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Crossing Borders of Motivation: Exploring Chinese Students' Intrinsic and Extrinsic Drivers for UK Master's Degrees

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ABSTRACT: *Globalization has increased the popularity of international master's degrees, especially among Chinese students in the UK, driven by both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. However, existing studies often overlook these motivations from a psychological needs perspective. This study addresses this gap using self-determination theory (SDT) to explore the motivations of six Chinese master's students in education in the UK through semi-structured interviews and NVivo 14 analysis. The results show that intrinsic motivations include personal interests and cultural experiences, whereas extrinsic motivations involve career prospects, educational advantages, and influences from peers, family, teachers, and agencies. SDT's psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—are crucial in shaping intrinsic motivation and the internalization of extrinsic motivation. The findings emphasize the need for educational institutions to create supportive environments that fulfill these psychological needs, thereby enhancing students' motivations and success in international education. Future research should explore different disciplines, master's programs, and changes in motivations over time.*

Keywords: Extrinsic motivation, international students, intrinsic motivation, master's degrees, self-determination theory (SDT)

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INTRODUCTION

Globalization has significantly enhanced the international connectivity of higher education, increasing the popularity of international master's degrees among students (Abo-Khalil, 2024). Many students are now choosing to pursue their master's degrees at institutions abroad (Mok & Sawan Khai, 2024). A significant number of these international students come from China, which has become the largest source of international students in the world (Zhai & Cao, 2025). According to the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2020), more than one million Chinese students were studying abroad in 2023, making them the most prominent and fastest-growing group of international students worldwide and the largest group in major English-speaking countries. Among the various English-speaking countries, the United Kingdom has long been a favorable destination for Chinese students studying abroad (Yu et al., 2023). The latest statistics from the UK government show that as of March 2025, the UK had issued 102,726 study visas to Chinese main applicants, accounting for 25% of all study visas (UK Home Office, 2025). Among these students, 59% were enrolled in master's degree programs (UK Home Office, 2025).

In the UK, master's degrees are generally categorized into three types: research master's, specialized master's, and professional master's (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), 2020). The research master's emphasizes research, with students primarily engaging in independent study to investigate a specific project. Specialized masters focus on structured teaching, providing students with learning opportunities. Professional masters are geared toward vocational skills training, equipping students with the qualifications and skills necessary for their careers. Currently, specialized masters, which are based on coursework and assignments, have become the fastest-growing postgraduate program worldwide (Jung & Li, 2021). Despite most specialized master's programs requiring self-funding, thousands of Chinese students are investing in these programs to increase their knowledge, skills, and credentials (Lai & Jung, 2025).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recognizing the rise in Chinese students pursuing master's education abroad, researchers have explored the factors behind their choices. Cebolla-Boado et al. (2018) employed questionnaires and focus groups to examine motivations from the perspective of human capital and the push-pull model. They reported that university prestige and the social and cultural advantages universities offer were the main driving factors. Similarly, Zhai and Cao (2025) applied the push-pull model, revealing motivations such as competitive admissions in China, students' social networks, an education-prioritizing culture, and the appeal of global competence and time savings provided by the UK. Lu et al. (2023), using questionnaires at two universities and drawing on human, social, cultural, and symbolic capital perspectives, identified factors such as broadening horizons, leveraging research resources, and accessing international career opportunities as influential.

While these studies offer valuable insights, they predominantly rely on the push-pull model or capital theory, both of which emphasize external factors such as economic benefits, social prestige, and cultural exchange (Cebolla-Boado et al., 2018; Jiao, 2025; Lu et al., 2023; Zhai & Cao, 2025). The push-pull model illustrates how external influences shape students' choices but often overlooks their agency and personal intentions, failing to fully consider their need for environments that foster personal growth and academic development (Yue & Lu, 2022). Capital theory, in explaining student behavior, also focuses on the influence of external resources and environments (Lai & Jung, 2025). This theory highlights the external benefits individuals can gain from education, such as economic value and social connections, but it does not adequately explore students' passion and interest in learning (Yang et al., 2024). Thus, while the existing research provides some insights into Chinese international students' motivations to pursue studies overseas, they do not present a complete picture, as the push-pull model or capital fails to capture students' proactive and psychological factors of students' motivation (Yang et al., 2024; Yue & Lu, 2022). To bridge this gap, we adopted self-determination theory (SDT) (Ryan & Vansteenkiste, 2023) as our theoretical framework, which is an ideal theoretical basis for understanding how students' self-awareness initiates and regulates their decision-making processes to study abroad (Reeve et al., 2022; Slemp et al., 2024).

According to Deci and Ryan (1985), SDT emphasizes the role of self-awareness in initiating and regulating actions through the internalization and fulfillment of psychological needs (Ryan & Vansteenkiste, 2023). These needs include autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy is the freedom to make independent choices and control one's actions and is achieved when individuals can engage in activities or perform behaviors according to their own will (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Competence pertains to the subjective feeling of being capable of completing specific tasks, and this need is fulfilled when individuals accomplish challenges and feel effective in their actions (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Relatedness involves establishing connections with others, such as feeling cared for and belonging (Slemp et al., 2024).

On the basis of the satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs, SDT distinguishes three types of motivation: amotivation (lack of motivation), extrinsic motivation (to achieve instrumentally external purposes), and intrinsic motivation (voluntary participation in activities for inner joy and satisfaction) (Ryan & Deci, 2017). While individuals naturally possess intrinsic motivation, it can be strengthened or diminished by environmental and social influences. Supporting the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness sustains and enhances intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Compared with extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation is correlated with more profound engagement, greater achievement, and greater well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Extrinsic motivation can also involve self-determination, as individuals internalize external ideals, values, or norms, making these parts of their conscious actions. The greater the degree of internalization is, the stronger the degree of self-determination within extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Vansteenkiste, 2023).

Theoretically, this study addresses this research gap by applying the SDT to explore the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of Chinese international students pursuing a master's degree abroad, complementing prior research based on the push-pull model and capital theory. An in-depth understanding of these motivations may enable more tailored support for Chinese students in their decision-making processes. Additionally, the findings provide valuable insights for universities to develop influential international master's programs. Educational institutions may use these insights to design strategies that attract and support international students, enhancing their study-abroad experience and academic success (Nikou et al., 2023). Given the significance of these factors for future planning, further exploration of students' motivations for studying abroad is essential. The present study addressed three research questions:

1. Factors influencing students' decisions to pursue a master's degree in the UK.
2. The intrinsic and extrinsic motivations they hold when they decide to study in the UK.
3. Influence of the three psychological needs in SDT—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—on the formation and expression of these motivations.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research method, allowing for an in-depth exploration of their experiences, thoughts, and feelings (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The research proposal was reviewed and approved by the appropriate local ethics committee. AI tools (ChatGPT, Grammarly) were used only for language editing, and the study was conducted by the authors.

Participants

The study participants included six Chinese students pursuing a master's degree in education at a university in the UK. Participants were selected using purposive sampling on the basis of three inclusion criteria: (a) studying in the UK, (b) originating from China, and (c) currently enrolled in a master's program. Four female and two male students were chosen to enhance the sample's representativeness, reflecting the gender ratio of Chinese students pursuing a master's degree in education at the university. Additionally, to account for varying backgrounds before deciding to pursue a master's degree, the study included three students who proceeded directly to graduate after completing their undergraduate degrees and three who pursued a master's degree after a period of employment. Table 1 presents the demographic information of all the participants, including pseudonyms, gender, age, and status (studying or working), when they applied for a master's degree. Their real names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect the participants' privacy.

Table 1: Description of the Interviewees

Name (Pseudonyms)	Gender	Age	Study or work status at application
Ava	Female	23	Studying
Charlotte	Female	25	Working
Noah	Male	24	Studying
Mia	Female	23	Studying
James	Male	24	Working
Sophia	Female	27	Working

This study achieved data saturation by conducting and analyzing interviews until no new insights emerged. Data collection ceased once saturation was reached, ensuring that additional participants would not provide new information (Daher, 2023). Table 2 presents the coding records of the six interviews, which demonstrate that saturation was achieved after the fourth interview, as subsequent interviews confirmed that no new codes emerged. Additionally, all the participants showed genuine interest in the research topic, which enhanced the authenticity of the interview results (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Table 2: The Results of the Saturation Measurement

Categories	Interviews					
	Ava	Charlotte	Noah	Mia	James	Sophia
Professional knowledge and skills	X	X	X	X		
Language proficiency	X					
Regional culture		X	X	X	X	
Educational culture		X		X		X
Employment opportunities			X	X		
Career development		X			X	X
Pursuit of a favorable social environment	X					X
High-quality education				X		X
High university rankings	X	X	X		X	X
Flexible entry requirements			X		X	
Shorter study duration			X	X		
Peers	X	X	X	X	X	X
Teachers	X	X	X	X		
Family	X	X	X	X		X
Intermediary agencies	X		X			
New codes in each interview	8	3	3	1	0	0

Note. X means that the category was mentioned in the interview.

Recruitment information for participants was initially disseminated through WeChat groups, followed by formal email invitations to students to participate voluntarily. The emails included a participant information sheet and an informed consent form. Throughout the research process, necessary measures were taken to ensure the appropriateness of the data collection procedures. The confidentiality of the participants, as well as the interview process and results, was emphasized. Participants were allowed to unconditionally withdraw and retract their data within two weeks after the interview without any consequences.

Data collection

This study employed semistructured interviews, a flexible and open method that enables respondents to express targeted yet unrestricted views and perspectives on the factors influencing their decision to pursue a master’s degree abroad, thus providing an in-depth exploration of their motivations (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

The interview questions were designed on the basis of literature concerning the motivations for pursuing a master’s degree abroad and feedback and suggestions from pilot and formal respondents. To assess the appropriateness of the questions, a pilot interview was conducted with a student who met the sampling criteria but was not included in the final sample of six participants.

Feedback from the pilot interview led to revisions and refinements in the wording of the questions, which included adding an introductory icebreaker at the beginning of the interview and reducing ambiguous referential terms to clarify the questions (Cohen et al., 2018). The interviews were conducted face-to-face, and the time and location were arranged according to the respondents' preferences. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. All the interview content was manually transcribed word by word, with a focus on the students' motivations and perspectives. Fillers or pauses were excluded from the official record to emphasize the content of the responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). To enhance effectiveness, we conducted member checking with participants for theme verification and maintained an audit trail throughout the coding process.

Data Analysis

This study employed thematic analysis to identify the various motivations of the students. Following the coding procedure outlined by Denscombe (2014), the analysis was conducted in three stages: initial coding, developing coding, and identifying themes. In the initial coding stage, the researcher reviewed the data line by line and performed open coding to identify categories of interest or relevance (Denscombe, 2014). During the development coding stage, the researcher tested the accuracy of the initial coding by comparing the meanings of texts with the same codes and re-examining the original texts to correct any miscoded segments, ensuring that all relevant information was captured (Denscombe, 2014). The themes were subsequently determined by grouping and organizing the coding hierarchy, consolidating codes with the same or similar meanings, and developing higher-level abstract codes most relevant to the research questions, thereby elucidating the research issues (Denscombe, 2014).

The length of each unit of analysis was not fixed; the researcher flexibly divided and analyzed the data segments on the basis of their significance and importance. The software NVivo 14 (QSR International, Doncaster, Australia) assisted in the coding process, facilitating the identification, categorization, and organization of themes within the text (Welsh, 2002).

To enhance the validity of the results, two independent authors analyzed and coded two rounds of data separately, finding only minor differences in their coding criteria. In the first round, the first coder identified 101 codes, while the second coder identified 98 codes, with an overlap rate of 97.0%. In the second round, the first coder identified 99 codes, and the second coder identified 98 codes, with an overlap rate of 98.9%. After reconciliation discussions, a consensus was reached, resulting in 99 identified codes.

FINDINGS

With respect to the pursuit of a master's degree in the UK, the research findings indicate that the factors influencing Chinese students' decisions can be categorized into six major groups: personal development interests, diverse

cultural experiences, aspirations for career prospects, the pursuit of a favorable social environment, educational advantages, and the influence of others.

Personal Development Interests

The category of personal development interests includes professional knowledge and skills and language proficiency.

Professional Knowledge and Skills

The hope for expanding knowledge and enhancing abilities was a common theme among participants, who aimed for personal progress. As Mia stated, “There will be more improvement in terms of personal learning abilities, learning planning, and some learning issues, so it is also an accumulation of knowledge and experience.” Similarly, Charlotte expressed her desire for self-development: “I think pursuing a master’s degree is an inner desire. Whether it’s to obtain a degree or to experience the learning process, the choice to pursue a master’s degree is driven mainly by the perspective of wanting to improve oneself.”

Language Proficiency

Personal development interests also encompass the improvement of language skills. Ava exemplifies this motivation, stating that her primary purpose for studying abroad was to enhance her language proficiency. She expressed, “I actually hope to speak like a native speaker. I hope my English can improve significantly.”

Diverse Cultural Experiences

The category of diverse cultural experiences includes regional culture and educational culture.

Regional Culture

Most participants expressed a desire to experience different regional cultures. Noah noted that his curiosity about foreign environments, which are different from China, was a key factor driving his decision to study abroad: “I am quite curious and want to see what the environment and culture are like abroad, as people often compare domestic and foreign situations online, so I wanted to see for myself.” Mia reflected on her past travel experiences, explaining that they significantly influenced her cultural interests and motivated her to pursue a master’s degree in the UK: “I have traveled in Europe, and this experience encouraged me to study here (in the UK) because I found that the rich cultural and educational atmosphere could truly stimulate and attract me.”

Educational Culture

The participants were also influenced by educational culture, including teaching methods and the academic environment. Mia highlighted the rich academic atmosphere and diverse learning experiences in the UK, saying, “In an all-English environment, classmates come from various countries around the world, and the exchange and sharing of information provide more aspects to delve into.” Charlotte, who had previously studied in China, hoped to experience different teaching methods and learning environments. She said, “You can visit the UK as a tourist, but going there as a student, especially at a student’s age, is a rare opportunity to study here.” Sophia noted that the academic atmosphere in the UK helped her focus on research, believing that UK universities provide a calm and stable environment. She said, “The overall atmosphere in the UK allows you to settle down and focus on (academic) work.”

Aspirations for career prospects

The category of aspirations for career prospects includes employment opportunities and career development.

Employment Opportunities

The participants also considered future employment prospects when they pursued a master’s degree abroad. Those who chose to continue their education immediately after graduating from university hoped that a master’s degree would provide them with more employment options. For example, Noah said, “I think having a master’s degree would broaden my employment options in the future.” Mia explained her motivation by highlighting the fierce competition in the current labor market and the desire to stand out among bachelor’s degree holders and those educated within the domestic system. She stated, “I just want to get a degree to facilitate my future work and life. Because the competition is very intense now, there may be limitations in job opportunities and further studies, so having a master’s degree would help me.”

Career Development

Participants who had been employed for some time, such as Charlotte and Sophia, viewed pursuing a master’s degree as a way to enhance their qualifications and achieve broader career prospects and professional development. Sophia noted, “I feel that if I want better career development, I need to improve my core competitiveness.” Similarly, James mentioned that acquiring more specialized knowledge was necessary for career advancement to align with his desired career path. He also expressed concerns about degree of depreciation, believing that an undergraduate degree no longer holds the same value as before: “A bachelor’s degree does not mean you can’t find a job, but relatively speaking, it’s at a disadvantage.” Therefore, he hopes to improve his competitiveness in the labor market by obtaining a master’s degree.

Pursuit of a Favorable Social Environment

Participants such as Ava and Sophia valued the safety of the UK, often comparing it to the United States. Ava explained, “I didn’t go to the US because of safety concerns. My family was very worried about my personal safety as a girl going to the US. The UK, by comparison, seemed a bit safer.”

Educational advantages

The category of educational advantages includes high-quality education, high university rankings, flexible entry requirements, and shorter study duration.

High-quality Education. The participants favored the UK because of its diverse academic environment and high-quality faculty. Mia expressed a strong interest in the international and varied perspectives provided by UK universities. She said, “In an all-English environment, classmates come from various countries around the world, and the exchange and sharing of information provide more aspects to delve into.” She also acknowledged the quality of the faculty in the UK, noting that higher education institutions could offer more opportunities to research her topics of interest, “Because my research needs to incorporate some foreign theories, I think it is more suitable to conduct it abroad. In the UK, my advisor will provide me with many suggestions and directions.”

High University Rankings. High university rankings are a significant factor in attracting students. Ava emphasized her high regard for international school rankings, such as the Quacquarelli Symonds World University Rankings (QS rankings), which she believed provide more options because of the number of highly ranked schools. She said, “The UK has many schools that are highly ranked in the QS rankings.” She noted that when comparing the UK with Canada and Australia, “Compared to countries such as Canada and Australia, the UK has more schools.” Noah also expressed a preference for prestigious schools, stating that successfully entering into an overseas university with a higher ranking than domestic ones fulfills part of his desire. He said, “The rankings of graduate schools abroad look better than those at home.” James, Charlotte, and Sophia similarly preferred highly ranked schools and hoped to study institutions with higher rankings.

Flexible Entry Requirements. Flexible entry requirements also influenced participants’ decisions to pursue an international master’s degree. Noah mentioned that the UK tends to offer admission without entrance exams, which alleviated the pressure of taking graduate entrance exams in China. His negative experiences with previous entrance exams deterred him from taking Chinese graduate exams, prompting him to apply to UK universities instead. He explained, “Having experienced the college entrance exam, which is highly competitive and extremely stressful, I couldn’t handle that kind of selection process. I thought studying abroad was a more reliable option.” Mia and James noted that their

experiences obtaining bachelor's degrees abroad or through joint programs made it easier to be admitted to master's programs abroad. James said, "I have a UK bachelor's degree, and applying for a master's degree in the UK with a UK bachelor's degree has its advantages."

Shorter Study Duration. The one-year master's program in the UK is also a factor considered by participants. Noah specifically acknowledged the advantages of the UK's one-year master's program in terms of saving time and costs. He highlighted that the shorter duration of the program allows him to save time compared to his peers for pursuing a degree or joining the workforce: "The UK program only takes one year; then, I can return home to find a job, which means lower time costs." Although Noah was the only participant to mention this factor, he emphasized its significance in his decision-making process.

Influence of Others

The category of the influence of others includes the impact of peers, teachers, family, and intermediary agencies.

Peers. Peers are the most influential group in participants' decisions to pursue a master's degree in the UK. Noah mentioned wanting to stay in sync with his friends or classmates, saying, "I feel like my friends around me are all pursuing master's degrees, which might push me to do the same." Charlotte noted that classmates, especially senior students, influenced her decision, "Many seniors from my undergraduate school went abroad and shared their experiences with us, sparking my initial interest in studying overseas." Sophia attributed her final decision to her friends' experiences and advice, "My close friend came back and shared his experiences. He told me that if I had the idea of studying abroad for a master's degree, I should be determined."

Teachers. With respect to teachers, their influence lies primarily in guiding participants' plans. Mia noted that her teachers strongly recommended pursuing a master's degree: "Most teachers think undergraduate studies are relatively superficial and that spending more time and effort in graduate school to research your areas of interest and projects can help you gain more knowledge. Therefore, teachers often provide many advice and suggestions in this regard." However, Mia was the only participant to mention the influence of teachers; other participants did not refer to the role of teachers in their decisions.

Family. With respect to family, most participants indicated that their parents supported their decision to pursue a master's degree in the UK emotionally and financially. As Mia said, "My family is very supportive of my decision. Whether I pursue a master's degree or not, they support my decision fully, both financially and emotionally." Some parents recognized the importance of a graduate degree and encouraged their children to continue their studies. For example, Sophia

stated, “My parents have always been open-minded and value education highly. When I decided to go abroad, they fully supported my decision.”

Intermediary agencies. The participants also indicated that intermediary agencies played an important role in helping them choose and apply to UK-based schools. Noah mentioned that his study abroad agency influenced his decision: “My study abroad agency suggested that applying to other countries would be more difficult than applying to the UK, as they believed the application process for other countries was more challenging.”

DISCUSSION

This study aims to explore students’ intrinsic and extrinsic motivations in pursuing a master’s degree in the UK, using SDT as a robust framework for analysis. The study revealed that participants were driven by both intrinsic motivations, such as personal development interests and diverse cultural experiences, and extrinsic motivations, such as career prospects, a favorable social environment, educational advantages, and the influence of others, in their decision to pursue a master’s degree in Education in the UK.

Intrinsic Motivation

The participants exhibited intrinsic motivation to pursue a master’s degree in Education in the UK, which was reflected in their interest in personal development and diverse cultural experiences, as supported by multiple studies. Ahmad et al. (2017) investigated students’ motivations for pursuing graduate studies abroad and revealed that students view familiarizing themselves with new cultures as a unique life experience, hoping to live and interact with different people through international study. Similarly, Zhu and Reeves (2019) studied the motivations of Chinese students studying abroad and reported that students regard international masters’ study as a cultural adventure and an opportunity to enhance knowledge and language skills. Yu et al. (2023) reported that the need for personal growth and cultural experiences is widespread and has continued to attract Chinese students over the past 20 years.

According to SDT, intrinsic motivation is highly self-determined, with individuals pursuing activities for inner joy and satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Participants hoped to experience different educational models and learning environments by pursuing a master’s degree in the UK and exploring the differences between Chinese and foreign cultures. This internal desire reflects a high degree of self-determination and autonomy (Ryan & Vansteenkiste, 2023). They anticipated that studying abroad would enhance their academic abilities and comprehensive skills, particularly in adapting to a nonnative language environment, increasing confidence and motivation in new learning and cultural contexts. This prospect of cross-cultural experiences fostered a belief that they could integrate into local social and cultural settings, enhancing their sense of

competence and relatedness (Howard et al., 2021). Therefore, the students' autonomy, competence, and relatedness were, to some extent, fulfilled during the decision-making process, reflecting their inner desires and self-drive, which are manifestations of intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Extrinsic Motivation

Various extrinsic motivations, including aspirations for career prospects, the pursuit of a favorable social environment, educational advantages, and the influence of others, also influenced participants.

With respect to aspirations for career prospects, both recent university graduates and professionals with work experience expressed a desire for the increased employment and career advancement opportunities that an international master's degree can provide. This motivation is influenced primarily by concerns over degree of depreciation in China and intense competition in the labor market, with participants hoping to obtain more valuable qualifications and better job opportunities (Zhai & Cao, 2025). This finding is supported by the research of Guan et al. (2023), who reported that potential Chinese international students are motivated by employment prospects. Students believe that a degree from an international institute is more likely to gain employers' favor in job searches, as it can demonstrate their outstanding work abilities to some extent and increase their chances of securing high-paying jobs (Nghia, 2019). Similarly, Zhai et al. (2019), in their systematic analysis of 68 articles on Chinese students' choice of Australia as a study destination, reported that enhancing degrees through international academic mobility significantly helps students pursue employment and improve their career prospects, making this a critical factor in their decision to study abroad.

The pursuit of a favorable social environment also reflects participants' extrinsic motivation. They chose the UK for its safe and stable social environment, which made them feel secure and confident in their learning environment. These findings align with the research of Zhu and Reeves (2019), who noted that the sense of security in the host country is a crucial factor that potential master's students consider before they make their decision.

In terms of educational advantages, the high reputation and quality of teaching, high rankings, flexible entry requirements, and short study duration reflect the characteristics of the degree of the UK master's degree that drive participants' extrinsic motivations. Multiple studies have confirmed that these factors are significant motivators. For instance, Yu et al. (2023) highlighted students' appreciation for high-quality teaching, lower barriers to entry, and shorter study duration abroad. Students recognized the strong reputation of UK institutions and their academic staff, viewing these factors as enhancing the value of their degrees (Lu et al., 2023). Similarly, Zhu and Reeves (2019) reported that intense competition for higher education in China limits access to suitable programs, motivating students to consider overseas options. Additionally, the one-year master's degree in the UK is prevalent among various study-abroad options (Yu et al., 2023). Compared with three-year master's programs in China

and two-year master's programs in the U.S. or Australia, the UK's shorter study duration not only helps students save significantly on tuition fees but also gives them an age advantage after graduation (Zhu & Reeves, 2019).

Furthermore, the extrinsic motivations for students pursuing a master's degree in education include the influence of peers, family, teachers, and intermediary agencies. Peer influence primarily reflects participants' desire to obtain a similar educational level, while parents, teachers, and intermediaries contribute advice and support. These results align with those of previous studies. For example, Zhu and Yang (2025) reported that parents provide significant support in their children's decisions to pursue education overseas. Zhai and Cao (2025) reported that Chinese students pursuing master's degrees in the UK are driven by peer influence and intermediary agencies. However, it is noteworthy that participants acknowledged only others' influence when specifically prompted, suggesting its relatively minor role in their decision-making (Guan et al., 2023).

SDT indicates that although extrinsic motivation originates externally, individuals can internalize external ideals, values, or behavioral norms and transform them into their own to guide conscious actions (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Ryan & Vansteenkiste, 2023). The extrinsic motivations mentioned above reflect this internalization process through the fulfillment of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

From an autonomous perspective, although students may initially be motivated by external factors, such as employment pressures and educational advantages, these influences are gradually internalized, becoming key motivations for their autonomous decisions (Ryan & Vansteenkiste, 2023). By aligning their pursuit of a master's degree abroad with long-term academic and career goals, students underscore the importance of autonomy in internalizing motivation (Reeve et al., 2022). During this process, family and societal advice may guide early decisions, but as the application process advances, students may develop a genuine interest in studying abroad. This shift represents a crucial aspect of autonomy internalization, where students move from passively accepting external suggestions to actively exploring and solidifying their interests and goals (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In this internalization process, individuals shift from passive decision-making to proactive control, enhancing self-determination within their external motivations (Slemp et al., 2024).

With respect to competence, factors such as the social recognition of a degree and professional reputation suggest that individuals have internalized a sense of competence, reflected in their optimistic expectations for future capabilities (Ryan & Vansteenkiste, 2023). Participants voiced concerns about the competitive job market and aimed to increase their employability and skills by obtaining a high-quality, internationally recognized master's degree, which they believe would help them stand out professionally. Although external pressures, such as employment demands, lie beyond their control, the prospect of high-quality education and a short study duration has bolstered their hopes for career success (Reeve et al., 2022). This positive anticipation has strengthened their motivation to pursue a master's degree abroad (Ryan & Vansteenkiste, 2023). Through internalization, participants can exhibit a stronger sense of intrinsic competence,

transforming these external pressures into self-determined motivation (Slemp et al., 2024).

In terms of relatedness, support from others can satisfy this need to a significant extent. Extrinsic motivations, such as family and friends' expectations, become powerful forces driving decision-making when internalized (Ryan & Deci, 2020). For example, the value families place on higher education is recognized by students and transformed into their pursuit of academic achievement. They strive not only to meet their family's expectations but also to realize the shared values of both themselves and their families (Reeve et al., 2022). Similarly, the influence and encouragement from friends have a comparable effect, making students feel that their decision to pursue a master's degree abroad is not just about meeting external expectations but also about achieving personal values and goals (Ryan & Deci, 2020). By converting external expectations into personal pursuits and goals, students strengthen the intrinsic drive behind their motivations, ultimately making their actions more self-determined (Ryan & Vansteenkiste, 2023).

Limitations of the Study and Future Directions

While this study presents encouraging findings concerning students pursuing master's degrees abroad, several limitations need to be considered. First, the findings are based on a specific group of students, limiting the generalizability of the results to students in other disciplines, institutions, and regions. Therefore, research on the motivations of other postgraduate groups would be beneficial. Second, this study involved only students enrolled in specialized master's degree programs focused on teaching and did not include students in research and professional master's programs. Thus, future research could explore whether the motivations of students pursuing these three types of master's programs differ. Third, this study aimed to capture students' motivations through a cross-sectional approach without considering how these motivations may change over the long term. Future research could conduct longitudinal studies to investigate changes in motivations and basic psychological needs over time.

Implications of the Study

Based on the results of this study, several recommendations are proposed to increase the positivity and proactivity of student motivation in international master's education. First, fostering intrinsic motivation among students is essential (Ryan & Vansteenkiste, 2023). As Ryan and Deci (2020) suggest, intrinsic motivation is not just an individual variable but also a response to the social environment. Both students and educational institutions can adopt various measures to stimulate students' intrinsic motivation for higher academic pursuits in different cultural settings (Cho et al., 2021).

Specifically, students can be encouraged to independently explore and develop their interests and passions through participation in various academic or cultural activities and projects, thereby enhancing their intrinsic drive (Alamri et al., 2020). Simultaneously, educational institutions can enrich their curricula by

deepening and broadening the knowledge offered and cultivating essential skills such as information gathering, problem analysis, and solution development (Mokski et al., 2023). This approach builds on students' existing capabilities, promoting competence and self-driven growth (Ryan & Deci, 2020). To sustain students' interest in diverse cultural experiences, educational institutions can encourage engagement with different cultural styles and characteristics through various extracurricular activities (Bi, 2025; Nikou et al., 2023). These might include visits to culturally significant landmarks or themed discussions on culture with participants from different countries (Ivanova et al., 2025). Such efforts can nurture and maintain their interest in diverse cultures, thereby enhancing their intrinsic motivation (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020).

Furthermore, from the perspective of extrinsic motivation, educational institutions can strive to meet students' basic psychological needs through the content and structural design of their programs (Ryan & Vansteenkiste, 2023). Higher education institutions need to not only develop students' academic knowledge and skills but also enhance their employability (Gutema et al., 2024). By increasing the employment orientation of courses and activities, including introducing more internship opportunities, career development services, and industry-related course content, institutions can help students combine academic knowledge with practical work experience, thereby improving their competitiveness in the job market. Educational institutions can also continuously improve the quality and support of education (Harrison et al., 2022). This includes adopting diverse teaching methods; enhancing resources such as libraries, laboratories, and technical equipment; and providing robust educational support staff (Alamri et al., 2020). Additionally, offering scholarships and financial aid will give students more autonomous choices for academic and skill development (Gutema et al., 2024).

Family, teachers, and intermediary agencies are crucial in students' study-abroad decision-making processes (Zhai & Cao, 2025). Therefore, enhancing the education and guidance provided to these groups is essential so that they can better support and guide students' decisions, thereby increasing their sense of relatedness (Sethi & Scales, 2020). Schools and educational institutions can offer more information resources and counseling services to help parents and students comprehensively understand the pros and cons of studying abroad and the necessary preparations. Through these measures, these influencers can better support students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, promoting their success and development in international education (Raboca & Carbuorean, 2024).

CONCLUSION

Through the lens of SDT, this study explored the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of Chinese students pursuing a master's degree in education in the UK. The findings align with those of previous research, showing that students' motivations include personal development interests, exposure to diverse cultural experiences, career aspirations, the pursuit of a supportive social environment,

educational benefits, and external influences. Among these factors, personal development interests and diverse cultural experiences reflect intrinsic motivations, whereas the others represent extrinsic motivations. The three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness play significant roles in the formation of intrinsic and internalizing extrinsic motivation.

This analysis underscores the significance of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations in students' educational choices and demonstrates the role of psychological needs in shaping motivation. Exploring student motivations prompts a broader discussion on the purposes of higher education. While extrinsic motivations are often instrumental, the internalization process reveals a commitment to self-improvement, suggesting that higher education should prioritize intrinsic growth. This focus not only promotes specialized knowledge but also fosters independence and self-motivation. Achieving this requires educators to create a supportive learning environment that fulfills students' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, fostering essential skills such as academic expertise, adaptability, cross-cultural communication, and employability. These attributes are vital for future societal success. Understanding these motivations enhances educational theory and practice, offering valuable theoretical and practical insights for students' ongoing academic and personal development.

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- ☒ None
- ☐ Some sections, with minimal or no editing
- ☐ Some sections, with extensive editing
- ☐ Entire work, with minimal or no editing
- ☐ Entire work, with extensive editing

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools, including ChatGPT and Grammarly, were used only for language editing and proofreading. They were not used to generate research content, data, analysis, findings, or conclusions. The authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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