

International Undergraduate Student Recruitment at China’s “Double First-Class” Universities

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the “Double First-class” universities in China, we analyze the recruitment policies of international undergraduate students at the institutional level. Findings indicate that “double First-class” universities have a certain autonomy in determining the recruitment scale and academic thresholds, demonstrating an unevenly set and loosely regulated policy decision making in China with an absence of a national academic standard and coordinative system. We categorize institutional policies at “double First-Class” universities into four kinds: Active-rigorous Player, Active Player, Rigorous Player and Inactive Player. As Active-rigorous Players, the most prestigious universities set admission requirements as strict as that of some research universities in North America. In general, academic rationale and economic rationale are not as important as political and social-cultural rationales in the recruitment policy. China’s HEIs need to maintain a subtle balance among academic, political, economic and social-cultural rationales, with more emphasis put on the quality control of international student recruitment.

Keywords: “Double First-class” universities, international undergraduate Students, recruitment, academic standards, rationales

INTRODUCTION

International student mobility is an important component of the internationalization of higher education. It also plays an active role in enhancing the political, educational, social and economic development of both the hosting countries and sending countries and promoting institutional and individual students' international horizon and capability. China is traditionally perceived as the most important sending country, but the past decade has witnessed China's rising position as one of the major hosting countries for international students and the largest one in Asia (Ma & Zhao, 2018). In 2018 there were 492,185 international students from 196 countries/areas pursuing their studies in China, among whom more than 258,122 students were enrolled in degree programs, accounting for 52.44% of all international students (MoE, 2019). With the rapid expansion and development of international students in China, the quality issue and sustainable development have become major concerns of policy-makers and university administrators. For example, Chinese universities face some problems in student recruitment, internationalized pedagogy, and international student management, such as obsession with the recruitment scale, low entrance thresholds, teaching quality, uneven development between regions and disciplines, a lack of quality faculty and teaching resources, and ineffective quality assurance and supervision system.

In China, due to the interplay of governmental incentives, institutional competition, and university rankings, the motivations of recruiting international students are unreasonable, resulting in more enthusiasm in increasing the number and the scale of international students than caring about the quality and academic standards of international students. The quality of enrollment and education of undergraduate international students in China is closely related to higher education institutions' reputation and competition. By taking 41 "Double First-class Universities" as examples, this paper analyzes the admission policies and practices for international undergraduate students in China, exploring the characteristics and problems and proposing suggestions for policy improvement. The paper starts with a brief literature review, followed by an introduction on research methods and findings, then turns to the discussion and conclusions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Conceptual Lens: Rationales and Logics of International Student Recruitment

In the global higher education market, hosting international students is of significance for universities' international competition, reputation, academic position in rankings. The rationales that drive universities to recruit international students are dramatically important and differ from country to country. De Wit (2002) identifies rationale as the motivation to integrate the international dimension into higher education pedagogy and practice, including an extension of both the purpose and outcomes of internationalization. Different rationales represent different ends and means of internationalization. Knight (2006)

classifies rationales of internationalization of higher education (IHE) into four categories: Political, Economic, Academic, and Social/Cultural. She further analyzes the rationales of different actors and stakeholders in the process of internationalization (Knight, 2006).

As the implementers of government policy and the suppliers of international higher education, Chinese higher education institutions' (HEIs) rationales for international student recruitment have direct influences on the quality and characteristics of international students. The rationales of international undergraduate admission differ from institution to institution. Different rationales lead to different international student recruitment strategies and practice. "Academic rationale" refers to that higher education institutions pay attention to academic standards in ISR by recruiting students with strong academic capability for the purpose of enhancing academic reputation, and providing scholarships to high-achieving students. "Political rationale" means that higher education institutions aim to recruit international students for the purpose of serving government policies and strategies, and are committed to improving the country's status and soft power. "Economic rationale" means that higher education institutions stress short-term and long-term economic benefits of international student recruitment by charging high tuition fees, expanding the scale of enrollment, improving the competitiveness of human resources. "Social/Cultural rationale" focuses on multicultural integration and cross-cultural understanding, emphasizing the cultural diversity of students.

Furthermore, three logics and dynamic forces, namely the state logic/force, the institutional academic logic/force and the market logic/force, interact and interplay with each other in shaping the admission policies of international students in China. The state logic stresses the national goal and strategy of international student education; the institution's academic logic pays much attention to the quantity or quality of international students; and the market logic attaches importance to economic benefits and the market mechanisms for the supply and demand match of cross-border higher education. There are complex interactions and dynamic influences between these different rationales and logics in different higher education systems. Three logics play different roles in the recruitment of international students in China's socialist market economy environment.

International Student Recruitment in China

International student recruitment is highlighted not only in traditional major hosting countries but also in emerging economies such as China, Singapore, Malaysia in Asia. With the aims of building up regional education hubs, the governments and higher education institutions in these countries have adopted active strategies to increase their competitiveness in the international student market (Wen & Hu, 2019).

The past decade has witnessed China's rising role as a major receiving country (Ma & Zhao, 2018; Wen & Hu, 2019; Wu, 2018). Most studies have examined China's international student education either from the macro-level of

government policy or the micro-level of individual students' behaviors and experiences. The meso-level of hosting institutions' policy and practice are long time ignored. At the macro level, the role of the Chinese national government is crucial in issuing policies and regulations, offering financial resources and scholarships, and making strategic planning and quality management. The *Regulations on Management of Higher Education Institutions in their Acceptance of International Students* in 2000 has stipulated international student education guidelines, management systems, types of students, scholarships, teaching, social management, and stay permits (Ma & Zhao, 2018). Recruiting international students has been taken as a strategy to strengthen China's soft power and promote the competitiveness of Chinese higher education (Wen & Hu, 2019). The national governments have launched policies and projects to drive the HEIs to recruit more international students. In 2010, the "Study in China Program" set the ambitious goal of receiving 500,000 international students by 2020 and aims to make China the biggest host country in Asia (Wen & Hu, 2019).

As a non-Western emerging player of international education, Chinese policies and rationales differ from traditional suppliers of international education. For the traditional major suppliers, such as the US, the UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand, economic rationale is a priority in recruiting international undergraduate students (Altbach & Knight, 2007). These countries have adopted neoliberalism ideology at the governmental and institutional policies by charging full tuition fees for international students since the 1980s or 1990s. The 21st century has witnessed the continental European countries, such as Germany, France and Finland, are shifting their policies from low tuition fees to high tuition fees for international students (Cai & Kivistö, 2011). In contrast to these countries, China has not set economic rationale as a priority. Rather, political and social-cultural rationales are more important in the policy and practice of internationalization of higher education (Ma & Zhao, 2018). Since international students are a potential source of soft power, the recruitment of international students could be a fundamental way to achieve China's diplomatic mission (Tian & Lowe, 2018). China pays more attention to long-term strategies of building and strengthening international relationship with the neighboring countries by enhancing higher education (HE) exchange and hosting students from the "One Belt and One Road" (OBOR) strategy (Lu & Tian, 2018).

The micro-level research focuses on educational, psychological and cultural issues of international student mobility (Ding, 2016; Lu & Tian, 2018; Wen et al., 2018). Economic growth, Chinese language and culture, scholarships, China's governmental policies, the reputation of research universities, and low costs are the main pull factors for attracting international students to pursue higher education in China. Low quality of higher education is named a major pushing factor for international student recruitment in China.

Quality is a major concern for Chinese higher education hosting international students (Yang, 2018). After 1990, the Chinese government delegated recruitment of international students to HEIs, permitting them to be responsible for recruitment, education, and routine management of international students (Ma & Zhao, 2018). A sound quality assurance system for educational programs for

international students is lacking at the state level. Ding (2016) and Wen et al. (2018) found that the satisfaction levels of international students in Shanghai and Beijing were lower than those of international students in Western countries such as the USA. Some international students studying in China reported that administrators showed little concern about the quality of their experiences at university (Tian & Lowe, 2018). The language barrier is one of the crucial factors influencing international students' cultural integration in China (Yang, 2020). According to Lu and Tian's survey, only 33.1% and 38.6% of international students reported that their oral Chinese and written Chinese were fluent. In contrast, most of the international students thought that their Chinese was average or poor. (Lu & Tian, 2018). The language requirements and academic standards for international student admission in China vary from institution to institution. In some Chinese higher education institutions, the low requirements and standards lead to the unsatisfactory learning outcomes of international students.

New Challenges Facing International Students Admissions amid Impacts of COVID-19

The spread of the Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) has significant impacts on international higher education in general and on international student mobility in particular. The Covid-19 has led to the decreasing scale of international student mobility in the short term, accelerating changes in directions and features of international students and intensifying competition in the international student market (Yang et al., 2021). With border closures and global travel restrictions, international students experienced educational, psychological and financial difficulties amid the pandemic (Alaklabi et al., 2021). In China, researchers predict that the number of international students coming to China will decline in the short term. Yet, as China moves toward recovery from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of international students will keep on increasing (Lin & Liu, 2021; Ma & Zhang, 2021; Yang et al., 2021).

In the post COVID-19 era, the strategies of international student admission and the situations of epidemic prevention and control vary by country, which could cause changes in international student mobility and intensify the competition in the international student market (Ma & Zhang, 2021; Yang et al., 2021). Health protection and safety occupy a more important position in influencing students' and parents' decisions on studying abroad and destination choices (Whatley & Castiello-Gutiérrez, 2021). Under the government policies on COVID-19, universities in China posit healthy protection as a priority and set up strict rules for returning of international students. A survey of 504 international students in China shows that 92.85% students were satisfied with the measures taken by Chinese government and 58.53% preferred to stay here in China rather than go to their home countries (Kulyar et al., 2020). Although China has been successful in pandemic control, the quality of China's international higher education is not as attractive as European and American countries (Yang et al.,

2021). The provision of a high-quality education is the fundamental way to attract international students coming to China (Yang et al., 2021).

The Chinese higher education institutions' international student admission policies, rationales, management, education and services are under-researched. In practice, the recruitment of international students in universities may be dominated by one or more rationales. The paper aims at filling in the knowledge gap by focusing on international undergraduate student recruitment at China's "Double First-class" universities.

Research Questions

The rationales and strategies of higher education institutions in recruiting international students predict what international students can be enrolled into Chinese universities, which result in the quality, quantity and composition of international student recruitment. Aiming at exploring the features and quality of international student recruitment, the paper focuses on three dimensions of international undergraduate student recruitment at China's "Double First-class" universities.

1). What was the scale of international undergraduate student recruitment at the "Double First-class" Universities in China?

2). What were the admission requirements (such as language proficiency requirements and academic standards) for international undergraduate students at the "Double First-class" Universities?

3). What were the rationales of the international student recruitment policies at the "Double First-class" Universities in China?

RESEARCH METHOD

In China, the policies and rationales of international undergraduate student recruitment vary from institution to institution. The research focuses on the "Double First-class" universities due to the following reasons: a. these universities are major HEIs hosting a large number of international students; b. the "Double First-class" universities represent the top-tier research higher education institutions in China, playing an important role in the global higher education competition; c. their admission policies are available for document analysis. We focus on the quantity, quality and rationales of international undergraduate student recruitment in the "Double First-class" Universities: The quantity refers to the enrollment scale of international students, the quality is determined by the academic requirements of enrollment, and the rationale is underlined by the priority on quality or quantity in the process of recruitment.

The data were mainly drawn from governmental documents and higher education institutional materials. The governmental documents include *Study in China Program* (MoE, 2010), *Administrative Measures for the Enrollment and Cultivation of International Students by Higher Education Institutions* (MoE, 2017), and *The Trial Quality Standard of Higher Education for International*

Students (MoE, 2018), and *Concise Statistics of International Students in China* (MoE, *Department of International Cooperation and Exchange* 2019). The institutional materials were from the official websites of the 41 “Double First-class” universities. The National University of Defense Technology was excluded from the list of analyzing because it did not recruit international students. On the official websites of foreign affair offices at the 41 “Double First-class” universities, we collected documents of undergraduate programs for international students in 2020 and 2021, and built up a database of recruitment information, including the Chinese and English language proficiency requirements, forms of entrance assessments, and the qualification requirements for international students in 41 “Double First-class” universities in 2021.

The research is based on document analysis. We conducted statistical descriptive analysis on the number of international students and content analysis on application eligibility, academic requirements, and academic assessment for international undergraduate student recruitment at China’s “Double First-class” Universities.

RESULTS

We analyze the recruitment policies including the documents, regulations, and plans issued by the HEIs. In China, the Higher Education Law stipulates that HEIs enjoy the autonomy on recruiting international students. Admission policies impact the quantity and characteristics of international students enrolled at each institution. This section elaborates the admission policies from the aspects of the enrollment scale, admission standards, requirements of language proficiency, and academic assessment at “Double First-class” Universities in China.

The Enrollment Scale of International Undergraduate Students at “Double First-class” Universities

International student education has been given great importance by the Chinese government and HEIs. In total, the 41 “Double First-class” universities hosted 160,783 international students, accounting for 20.65% of a total enrollment of international undergraduate students in China in 2018 (MoE, 2019). The recent years have witnessed the number of international students from African countries through the “One Belt, and One Road” strategy increased rapidly (Ma & Zhao, 2018). As shown in Figure 1, the numbers of international undergraduate students hosted by “Double First-class” universities varied from institution to institution in 2018. The higher the academic position, the higher the number of international undergraduate students were recruited. Thirteen universities hosting more than 1000 international undergraduate students are all prestigious universities, including Zhejiang University (Number = 2676), Wuhan University (1916), Shanghai Jiao Tong University (1698), Peking University (1644), Sichuan University (1547), Zhengzhou University (1524), Tsinghua University (1494), and Fudan University (1446) (see Figure 1).

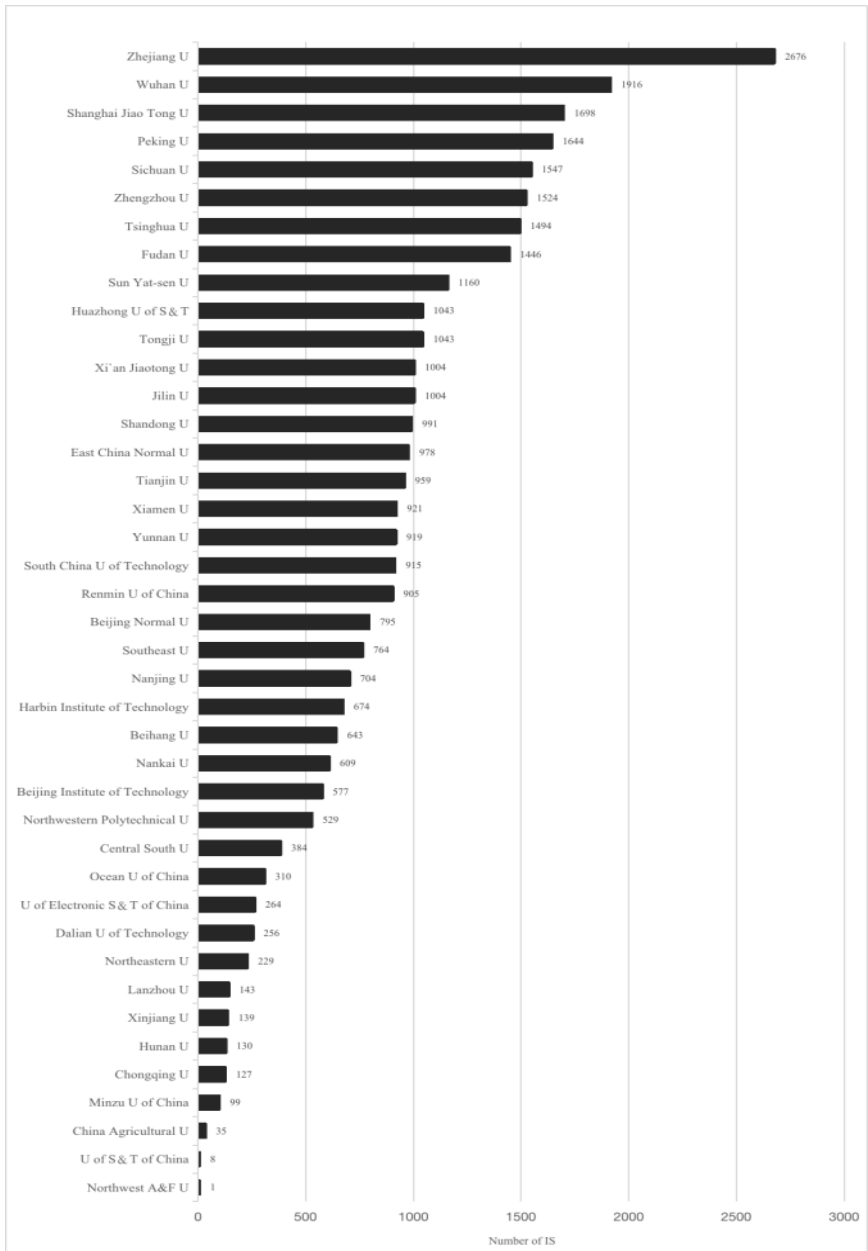


Figure 1: The Number of International Undergraduate Students at 41 “Double First-class” Universities in China in 2018

Sources: Department of International Cooperation and Exchange, Ministry of Education, China (2019). *Concise Statistics of International Students in China*.

In general, the enrollment number at universities in East China is higher than those in Central and West China. The number of international students recruited by the “Double First-class” universities decreased sharply in 2020 due to the impacts of COVID-19 and the uncertainty of the admission policy in China. Taking Xiamen University as an example, the number of international students has reduced from 3,481 in 2018 to 1,719 in 2020.

Admission Requirements

The admission requirements are closely related to the quality of international students recruited by “Double First-class” universities. The admission decision is based on a comprehensive evaluation of applicants’ language proficiency, academic performance, and other supporting materials.

Language Proficiency Requirements for Admission

Language proficiency of international students is a critical precondition for a successful learning experience and high achievements. Aiming at attracting more international students and enhancing international competition capability, Chinese research universities provide bachelor’s degree programs in both Chinese medium and English medium of instruction. International students must demonstrate proficiency in Chinese or English to be admitted.

Table 1 shows the language proficiency requirements of undergraduate programs in 2021. Applicants whose native language is not Chinese/English must take at least one of the Chinese/English language examinations and earn the necessary scores to meet the requirements.

As shown in Table 1, among the 41 “Double First-class” universities, the degree of the requirement of Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK) scores can be divided into three levels: low (\geq Level 4), middle (\geq Level 5), and high (\geq Level 6). Twenty-two “Double First-class” universities require HSK at level 4 or above, and 17 universities require level 5 or above. Only Peking University set a very high requirement of level 6 or above. Eight universities add their own Chinese test in the process of enrollment, and 12 universities claim that they accept other certificates of Chinese learning and transcripts. The international students recruited by the 22 universities with the Chinese language proficiency at HSK level 4 may face more challenges on academic and cultural adaption than another 18 universities with the requirement above HSK level 5.

Thirty-one of the “Double First-class” universities offer English-taught undergraduate programs for international students. Most are in Medical and Economic Management majors. TOEFL or IELTS score is needed if the applicant’s native language is not English, but the requirements vary among institutions. For example, the Bachelor program of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) at Sun Yat-sen University requires higher English scores than other programs: a TOEFL scored on 105 or above, or an IELTS scored on seven or above.

Table 1: The Language Proficiency Requirements for International Students in programs of Chinese as Medium of Instruction in 40 “Double First-class” Universities in 2021

Chinese proficiency requirements	Degree of requirement	University	Number of universities
≥HSK level 4	Low	Nankai University, Tianjin University, Dalian University of Technology, Jilin University, Harbin Institute of Technology, Tongji University, Southeast University, Xiamen University, Shandong University, Ocean University of China, Wuhan University, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Central South University, South China University of Technology, Chongqing University, University of Electronic Science and Technology of China, Xi’an Jiaotong University, Northwestern Polytechnical University, Lanzhou University, Zhengzhou University, Yunnan University, Northwest A&F University Minzu University of China, Tsinghua University, Renmin University of China, Beihang University, Beijing Institute of Technology, China Agricultural University, Beijing Normal University, Fudan University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, East China Normal University, Nanjing University, Zhejiang University, University of Science and Technology of China, Sun Yat-sen University, Sichuan University, Northeastern University, Xinjiang University	22
≥HSK level 5	Middle		17
≥HSK level 6	High	Peking University	1

Sources: The Chinese version and data sources are acquired from the enrollment policy of the 41 “Double First-class” universities for international students in 2021.

Table 2: The Language Proficiency Requirements for International Students in Programs of English as Medium of Instruction in 39 “Double First-class” Universities in 2021

	English language requirements	Degree of requirement	Universities	Number of universities
TOEFL score	≥65	Very low	Northwestern Polytechnical University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, South China University of Technology	3
	≥70	Low	Nanjing University, Northeastern University, Jilin University, Beijing Institute of Technology, Tianjin University, Harbin Institute of Technology, Southeast University, Zhejiang University, Wuhan University, Xiamen University, Shandong University, Ocean University of China, Zhengzhou University, Tongji University, Beihang University, Dalian University of Technology	3
	≥80	Middle		13
	≥85	High*	East China Normal University	1
	≥90	High	Fudan University, Sichuan University	2
	≥105	Very high	Sun Yat-sen University	1
	≥4.5	Low	Northeastern University	1
IELTS score	≥5	Low	Northwestern Polytechnical University, Beihang University, Beijing Institute of Technology, Harbin Institute of Technology, Nanjing University, Zhejiang University, Wuhan University, Ocean University of China, South China University of Technology, Shandong University, East China Normal University, Tianjin University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Southeast University, Xiamen University, Zhengzhou University	1
	≥5.5	Middle		8
	≥6	High*		7
	≥6.5	High	Tongji University, Fudan University, Sichuan University	3
	≥7.5	Very high	Sun Yat-sen University	1

Sources: The Chinese version and data sources acquired from the enrollment policy of the 41 “Double First-class” universities for international students in 2021

Note: *A TOEFL score of 85 or above is a language requirement for the University of Alberta.

*An IELTS score of 6 or above is a language requirement for University of Hong Kong.

This English proficiency requirement for international students is almost at the same level as that of Harvard University, with TOEFL scores of 100-120. As shown in Table 2, Sun Yat-sen University, Fudan University, East China Normal University and Sichuan University require international applicants to achieve TOEFL scores of above 85, and Sun Yat-sen University, Fudan University, Sichuan University and Tongji University require IELTS scores above 6.5. In addition, seven universities require IELTS scores above 6.0. The rest of the “Double First-class” universities have middle and low-level requirements for IELTS and TOEFL scores. The language proficiency requirements for some universities are unclear. In summary, 12 “Double First-class” universities require applicants’ English language proficiency as high as that of research universities in North America, for example, a TOEFL scored on 85 or above, which is equivalent to the language requirement at the University of Alberta.

Academic Assessment for Admission

Academic performance shows students’ learning ability and learning attitude. In order to ensure the academic performance of international students, many countries have set up admission assessments and examinations for applicants to assess their academic preparation. China has no unified entrance examination or academic standards for the admission of international students.

The first category of hosting institutions has strict academic standards and assessment process, paying much attention to academic rationale in their recruitment policies. Nineteen “Double First-class” universities have language and academic test requirements for admission (see Table 3). Among them, ten have both written exams and interviews. Eight have only interviews. Sun Yat-sen University has only written exams.

Among the ten “Double First-class” universities assessing applicants’ academic performance by written tests, Chinese, mathematics, and English are the main test subjects. In addition, seven universities, including Peking University, Tsinghua University, Renmin University of China, Beijing Normal University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Fudan University, and University of Science & Technology of China, allow applicants to provide their national/regional high school graduation exam or college entrance exam scores or results of international standard tests (e.g., SAT, IB, A-level, AP, ACT) as academic certificates to apply for exemption from the entrance exam. Taking Peking University as an example, the exemption requirement for overseas students in 2021 is a score of 30 or above on the ACT. Based on Office of Undergraduate Admissions data as of 2020, the SAT scores of international undergraduate freshmen admitted to the University of California Berkeley are between 29-35 (University of California Berkeley, n.d.).

This group of hosting institutions stresses the academic standards and rationale of international student recruitment.

The second category of hosting institutions has neither strict academic standards nor clear assessment processes for international student recruitment. Thirteen “Double First-class” universities have neither written exams nor interviews (see Table 3).

Table 3. The Forms of Entrance Assessment for International Students in 41 “Double First-class” Universities in 2021

Forms of entrance assessment	Universities	Number of universities	Academic rationale
Written examinations and interviews	Peking University, Tsinghua University, Renmin University of China, Beihang University, Beijing Normal University, Fudan University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Nanjing University, University of Science and Technology of China, Sichuan University	10	Very importance
Interviews only	Xiamen University, Wuhan University, Tianjin University, Beijing Institute of Technology, China Agricultural University, East China Normal University, Chongqing University, Northwestern Polytechnical University	8	Importance
Written examinations only	Sun Yat-sen University	1	Importance
Determined by the academic committee of each college	Nankai University, Jilin University, Harbin Institute of Technology, Tongji University, Zhejiang University, Shandong University, Ocean University of China, Electronic Science and Technology of China, Yunnan University, Minzu University of China, Dalian University of Technology, Southeast University, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Central South University, South China University of Technology, Zhengzhou University, Northeastern University, Northwest A&F University, Xinjiang University, Xi'an Jiaotong University, Lanzhou University, Hunan University	9	Empowered to college
No entrance examinations		13	Neglected

Sources: The Chinese version and data sources are acquired from the enrollment policy of the 41 “Double First-class” universities for international students in 2021.

That means the academic rationale for admission is overlooked in these universities. The academic committees of each college at the other 9 “Double First-class” universities have the autonomy to decide whether to set up entrance examinations for international students.

In addition to the academic assessment and exams, the academic performance in senior high school is considered as a qualification requirement for admission by some “Double First-class” universities. All “Double First-class” universities require that the applicants have a certificate of senior secondary education, while only eight “Double First-class” universities require applicants to have a good record in high school.

DISCUSSION

The section summarizes the findings and discusses the China’s research universities’ international undergraduate student recruitment policies and practice.

Forces shaping the Recruiting International Students in China

The international student recruitment policy and rationale are shaped by the forces of state logic, market logic and institutional logic in China. Institutional logic is operated under the market logic regulated by governmental policies and regime in China. Compared with counterparts in traditional major receiving countries, China’s HEIs lack awareness of international market campaigns and branding. The hosting institution has not fully played the role of market agency. Strategies of these “Double First-class” universities are similar, mainly relying on traditional recruitment channels and marketing strategies. New creative strategies such as new media technology, partnerships with source countries, and strategic and marketing research on recruitment, which are commonly used at universities in advanced countries, are rarely seen in China (Sin et al., 2019). Chinese universities face challenges in attracting and recruiting international students since they are later-comer and not competent in global market competition.

In China, the demand for and supply of international student education does not meet with each other automatically by the liberalized market mechanism. Rather, the national government's strategic projects and policies, such as the “Study in China Program”, “Double First-class” Project, OBOR, have significant impacts on the HEIs’ rationales and policies of recruitment. The government encourages and motivates the “Double First-class” universities to recruit more students from the OBOR countries by providing scholarships and financial support, leading to a niche market in the Asian and developing countries since 2015 (Ma & Zhao, 2018). Since all “Double First-class” universities are public

research universities, they prefer to follow the state logic rather than the professional academic logic on recruiting international students.

Four types of players in terms of international student recruitment are shown in Table 4(a) and Table 4(b).

Table 4(a): Types of Players in International Student Recruitment

Category	Quantity of international students	Quality of international students	Institution (No. of international students)	Number of institutions
Category A: Active & rigorous player	High (numbers >500)	High (written exams or interview & high language proficiency requirement)	Shanghai Jiao Tong University (1698), Peking University (1644), Sichuan University (1547), Tsinghua University (1494), Fudan University (1446), East China Normal University (978), Renmin University of China (905), Beijing Normal University (795), Nanjing University (704), Beihang University (643), Zhejiang University (2676), Wuhan University (1916), Zhengzhou University (1524), Huazhong University of Science and Technology (1043), Tong Ji University (1043), Xi'an Jiaotong University (1004), Shandong University (991), Xiamen University (921), South China University of Technology (915), Southeast University (764), Beijing Institute of Technology (577),	10
Category B: Active player	High (numbers >500)	Low/middle (no entrance examination, and low/middle language proficiency requirement)		12

Table 4(b): Types of Players in International Student Recruitment

Category	Quantity of international students	Quality of international students	Institution (No. of international students)	Number of Institutions
Category C: Rigorous player	Low (numbers < or =500)	High (written exams and interview)	University of Science and Technology of China (8) Central South University (384), Ocean University of China (310), University of Electronic Science and Technology of China (264), Dalian University of Technology (256), Northeastern University (229), Lanzhou University (143), Hunan University (130), Xinjiang University (139), Chongqing University (127), Minzu University of China (99), China Agricultural University (35), Northwest Agriculture and Forestry University (1)	1
Category D: Inactive player	Low (numbers < or =500)	Low/middle (no entrance examination, and low/middle language proficiency requirement)		12

Note: The table only includes the universities with information of quantity and entrance requirements of international students.

Market logic does not play a major role in matching the demand and supply. According to Wen and Hu (2019), the recruitment of international students in China has gradually become an autonomous behavior of colleges and universities, while the market is playing a coordinating force. However, the market influences institutional recruitment through university rankings, generating prospective student competition and revenue returns. Due to that, the number of international students is counted as one of the indicators in university rankings, some “Double First-class” universities pay more attention to the quantity than the quality of international student recruitment.

The “Double First-class” universities are different types of players in recruiting international students since they adopt different strategies and rationales on recruitment. According to the international student quantity (recruitment scale) and quality (academic requirements and process), they could be categorized as four types of players, namely Active-Rigorous Player (Category A), Active Player (Category B), Rigorous Player (Category C), and Inactive Player (Category D). Ten Category A-universities stress both the quantity and quality of international students and they indicate most competitiveness. A majority of them are the most prestigious universities located in the most economically developed big cities in China. Twelve Category B-universities, as Active players, pay more attention to the quantity rather than the quality of international students. They need to enhance the entrance assessment and academic requirements of international student recruitment so as to become major competitors. Belonging to Rigorous Player of Category C, the University of Science and Technology of China stresses the quality and ignores the quantity of international students. As Inactive Player, Twelve Category D-universities have both low number and low/middle quality of international students. This group of universities has disadvantages in attracting international students due to both the less prestigious academic position and the geographical position located in western and less developed regions in China.

Institutional Rationales and Priorities for International Undergraduate Recruitment

The findings echo the previous research argument that rationales of international student recruitment in China focused more on political and social cultural rationales and less on economic and academic rationales (Wen et al., 2018; Tian & Lowe, 2018). In general, regarding the elite institutions’ rationales of recruiting international undergraduates, academic rationale and economic rationale seem less important than social-cultural and political rationales in China. The research universities’ rationales on international student recruitment differ by institution. One-third of “Double First-class” universities (Active-Rigorous Player-Category A) with rigorous admission requirements on academic performance and language proficiency adopt the academic rationale as the priority. Taking the quantity as the priority, another one-third “Double First-class” universities (Active Player-Category B) emphasize political, economic, cultural rationales rather than the academic rationale. Chinese research universities are

suggested to pay more attention to academic rationales. Keeping the subtle balance between academic, political, social-cultural and economic rationales in international student recruitment is crucial for the sustainable development of the internationalization of higher education. Chinese HEIs need to adopt different strategies and rationales according to specific international student markets so as to promote their global competitiveness (Li, 2021).

Impacts of COVID-19 on International Students Admissions in China

COVID-19 has had a profound impact on the flow of international students. The number of international students applying for 41 “Double First-class” universities has decreased dramatically in the past two years. Some “Double First-class” universities have simplified the application procedures and processes to attract more applicants. For example, Peking University, Renmin University of China and Shanghai Jiao Tong University canceled the written entrance examinations for international students in 2020. Applicants can directly participate in the online interviews as long as they pass the registration review. Some universities have modified the exam methods by using online examinations, although they face challenges of guaranteeing the reliability of admission assessment. With increasing uncertainty and fiercer competition in the international student market, the “Double First-class” universities, as the first-tier of Chinese HEIs, need to address quality issues and challenges of COVID-19’s impacts. HEIs need to keep the balance between adopting flexible recruitment forms and maintaining the quality of international students admitted.

CONCLUSION

Quality Issues of International Student Recruitment in China

Over the past decades, China has paid more attention to the quantity of international students and has achieved the goal of being one of the major receiving countries of international students. However, the catch-up mindset is detrimental to the long-term sustainable development of Chinese international higher education. The rapid expansion of the quantity does not mean the same-level increase in the quality of enrollment and education. The niche market China has occupied in the global HE market is the low or middle-level students rather than the high level.

The government in China has played a weak role in supervising the quality of institutional international student recruitment, which results in consequent misconducts of individual HEIs, such as low entry thresholds for admission and weak internal quality assurance (Wen et al., 2018). The absence of a unified entrance examination system and clear admission standards make universities lack an objective basis for the evaluation of students’ academic levels and educational preparation. The academic standards of international undergraduate recruitment are unevenly settled and loosely regulated in China. China lacks a national academic standard and coordinated system for recruiting international

students. Such loosely regulated recruitment policies are not effective to recruit high-quality students. At the institutional level, quantity priority and non-academic rationales driving recruitment will negatively affect Chinese universities' reputation, competitiveness and attractiveness of in the international student market.

Our findings show that "Double First-class" universities play a crucial role in international student education, hosting one-fifth of international undergraduates. The most prestigious universities in the coastal regions receive the largest number of international students. The HEIs located in the least developed western regions attract a small number of degree-seeking international students.

The admission standards of Chinese research universities are not high compared with those of the research universities in economically advanced countries. The language proficiency and academic requirements for international undergraduate student recruitment differ among 41 "Double First-class" universities. The most prestigious universities have the highest standards at both language and academic levels. More than half of "Double First-class" universities adopt middle-level admission standards of Chinese language proficiency, and one-third have no written subject test or interview for recruitment assessment. The thresholds of the Chinese and English language proficiency and academic level requirements in some HEIs are not enough for international students to be qualified for academic training.

The admission standards are the gatekeeper for the quality of international students. Language and academic requirements for admission need to be enhanced to recruit high quality international students. China's research universities need to set rigorous admission standards, requirement processes and national entrance exams so as to enhance the quality of international students. Inadequate admission standards lead to unsatisfied education experience of international students in China. As the top-tier universities in China, "Double First-class" universities should compete for the high-level international student market rather than the low-level or middle-level student market.

China's Research Universities' Practice on International Student Recruitment

The international student admission policies of elite universities in China are influenced not only by the international environment and domestic government policies, but also by the development strategies and ideas of universities themselves. Overall, "Double First-class" universities have a certain autonomy in determining the recruitment scale, language proficiency requirements, academic standards and assessment form and process. Currently the dominant rationales for recruiting international students are associated more with social-cultural and political rationales while less with academic and economic rationales. As the largest developing country, China faces opportunities and challenges as an emerging major hosting country of international students. The paper contributes to understanding rationales and policies at China's research universities in terms

of international undergraduate student recruitment. Policy suggestions are also provided for thinking of how to improve China's HEIs' international student recruitment.

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