

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE INFLUENCING FACTORS OF CHINESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' WILLINGNESS TO STUDY ABROAD FOR POSTGRADUATE PROGRAMS

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Abstract: This study aims to explore the influencing factors of Chinese university students' willingness to study abroad for postgraduate programs. A mixed-methods approach (questionnaire survey and in-depth interviews) was adopted to analyze 108 participants. The findings reveal that learning experience factors, such as undergraduate institution reputation and major advantages, exert the greatest impact on study abroad willingness, followed by personal factors (career prospects, language proficiency, etc.), target institution factors, and family factors. Through in-depth interviews, this study finds that students' decision-making is mainly driven by the improvement of academic competitiveness, career development needs, and attraction of international resources, while family support plays a more auxiliary role. The study reveals the complex mechanism of study abroad decision-making among postgraduate students, emphasizes the core status of autonomy and goal orientation, and provides an empirical basis for the optimization of educational policies and study abroad guidance.

Keywords: Chinese university students; Study abroad willingness; Postgraduate education; Internationalization of education; Study abroad decision-making mechanism

1 INTRODUCTION

With the continuous advancement of globalization, the mobility rate of international students has been rising steadily, and studying abroad has become a core component of the global higher education system. According to the 2020 report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the number of international students worldwide nearly tripled in the first two decades of the 21st century. For China, studying abroad is no longer a choice for a small elite. In recent years, the number of Chinese international students has increased by more than 10% annually, with a particularly significant growth at the postgraduate level, although this trend has changed somewhat after the outbreak of COVID-19 [1]. In the existing literature, most studies on the study abroad willingness of Chinese students focus on the undergraduate population, while there are few studies on the decision-making process of master's or doctoral students. This study aims to fill the gap in the current literature, especially in the research on the study abroad willingness of Chinese postgraduate students. The specific research questions of this study include: 1. What is the degree of influence of different factors on students' study abroad willingness? 2. Why do different factors have different degrees of influence on students' study abroad willingness?

To answer the above research questions, this study will first conduct a quantitative analysis through a questionnaire survey to assess the degree of influence of various factors on students' study abroad willingness, and draw conclusions through statistical analysis. Then, this study will carry out a qualitative study through in-depth interviews to further explore individual differences and complexities in students' decision-making process, so as to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanism. Through the mixed-methods approach, this study not only quantifies the importance of each factor but also reveals the specific mechanisms through which these factors shape the study abroad willingness of Chinese postgraduate students. This method helps to answer the research questions more comprehensively and provides a more scientific basis for future policy formulation and practice.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Current Situation and Development of International Education

According to the existing literature, the rapid development of educational internationalization is mainly attributed to four factors. First, Pawar et al. (2020) pointed out that education quality is one of the main factors influencing international students' choice of destination [2]. Academic reputation, global ranking, research level and other factors directly affect students' study abroad decisions. Wilkins and Huisman (2015) also emphasized this point, noting that higher education institutions in developed countries attract a large number of international students due to their high-quality educational resources and academic reputation. Second, immigration policies also play an important role in influencing students' study abroad decisions [3]. Song and Kim (2023) pointed out that changes in immigration policies not only affect students' choice of study location but also their academic expectations and career development [4]. Third, according to the OECD (2020) report, studying abroad has become increasingly part of students' career planning rather than merely an academic choice. Many students choose to study abroad in order to obtain broader career development

opportunities and higher salaries. Finally, the social and political stability and cultural environment of the study abroad destination play an increasingly important role in students' study abroad decisions. In recent years, social unrest and political instability in some countries have led some students to question whether they should study in these destinations, while countries with political stability and cultural inclusiveness are more attractive to students [5].

2.2 Factors Influencing Chinese Students' Choice of Studying Abroad

According to the data from the Ministry of Education of China, the number of Chinese students studying abroad in higher education institutions reached 700,000 in 2024, and this figure is expected to grow steadily in the coming years. According to the existing literature, multiple factors may influence the decision of students or their families to study abroad. First, the sustained growth of China's economy has enabled many families to invest more resources in their children's education. Despite the great progress made in China's higher education, many students still choose to pursue an overseas academic environment. A study by Hou Chunguang and Du Debin (2023) shows that international academic exchange platforms and high-quality educational resources are key factors attracting Chinese students to pursue further studies overseas. Third, in addition to education quality, expectations for career development have also become a key factor influencing Chinese students' study abroad decisions. Study abroad experience not only provides students with an international academic perspective but also helps them improve their professional skills through internships and employment opportunities [6-7].

3 RESEARCH METHODS

According to the study by Shen Wenqin (2023), postgraduate students usually have a solid academic background, and their study abroad decisions are jointly influenced by various factors such as academic progress, career development, cross-cultural communication, and access to academic resources [8]. These motivations are different from those of undergraduate students. Based on the existing literature, four categories of factors influencing the study abroad willingness of Chinese postgraduate students have been identified, namely personal factors, family factors, learning experience factors, and target institution factors. This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to comprehensively understand the mechanism behind Chinese postgraduate students' study abroad decisions. First, based on the four categories of factors identified above, this study designed a questionnaire to measure the degree of influence of different categories of factors on students' study abroad decisions, involving personal factors (such as grade point average, foreign language proficiency, personal motivation), family factors (such as family economic status, educational background, and expectations for their study abroad plans), learning experience factors (such as the type and level of the undergraduate institution attended), and target institution factors (such as perception of education quality in the destination country, immigration policies, etc.). Subsequently, through in-depth interviews, this study explored the underlying reasons behind students' decisions.

The questionnaire survey involved 108 participants from different universities across China, representing a diverse group of undergraduate and postgraduate students. The selection of these participants ensured broad representativeness and academic coverage, including students from top universities and ordinary universities. The survey was conducted online, and the participants provided valid responses reflecting a wide range of age groups, grades, and gender distributions.

Table 1 General Information of 108 Participants

Basic Information	Age	Age	Age	Grade Distribution	Grade Distribution	Grade Distribution	Grade Distribution	Grade Distribution	Gender	Gender
Category	18-22 years	22-30 years	Over 30 years	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior	Graduated	Female	Male
Number	68	38	2	11	19	35	37	6	58	50

General information of 108 participants is shown in Table 1.

To ensure the reliability of the collected data, the author conducted reliability and validity tests on the questionnaire. The Cronbach's α value of the questionnaire was 0.828 (>0.7), indicating that the questionnaire had high reliability and was suitable for further analysis. In the validity test, the p-value obtained from the questionnaire was <0.05 , indicating that the questionnaire effectively measured the intended constructs and was statistically significant, which could be used to draw conclusions.

Table 2 Questionnaire Reliability and Validity Test Results

Measurement Index	Value
Cronbach's α	0.828
p-value	<0.05

Questionnaire reliability and validity test results are shown in Table 2.

From the 108 survey participants, the author randomly invited six students to conduct in-depth interviews.

Table 3 General Information of Six Interview Participants

Participant	Gender	Grade	Discipline	Participant	Gender	Grade	Discipline
P1	Female	Junior	Engineering	P4	Male	Graduated	Computer Science
P2	Male	Senior	Social Sciences	P5	Female	Sophomore	Public Health
P3	Female	Senior	Business	P6	Male	Junior	Law

General information of six interview participants is shown in Table 3.

This study strictly abides by academic ethical standards. All participants signed an informed consent form before participation, which outlined the research purpose, procedures, and participants' rights. During the research process, all data were kept strictly confidential, and the personal information and responses of the participants were anonymized to ensure the protection of their identities.

4 RANKING OF INFLUENCING FACTORS AND ANALYSIS OF THEIR CAUSES

According to the analysis results of quantitative data, among the four groups of factors, learning experience factors have the greatest impact on students' study abroad willingness, with an average score of 3.69; personal factors follow closely with an average score of 3.67; target institution factors rank third with an average score of 3.58; and family factors have the least impact with an average score of 3.55. Among learning experience factors, the institution attended has the greatest impact with an average score of 3.76, followed by major type with an average score of 3.62. Among personal factors, personal competitiveness and employment prospects have the greatest impact with an average score of 3.91; language proficiency and educational resources follow closely with an average score of 3.85 each. Among target institution factors, the education level of the destination country has the greatest impact with an average score of 3.91, while immigration policy has the least impact with an average score of 3.28. Among family factors, family economic conditions have the greatest impact with an average score of 3.58, followed by parental expectations and support with an average score of 3.56, and family background has the least impact with a score of 3.50.

Although quantitative data reveal the strength of the influence of each factor, they do not fully explain the specific motivations and decision-making processes of individual survey participants. Specifically, why do school and major factors have the greatest influence? Why do personal factors have a significant impact but a slightly lower degree of influence? Why do target institution factors have a lower influence compared with education experience factors and personal factors? Why do family factors have the least influence? Therefore, the author conducted an in-depth study through interview research.

According to the interview responses, undergraduate institution and major factors have a significant impact on students' study abroad decisions due to the following key reasons. First, the academic reputation of the undergraduate institution plays an important role in students' decision to study abroad. For example, P1, a junior student majoring in engineering, emphasized that the tier of her undergraduate institution directly affects her success rate in postgraduate applications. "The reputation of the undergraduate institution is important when applying for overseas postgraduate programs. As a graduate from a 211 Project university, my undergraduate degree is highly recognized when applying to overseas universities". Second, the professionalism and advantages of the major chosen at the undergraduate level also affect students' decisions. For example, P4, a graduate majoring in computer science, pointed out that the technical foundation laid during undergraduate study makes him more competitive in applying for international postgraduate programs. "In my field, a solid technical background is important. The resources and knowledge acquired during my undergraduate study enable me to pursue further studies abroad". Third, students usually regard studying abroad as an opportunity to improve academic and career development, which is influenced by undergraduate study. P5, a student majoring in public health, said that her undergraduate professional study made her want to explore international educational opportunities. "Undergraduate courses have laid the necessary foundation for me, but I want to expand my knowledge globally. Studying abroad will provide more in-depth resources and research for my field".

The relatively large impact of personal factors on students' study abroad decisions can be attributed to several key motivations, as evidenced by the interview data of the participants. First, personal competitiveness and future career prospects have become a strong driving force for students to decide to study abroad. For example, P1, an engineering student, emphasized that studying abroad will significantly enhance her career opportunities. "I believe studying abroad will make me more competitive in the global job market. Exposure to international companies and the diverse skills I will acquire will make me stand out". Second, language proficiency also plays a key role in motivating students to pursue further studies abroad. P6, a law student, said that his high English proficiency gives him confidence in studying abroad. Third, academic performance and personal motivation to pursue excellence also affect students' decisions. P2, a social science student, explained how his academic performance inspired his desire to pursue further studies abroad. "I want to continue to build on what I have and improve my academic level. Studying abroad will expose me to a wider range of research perspectives and academic challenges".

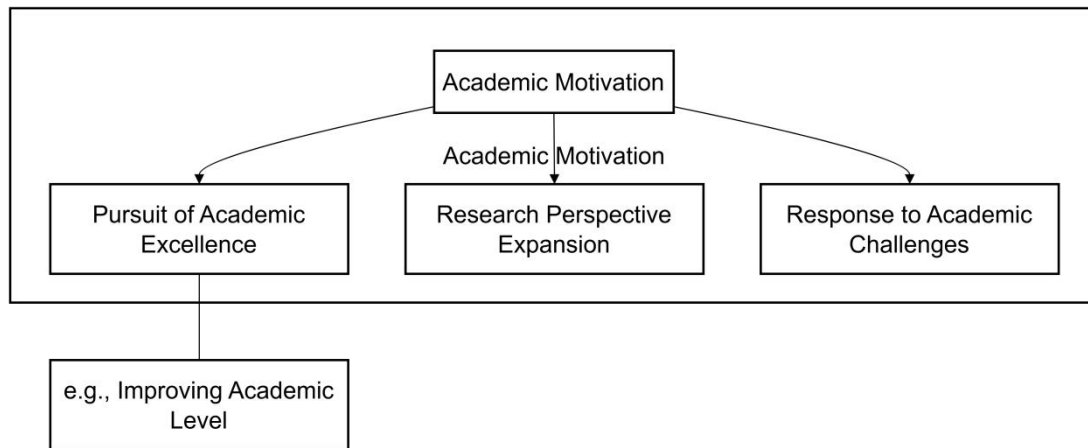


Figure 1 Personal Factors and Motivations for Overseas Study

Analysis of Personal Factors and Motivations for Overseas Study is shown in Figure 1. Although external factors such as the education level of the destination country, immigration policies, and limitations of domestic education play a role in students' study abroad decisions, their influence is often relatively low compared with school, major, and personal factors. The interview data reveal several reasons behind this trend. First, many students value the academic and career opportunities provided by studying abroad more than external factors such as immigration policies. P4, a computer science graduate, explained that while immigration policy is a consideration, it is secondary compared to the quality of the educational experience. "I focus more on the courses and research opportunities offered in my major. Immigration policy is important, but not my top priority—academic resources and career prospects come first". Similarly, P3, a senior business student, emphasized that students tend to care more about the academic reputation of universities in the destination country than external factors such as visa regulations. Second, the education level of the destination country is an important external factor, but students generally consider the education quality and specific academic resources of universities more critical to their decisions. Third, although the limitations of domestic postgraduate education are a consideration, they do not outweigh other factors in the decision-making process. P2, a second-year postgraduate student majoring in social sciences, mentioned that while he recognizes the limitations of domestic education, he values the international perspective and access to more diverse academic resources abroad more. "Domestic education has its limitations, but I think the main reason for studying abroad is to gain global perspectives and research, rather than escaping the limitations of domestic education".

Although family factors are still important, their influence on students' study abroad decisions is often lower compared with other factors (such as academic reputation, career opportunities, and personal motivation). The interview data reveal several reasons why family-related factors play a more indirect role in students' decision-making process. First, many students are now more independent in decision-making, regarding studying abroad as an opportunity for personal and career development rather than something mainly driven by family expectations. P5, a third-year postgraduate student majoring in public health, shared that although her family supports her decision, her career goals ultimately influence her choice to study abroad. Second, P1, a first-year postgraduate student majoring in engineering, acknowledged that family economic status is indeed an influencing factor, but she emphasized that the long-term career benefits of studying abroad outweigh immediate economic concerns. Third, while parental support is important, the influence of parental expectations is relatively mild. P6, a first-year postgraduate student majoring in law, mentioned that his parents support him but do not impose any strong expectations on him. "My parents want me to succeed, but they always encourage me to go my own way. They are happy as long as I pursue what I love". This indicates that although family support provides emotional backing, it does not always play a leading role in study abroad decisions. In many cases, parental encouragement is more about supporting students' personal aspirations rather than guiding their academic or career choices.

5 INTERACTIVE INFLUENCE OF ACADEMIC REPUTATION, PERSONAL MOTIVATION AND EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

The decision of Chinese postgraduate students to study abroad is jointly influenced by personal motivation, academic goals, and broader socio-economic factors. As shown by the research results and literature, certain factors (such as academic reputation and institution quality) have higher weight in the decision-making process, while other factors (such as family influence and immigration policies) play a more auxiliary role. The differences in the influence of these factors can be attributed to the interaction between global trends, domestic education reforms, and economic conditions. The finding that educational factors always have the greatest impact on students' study abroad decisions is basically consistent with the study by Pawar et al. (2020), which emphasizes that academic reputation and institution ranking are the most important determinants for students to choose study abroad destinations [2]. Chinese students are keen to enter prestigious universities with global reputation and advanced research opportunities. This reflects China's sustained economic development, which enables more families to support their children to study abroad. Therefore, the reputation

and academic quality of institutions have become the primary considerations. In addition, students are increasingly attracted by specialized academic programs abroad that offer cutting-edge research facilities and align with their future career goals. As pointed out by Pawar et al. (2020), international academic exchange platforms and high-quality overseas educational resources continue to attract Chinese students who wish to improve their academic level and global career prospects [2].

Personal factors (such as academic performance and language proficiency) also play an important role, but their influence is relatively inferior to institution-related factors. This finding corresponds to confirmatory studies including those conducted by Chand and Tung (2019), that language proficiency (especially English proficiency) is crucial for Chinese students who want to succeed in overseas academic environments [9]. In addition, according to Chand and Tung, immigration policies have an increasing impact on international student mobility, especially when stricter policies are implemented in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom. However, these policies are usually considered secondary to the education quality and career development opportunities provided by the host country. This is also consistent with the results of this study that target institution factors (such as the education level and immigration policies of the study abroad destination) have less influence on students' decisions. As emphasized by the research results, students tend to prioritize access to high-quality educational programs and career opportunities over worrying about immigration policies. In addition, students prefer countries with more favorable immigration conditions, such as Canada and Australia, where post-graduation employment opportunities are regarded as part of the long-term career benefits of studying abroad [10]. Finally, although family factors are still important, they have the least impact on students' study abroad decisions. The research results show that family financial support and parental expectations are less decisive than personal motivations related to academic and career goals. This is consistent with the view of Zeng Shaorui (2024) that although family support is crucial for students to study abroad, it is increasingly regarded as a supporting factor rather than a main driving force. Chinese students have become more independent in the decision-making process and pay more attention to personal academic interests and career development [11]. The increasing affluence of Chinese cities has made studying abroad more accessible, but decisions are still mainly made by students themselves, reflecting the trend of regarding international education as an investment in future career prospects and social mobility. As pointed out in the literature, family support provides more opportunities for studying abroad rather than directly driving the decision.

6 CONCLUSION

This study systematically explores the influencing factors and mechanism of Chinese university students' willingness to study abroad for postgraduate programs through a mixed-methods approach. The study finds that learning experience factors (such as undergraduate institution level and major type) have the most significant impact on study abroad willingness, followed by personal factors (such as career prospects and language proficiency), target institution factors (such as education quality), and family factors (such as economic conditions). Qualitative analysis further reveals that students generally regard studying abroad as a strategic choice to enhance academic competitiveness and career development, rather than being purely driven by family expectations or external policies. Although family support provides emotional backing, its direct influence is relatively limited, and students' decision-making tends to be more autonomous and goal-oriented.

The contribution of this study is to fill the gap in the research on study abroad decision-making among postgraduate students, reveal the dynamic relationship between different factors, and provide practical implications for universities, policy makers, and families: universities can enhance students' competitiveness by strengthening international academic cooperation, policy makers need to optimize study abroad services and information transparency, and families should pay more attention to students' individual needs. The limitations of the study include a small sample size and limited geographical coverage. Future research can expand the sample scope and incorporate more cultural and economic variables to deepen the analysis.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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