The Impact of Sino-British University Undergraduates' Preferences of Studying Abroad Under the COVID-19—Taking University of Nottingham Ningbo China as an Example

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Abstract. Under COVID-19, studying abroad is a tough decision for current students, and much research has analyzed and discussed the reasons and issues about the topic aimed at Chinese undergraduates. However, Sino-British university undergraduates as a special cohort have been largely neglected in this education research. To expand people's perceptions and diversify the education research community, this paper objectively and fairly analyzes university students' preferences for studying abroad under the outburst of coronavirus by observing and collecting data from the questionnaire and online survey systems under the approval of the University of Nottingham Ningbo China. After identifying sixteen factors that influence students' decisions, this research mainly explains the national policy, international situation, and parents' concerns by giving examples that happened in real life, and also elaborately discusses the possible impacts on students' choices behind the statistics and texts.

Keywords: Studying abroad · Sino-British University · Undergraduates · COVID-19

1 Introduction

With the increasing globalization and cultural diversification, more Chinese students choose to study abroad for high-quality programs, career betterment, and personal growth, especially after achieving the bachelor degree [1]. Growing motivations and demands of Chinese students for a diverse educational environment drive foreign universities and colleges to seek to establish Sino-foreign cooperative joint ventures. Currently, two Sino-British Universities in China are regular higher education institutions with entity status offer Degree Program, which are University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC) and Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU). The universities provide academic transnational programs, and various specialized courses, and offer a forum for students to discuss international issues so that learners can be equipped with

proficient academic language abilities, diverse knowledge, and cultural perspectives to further study in international education [2].

However, the unprecedented impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on studying abroad has changed many undergraduates' academic choices. The 2020 QS report estimates that pandemic had impacted 57% of international students' study abroad plans [3]. Also, the rate of Sino-British University undergraduate class of 2020 students who chose to further study abroad broke the increasing trend that lasted five years [4]. This paper points out the different factors that influence students' choices by using a questionnaire to collect 271 effective responses from Mainland Chinese undergraduates at UNNC and deeply discusses possible reasons and relationships among these determinants that incorporate families, transportation, health, security, expenses, and policies. In specific, through critically comparing and analyzing impacts across different student groups, hope to present useful input and optimize the choices of future students who would like to study abroad as well as institutions' course and policy design.

2   Research Design

The research team used quantitative instrument, questionnaires via online survey systems (Sojump), and adopted the random sampling method to access university students. The research team successfully collected 329 valid responses. Among all participants, the main discussion objects in this research and paper are 271 mainland undergraduates who want to study abroad under COVID-19.

The research team applied descriptive analysis to examine and demonstrate questionnaire respondents' preferences towards studying abroad under the COVID-19 pandemic and the most influential factors that impact their choices. The purpose of presenting the result is to provide preference mainly for students who are still planning to pursue higher degrees out of their countries and also related individuals or institutions.

3   Findings

3.1   Factors

See Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4.

Table 1. Relations of factors impact preferences of studying abroad for undergraduates at UNNC (Difficult to purchase the airline tickets to Difficult to prepare application)

	Difficult to purchase airline tickets	Dissatisfaction of online study	Discrimination against Chinese	Health risk	Security risk	National policy	Invisible expenses	Difficult to prepare application
Difficult to purchase airline tickets	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Dissatisfaction of online study	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Discrimination against Chinese	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1
Health risk	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	1
Security risk	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	1
National policy	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1
Invisible expenses	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Difficult to prepare application	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0

Table 2. Relations of factors impact preferences of studying abroad for undergraduates at UNNC (Difficult to purchase airline tickets to Difficult to prepare application)

	Parents' concerns	Host culture	International situation	School policy	Force to defer admission to college	Fewer flights	Time and money wasting on quarantine	Mass applications
Difficult to purchase airline tickets	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
Dissatisfaction of online study	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Discrimination against Chinese	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0
Health risk	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0
Security risk	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0
National policy	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
Invisible expenses	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Difficult to prepare application	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1

Table 3. Relations of Factors impact preferences of studying abroad for undergraduates at UNNC (Parents' concerns to Mass applications)

	Difficult to purchase airline tickets	Dissatisfaction of online study	Discrimination against Chinese	Health risk	Security risk	National policy	Invisible expenses	Difficult to prepare application
Parents' concerns	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Host culture	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	1
international situation	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1
School policy	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Force to defer admission to college	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Fewer flights	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Time and money wasting on quarantine	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Mass applications	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1

Table 4. Relations of Factors impact preferences of studying abroad for undergraduates at UNNC (Parents' concerns to Mass applications)

	Parents' concerns	Host culture	International situation	School policy	Force to defer admission to college	Fewer flights	Time and money wasting on quarantine	Mass applications
Parents' concerns	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Host culture	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1
international situation	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1
School policy	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	1
Force to defer admission to college	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Fewer flights	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
Time and money wasting on quarantine	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Mass applications	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0

1 means that factors in columns have an impact on factors in rows
0 means that factors in columns do not have an impact on factors in rows

3.1.1 National Policy and International Situation

Tables present that many factors mutually interact and exist not only in one aspect of students' life and study.

First, some countries' loose policies aiming at the COVID-19 pandemic increase the health risk of citizens and foreigners and also make international students think twice about decisions of studying abroad. For example, the American government's attitude and policy on vaccination and prevention measures reduce citizens' awareness of protecting themselves so that the individual death rate is constantly increasing, and meanwhile the number of foreign students is declining. Student and Exchange Visitors Program (SEVIP) has published that the total number of 2020 SEVIS records for current F-1 and M-1 students was 1,251,569, a decrease of 17.86% from 2019 [5]. Also, 25.5% of students in the questionnaire mention the impact of security and safety on their future study under COVID-19, especially the increasing severe health problems due to the national policy. Another example is that exit and entry procedures according to different national policies influence students' decisions of studying abroad. Some participants worry about applying for visas and other complex procedures will slow down or delay their study plans. Also, these procedures can cause many invisible expenses and even some money problems that could be the biggest restrictions for students who are dreaming to go abroad but without enough financial support. Finally, the national policy also can cause a higher price level and a shortage of airline tickets. For example, Britain announced the lock-down policy and no foreigners including international students could enter the country. Also, students who were staying in the other country could not buy tickets to go back [6].

Moreover, the international situation like the deteriorating relationship between Ukraine and Russia has an intimated effect on all other factors, at the same time, raising the concerns of Chinese overseas students. Particularly, unstable relations among countries under the widespread Coronavirus further deepen the discrimination against Asians, especially in some western countries. Constant discrimination events and even shooting incidents related to Chinese in the university and surrounding neighborhood not only arouse the university's international Chinese cohort afraid of death but also increase participants' worries about self-security abroad. Meanwhile, some participants say that majority of overseas education agencies no longer recommend these universities with unsafe community environments, despite their prestige in academia. Also, a participant mentions that expenses of studying abroad are influenced by international situation, in particular economic policies. For example, a couple of years before, the U.S government used tariffs to combat Chinese economics had increased the value of US dollars so that invisible costs and economic burdens for international students also increased [7].

In addition, the university policy, such as recovering offline classes or announcing online teaching, influences students' decisions as a relatively dominant factor. For example, in March 2020, for curbing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, many American universities decided to shift teaching online. This kind of announcement affected many students' choices, such as taking a gap year, withdrawing, and so on [8]. Also, some Chinese overseas students chose to continue studying in some Sino-foreign universities because a new policy has been published in September 2020 to reduce students' failure of studying abroad [9].

3.1.2   Parents' Concerns

With the increasing number of people who are infecting the COVID-19 virus out of China, parents are worried about the security, health, and study of their children who are abroad or intend to study abroad. These parents' concerns, to a great degree, affect students' preferences and choices because parents are still dominated to provide financial support for paying tuition and living expenses that need to cost a lot of money for experiencing high-quality programs in foreign countries as international students. In particular, based on some political behaviors like national policies and complex international situations, parents further worry about students' security as the increasingly acute conflicts between America and China. With the disagreement and discouragement of parents, students gradually lose the excitement and hope of studying abroad. Also, in the current, most Chinese parents only have one child to raise and cultivate due to the one-child policy so they are trying to offer the best education and employ the most cost-effective way to maximize the return that invests on their child. Thus, security is the most important factor that participants mention many times in the questionnaire.

Furthermore, parents' concerns can not influence many other factors because the individual's worrying without actual practice has a small impact on anything. This kind of worrying and concern is likely to be harmful because they increase people's emotional burdens and disturb students to make the right decisions for academic study and future careers. However, a majority of parents are still reasonable and wise to deliver back the right of making decisions to students rather than stopping and seizing the students' choices of studying abroad.

3.2   Impact

The demand for students who intend to study abroad for higher education has expanded with the globalization and internalization of education, but this current demand for undergraduates at Sino-British Universities leads to a slight decline under COVID-19 due to several factors that are present in Fig. 1.

3.2.1   Countries

The percentage of students who want to study in the United States increased surprisingly in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic and even in the face of an uncertain international situation, but these participants believe that the pandemic will only last one year and that pandemic's end will finish some conflicts between China and America. Compared with students in other universities who are unwilling to further study in America, the choices of Sino-British university undergraduates seem unpredictable. However, the increasing number of Asian countries' applications including Singapore and Japan is not drastic as students in other universities. The possible reason can be that many students who attend Sino-British universities tend to future study in English-speaking countries with western culture. Also, through learning in an English environment, students are accustomed to using English as an academic language to communicate and discuss in the academic community. If students change to study in a country employing other languages as a means of academic communication, time and effort need to be spent in adapting to the culture and community [10].
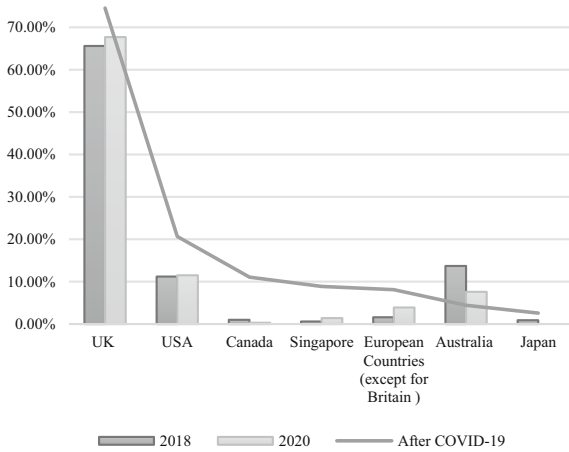
Fig. 1. Compare the trend that students chose and will choose destinations of studying abroad before and after COVID-19

Furthermore, the United Kingdom is always a popular choice among Chinese students, and given the country's positive anti-epidemic prevention policy and welcoming attitude toward international students, a consistent intention and clear upward trend is expected. However, non-Sino-British University students choose differently. The relatively safe learning environment and friendly international policies in Asian countries attract their attention and change their mind from feeling the new western culture to continuing to learn the traditional eastern culture [11].

3.2.2 Individuals

Choices Based on Different Grades All year 4 students will not choose to attain the master degree in Chinese schools (except for Sino-Foreign Universities). Insufficient time and effort of preparing the high-competitive entrance examination and long-term duration of Chinese postgraduates programs eliminate these pre-graduates' thoughts of studying in the hometown through this method. Over half of them prefer to work or gap a year as a buffer to All year 4 students will not choose to attain a master's degree in Chinese schools (except for Sino-Foreign Universities). Insufficient time and effort in preparing for the high-competitive entrance examination and long-term duration of Chinese postgraduates programs eliminate these pre-graduates' thoughts of studying in their hometown through this method. Over half of them prefer to work or gap a year as a buffer to re-apply and further study abroad. Hence, offering more working vacancies and temporary research jobs can help these graduates enrich their academic background or work experience, and society can make use of the idle labor force [11].

However, 53% of first-year students who just step into the university take attending the Chinese Postgraduate Entrance Examination into account. Due to the increasing and competitive number of applicators, the difficulty of application may push students to study abroad to further postgraduate study [12].

Different Schools and Majors: Business, Science, and Social Science Compared to FoB (Faculty of Business) students, FoSE (Faculty of Science Engineering) students are more likely to further study rather working. The possible explanation could be that science students need higher academic qualifications to find an ideal job because they may need to learn more skills and knowledge at a higher level of studying [13]. However, business students can learn basic knowledge and idea in the bachelor degree, and also need enough practice from real jobs [14]. Thus, business students prefer to find a job rather than further study. It is also related to their experience as undergraduates: business students always look for an internship in some big companies during winter and summer vacation, but science students often participate in some research projects as assistant researchers with their professors or seniors. Undergraduates have early started to seek suitable jobs and made sure the future direction of employment under the encouragement of UNNC.

4   Conclusion

Through employing tables that show the cause-and-effect relationships, this research presents the different factors interacting and mediating a group of Chinese students to study or not study abroad under and after the COVID pandemic. No single determinant exists alone, and some of them have a huge impact proven by related events have happened. Furthermore, due to the different education and teaching environment, the preference and choices of Sino-British university undergraduates, such as the likeness of studying in Asian countries and urgency of working, are not identified with those of students in other universities. We acknowledge some limitations of this research, except for sharing these findings. Firstly, the ratio of participants in three schools needs to be balanced rather than the number of respondents from FHSS being more than other schools. Also, the research does not include undergraduates from Hong Kong and Macao areas of China. Finally, the topic, the impact of COVID-19 on specific countries about studying abroad, is worthy to study in further research.

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