly influence changes in Chinese international students' motivations. Thus, further research is needed to pay attention to Chinese international students' motivations and their changes towards the Australian region.

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