Motivation factors in student decisions to study Transnational Higher Education in China: a comparative study of two Anglo-Sino programmes

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Motivation Factors in Students Decisions to Study on a Transnational Higher Education Programme in China: A comparative study of two Anglo-Sino programmes

Abstract

China continues to experience rapid economic growth and the increasing demand for tertiary level education of Chinese citizens has created a significant market for Higher Education (HE) providers across the globe. Transnational Higher Education (TNHE), where the delivery of an overseas degree is partly conducted in the host country, continues to be a popular model of HE delivery in China. Although much research has been undertaken regarding student motivations to study abroad at a foreign university, little is understood about why Chinese students choose TNHE in China. Drawing on push-pull theory and using survey (328) and interview data (40) from students at two Anglo-Sino programmes, the study findings highlight that understanding Chinese students’ motivation requires a more contextualised and student-centric approach, to better appreciate students’ choices, including though a Confucian lens.

Keywords: China, Chinese students, transnational higher education, student motivation, push-pull theory; Confucianism

Introduction

With the accelerating pace of globalization and internationalization of higher education (HE), Transnational Higher Education (TNHE), has experienced exponential growth (Kosmützky & Putty, 2016; Hu & Wen, 2019). TNHE offers an internationalised learning experience, mostly without necessarily requiring students and academics to travel (Kosmützky & Putty, 2016). TNHE can take different forms, including branch campuses, franchising, joint programmes, distance-learning programmes, articulation and validation (Chee, Butt, and Wilkins, 2016; He, 2016; Bordogna, 2018). The costs to the students are lower when compared to studying abroad, reducing travel costs in addition to lower study and living costs.

The economic value of TNHE programmes has also been recognized by HE Institutions (HEIs) (Asaad, Melewar, & Cohen, 2015; Gottlieb & Beatson, 2018; Guilbault, 2016; Mellors-Bourne, 2017). For example, in 2017-2018 there were 693,695 enrolments on transnational programmes...
provided by 139 UK HEIs. The net economic value brought by the 2015-16 cohort of international students over the courses of their studies is around 20.3 billion (Universities UK International, 2019).

China has become an attractive country for TNHE due to its rapid economic growth and the increasing demand for HE. By the end of 2019, there were 88 TNHE institutions operating in China, offering 881 programmes, nearly half of which were offered by UK HEIs (Liu, 2020). China is the second highest country hosting high UK TNE with 36,940 programmes, closely behind Malaysia with 46,490 UK TNE provision (Universities UK International, 2019).

Whilst the number of TNHE programmes offered by UK institutions in China remains positive, the quality of domestic education, as well as that of neighbouring countries continues to grow, intensifying the competition for TNHE programmes. Investigating students’ motivations in choosing a particular TNHE programme is important for several reasons, not least in enabling institutions to stand out. Firstly, such an investigation provides useful indicators for the institution and government as to why students choose an institution/programme over others. Such information can then be used in marketing and strategy planning, in order to inform students of their options, beyond that of the traditional university route. Secondly, understanding students’ reasoning behind their choices and perceptions of TNHE programmes enables better understanding of students’ expectations of study and thus appropriate strategies can be introduced to improve student experience, which, in turn, can create a positive word-of-mouth marketing potential (Alemu & Cordier, 2017).

Indeed, despite the rise of TNHE in China, relatively little is known about the factors influencing Chinese students’ choices of specifically opting to study on joint programmes delivered by a Chinese institution in collaboration with a foreign partner university. Fang and
Wang (2014) assert that more research is required on students' study experiences at different levels and types of TNHE in China. This is echoed by Mellors-Bourne (2017, p.79):

“…the changing demand for transnational partnership and collaborative provision should be researched from an individual country perspective ... such analysis might better advise UK universities on both growing and declining market opportunities”.

To address this gap, this paper examines motivation factors of students in two TNHE programmes from a UK HEI Provider (UK1) at their two partner universities in China. The findings of this study offer a better understanding of the motivational factors influencing Chinese students’ choice of TNHE, which remain under-researched. The findings have major implications for HE institutions and governments in developing effective strategic planning in marketing. Moreover, it contributes to the theoretical knowledge of the push-pull theory in student choice of TNHE.

**Literature Review**

Previous research around student motivations in this area has been predominantly centred on international student destination choice of cross-border study, with a primary focus on major recipient countries such as the UK, the USA and Australia (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Chen, 2007; Lee, 2014). The major theory used was the push-pull theory. Commonly identified push factors include lower quality of in-country education, a lack of accessible programmes at the local educational institutions in the home countries and employer preference for overseas HE qualifications (Chen, 2007; Lee 2014; Ahamd & Hussain, 2017). Pull factors generally relate to the quality of the degree programme, reputation of the institution and/or country, an English-
speaking environment and experience of a new culture (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Wilkins, Balakrishnan, & Huisman, 2012; Ahmad & Buchanan, 2016).

In the case of China, existing studies identify the push and pull factors influencing Chinese students’ in their decision to study overseas e.g. Morrish & Lee (2011), Wilkins & Huisman (2011), Bodycott & Lai (2012), Wu (2014), Fang and Wang (2014), Manns and Swift (2015), Chen (2017), and Liu & Morgan (2017). The main factors identified are consistent with the wider research on overseas HE choices, albeit with stronger focus on the Confucian tradition and the importance of families, teachers, friends, alumni and guanxi, meaning beneficial networks and connections (Fang and Wang, 2014; Wu, 2014; Liu & Morgan, 2016). Additionally, the safety of the study destination (Manns & Swift, 2015) and influence of friends, colleagues and relatives have also been researched as significant influential pull factors for Chinese students’ choices of overseas HE education (Chen, 2007; Bodycott, 2009; Bodycott & Lai, 2012).

In recent years, more studies have been researching the flow of international students to other parts of the world, particularly Malaysia and the United Arab Emirates, where increasing numbers of international branch campuses (a major form of TNHE) are located (Wilkins & Huisman, 2011; Ahmad and Buchan, 2016; 2017; Ahmad & Hussain, 2017). However, the focus of such studies has tended to be about branch campuses, whereas joint programmes (as a distinctive mode of TNHE in China) has been under-researched, especially in China where joint programmes are the dominant form of TNHE, as further explained in the next section. Indeed, joint programmes have become an increasingly integral part of Chinese HE (Huang, 2008). Despite this rise of TNHE, very little is known about the specific pull and push factors influencing Chinese student’s choices of joint programmes delivered jointly by Chinese and other foreign partner institutions.
**Transnational Higher Education (TNHE) in China**

TNHE is defined by the State Council of China as:

“…the cooperation between foreign education institutions and Chinese education institutions in establishing programmes or institutions to deliver education services within the territory of China mainly to Chinese citizens” (Fang, 2012, p. 6).

Within the wider literature, the term ‘TNHE’ is often used as an umbrella term for study arrangements including franchising, twinning degrees, programme articulations, branch campus, virtual/distance learning or corporate programmes. The joint programmes within this study are twinning programmes, defined by the British Council as “academic programmes in host country/ies that are jointly designed, delivered and quality assured through collaboration between host and sending country partners” (Knight & McNamara, 2017, p.16). These programmes generally offer elements of study abroad and their modes of study are generally referred to as the amount of time spent in the home country plus the time spent abroad, for example ‘2+1’, ‘3+1’ or ‘3+0’ etc.

Since June 2018, there have been 2,342 TNHE programmes offered collaboratively by Chinese and foreign partner institutions, among which 1,090 were undergraduate and postgraduate programmes (MoE, 2018). Despite such high numbers, transnational campuses can face difficulty when seeking approval from the Chinese government as the overseas institution must be highly ranked and offer programmes in subjects which are viewed as beneficial for the country's industrial development (He, 2016). For example, TNHE programmes can be further subdivided into: Foreign degree programme, Chinese degree programme, double degree programme, and non-degree programme (Fang & Wang, 2014). Within these, management, economics, business, and information technology (IT) are typically the most popular programmes (Fang & Wang, 2014; Yang, 2008).
The Theoretical Framework: the push-pull model

As evidenced in the literature review, the push-pull model has been extensively used to explore the external factors influencing international student’s HE choices. Whereas much is known about the push and pull factors influencing Chinese students’ choices of overseas HE, little is known about the push and pull factors determining Chinese students’ choice of TNHE joint programmes internally, in China and directly from asking students to share their personal perspectives.

Due to the push-pull model’s prevalent use, this study draws upon an extended model by Liu and Zhu (2019), which was further constructed based on Fang and Wang (2014). Fang and Wang (2014) pointed out that the HE market in China can be divided into three market sectors: domestic, transnational, and overseas HE. Therefore, in the extended push-pull model, students firstly choose TNHE as the result of push factors from the domestic and the overseas HE and the pull factors from the TNHE. Secondly, students choose a certain TNHE programme based on factors such as institutional characteristics (both domestic and overseas partners, e.g. university’s brand and reputation) and programme characteristics (Fang and Wang, 2014). It is noted that the traditional push–pull theory has been criticized for failing to account for the influence of students’ personal characteristics, such as academic ability, personal preferences and social-economic status (Li & Bray, 2007), as well as the influence of significant figures such as parents, friends, and alumni (Chen, 2007). Therefore, the extended model identifies the push factors from domestic and overseas HE and the pull factors of transnational HE and includes more personal and familial characteristics, as highlighted in Figure 1, below.
Based on gaps highlighted from the literature review, the following research questions were developed:

1) Why do Chinese students choose TNHE as their programme of study?

2) What influences Chinese students to choose their TNHE programme?

3) What is/are the main sources of information influencing students’ choices?

Research Design and Methods

Research context

This research examines student motivations from two different types of TNHE programmes in China, delivered by ‘UK1,’ a HEI in the UK. Two different TNHE programmes were investigated: a double degree law programme, coded as Chinese Law (CL) and a foreign business degree programme, coded as Chinese Business (CB).
UK1-CL is an undergraduate Law joint programme, included in the National General Higher Education Enrolment Plan, which requires that students pass the National College Entrance Examination. It is a double degree programme with a “3+1” training mode, which allows students to study their final year in the UK once they have completed their first three years at CL and attained an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) score of 6.5 or above. If the student does not reach the required IELTS score or decides not to go abroad for their final year, the student can still obtain their degree offered by CL, subject to a successful thesis.

UK1-CB programme is an undergraduate Business Studies programme, which is not included in the National General Higher Education Enrolment Plan and which only requires a local entry examination to attend if they have failed their National College Entrance Examination, known as Gaokao. Gaokao is a foreign-degree-only programme with a “2+2” delivery mode, meaning that students can only study in the UK once they have completed the first two years of study at CB, and with an IELTS score of 6.0 or above. If the student fails to reach that requirement, they are not able to go to the UK or receive a local degree.

An overview of both TNHE programmes can be found in the table 1 below:

Table 1. The Overview of the Two TNHE Programmes
### Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programmes</th>
<th>UK1-CB</th>
<th>UK1-CL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year Started</strong></td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Graduates</strong></td>
<td>Around 1,000</td>
<td>Around 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Field of Study</strong></td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Study Mode</strong></td>
<td>2+2</td>
<td>3+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Degree Obtained</strong></td>
<td>No degree to be obtained in China; foreign degree to be obtained in the UK when completed the other two years of study in the UK</td>
<td>Chinese degree to be obtained in China if not going to the UK in the fourth year; Both Chinese and foreign degrees to be obtained in the UK if completed the fourth year of study in the UK.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Recruitment</strong></td>
<td>Taking the National College Entrance Examination and reaching the score set by the government are not required.</td>
<td>Students need to reach the score set by the TNHE programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IELTS Score required for study in the UK</strong></td>
<td>6.0 or above</td>
<td>6.5 or above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Composition of Teaching Staff</strong></td>
<td>3 UK staff for professional courses and IELTS courses; Chinese staff for English and IELTS courses</td>
<td>3 UK staff for English and IELTS courses, Flying faculties from the UK for English law courses; Chinese staff for Chinese Law courses.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Methods

The primary aim of the research was to better understand Chinese student motivations when studying on TNHE in China. To contribute to this knowledge, a case study approach was adopted for the study (Simons, 2009), using mixed methods, with an initial survey and follow-up interviews. The survey was aimed at gaining a general picture of student motivation factors and the follow-up interview with students was used to provide an in-depth analysis of related issues.

The questions designed on the survey asked the respondents to rate the most important motivation factors influencing their choice of TNHE from pre-defined categories based on the
relevant literature (e.g. Wilkins & Huisman, 2011; Wilkins, Balakrishnan, & Huisman, 2012; Ahmad & Buchana, 2016, 2017; Ahmad & Hussain, 2017). 328 students completed the questionnaire, with 101 current students at CB and 227 at CL. Student demographics from the completed surveys are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Student Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic area from questionnaire</th>
<th>CB (n 101)</th>
<th>CL (n 227)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender (Male = M, Female = F)</td>
<td>M-53%</td>
<td>M-29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F-47%</td>
<td>F-71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant category responses</td>
<td>Neither-</td>
<td>Both-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>regarding parents graduating from</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>college</td>
<td>Both-</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>39%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual household income (5</td>
<td>Relatively</td>
<td>Dominant category</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>categories in the range &gt;100,000</td>
<td>even</td>
<td>100,000-360,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-&lt;2,000,000 RMB)</td>
<td>distribution (between 15%-18%) in categories</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>between &gt;100,000 -&lt;2,000,000 RMB</td>
<td>RMB (47%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant study mode (first</td>
<td>2+2.98%</td>
<td>3+1.99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>figure=study years in China, second</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>figure=option to study in the UK)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants’ present year of study</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1-4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present average grading (good</td>
<td>98%-good honours</td>
<td>98%-good honours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>honours = 60%-100%/2:1-1st)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive expectation to enrol for</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>an advanced degree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant proposed destinations for</td>
<td>UK-89%</td>
<td>China-52%,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>further study</td>
<td></td>
<td>UK-26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Forty follow-up interviews were conducted with 20 volunteer students from CL and CB programme respectively. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the research team member based in China and lasted on average between 30 and 45 minutes. These interviews covered areas of interest drawn from the analysis of the quantitative surveys, and focused on exploring motivation and choice factors for TNHE study. The qualitative interview data was analysed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Relating to the original research questions, data was coded to map and contextualize emerging patterns to enable the research team to better understand motivating factors across the sample.
Study Findings

This section details the preliminary quantitative findings based upon the survey data gathered from the sample of 328 students. These data indicate trends in student choice factors, with some nuanced differences between the two institutions.

As per Figure 2, both CB and CL students valued the transitional period most in choosing their TNHE programme over studying abroad directly. This is followed by lower entry requirements in academic grades and lower costs for both groups.

Figure 2. Reasons for Choosing TNHE in China Rather than Study Abroad

Figure 3 highlights students’ reasons for choosing TNHE rather than studying at a local Chinese university, students from CB valued how the TNHE offer was “easier to get access to” as most important, while the students from CL attached more importance to how the TNHE programme had the “benefits of English instruction”. This is followed by students’ perspectives that the TNHE programmes offered a “higher quality of education” compared with a domestic programme by both groups.
Figure 4 indicates that both student groups valued the “reputation of their university” in their choices. That said, for students choosing CB, the “authoritative overseas degree diploma” was equally important, whilst for students choosing CL, having “excellent teaching resources” and a good university reputation were equally important.
Regarding the reasons for choosing their specific programme of TNHE study, the CB students listed, “recommendation of parents” as the most important factor, followed by both “employment prospects” and “personal interest”. The CL students attached importance to “employment prospects”, “personal interest”, and “reputation of the university” (see Figure 5).

As for sources of information when researching their choice of institution, the recommendation of parents/family/friends ranked first in both CB and CL students lists. Other important information sources were the official website/admission office of both partners (see Figure 6).
**Thematic Findings**

The qualitative findings revealed four main themes regarding TNHE choices common to both institutions, with a number of sub-themes emerging specifically from the CL data. These themes are presented below.

*The push of domestic HE resulted from low Gaokao examination results*

The most prevalent motivation related to entry requirements and the results of the *Gaokao* examinations. 65% of the respondents directly mentioned that their examination results were too low to enable them to get into their first choice of university:

“According to my real situation…I did not get a high score in the college entrance examination.” (CB-04)

“When the score has been released, it was not particularly high, so it was hard for me to choose the university.” (CL-15)
This sentiment was consistent across both institutions, with students frequently noting that the primary reason they were drawn to a TNHE programme was due to disappointing or unexpectedly low results. Although this was the most-cited reason, this was often accompanied by secondary reasons, such as family influences, as subsequently outlined, below.

*The pull of the TNHE entry requirements*

Despite the ‘push’ of the examination results, the ‘pull’ of the TNHE entry requirements allowed these students to continue with their studies without having to re-sit *Gaokao* examinations. This ‘pull’ of entry requirements saw a CL specific sub-theme emerge in relation to subject choice, with students demonstrating a far more discipline-focused motivation for selecting their choice of study when compared to CB Respondents:

“When I chose a major after the college entrance examination, my first thought was to study Law. At that time, my score was lower than the admission score of the Law programme... [the TNHE course] made it likely that I will be admitted.” (CL-05)

Whilst examination results may not have resulted in the preferred choice of university, it was clearly important for CL students to continue studying their chosen discipline of Law, with the ‘pull’ of flexible TNHE entry requirements allowing for this to happen.

This discipline-focused motivation did not occur within the CB data, with participants speaking generally about their choice of HEI and the ability to study offered by the ‘pull’ of TNHE entry requirements.

Extended from the above themes, the data reveals that TNHE was not students’ first choice and may not have been previously known as an option to the participant. The concept of studying on a TNHE programme was discussed as being almost a last resort by the student sample, whose examination results appear have largely come as a surprise and perceived as a
disappointment. Many of the respondents had not necessarily considered other forms of HE before being confronted with the realities of the entry requirements as 17 respondents had intended on attending a ‘normal’ course at a ‘normal’ Chinese university before needing to re-evaluate their options. For example:

“At that time, I thought so, to be honest, [I had planned to] go to an ordinary university”. (CB-15)

Only one respondent, CL-03, demonstrated a prior awareness of TNHE programmes in general, but noted that they ultimately chose the institution before selecting a TNHE course. They explained that, the decision around institutional prestige and reputation was of primary importance, with the TNHE element factoring afterwards. This suggests that the option to study on a TNHE course is relatively unknown amongst Chinese students when making their HE study choices. A number of interviewees noted that they had not considered studying abroad at all before commencing on a TNHE programme:

“[I] didn't go to a foreign university in the first place because I didn't have this plan.” (CL-01)

“I did not plan to study abroad. Then I did not get a high score in the college entrance examination.” (CB-07)

The latter excerpt further exemplifies how TNHE became an option when other routes into HE (both the domestically and overseas) failed.

Nonetheless, students from both institutions (including all students from CB) expressed an interest and intent in taking a study year abroad or moving onto postgraduate study abroad, as a consequence of having commenced their TNHE course. Over half of the interviewees (21) expressed interest in studying in the UK as part of their education, with a further two wishing
to study in Hong Kong. Students from both institutions spoke about the international elements of the course acting as a positive for their future:

“Yes. In fact, I think [because] of UK1’s degree as a springboard. I think if I have this diploma, it will be easier for me to apply for a postgraduate course. So, this is why I applied for this course at that time.” (CL-02)

“… I will go to UK1 University for two years, so I will definitely continue a further degree. It will be in the UK, because the master there is only one year and it should be easier [to] apply for a better university (CB-05)

With the example of CB-05, university prestige and rankings are viewed as a strong ‘pull’ factor, which aligns with consideration of overseas institutional ‘pull’. In the excerpt above, the student indicates that other universities are viewed as being ‘better’ than their local TNHE institution, with their current course acting as a stepping-stone to what they perceive to be a ‘stronger’ institution.

However, study abroad was clearly not for everyone. A unique strand that emerged from the CL data findings was that four students expressed that they had no intention of studying abroad, instead preferring to put their law studies into practice in China. A number of CL students noted that they felt the international content detracted from their studies of Chinese law, particularly for those who demonstrated little to no interest in going overseas as part of their TNHE study:

“…the disadvantage [of studying law on a TNHE programme] is that because I want to continue my postgraduate study in China. But I cannot devote myself fully into the professional [law] course because a large amount of my time is occupied by English courses [offered by the CL programme].” (CL-14).
Family influence as a strong pull factor

Familial influences formed another theme, with 17 of the interviewees citing family reasons for studying on a TNHE programme in China. From both universities, respondents cited that their parents had suggested the programme to them:

“My father helped me to choose this programme.” (CL-19)

“But my mother saw the [word] ‘international’ on the official website, and then she said you could check it out.” (CB-16)

Sometimes the suggestions came from the extended family or friends:

“I did not get a high score in the college entrance examination, and I have a relative who is also in this programme. He recommended it to me.” (CB-01)

“…then my mother has a colleague's daughter who is studying here, and then she recommended that I can come here. Later, my mother checked the relevant information on the Internet. My mom thought it was quite good, then I came here.” (CL-10)

Family members have also been influential in student choice of subject or discipline of study as noted by many CL students. This, however, was not seen among the CB students.

“The reason I chose CL is because the family hopes that I can become a civil servant in the future and they think studying law is a better way.” (CL-14)

“My father suggested that I could learn law. Employment is quite good. In addition, my father is a doctor, and he wanted to learn law before. He said that he hopes I can learn the law.” (CL-15)
Not being prepared for study abroad and the pull of the transition period of TNHE

As an extension to the theme of family influences, the idea of preparedness to study abroad also emerged in both institution’s dataset data, although predominantly in the CB data. Therefore, the transition period offered by TNHE acted as a strong pull factor.

“Parents and other relatives recommended me to choose this programme. They thought this programme can give me a transition period in China.” (CB-05)

“I didn’t consider going to the UK because my family recommended to me that I should study here first as a transition period and then go abroad to study. In this way, I will get a better learning experience.” (CB-08)

Lower requirements of English language as a pull factor of TNHE

There were 28 references across both datasets indicating that lower requirement of English language skills was another pull factor of TNHE, especially compared to that of directly going abroad.

“First of all, because my English is not very good, I am afraid that I cannot adapt to it if I directly go abroad, so I would like to find a TNE programme in China first.” (CB-10)

“I also chose this programme because it can provide me some help [to develop my] English” (CL-18)

Lower cost of TNHE as a pull factor

Another theme relates to the cost of studying on a TNHE programme. The idea of lower study costs, particularly when factoring study abroad, was seen as appealing. Economic factors linked
to students’ family income, especially concerned CL students, with income generally much lower than that of CB students. For example:

“First of all, there is a reason about financial problem, because if go directly to a foreign school, family may be under pressure.” (CB-15)

“The last reason is that its tuition fee is very reasonable …the programme in CL is very cheap… Our family can afford it, so, I chose here.” (CL-18)

Such findings align with the recurring theme of familiar influences and reinforce the important role and influence of family economic background within the motivational and decision-making processes when opting to study on a TNHE programme.

For other students, particularly from CL, study costs were also extended to discounts on elements like further study and IELTS examination prices, which made the TNHE courses more appealing:

“… the programme will accredit you IELTS scholarship if you get a certain score in IELTS test. And you will have a lot of reimbursement aspects when you go out for the exam.” (CL-10)

As part of this perceived value for money, it was evident from the CL data that students valued the opportunity to gain the double diploma (receiving an award from both the domestic institution and the overseas partner), without needing to make an up-front decision of going overseas:

“I can get a double diploma. And after three years I could make the choice. I think it is quite good.” (CL-11)
Common to both CB and CL students was the understanding and expectation that a UK TNHE programme with study abroad options, would be more financially viable than study costs following TNHE study in other countries:

“… the United States is more expensive.” (CB-06)

“… universities have cooperation with Nordic universities, but they are all self-funded, which is expensive.” (CL-19)

Discussion

This research has revealed that students’ choice of TNHE is the result of the ‘push’ factors from both domestic and overseas HE, along with the ‘pull’ factors from the TNHE opportunity, especially that TNHE offers students a transition period before studying abroad. Although the push-pull model offers useful explanation for this, more student-focussed, personal issues that arose need to be accounted for. There were striking similarities between students studying at the two institutions in terms of their motivations and university choice, particularly around the Confucian tradition of family and guanxi (Liu & Morgan, 2016), as discussed below.

Consistent with the findings of Fang and Wang (2014), the prevailing push factor from domestic HE is the high requirement of Gaokao score which denies students’ access to satisfying domestic HE because of their low Gaokao scores. It was evident that low grades, which prevent students from engaging in what is perceived to be a ‘normal’ / traditional degree course within a Chinese university, are a major influence on student motivation for TNHE as it is relatively lower in entry requirements by comparison. This is echoed by Ma and Abbott (2006) who identify the ‘pull’ of entry requirements as being key to the success of TNHE, allowing for flexible non-standard entry routes into HE for Chinese students. Being viewed as the last resort of HE, this research infers that students had not explicitly considered studying
on a TNHE programme to begin with, but instead came to TNHE programmes through other circumstance. Therefore, students were seemingly ‘pushed’ away from studying on a domestic HE course because of low Gaokao scores, and yet were not familiar of the ‘pull factors’ available to them via TNHE. This can be seen to be particularly of note regarding students from CB who failed in the Gaokao, but were not aware of what a TNHE course could offer as the dominant student choice was largely viewed as studying on a ‘normal’ course at a ‘regular’, often Chinese, university. This is contrary to the CL students, who chose the TNHE programme over a “normal” law programme mainly because of the “pull” factors of TNHE programmes, such as the benefits of dual degrees, the benefits of English instruction and the perceived higher quality of UK education. Our findings suggest that students are not always aware of the in-country TNHE options and its benefits at the point of taking the Gaokao exams, which reinforces the findings of Fang and Wang (2014) that information gaps exist between students and TNHE programmes. Therefore, more marketing and information are needed to attract students who are experiencing the ‘push’ of examination grades, particularly as this study has highlighted that TNHE programmes may not be well known. Such findings align to Mazzarol and Soutar’s (2002) study, who identified that although word-of-mouth and interpersonal recommendation are powerful tools in decision making, marketing and promotion are other key factors required to substantiate and quantify the ‘pull’ factor for TNHE study choices for prospective students.

In addition, students’ original intent to study in China, resulted in the ambition to study abroad as secondary, but nonetheless with significant benefits regarding next-step study options for students, with the exception of a minority of law students. Indeed, over half of the students expressed an interest or intent in study overseas after having experienced their TNHE course. Benefits were seen in TNHE offering a transitional period, which pulled students as it can help them to better adapt to further opportunities for study abroad, for both personal and familial
reasons. Whilst Fang and Wang (2014) also acknowledged the benefits of TNHE in preparation for overseas study, the value of such a transitional period was not frequently stressed among students from other countries, but was more pertinent to the Chinese students. Our study has revealed that the benefit of TNHE offering a transitional period was more prevalent within the CB student dataset than CL students. This can be mapped to the differences in students’ characteristics as students at CB are ‘out of quota’ students who had failed their *Gaokao* with much lower academic performance, and thus could feel less prepared for their future study abroad, particularly around the English language, a finding supported by Fang & Wang (2014).

Apart from the main pull of transition period, the other main pull factors from TNHE include lower costs, again linked with the Confucian tradition of family burden; lower entry requirements in English levels; higher quality of education; benefits of English instruction; excellent teaching resources and better employment prospects. Such outcomes align with other study findings in the field as identified by Abubakar et al. (2010), Wilkins, Balakrishnan, and Huisman (2012), Fang and Wang (2014), Ahmad and Buchanan (2016), and Dowling-Hetherington (2019).

It was evident that the major ‘push’ factors from overseas HE opportunities are high costs and perceptions of value, high requirements on English language ability and, to a lesser extent, issues with regards to entry requirements, complementing previous study findings as identified by Wu (2014), Fang and Wang (2014), and Liu & Morgan (2017).

Although largely unmentioned in the interviews, but clearly evident in the survey findings, the reputation, an important dimension of the image of HEIs (Manzoor and Al Mahmud, 2020), of both the overseas and domestic institution constituted the main reason for students’ choice of the collaborative programme provided by UK1, as illustrated in Table 4. This corresponds to previous findings, such as Wilkins et al. (2012), and Fang and Wang (2014), where university
reputation and cost consideration are noted among students’ choices of TNHE. For CB students, authoritative overseas degree certification provided by the local collaborating institution are equally important given the fact that UK1-CB only offers one degree from UK1, which is less well known in China compared with a degree offered, for example, by Oxford and Cambridge University. However, as UK1-CL is a dual degree programme and CL is renowned for its law programme in China, this was not likely to have been a consideration for CL students. Indeed, perceptions of cost and value, were evidenced across both the quantitative and qualitative data sets, with students citing how dual degrees offer increased benefit as they effectively pay once for two-degree awards.

All the above differences in motivational factors between the CB and CL students can be mainly attributed to the differences in the characteristics of the two student groups, again highlighting the need to account for more personal attributes in the push-pull model. The students from the CB programme had much lower academic performance than that from the CL programme. Therefore, CB students felt less prepared for overseas study and valued the transition period offered through TNHE more than the CL students. While for the CL students, the pull factors generally conformed to those identified in students’ choices of overseas HE, such as the quality of the degree programme, reputation of the institution and benefits of English learning (e.g. Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Wilkins, Balakrishnan, & Huisman, 2012; Ahmad & Buchanan, 2016). In addition, the different characteristics of the programme also shaped student motivation for TNHE and even for further study choice. The CB programme allows no choice at the end of their first stage of study in China, therefore all the students will go to the UK for the next stage of study. For the CL students, the CL programme allows free choice to students about the destination for the next stage of study. For them, the university prestige and rankings, employment prospects are more important for consideration in deciding the destination for the next stage of study. This echoes the finding of Manzoor and Al Mahmud
(2020) that these are important aspects of university image influencing students’ choice, satisfaction and even loyalty.

Finally, students’ choices of TNHE were also influenced by parents and other family members, as they constituted important sources of information. This is consistent with the existing literature, which stressed the Confucian importance of parents in Chinese students’ choices of HE (Liu and Morgan 2016, 2017; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) and the important role of cultural element in international students’ choice of HE (Mahmoud et al., 2020). In addition, students’ family background and financial status was therefore an important factor in the choice of TNHE programmes, as tuition fees for TNHE are typically 3-5 times more than those of a local Chinese HE programme, especially for those students from CB, whose tuition fee is twice that of the CL students.

**Conclusion & Recommendations**

This study set out to identify students’ motivations and corresponding factors which serve to influence their study decisions for choosing a UK TNHE degree in China. The adoption of an extended pull-push theory, which considers the push factors from both domestic and overseas HE and the pull factors from TNHE and integrates student’s characteristics and personal situations, has served as a useful framework on which to examine the driving forces and stimuli influencing study choices for TNHE for Chinese students. It is therefore proposed for further studies looking at motivations of Chinese students in studying on TNHE programmes in China.

With regards to motivational factors, differences were found between the two student groups. CB students chose TNHE mainly because of their low Gaokao scores which denied their access to regular domestic HE and the pull of lower entry requirements of TNHE which offered a second choice. More importantly, their personal characteristics, such as feelings of being unprepared to go overseas and low English language proficiency pushed them away from
overseas HE. As a result, the transitional period offered by TNHE acted a strong pull factor for them. In contrast, The CL students chose the TNHE programme over a “normal” law programme mainly because of the “pull” factors of TNHE programmes, such as the benefits of dual degrees, the benefits of English instruction and the perceived higher quality of UK education. For both student groups, higher cost of overseas HE and English language proficiency, compared with TNHE, pushed them away from overseas HE. In addition, their choices were heavily influenced by their parents and family socio-economic backgrounds. As for reasons influencing student choice of specific TNHE programme, recommendation of parents, employment prospects, and reputation of the university were the major considerations. In terms of sources of information when researching their choice of institution, the recommendation of parents/family/friends constituted as the most important factor for both CB and CL students. This is summarised in the Figure 7 below, with a reference to the theoretical framework we put forward earlier in the paper.

**Figure 7. An extended push-pull framework for students’ choice of TNHE in China**

Our findings have illustrated how students consider TNHE as a steppingstone or a transition period to studying overseas. The exceptions remain within the discipline of law, wherein a minority of students from CL expressed an intent to remain in China, without going overseas.
This could be due to the value of understanding the local / Chinese legal framework, over international legal studies, which offered a stronger “pull” factor for CL than that of UK1. This finding also confirms the estimation of Fang and Wang (2014) that students in the double degree programme tend to use TNHE programme to gain access to high quality domestic higher education institutions instead of overseas higher education.

Most crucially, this research has identified that TNHE is often not a first choice for Chinese students, but instead the ‘push/pull’ revolves around necessity and the students’ personal situation. This indicates that TNHE is not well known as an HE option and is not perceived as ‘normal’ education, which emphasizes the importance and necessity of engaging in marketing and in branding to students (Guilbault, 2016; Williams & Omar, 2014). It also indicates that there are different and distinct markets at play, reinforcing the need to emphasize the pull factors of TNHE for future recruitment. In light of the study findings, the following recommendations are offered:

- Chinese students studying TNHE value the transitional period enabled through the programme. This preparation period should be emphasised when universities are promoting and recruiting to TNHE.

- UK TNHE has value for English language instruction as identified by Chinese students. TNHE providers should stress the benefits of reinforcing English language skills, which can support students’ further study decisions (as part of this ‘transition period’) for study abroad options.

- Parental influences are a strong part of student motivation, as such, students and parents alike need to be fully informed about TNHE programmes. For example, creating a WeChat group (a tailored social media experience for a Chinese audience) of the
parents is recommended, as WeChat is now the most popular social networking platform in China (Zhu, 2019). This is deemed important considering the important role of social media in university branding (Pringle and Fritz, 2019) and to create a positive word-of-mouth communication to potential students and to increase students’ enrolments.

- Additionally, as reputation plays a key role in developing the positioning strategy for HEIs (Conard & Conard, 2000), factors such as the reputation of the collaborating institution in China and their unique teaching resources should be highlighted to ensure the target audiences are fully informed.

- Student choice of TNHE study programmes/majors is a result of consideration of employment prospects and personal interest. Employment prospects should be included in marketing materials.

This study focuses on student motivations from two different types of TNHE programmes in China. However, it is not representative of all TNHE programmes in different disciplines. Future research, within and across different disciplines, on student motivations for TNHE programmes in China are encouraged to better understand subject-specific motivations.

References


