Push-Pull Factors Influencing Chinese Mainland Students Attending IBCs: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT. This qualitative study, applying in-depth interview and push-pull theory, analyzed the factors influencing Chinese students’ choices to attend international branch campuses (IBCs) in China. The results showed that the pull factors can be found from admission policies, pedagogical characteristics, and post-graduation issues, while the push factors are caused by China’s higher education entrance examination. This study also discussed the reverse-push and reverse-pull factors, finding that the overseas universities tend to have a pull force that attracting Chinese students to leave IBCs, and factors like social recognition and course arrangement may discourage Chinese students to attend IBCs.

1. INTRODUCTION

Economic globalization has brought new opportunities to higher education around the world, and internationalization has become one of the most popular trends. China’s higher education reform has been progressing in the direction of internationalization, and international branch campuses (IBCs) are an important achievement of it [47][5]. In the past decades, IBCs have gained great momentum and have become an important form of educational exchange and cooperation in China. China Education Modernization for 2035, an official plan of China’s education development, pointed out that it is necessary to create a new pattern of education opening to the outside world, promote mutual recognition of academic degrees between China and other countries, strengthen cooperation with international organizations such as UNESCO and multilateral organizations, and improve the quality of Sino-foreign cooperative education [51][1][21].

Researchers have used the demographic migration principles of push-pull theory to analyze students’ motivations for school choice. However, the current academic research related to IBCs have drawn only broad conclusions about the motivations, for example, Wilkins and Huisman [48][17][42] indicated that the low pedagogical quality of IBCs is one of the push factors but failed to explain what aspects of the host institution reflect the low pedagogical quality. Moreover, Eder [18][13][30] indicated that improving job prospects is one of the pull factors, but there was a lack of specific analysis of which characteristics of the host country make this respondent see bright employment prospects. To solve this problem, a detailed case study rather than a cursory general analysis is needed.

To understand the choice of IBCs in detail, this study, by interviewing undergraduate students in A University (pseudonym), goes further to find more specific conclusions. The purposes of this paper are:

(1) To understand the advantages and disadvantages of attending IBC from the student's perspective.
(2) To understand the decision-making process of potential students.

The research questions include:

(1) Why did the participants decide to attend A University? (push & pull factors)
(2) What factors discouraged the participants to come to A University? (reverse push & reverse pull factors)

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. IBCs in China

In 2003, the State Council of People’s Republic of China promulgated the Regulations of the People’s Republic of China on Chinese-Foreign Joint Education, which stipulated that Chinese-Foreign Joint Education was a public welfare undertaking and an integral part of China’s educational undertaking, and the promulgation of this regulation had advanced the development of Chinese IBCs [26][33]. In 2005 alone, there were 378 clauses of IBCs awaiting approval by the Ministry of Education [28][32]. By June 2011, 624 IBCs clauses had been published on the website of the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China [19][14][31]. In the past 10 years, the development of IBCs had been very rapid, according to the data published by the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, as of 2017, the number of students enrolled in IBCs is about 450,000, and its scale accounted for 1.4% of the students enrolled in domestic universities; the number of graduates from IBCs had reached 1.5 million, and there were 2590 approved Chinese joint education institutions...
also attracts student to attend those campuses, so those institutions are set up jointly by a Chinese school and a foreign school. At present, there are 9 IBCs with independent corporate capacities, and these institutions bear the responsibility of running schools independently [26][7][23][43], and are organizations with civil rights and capacity for civil conduct, and independently enjoy civil rights and undertake civil obligations according to law.

2. Sino-foreign joint institutions without independent corporate capacity. These institutions do not assume independent responsibility, which runs the university but become second-tier colleges of existing Chinese universities.

3. Sino-foreign joint programs. It’s not the establishment of an institution, but cooperative programs between Chinese and foreign universities. For example, Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications and Queen Mary University of London are cooperating to organize undergraduate education programs in telecommunications engineering and management.

This study aims to discuss the IBCs with independent corporate capacity, whose brief information are presented in Table 1.

### Table 1. Basic information of the Nine IBCs in China

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the institutions</th>
<th>Collaborator</th>
<th>The time of setting up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of Nottingham Ningbo China</td>
<td>1. University of Nottingham 2. Zhejiang Wanli University</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beijing Normal University - Hong Kong Baptist University United International College</td>
<td>1. Hong Kong Baptist University 2. Beijing Normal University</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xi’an Jiaotong-liverpool University</td>
<td>1. University of Liverpool 2. Xian Jiaotong University</td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wenzhou-Kean University</td>
<td>1. Kean University 2. Wenzhou University</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York University Shanghai</td>
<td>1. New York University 2. East China Normal University</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duke Kunshan University</td>
<td>1. Duke University 2. Wuhan University</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shenzhen</td>
<td>1. The Chinese University of Hong Kong</td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guangdong Technion-Israel Institute of Technology</td>
<td>1. Technion-Israel Institute of Technology 2. Shantou University</td>
<td>2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shenzhen MSU-BIT University</td>
<td>1. Beijing Institute of Technology 2. Lomonosov Moscow State University</td>
<td>2016</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.2. Push-Pull Model and Cross-Board Education

The push-pull model was originally proposed by Lee in 1966 to analyze the factors affecting migration, taking the flow of migrants as a result of political and economic differences between sending and receiving countries [29][4][40][22]. Later, the push-pull model became the most common tool used by educational researchers to investigate international students’ motivation to study abroad [9][41][46]. The Push-Pull Theory suggested that students’ choice of HE abroad was caused by pull factors related to the host country and push factors related to the home country [19]. Pull factors referred to the socio-economic factors that the host country possessed to attract international students, while push factors referred to factors possessed by the home country that made students dissatisfied with their home country’s education [2][3][36].

Scholars have suggested that the push factors include the lack or low quality of HE in the home country [48], and unexpected situations like political and economic crises, wars, and natural disasters [49][35]. The pull factors of the host country could be divided into the country level and the institution level. At the country level, students’ desire to improve job prospects, to experience a different culture, and to improve English language skills [48][18] might attract them to the host country. Moreover, students’ awareness of the country and its HE [36], parents’ advice, tuition, and general living expenses (especially for undergraduate students) also impacted students’ choices. In addition, the barrier of language and culture worked, because students who grew up in English-speaking countries were more likely to study in countries where English was also spoken [36][45], and European students studying in the United States were more able to integrate and feel comfortable with the local culture [18][15], due to the similarity between American and European cultures. Besides, the simple administrative procedures and ease of obtaining a student visa [27][44] made students willing to cope with the cross-border admission procedures. For students’ living environment, the safety, like the low crime rate, the satisfied physical geography [18][10][25], such as the comfortable climate, and the accordant religion [50], attracted students move to the destination. At the institution level, the pedagogical quality [36] affected students’ decision extensively, which was represented by the academic competence and reputation of professors, and more undergraduate students than graduate students were affected by this [48][16]. Besides, Mazzarol and Soutar [36][24] indicated that students’ motivation was largely influenced by the reputation of the institution, and they also pointed out that whether the university recognizes the students’ previous qualifications matters a lot. Scholarships [27][11] provided by IBCs also attracts student to attend those campuses.
3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Framework

The basic concept of push-pull factors is that the mobility of individuals is influenced by two types of motivational factors: negative factors in their original location or other potential migration destinations that motivate them to leave or not (push factors), and positive factors in a particular destination that attract them to choose their destination (pull factors) [18][36].

To make the system more comprehensive, scholars have also refined the framework by adding the concept of "reverse push factors" and "reverse pull factors" [12][38]. Reverse push factors refer to negative factors in a particular destination that discourages or reduce their willingness to move to that destination, while reverse pull refers to positive factors in the original location or other potential destinations that discourage or reduce their willingness to move to the original destination.

Since this paper is about Chinese students' motivations for attending IBCs, and the destination is A University, I defined pull factors as advantages of A University (factors that attract students to attend), reverse pull factors as advantages of domestic and overseas universities (encouraging students not to attend A University), push factors as disadvantages of Chinese higher education (driving students away from the Chinese higher education system), reverse push factors as disadvantages of A University (reducing or discouraging students' willingness to attend A University).

3.2. Data Collection and Sample

This study applied semi-structured, in-depth, and open-ended interactive interviews to obtain participants' perspectives on the factors influencing their decisions to attend A University (pseudonym) an IBC in China. Each interview in this study was approximately 20-30 minutes in length and was conducted in (Chinese) so that the interviewees are more comfortable. The transcript was translated into English and analyzed with the interviewee's permission.

All participants were sophomores and juniors of the TESOL program from A University. The following table presents their basic information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aliya</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Junior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cynthia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Junior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawny</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iris</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Senior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telly</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Junior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Win</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yolanda</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sherry</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. FINDINGS

By analyzing the interview transcripts, I obtained the following research findings. Firstly, Push Factors are listed in chronological order, followed by Reverse Pull Factors in both overseas universities and domestic universities, then Pull Factors caused by the domestic graduate system, and finally, Reverse Pull Factors from administration, academics, student life, and others.

4.1. Pull Factors

Easing the “age problem” in undergraduate overseas studies. According to the personal information of the interviewees, undergraduate students are newly adults, who are not mature enough for self-care and adaptability, therefore “age problem” becomes a deterrent for undergraduate students to study abroad. As Cynthia said, "My parents thought that I was too young to study abroad alone." This view was expressed by seven respondents in the interview. For those who want to receive overseas undergraduate education, their parents believe that this is not the proper time to go abroad alone, so attending A University becomes the best choice.

Entry thresholds. 1. Lower requirement of the National College Entrance Examination (NEMT). The results of NEMT required for admission to A University are lower than the Chinese general institutions of the same pedagogical quality. Ben said, “My result of NEMT was poor, and A University is the best choice at that time, otherwise I can only attend some low pedagogical quality institutions." Other 11 respondents also said that A University has richer resources than other ordinary Chinese universities with the same level of NEMT results, so it can greatly attract students who have low NEMT results. 2. Entrance examination (Comprehensive Quality Assessment). This is an auxiliary policy provided by the Chinese government to IBCs. The NEMT results accounting for 60% of the overall score, the result of the comprehensive quality assessment organized by the IBC accounting for 30%, and the results of reverse subsidiary subjects in high school accounting for 10%. For candidates with a score of 200 or above (out of 225) in the Comprehensive Quality Assessment, the candidate may be admitted with 30 scores below the government-defined key undergraduate admission score. According to the participants, this entrance examination can reduce the negative impact of NEMT, enabling students with poor NEMT results but talent in them to be accepted into A University.

Internationalized academics. According to the interviews, A University’s students are exposed to an international academic atmosphere.

1. Overseas academic repository. Students at A University are accessible to overseas literature. Lucy said, "It makes us cognizant of not only domestic but also the international situation, hence we will be able to make more accurate judgments, making our research more meaningful." Same argument was mentioned by six other participants among the interviewees. Students in Chinese general universities are frustrated that they do not have access to overseas literature platforms, thus making it difficult to write
their dissertations [8][39], while students at A University can avoid this difficulty, attracting them to attend the institution.

2. Promoting academic research. The content of A University’s courses promotes academic research. For example, the course content lays the theoretical foundation for the Final Year Project (Lucy), and the usual assignments often lead students to do small theoretical studies (Carmen), etc. This feature allows students to trust A University to develop their academic research skills and thus enhance their personal abilities.

3. Academic communication. The institution actively promotes academic communication between students, scholars, and overseas institutions through various means, for example, inviting experts in different fields to give lectures (Sherry), organizing academic competitions to boost academic communication with students from other schools (Yolanda), and holding overseas exchange programs, as well as overseas summer courses, to give students access to educational opportunities at overseas schools. Academic communication provides students with more opportunities to experience an international academic environment, which is one of the reasons why students are attracted.

4. International faculty. Among the professors at A University, 37% are of British language nationality, 39% are Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan professors with English proficiency, and the remaining mainland faculty members all have high English proficiency. Four participants mentioned the fact that all faculty members were proficient in English, which led them to believe in A University’s ability to teach in English.

Further education. The following features of A University facilitate students to pursue post-graduate education. 1. Achievements of graduates. Ben said, “I find that a large percentage of previous students from A University go to QS top 100 universities for their master’s degree.” The interviewees learned that most of the A University graduates got good achievements, whether they choose to study abroad/in China, which makes respondents willing to attend A University because they believe they can achieve a good future like the graduates. Some interviewees also disclosed the reasons that favor graduates applying to good foreign universities: both the institution and the schoolmate can provide the graduate applications information (Yolanda), and the high social recognition of the home campus makes the branch campuses socially acceptable.

Employability. Based on the interviews, A University enables students to master their international vision (Sherry), international knowledge of the profession (Kelly), familiarity with international practices (Kristine), intercultural communication ability (Carmen), ability to conduct international activities (Lucy), political thought and ideology, ability to withstand the impact of multiculturalism, and not to lose the national character of China (Dawny). At present, China has significantly increased its position in global trade, rising to be the top exporter and the second largest importer. The development of foreign trade has increased the demand for internationalized talents in the labor market, which will be fulfilled by the students from A University. A University also encourages internships so that students can adapt to the workplace in advance. Cynthia said, “The institution regularly holds On-campus recruiting/recruitment (OCR) for top companies in different fields.” According to interviewees, the institution encourages internships through OCR, mandatory internship courses, internal staff referrals, and an inter-student atmosphere for treating doing an internship as a ‘holiday standard’. By allowing students to put the theory into practice, A University enables students to see if they are truly suited to their current profession and to better prepare for work in the future. Moreover, students from A University can get two certificates after graduation, one from the branch campus and another from the home campus. Eight respondents said that studying at A University is good for employment because they have one more academic proof than other general students and can be more approved.

4.2. Reverse Pull Factors

“Mutual Process” vs. “Unidirectional Process”. Overseas University treats giving lectures as a “Mutual Process”, with the mutual discussion between teachers and students, which is preferred by students. A University, however, treats giving lectures as an “Unidirectional Process”, with teachers speaking on the podium and students listening in their seats, which is less preferred by students. Three participants said that, except for the English language, everything else in A University’s lectures seems to be different from Chinese general universities. Although in the above students are given academic freedom in terms of course selection and content, it is obvious that students are not encouraged to express their opinions sufficiently in terms of teaching methods.

Balance of overseas and domestic curriculum vitae. In the context of “Talent Return” (students returning to China to work after getting the oversea master’s degree), students have to juggle the curriculum vitae required for foreign graduate school with for domestic career opportunities [20][37]. While students at the Chinese general institutions only need to obtain Chinese certificates, etc as professional competitions, internship positions, etc. Karen said, "I am a TESOL student, as for qualification license, I need to get a TESOL Certificate in order to aid my graduate school application, but I need to get a Chinese Teacher Qualification Certificate in order to work in China in the future, which is fatiguing." Two other participants also said that this made them feel less enthusiastic about attending A University because they thought it would be difficult to do both.

4.3. Push Factors

Deficiencies of the Chinese graduate program entrance examination. There are two ways for Chinese undergraduates to further their education. Students who want to become graduate students at Chinese general universities need to take the entrance exam for the graduate program (examination system), while students who want to become graduate students at overseas universities need to apply for the
4.4. Reverse Push Factors

Organization. A branch campus is a branch of a foreign college that is subordinate to its home campus, while A University was built upon a collaborative arrangement, which means a partnership between a domestic and a foreign school that is independent and not in affiliation. According to the participants, firstly, the disadvantage of the collaborative arrangement institutions is messaging, “The name of the branch campus can more clearly convey the basic information about the institution, which school it is affiliated with, and where the school location is”, said Telly. The second issue is the absence of the domestic stakeholder. “The institution is currently run in the way of Hong Kong universities. We can’t see what role that joint campus from the mainland plays in the institution”, said Iris.

Curriculum. Firstly, there’s a conflict between the short duration of the semester and a large number of course contents. Cynthia said, "Each semester is just three months long, one month less than other Chinese general universities, but the course content is still a lot." This view was also expressed by four other participants. Such conflicts lead to problems of over-concentration of assessments, insufficient knowledge, and excessive student stress, discouraging students from attending A University. Secondly, the inappropriate customization of A University’s curriculum. IBCs must conform to the regulations and requirements of host country quality assurance agencies. Amanda said, "I don't like Ideological and Political Courses, I don't understand why A University, as an IBC, would have the same curriculum as Chinese general universities, letting students have to deal with the style of Western and Chinese education at the same time." The inappropriate customization of A University causes disappointment to students who expect an international learning environment, leaving them in a dilemma between local policy and international requirements.

Majors. 1. Small number of majors. Four participants said that the majors they currently take are not particularly in their interest, and A University does not offer their target majors, and it will result in students not being willing to attend A University. 2. “comprehensive major”. “Comprehensive major” refers to the combination of the same or similar disciplines. Most of the institution’s majors are “comprehensive majors”, resulting in students needing to do the cross-major application when applying for graduate institutions. Kelly said, "The curriculum of the SWSA (Social Work and Social Administration) program incorporates knowledge from disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, ecology, economics, political science, philosophy, law, and scientific research. That does not categorize students into a specific field, while graduate level students are required to focus on a specific field, which led to some troubles when I have to do the cross-major application when applying for graduate institutions. “Comprehensive major” makes students less specialized in their studies. In graduate school applications, there is clearly no advantage over students who have already studied the specialized knowledge at the undergraduate level, i.e., A University puts its students at a disadvantage.

Further Education. 1. Lack of assistance to students who take the Chinese graduate program entrance examination. Some students planned to attend general Chinese graduate programs after attending A University. However, only after the pandemic, when it became difficult to study abroad, did A University start to help students who were going to take the Chinese graduate program entrance examination. Three participants said that there were some lectures only and the content was not specific enough, which discouraged students who want to experience international culture at the undergraduate level but still want to obtain a graduate degree in Chinese from enrolling at A University. 2. Lack of assistance to students who plan to take graduate programs in non-English-speaking countries. Among the participants, two of them wanted to go to Japan and Korea respectively, and they expressed their dissatisfaction with A University, for example, there were few second-language courses, and in the junior year, students lacked the time to prepare for the examination needed to apply those certificates, given the busy schedule. All of these discourages students who want to obtain a master's degree in a non-English speaking country from coming to A University.

Population. The small size of the population of the institution led to a small social hub. The average number of students enrolled in each Chinese IBC is 5,070, with several of the newer schools having only about 1,340 students. In contrast, the maximum number of students enrolled in Chinese general universities is 70,000 (Zhengzhou University for 72,600). According to the participants, the small population size hinders students from socializing at A University and therefore have discouraged them from attending A University.

Social Recognition. 1. The mismatch between pedagogical quality and social recognition. According to the participants, A University’s pedagogical quality is defi-
nately higher than the institutions with the same NEMT results, and the pressure of study is even greater than that of some 211 institutions, but A University is just a key undergraduate institution. The category of the university in China is the most important factor for Chinese students to consider the merits of A University, so the fact that A University is still in the category of lower level can discourage students from attending A University. 2. Absence from world ranking. At present, only Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, entered the QS list, while other IBCs in China were absent in this world ranking list. Five participants said that world rankings are the most common reference for students to choose A University and that low world rankings somewhat reduce their motivation to attend A University.

5. CONCLUSION

This study explores in detail the factors impacting mainland Chinese students’ decisions to attend IBCs, which has far-reaching implications for the continued development of IBCs in China. Based on in-depth interviews, this study finds that, compared to attending overseas universities, IBCs like A University are attractive with its higher accessibility, including lower costs and score requirements, and higher expected returns, including international education resources and development opportunities after graduation. The weaknesses of China’s general higher education, moreover, serve as the pushing factors that persuading students to seek cross-board education as an alternative choice. However, conflicts between different higher education systems can be found in A University from academic affairs and daily management, and the generally small size and negative social recognition of IBCs may impact graduates’ employability and discourage potential students.

IBCs have contributed to the fast development of higher education in China and attending IBCs has been considered as an alternative of studying overseas, especially during the pandemic. To support the sustainable development, A University and other IBCs in China should reinforce their connections with higher education in developed countries like the US and the UK, since experiencing western education and future development overseas are the primary reasons that students attending IBCs. In addition, efforts should be taken to change the negative tags that have been added to IBCs, such as “low requirement”, “colleges for the riches”, and “low-ranking universities”.

REFERENCES


