

An Exploration of International Students' Motivation to Pursue Doctoral Studies in China

Yating Hu¹

Kun Dai²

¹ Queensland University of Technology

² Peking University

With the growing trend of globalisation and the internationalisation of higher education, China is actively recruiting more international students to study at Chinese higher education institutions. Specifically, transforming from a traditional country that usually sends students to study overseas, China now attempts to attract more international students to learn in China to improve the competitiveness of higher education as a receiving host country. Notably, international doctoral students are a significant cohort in this trend, reflecting the quality of HE in a country. Although many studies have focused on international student mobility, the research explores international students' motivations to pursue doctoral degrees in China is still limited. To fill this gap, through the push-pull model, we conducted an exploratory qualitative study to investigate the motivations of 35 international doctoral students from three Chinese universities located in Beijing, Shandong, and Guangdong, respectively.

The findings show that various national, institutional, and individual factors have comprehensively influenced their choices to pursue doctoral studies in China. Considering the national factors, we find that the promising economic future of China attracts most doctorate students who choose to study in Chinese universities. To attract global talent, the Chinese government manages international student education by providing favourable scholarship policies to ease the students' economic burdens. Moreover, the more accessible visa policy to countries through the 'Belt and Road Initiative' also inspires research students from Pakistan to China. The promising economic future of China, the scholarship policies, and visa policy are pull factors. But the long-distance and language barriers are push factors that affect students' decision to pursue degrees in China. As for institutional factors, the quality and reputation of the higher education institutions attract students to study in China. Some countries cannot offer doctoral majors and research supports to students, which pushes them out of their home countries' institutions. Notably, a suitable supervisor can also be a pull factor for research students to consider when choosing China as a study destination. Academics with overseas study experience are more welcomed to many international students who decide to study in China.

Meanwhile, some international students are also motivated by the less complicated requirements to gain acceptance at Chinese institutions than in developed countries. However, in developed countries, such as the USA and Canada, their institutions demand students to pass difficult examinations to enrol, which can be the push factors. From an individual factor aspect, colleagues, peers, and relatives' suggestions affect those participants' decisions. Students family ties and their interest in the Chinese culture can be the pull factors for them, while the learning adaption problem can be the push factors. The findings presented in this study show that those who made the final decision about studying abroad went through a complex process

of weighing and considering the interaction of national, institutional, and individual factors. This study contributes to international and doctoral education and offers valuable insights for researchers and other stakeholders interested in student mobility.