

Research on the Current Situation of China's Higher Education Students Studying Abroad in the Context of Higher Education Internationalization

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Abstract: In the context of education internationalization, the internationalization of higher education has become a major trend in the field of education in most countries, with international student education as the core. This phenomenon promotes cultural exchanges and integration among countries as well as higher education reform, which is of great significance in enhancing the international influence of higher education in each country. However, there are also some challenges faced by higher education students when studying abroad. The article digs into the origin and history of studying abroad, analyzes the current situation and reasons for higher education students in China to study abroad, discusses the opportunities and challenges faced by higher education students in China when studying abroad, and analyzes the trend of studying abroad in China.

Keywords: Internationalization of higher education; International students; Study abroad; Current situation and development trend

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1. Introduction

Students of higher education in China can obtain various aspects of education during their study abroad, which plays an important role in promoting self-growth and realizing their ideals. In recent years, with the deepening of globalization, the internationalization trend of education has become more popular on the basis of the development of economic and trade globalization. Many higher education students have gone abroad for further study, and as of now, the heat of studying abroad will continue for a long time.

2. Current situation of Chinese higher education students studying abroad

The “2023 White Paper on Study Abroad in China-University Chapter” introduces the current situation of international students in China by analyzing data from the past five years.

2.1. Overview of the current situation

The number of individuals aged 25 and above who intend to study abroad for master's and doctoral degrees is gradually increasing, and the number of individuals who go abroad to study at the high school and undergraduate levels accounts for about 70% of the total population going abroad. Many students choose to study abroad at the master's level. Compared with 985 and 211 universities, "doubly non-permanent" colleges are the main source of international students, among which the proportion of students from private colleges and specialized colleges choosing to study abroad is rising significantly. Among the total number of students going abroad to study, those with a GPA of 3.0 or above account for about 70%. Compared to undergraduates, master's degree holders, and students at other educational levels, those who intend to study abroad for doctoral degrees generally achieve better grades. The report indicates that students intending to study abroad generally have relatively stable and continuous interests. People intending to study abroad for master's and doctoral degrees generally acquire information on a social level ^[1]. At present, about 40% of the individuals with the intention to study abroad have already had the experience of overseas study before going abroad, of which the proportion of doctoral students is predominant. From the perspective of families, the group of parents with bachelor's degrees has become the main body of people intending to study abroad, while the importance of elite families to study abroad remains high. After calculations and statistical analysis, it is found that the average annual income of families intending to study abroad is very high, generally over RMB 400,000.

2.2. Analysis of the reasons for studying abroad

The report further shows the reasons people aged 25 and above chose to study abroad. Firstly, they aim to promote self-improvement, increase their competitive advantage in employment, and expand their career development path. At present, Chinese people intending to study abroad generally do so to enrich their experience and broaden their horizons. In the increasingly complex and fierce market competition environment, studying abroad promotes self-improvement, increases the competitive employment advantage, broadens the career development path, and strives for a relatively broad and better employment prospect ^[2]. The research data also show that many prospective students no longer take studying abroad as an important opportunity to practice and improve their foreign language skills, but have already laid a language foundation before going abroad, and have relatively excellent language skills to cope with overseas life. Secondly, important factors attracting students to study abroad include the opportunity to gain a different way of thinking, diversified educational resources, and learning and growing under new educational concepts. Many people who intend to study abroad focus on the employment advantages, which means that many students who intend to study abroad continue to do so in order to obtain better employment resources after further study. China's recent implementation of high-level talent quality treatment has made many students realize that studying abroad brings opportunities for their future development. Thirdly, studying abroad can promote the improvement of self-competence. In the eyes of people who intend to study abroad, studying abroad can provide a means and channel for them to explore the unknown, promote the improvement of their comprehensive ability, and form a correct perception of themselves ^[3].

2.3. Changes in the number of students studying in the United States

In the past, the United States was the first place where many Chinese students studied. However, the number of students studying in the United States has changed in recent years. According to the 2023 United States International Education Gateway Report (hereinafter referred to as the Report), although the total number of Chinese students going to the United States during the 2022–2023 academic year was 289,500, it can be found that this number has declined in recent years, and new changes are gradually revealed by observing the trend of change. The advantage of studying abroad in the United States is gradually weakening, and the selectivity of

study destinations is progressively strengthening.

2.4. Growth in the number of students studying in the United Kingdom

According to the data from 2020 to 2021, the total number of Chinese students studying in the United Kingdom has increased, which is close to about 70% of the total number of students studying in the United States. In the post-epidemic era, the United Kingdom has replaced the United States as the preferred country for studying abroad. The China Study Abroad Development Report (2022) includes a reference to the record number of total Chinese students studying in the United Kingdom. In addition to the UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) route to the UK, there are also other routes to studying in the United Kingdom, so the actual total number of students going to the United Kingdom will be higher than the official statistics.

2.5. Relatively limited impact of the epidemic on prospective students

In the information age, people have a new perception of the concept of education, and many prospective students choose to plan their study programs as early as possible. The research data show that the number of people who start planning to study abroad one or two years in advance is gradually increasing, and the proportion shows a rising trend. Although studying abroad has been affected by the epidemic in recent years and some prospective students hold a conservative wait-and-see attitude, with the gradual relaxation of the epidemic control policy, this part of the population has gradually resumed the preparatory work. Survey data in the past four years show that the number of master's and doctoral students intending to study abroad who seek help from study abroad organizations has gradually increased, and they generally hope to use external resources to enhance their own strengths in order to strive for acceptance by the ideal overseas institutions^[4]. The impact of the epidemic on the population with master's and doctoral degrees intending to study abroad is gradually weakening, and the preparation time is also gradually shortening. The relaxation of policies, the gradual competition for admission opportunities at overseas institutions, and the increase in the number of choices have brought students intending to study abroad for master's and doctoral degrees to the stage of intense preparation. In addition, the increase in the number of Chinese-foreign cooperative education programs has also made many people intending to study abroad focus on the branch campuses of overseas institutions in the hope of selecting a development path that best suits their needs among the many choices.

3. Challenges faced by Chinese higher education students studying abroad

Studying abroad not only brings many development opportunities to many students who intend to study abroad but also many challenges. The White Paper on Study Abroad in China 2023 summarizes the main challenges faced by Chinese students in the past five years and the causes of the problems. Cross-cultural adaptation has caused problems for many Chinese students, such as language barriers due to the influence of stereotypical thinking, low classroom participation, and differences in learning styles during their study abroad^[5].

3.1. Challenges faced during study abroad

3.1.1. Language barrier due to the influence of stereotypical thinking

Language is a great challenge faced by many students when studying abroad. Even if the students obtained good results on the IELTS test and can watch English and American movies and films without assistance, in reality, they often lose their "language function" when faced with diverse accents. In addition, many Chinese students have a low ability to learn and use the language in daily life. The IELTS content that Chinese students learn at home is adapted language, which is very different from the everyday language used overseas. For example,

when ordering a meal, international students may translate tomato sauce as “tomato paste” due to stereotypical Chinese English thinking, and may not be able to correctly reflect what the waiter is saying in a timely manner. In language learning, it is generally believed that only when a language is used does it have vitality and is truly mastered. Many Chinese students subconsciously reject the local “language community” when they live abroad, preferring to find a small world of Chinese, or reducing or refusing to communicate, immersing themselves in the Internet world. Without communication, language loses its value, and the language skills of international students will gradually weaken over time. Wandering outside the local language environment will also give Chinese students a bad experience of studying abroad, which will affect the final learning results ^[6].

3.1.2. Low classroom participation

It is a common problem for Chinese students to become “dumb” in the classroom when studying abroad. Compared with domestic classrooms, foreign classrooms encourage students to question, refute, and challenge, which is quite difficult for Chinese students who grew up with the idea of respecting their teachers. Gradually, Chinese students who follow the concept of “respecting the teacher and emphasizing the way of the world” stay quiet in the classroom and have low classroom participation. The habit of thinking of not daring to challenge authority causes Chinese students to be easily sidelined in classroom learning and group activities, and unable to let the professor know themselves more deeply.

3.1.3. Differences in learning styles

Parents, teachers, and schools are the supervisors and driving forces of the domestic learning and development path, which will restrain students’ behavior and set the direction of their growth. Students will gradually grow up to be “successful” with the help of their parents. In this way, Chinese students lose the ability to exercise self-discipline and thus have relatively low self-discipline. In contrast, it is common for foreign countries to allow students to plan their own development paths and to be the supervisors and driving forces of their own paths. Therefore, when Chinese students live abroad, they are often unable to fulfill strict self-management and become “giant babies” in life and study. International students are considered to be “academically dishonest” by professors during their study abroad, and this phenomenon occurs because international students do not pay attention to the format of the local thesis and the time management and self-discipline during their academic research. Improper time management will increase the research pressure of international students and drive them to look for “shortcuts” in the field of academic research. Therefore, many international students are considered “academically dishonest” during their study abroad. In addition, the different living environment may also cause other problems for Chinese students, such as the convenience of topics. Thus, for Chinese students, studying abroad is a great challenge ^[7].

3.2. Facing employment difficulties when returning home

In addition to the above problems, Chinese international students are also faced with employment difficulties. In recent years, the number of undergraduates graduating and the number of international students returning to China to seek employment have been rising year by year, and behind the huge number of employed people is the increasingly more severe employment situation. Breaking the employment dilemma has become the main problem faced by international students returning to China to search for jobs. In the past years, it was indicated in the White Paper on Study Abroad in China that one of the major disadvantages of international students returning to China to seek employment is that they do not have clear and explicit employment direction and goals, and their awareness of career planning needs to be strengthened ^[8]. Clear and explicit employment directions and goals can enhance the employment competitiveness of international students, which can help

them to make good preparations within a limited time and put their time and energy into other aspects of enhancing employment competitiveness, such as understanding the employment positions, perfecting personal resumes, and enriching work experience. Choosing a suitable employment direction and goal is an effective means to break the employment dilemma.

4. Future trends of Chinese students studying abroad

The data in the White Paper on the Development of Study Abroad in China 2023 reflect the future trend of Chinese students studying abroad in the context of internationalization.

Firstly, the growth trend of studying abroad at a younger age is obvious. The Report mentions an increase in the number of people aged 14–17 intending to study abroad, with a clear upward trend. The main age of those intending to study abroad with bachelor's degree or below is between 15–21 years old, a change in the trend that indicates that domestic parents are providing more choices for their children's growth and development. The age of people intending to study abroad for master's and doctoral degrees also shows a downward trend, and many students who have not yet reached the stage of master's and doctoral education have also shown a tendency to study abroad. This change shows that domestic families are now influenced by the idea of studying abroad. The increase in employment pressure has made students at the master's level become the main force of study abroad.

Secondly, studying abroad is gradually developing in the direction of popularization. At present, families from all walks of life have developed the idea of sending their children to study abroad. Many elite families send their children for education overseas, hoping to utilize overseas educational resources to promote their children's growth and success. Additionally, worker families are gradually becoming the main group to send their children to study abroad. This change shows that nowadays, studying abroad is not the privilege of rich families, and ordinary families can also send their children to overseas education on the basis of weighing the pros and cons. Furthermore, the number of returnee families has increased and will show a rising trend in the future ^[9]. There is a certain inevitability in this development trend. Many families see studying abroad as the main method for their children to expand their horizons and increase their knowledge. As the total number of families sending their children to study abroad increases, it will inevitably lead to an increase in the number of returnee families.

Thirdly, the policy of studying abroad in the future should change with the times. The rapid changes in the international environment often affect the development of nationalization of higher education. The government should always pay attention to the changes in the international situation, predict the direction of the development of internationalized education, improve the existing rules and regulations, and enhance the ability to cope with the changes in the situation.

Fourthly, the research of related theories should be focused on to lay the foundation for the development of higher education internationalization. We should timely adjust the direction of theoretical research, face up to the influence and role of NGOs (non-governmental organizations) in nationalization, and make up for the gaps in the research field, so as to lay the foundation for the development of nationalization of higher education ^[10].

Lastly, we should also weigh the strategies and explore new paths for the internationalization development of higher education while adhering to Chinese cultural characteristics. The internationalized development of higher education should not excessively pursue overseas characteristics while neglecting China's national characteristics. Instead, it should explore the correlation point of values, promote cultural integration on the basis of firm values, and provide favorable conditions for the stable development of the internationalization of

higher education. In addition, the cost of studying abroad is gradually increasing, and even though the cost of studying abroad far exceeds the affordability of families, there are still many families who want to send their children abroad to receive education.

5. Conclusion

Under the influence of economy and politics, education gradually highlights the development trend of internationalization. China's promotion of the internationalization of higher education should observe the development process from the perspective of development and mobility, grasp the development trend, summarize the development problems, and formulate solutions. These can create favorable conditions for Chinese students to study abroad, attract international students to return to their home countries through policy support, and provide high-level talents for the construction and development of China.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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