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A Quantitative Comparative Analysis of Incoming and Outgoing Students' Perceptions of International Student Mobility

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ABSTRACT: *International student mobility is essential to higher education internationalization, yet comparative quantitative research on incoming and outgoing students remains limited. In this study, motivations and attitudes toward cross-border education were analyzed by comparing 329 international students in China and 303 Chinese outgoing students using questionnaires. Data were examined via reliability and validity tests, mean comparisons, and structural equation modeling (SEM), with acceptable model fit indices. The findings show that incoming students prioritized postgraduate employment and scholarships, whereas outgoing students focused on cultural exploration and personal growth. Incoming students held more optimistic attitudes toward career benefits, policy support, and leadership engagement. Both groups supported peer mentoring but were neutral toward extended language courses and online learning. This study enriches theoretical frameworks and provides practical implications for universities and policy makers to design tailored strategies that improve student satisfaction and support sustainable international mobility.*

Keywords: cultural adjustment, educational experiences, incoming students, international student mobility, outgoing students, social cohesion, student perception

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INTRODUCTION

International student mobility is a core pillar of the internationalization of higher education institutions (HEIs), reflecting the growing significance of international education (Brooks et al., 2024). While HEIs have made efforts to improve international image and academic reputation, the movement of international students has become the key driver of knowledge exchange and institutional development. It not only offers students diverse academic experiences but also improves international awareness, intercultural capabilities, and collaborative opportunities (Guillén-Yparrea & Ramírez-Montoya, 2023).

International student mobility includes a rich variety of activities, such as exchange programs, abroad study programs, and international internships, exposing students to different cultural environments and educational systems (Yang, 2022). All of these activities are important for developing adaptability and cross-cultural communication capabilities for the global work market. Furthermore, this international student mobility helps with cultural and intellectual flourishing for host institutions, supports the flow of ideas and elevates the academic environment as a whole.

Students' expectations, motivations, and perceptions related to international student mobility are complex and multidimensional (Jeno et al., 2022). Although much research focuses on incoming international students' experiences, comparative studies covering both incoming and outgoing students remain scarce. This significant gap in the literature highlights the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the perceptions of incoming and outgoing students to advance international education research (Vidal, E. & Kamp, A. 2025; Ma, 2020; Ammigan et al., 2021).

This study aims to fill this gap through a quantitative comparative analysis of two distinct groups: students who are incoming to China and students who are outgoing from China. By examining their attitudes toward key dimensions, the study seeks to reveal significant differences and similarities in their priorities and expectations.

The research objective is to identify the main motivations behind students' decisions to pursue education overseas (Objective 1) and to gauge students' overall sentiments toward issues related to international student mobility (Objective 2). These objectives are grounded in an established theoretical framework and the previous empirical results, providing a solid foundation for research design and hypothesis formulation.

By adopting a quantitative research approach, this study collected feedback from 329 international students enrolled in China and 303 Chinese students studying abroad. The collected data cover a wide range of perspectives, which is helpful for gaining a deep understanding of views and international education characteristics evaluations through incoming and outgoing students. On the basis of these findings, this study provides a basis for formulating more effective marketing strategies and improving services to meet international students' changing needs.

Comparing the incoming and outgoing students, this study makes three significant contributions. First, it integrates behavioral mechanisms (such as motivation, attitude, and perceived value) into internationalization analysis, connecting higher education research with psychology and organizational behavior. Second, it employs a multigroup quantitative design, distinguishing specific differences among incoming and outgoing students. Finally, it provides practical guidance, targeted communication and support strategies to meet students' psychological needs and decision-making patterns.

Finally, the study contributes to ongoing discussions about international student mobility, providing practical insights for higher education institutions to expand their international influence and improve student satisfaction (Pedro et al., 2024). Through rigorous scientific analysis, this study emphasizes the necessity of integrating educational services to meet the diverse expectations of both incoming and outgoing students, thereby promoting the sustainable development of international education.

Hypotheses

This study has two objectives: (1) to identify key motivations for cross-border education and (2) to assess attitudes toward critical issues in international student mobility. Two hypotheses were tested:

- H₁: The main reasons why students choose to study abroad vary between incoming and outgoing students.
- H₂: The attitudes of incoming students differ from those of outgoing students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International education has evolved into a multidimensional phenomenon, encompassing academic exchanges, interinstitutional partnerships, and cross-border initiatives (PAL & Omolaja, 2024). This expansion, driven by institutional financial needs, talent development, and academic collaboration (Sharipov, 2020; Jacobs, 2022), centers on student mobility—a core component of higher education internationalization. Understanding incoming and outgoing students' perceptions is critical for optimizing institutional strategies. This review synthesizes key scholarship into three themes, identifies gaps, and links the findings to the focus of the present study.

Foundational Frameworks for Student Mobility

Theoretical grounding is strengthened through systematic engagement with three dominant theories: the push-pull model, the theory of planned behavior (TPB), and the student-as-consumer paradigm. Student mobility research is anchored in two pivotal frameworks. The “push and pull” model (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) distinguishes individual drivers (e.g., career aspirations) from contextual allures (e.g., institutional reputation) and is widely applied to both incoming and outgoing students. However, it overlooks nonacademic motivations such as global citizenship—an oversight highlighted by recent studies (Gutema et al., 2024; Wang & Wang, 2022).

The “student-as-consumer” paradigm has reshaped institutional practices, positioning students as active participants rather than passive recipients (Latif et al., 2021; Cress et al., 2023). High-quality services and curriculum relevance now directly influence enrollment (San, 2023; Tyas et al., 2024). However, while Voss et al. (2007) stress the marketing value of service quality, Bortolotto (2021) warns that overcommercialization erodes the intrinsic value of education. Ammigan et al. (2021) note institutions' financial reliance on international students, but Maslen (2020) cautions that this may marginalize domestic groups.

The theory of planned behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1991) further explains student mobility decisions by linking attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control to intention and behavior. This framework is especially valuable for comparing incoming and outgoing students because it captures both rational calculation and social influence. Despite its explanatory power, few studies have explicitly applied the TPB to both incoming and outgoing mobility groups, representing a key theoretical gap addressed by this study.

Institutional support is a consistent priority. Comprehensive career guidance, cultural programs, and language aid enhance retention and academic success (Nasirudeen et al., 2014; Rickmann et al., 2020; Cruwys et al., 2021). Cultural diversity adds complexity: Erdemir & Wu (2023) emphasize that decision makers must tailor support to students' cultural backgrounds, a need reinforced by Bianchi & Martini (2023) in their study of language needs among incoming students.

Perceptual Divergences and Commonalities between Student Groups

Incoming and outgoing students share core mobility benefits—enhanced employability, cross-cultural competence, and academic growth (Avolio & Benzaquen, 2024). Both face challenges: financial constraints, cultural adaptation stress, and academic adjustment (Usher et al., 2022; Astley, 2024). Short-term programs appeal to those seeking language skills (Alexander et al., 2022), while long-term programs foster deeper growth but risk discontinuity (Stephen, 2024).

Critical differences emerge in motivations. Incoming students prioritize institutional reputation and postgraduate opportunities (Bound et al., 2021; Olagunju et al., 2024). Abu-Rumman (2021) reported that incoming Middle Eastern students valued degree recognition over cultural experiences, whereas outgoing peers focused on personal development. Outgoing students also stress academic continuity—Helms (2014) notes that dual-degree programs address this, but they remain inaccessible to many.

Environmental factors shape perceptions differently. Incoming students highly rate physical infrastructure and mental health services (Wilkins et al., 2024; Ismail & Ling, 2025), whereas outgoing students prioritize host institution resources and credit transferability (Shohel et al., 2021). Language barriers uniquely hinder incoming students (Ma, 2020): Adeyeye (2024) links poor proficiency to social exclusion and reduced confidence, even with support (Chen et al., 2023), which can also affect students' sense of belonging in host institutions (Abdalla, 2024).

Contextual Factors Shaping Mobility Decisions

Policy and cost are decisive. Government frameworks—like Australia's 2015–2025 strategy (Wu & Liang, 2017) and Germany's tuition-free policies (Hilgendorf, 2005)—drive mobility flows. Geopolitical shifts disrupt these patterns, as Hou & Du (2020) observed after the pandemic. Cost perceptions defy stereotypes: Sawheny (2023) and Colclough et al. (2017) confirm that living costs, not tuition, are primary barriers. Scholarships are transformative—Khosro et al. (2024) show that they attract incoming students from developing countries, while Agustian et al. (2023) note that fee structures shape institutional competitiveness.

Institutional strategy matters considerably. HEIs that integrate multicultural curricula and staff mobility (Bakay, 2023) improve the experiences of both groups. Staff mobility enhances teaching quality through diverse methods (Rubin & Guth, 2023), but Bagayawa et al. (2024) criticize overemphasis on incoming student recruitment over tailored support. Digital tools offer flexibility (Nkrumah et al., 2023) but risk reducing cross-cultural interaction (Cao & Meng, 2020), a trade-off unevenly felt by mobility groups.

From the above literature review, we find that the key gaps persist. First, most research focuses on single student groups and lacks quantitative comparisons of motivations and attitudes (Gonçalves & Oliveira, 2022). Qualitative work (e.g., Abu-Rumman, 2021) hints at divergence but lacks large-sample validation. Second, “perceptions” are conflated with “experiences,”

ignoring differences between pre-mobility motivations and post-mobility sentiments. Third, studies from 2024–2025 (Bhardwaj et al., 2025) highlight implicit curricula and digital impacts, yet these are absent from comparative analyses. These gaps inform our research. We test two hypotheses: (1) Mobility motivations differ between incoming and outgoing students, and (2) their attitudes toward mobility-related issues diverge. By addressing these issues, this study advances a nuanced understanding of student mobility and informs targeted institutional strategies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a quantitative comparison design to explore international students' perspectives during their enrollment and graduation processes. The research framework is based upon theories of student motivation, satisfaction, and institutional branding, focusing on how factors shape the international landscape of higher education.

Research Design

In higher education, market research is important for understanding international students' expectations. Such a pursuit not only broadens students' horizons and enhances their language skills but also increases their global job market competitiveness. By acknowledging the diverse significance of international education for individual development, career advancement, and societal contributions, HEIs can effectively invest in and enhance their international programs.

The Ministry of Education, along with seven other departments, has emphasized the importance of promoting educational modernization through international cooperation (Ministry of Education, 2020). Opinion highlights the necessity of the educational openness principle, advocated for mutual learning, inclusiveness, and global exchange. This policy direction establishes a more comprehensive, extensive, and proactive educational framework to achieve internationalization.

The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council have formulated a strategic plan to increase the global capacity for talent cultivation and aggregation (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council, 2025). Their “*Outline for the Construction of an Educational Powerhouse (2024–2035)*” emphasizes improving education, guidance, services, and international student management. The plan also calls for a national-funded international study system and mechanism reform, a “Study in China” brand and ability strengthening, and the improvement of students' admission and assessment processes in China. Through encouraging and supporting outstanding talent selection, as well as expanding exchanges between Chinese and foreign youth, these policies implement initiatives, such as international summer schools.

Continuous monitoring and improvement of students' satisfaction with studying abroad is vital for consolidating a school's achievements in the international arena. This study employed a quantitative comparative analysis method to explore the differences in cognition among students who participated in the student exchange program (including incoming students and outgoing students).

The study target population includes international students studying in HEIs from multiple countries. A stratified random sampling technique is used to cover different academic levels, subject areas, and geographical regions. The questionnaire is carefully designed to align with research objectives and a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 5 (very attractive) to 1 (not attractive)) to assess international students' main motivations.

Sampling and Participants

This study employed a quantitative approach to compare the global student mobility concepts of incoming and outgoing international students. The sample included international students studying in China and Chinese students studying abroad, with a focus on ensuring representation across different geographical, educational institution, and cultural backgrounds.

Incoming Students' Demographic Characteristics

The survey included 329 incoming international students from 44 countries. These students were enrolled at 107 universities across China. The countries of origin are diverse, encompassing regions such as Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas. The top five countries of origin for incoming students are Vietnam (174), Nigeria (26), Pakistan (16), Russia (15), and India (14). Each of the other countries, including Angola, Burundi, Cambodia, and others, contributed one respondent. This wide geographical representation enhances the generalizability of the findings.

Institutions of Incoming Students

Incoming students were distributed across 107 universities in China. The most frequently reported institutions include Shenyang Jianzhu University (95 respondents), Jilin University (26), Guangxi University for Nationalities (5), China Pharmaceutical University (4), and East China Normal University (4). Most other universities had only one respondent. Some students attended multiple institutions, but the data reflect their primary institution of study.

Outgoing Student Demographic Characteristics

A total of 303 Chinese students participated in the survey, representing those who had studied abroad. Their destinations spanned 24 countries or regions, with the United States (90 respondents), Germany (64), Japan (28), the United Kingdom (25), and South Korea (23) being the top five. Other countries, such as

Finland, Russia, and Canada, contributed fewer participants. Many students pursue studies in more than one country, but the analysis focuses on their first destination to ensure consistency.

Institutions of Outgoing Students

Outgoing students were enrolled at 113 universities abroad. The top five institutions by number of respondents are Benedictine University (USA, 56), Wismar University (Germany, 38), Kumamoto University (Japan, 18), Darmstadt University of Applied Sciences (Germany, 15), and Transilvania University of Brasov (Romania, 14). Most other universities had only one participant. Some students continued their studies in additional countries, but the first institution was used for data collection.

Data collection procedures

To ensure a representative sample, the study utilized a stratified sampling approach based on country of origin, university type, and academic level. Surveys were distributed through university partnerships, online platforms, and direct outreach. Participation was voluntary, and all the responses were anonymized to protect confidentiality. The final sample size was determined on the basis of statistical power requirements and practical feasibility.

Data were collected via structured questionnaires administered online and in person. To enhance reliability, the responses were cross-validated where possible, and the outliers were carefully reviewed. The sample reflects a broad spectrum of experiences and perspectives, contributing to the robustness of the comparative analysis.

In the analysis of the types of study programs chosen for mobility, incoming students included international students enrolled in Chinese HEIs ($n = 329$) from 44 countries, representing bachelor's (53.8%), master's (30.1%), short-study (14.9%), and doctoral (1.2%) programs. Outgoing students: Chinese students who studied abroad ($n = 303$) in 24 countries/regions, representing master's (46.8%), short-study (42.9%), bachelor's (7.6%), and doctoral (2.6%) programs.

Financial assistance is widely recognized as a critical factor in international education. Its importance is also evident in the present study, which highlights a notable disparity between the financial circumstances of incoming and outgoing students, as depicted in Figure 1.

In this study, self-funding is the primary source of funding for both groups. The proportion of self-funding outgoing students is nearly double that of incoming students, reflecting the strong demand for overseas study among Chinese students. Full scholarships from either host institutions or governments rank second, indicating global efforts to attract international students.

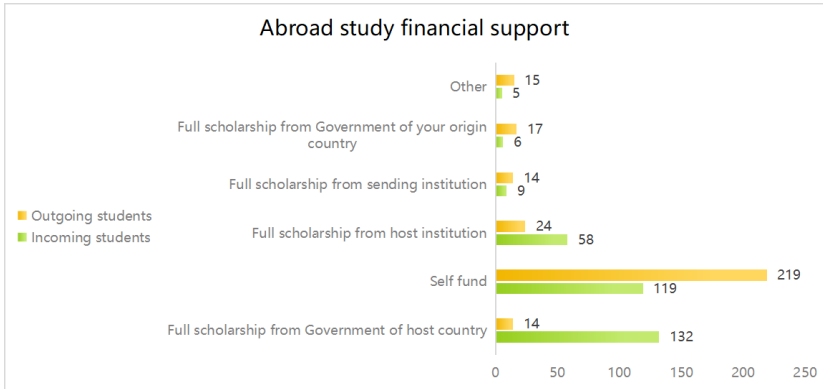


Figure 1. Financial support from abroad for incoming students and outgoing students

Data Analysis Techniques

Structured sampling and statistical procedures ensure data representativeness and reliability. A standardized questionnaire is used to collect the original data on students' perceptions and experiences. The statistical software SPSS was used to analyze these data. Descriptive statistics, mean comparisons, reliability analyses, and validity tests were conducted. In addition, structural equation modeling (SEM) using AMOS was performed to verify the measurement model, test convergent and discriminant validity, and enhance the robustness and credibility of the findings. The overall model fit indices were satisfactory: $\chi^2/df = 2.13$, CFI = 0.941, TLI = 0.928, RMSEA = 0.047, and SRMR = 0.044, confirming acceptable model fit and reliability.

Cronbach's α was used to evaluate internal consistency. The overall Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.915$, indicating excellent reliability. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) revealed four factors consistent with the theoretical framework, explaining 72.36% of the variance. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) confirmed that all the items load strongly on the target constructs (loading > 0.6), and all the AVEs exceed 0.5, supporting convergent validity.

Ethical Considerations

This study involved only questionnaire surveys, did not include experiments or physical interventions, and was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki of 1975. All the participants provided voluntary informed consent, and the responses were anonymized. No sensitive personal or health information was collected, and no risks to participants' rights or welfare were identified.

RESULTS

The results are in line with two research objectives: (1) motivations for studying abroad and (2) attitudes toward international student mobility issues. The reliability, validity, and fitness of the measurement model were further supported by SEM, with satisfactory model fit indices ($\chi^2/df = 2.13$, CFI = 0.941, TLI = 0.928, RMSEA = 0.047), ensuring the robustness of the subsequent comparative analyses.

Comparative Analysis of Motivations

Understanding core motivations is essential for universities and policymakers to improve their attractiveness and support systems. This study identifies significant differences in motivational differences between incoming and outgoing students

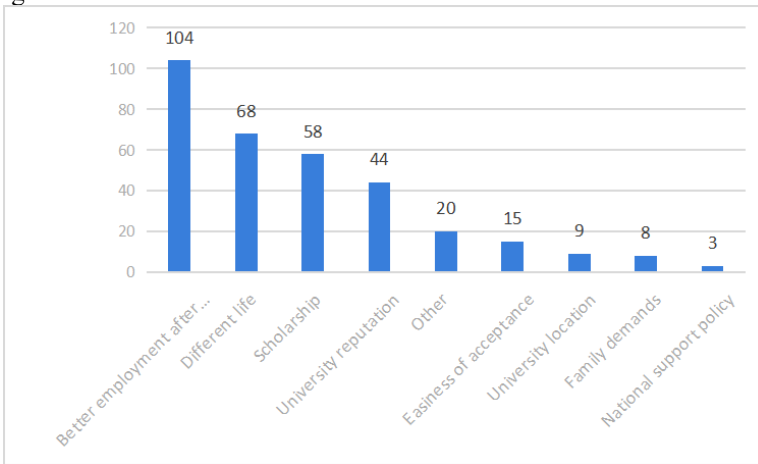


Figure 2: Motivations for studying abroad among incoming students

The main motivational factors mentioned by incoming students studying in China are presented in Figure 2. The strongest motivators are better postgraduate employment, followed by different lifestyles and scholarships. University reputation is also important, while national support policy is the least influential factor.

In contrast, Figure 3 illustrates the motivations of outgoing students leaving China. The top motivation is lifestyle/cultural experience, followed by employment prospects and university reputation. Scholarships and national policies are less emphasized. Notably, family expectations are the least influential factor.

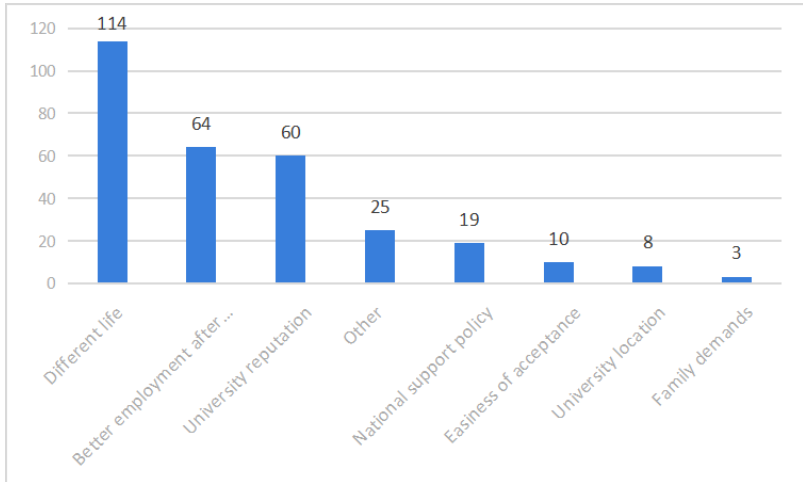


Figure 3: Motivations for studying abroad among outgoing students

Comparative analysis reveals that employment prospects are a shared priority. Both groups value cultural exposure and personal growth. Scholarships are more influential for incoming students, whereas national support policies resonate more with outgoing students. These findings provide empirical support for Hypothesis 1; the motivations for studying abroad differ between incoming and outgoing students.

Attitudinal Comparisons

A 5-point Likert survey (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) was used to measure attitudes toward eight mobility-related issues. A score of 3 indicates neutrality, scores above 4 indicate agreement, and scores below 2 indicate disagreement. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparison of incoming and outgoing students’ attitudes toward international mobility

Questions related to student mobility	Incoming students (Mean)	Outgoing students (Mean)	Total
As long as the university offer scholarship, I will choose it regardless the university is good or not.	3.13	2.74	2.94
University orientation with senior students involved will be better	4.12	4.09	4.11
Language courses full cover every year of the program is better than language courses in the first year	3.86	3.82	3.84

Meeting university leaders at regular intervals will be helpfully to improve learning experience	4.16	3.84	4.01
Abroad study help/will help me to have better employment	4.32	4.04	4.18
Online classes will be indispensable in future abroad study	3.71	3.59	3.65
Abroad study will have spurting growth	4.05	3.77	3.92
The government will take more supportive policies to stimulate abroad study in the future	4.29	3.97	4.13

The survey results reveal significant discrepancies in attitudes between incoming and outgoing students regarding overall sentiments on issues related to international student mobility. These findings are crucial for understanding how different student cohorts assess the value and quality of international education experiences.

Financial Incentives and Institutional Choice

One of the most striking findings is the differing attitudes toward financial incentives. “As long as the university offered a scholarship, I would choose it regardless of whether the university was good or not”, proves that neither incoming students (mean = 3.13) nor outgoing students (mean = 2.74) strongly agreed that they would select a university solely on the basis of the availability of scholarships. This suggests that although financial support is a factor, it is not the primary driver of decision-making among international students. Furthermore, the lower mean score among outgoing students indicates that compared with incoming students, outgoing students pay less attention to financial factors with respect to international student mobility.

University Orientation and Student Engagement

Incoming students demonstrated slightly greater agreement (mean = 4.12) than outgoing students did (mean = 4.09) regarding the involvement of senior students in university orientation programs to enhance the experience (“University orientation with senior students involved will be better”). This small yet consistent difference underscores the potential value of peer mentors in facilitating smoother transitions for new international students. Both groups, however, strongly agreed, indicating that this aspect should be prioritized in institutional strategies to improve student integration and satisfaction.

Language Course Structure and Academic Support

Both incoming (mean = 3.86) and outgoing (mean = 3.82) students displayed neutrality regarding the notion that language courses should extend throughout the entirety of the program rather than just the first year (“Language courses full cover every year of the program is better than language courses in the first year”). This neutrality implies that students may not perceive a clear benefit in extending language instruction beyond the initial phase or that they may find the current language support structures adequate. However, the slight preference for extended language courses among incoming students suggests that institutions might consider tailoring language support to better address the needs of newly arrived students.

Interaction with University Leadership

Incoming students (mean = 4.16) were more likely to agree that regular interaction with university leaders would enhance their learning experience than outgoing students were (mean = 3.84) (“Meeting university leaders at regular intervals will be helpfully to improve learning experience”). These findings emphasize the importance of transparent communication and leadership engagement in fostering trust and a sense of belonging among incoming students. The lower score among outgoing students may reflect a perception that such interactions are less relevant once they have become more integrated into the academic environment.

Employment Prospects and Career Development

A notable disparity was observed in students' beliefs regarding the impact of studying abroad on future employment (“Abroad study help/will help me to have better employment”). Compared with outgoing students, incoming students (mean = 4.32) were more strongly likely to agree that studying abroad would lead to improved employment outcomes (mean = 4.04). This difference may be attributed to the aspirational nature of incoming students, who are often motivated by the promise of enhanced career prospects. Conversely, outgoing students may hold more realistic or cautious views based on their actual experiences, suggesting a need for targeted career development support for those returning home.

Role of Online Learning in Future Study Abroad Experiences

Both incoming (mean = 3.71) and outgoing (mean = 3.59) students did not strongly agree that online classes will be indispensable in future study abroad programs (“Online classes will be indispensable in future abroad studies”). This neutrality reflects a general uncertainty regarding the role of digital learning in international education. However, the slightly higher score among incoming students indicates an increasing openness to hybrid learning models, which institutions should consider integrating into their educational offerings.

Growth Trends in International Student Mobility

Incoming students (mean = 4.05) exhibited more optimistic views about the future growth of international student mobility than outgoing students did (mean = 3.77) (“Abroad study will have spurting growth”). This optimism may be rooted in the expectations and aspirations of incoming students, while outgoing students may have faced challenges or limitations that diminished their confidence in the long-term viability of international education. Institutions should address these concerns through policy advocacy and strategic planning to sustain and expand global student mobility.

Government Policy Support for International Education

Incoming students (mean = 4.29) demonstrated significantly greater agreement that governments will implement more supportive policies for international education than outgoing students (mean = 3.97) (“The government will take more supportive policies to stimulate international study in the future”). This divergence may reflect differing levels of exposure to policy environments, with incoming students being more influenced by promotional materials, whereas outgoing students possess first-hand experience with bureaucratic and regulatory challenges. These findings underscore the need for more transparent and accessible policy information for all students.

Both groups agreed that peer mentoring and career benefits are valuable. Incoming students expressed stronger agreement on leadership engagement and policy optimism. Both groups were neutral toward extended language courses and the future necessity of online learning. These results support Hypothesis 2: attitudes differ between incoming and outgoing students.

DISCUSSION

This study provides an empirical analysis of motivations and perceptions among incoming and outgoing international students in China, revealing the interplay of personal aspirations, institutional support, and policy contexts. A core finding stands out: notable disparities in priority setting between the two groups—outgoing students prioritize cultural experiences, while incoming students rely heavily on scholarship support. These results underscore the inadequacy of one-size-fits-all strategies in international education. The findings offer actionable insights for institutional strategy and policy design and illustrate how behavioral science can inform student support.

Interpretation of Core Findings

Motivational Differences (Research Objective 1)

Incoming students’ strongest motivation is postgraduation employment, which is consistent with Albarico (2024), who identifies labor market prospects as a key choice factor. They also value university reputation and campus life,

emphasizing that academic excellence and holistic experience are pivotal for attracting global talent.

Outgoing students prioritize cultural exploration, reflecting an exploratory, experience-driven orientation toward personal growth (Azram et al., 2024). While career prospects and institutional reputation remain relevant but secondary, which aligns with Prazeres (2017).

Financial and policy factors further distinguish the two groups. Scholarships rank high for incoming students, confirming that cost is a persistent concern (Peng & Dai, 2025); however, national support policies are perceived as weak. In contrast, outgoing students downplay family expectations, indicating increasing individual autonomy.

Attitudinal Variances (Research Objective 2)

Economic incentives elicit lukewarm interest from both groups, with outgoing students showing even lower enthusiasm for scholarships. This gap highlights the need to address outgoing students' financial realities and clarify postgraduate career pathways. Peer mentoring, however, garners strong support from both groups, suggesting that peer systems ease transition.

Neutral attitudes toward language course extension and academic support reveal limited demand for prolonged language training beyond the first year, although incoming students' slight preference for extension suggests that tailored support for new entrants remains beneficial. Incoming students value leadership interaction more strongly than outgoing students do.

Incoming students express greater optimism about career benefits, mobility growth, and policy support. Outgoing students hold more cautious views, which are likely shaped by direct overseas experience (Peng & Dai, 2025). Blended learning gains modest acceptance from both groups, with incoming students being slightly more receptive, indicating a growing demand for digital education flexibility.

Theoretical, Practical, and Policy Implications

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the literature by explicitly integrating and validating three foundational theories: the push-pull model, the theory of planned behavior (TPB), and the student-as-consumer framework. It does not merely mention theories but also demonstrates how motivational and attitudinal patterns align with core theoretical propositions.

This study advances international education research by integrating behavioral science frameworks into mobility research, particularly in alignment with the theory of planned behavior (TPB) and self-determination theory (SDT). Attitudinal differences based on intrinsic motivation and external policy support validate these theories.

This challenges simplistic cross-cultural adaptation models. Outgoing students' reduced optimism reflects dynamic, experience-shaped adaptation requiring context-sensitive theories. A novel contribution lies in its comparative ecosystem view: incoming and outgoing students are interrelated parts of mobility, not separate groups. The diminished role of family expectations in outgoing students' decisions extends the understanding of student autonomy, emphasizing individual agency in policy and practice.

Practical and Policy Implications

For HEIs, targeted strategies are imperative. To attract prospective students, career services should be strengthened, academic programs highlighted, and cultural and lifestyle advantages promoted. For outgoing students, design curricula that integrate cross-cultural experiences and career preparation.

In terms of policy, the findings align with China's educational modernization agenda (Ministry of Education, 2020) and the Outline for Building an Educational Powerhouse (2024–2035). Recommended actions:

1. Enhance policy transparency for grants, visas, and administrations.
2. Prioritize peer mentoring and leadership engagement for incoming students.
3. Provide tailored career guidance for outgoing students.

Notably, incoming students' positive views on academic quality demand sustained investment in course design and faculty development. Moreover, the growing acceptance of blended learning calls for integrating digital platforms into long-term strategic planning to meet evolving student expectations.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has three main limitations, each explicitly linked to theoretical and methodological boundaries. First, the sample is centered on China-related mobility, which may limit its generalizability to other national contexts. Second, self-report survey data are vulnerable to social desirability bias and recall inaccuracies, which may affect precision. Third, while findings align with behavioral theories, the framework focuses on pattern identification rather than rigorous hypothesis testing of models such as the TPB (Ajzen, 1991) or the dual process model (Frankish & Evans, 2009).

Future research may replicate cross-cultural comparisons in other national systems; 2) adopt mixed methods (interviews, longitudinal tracking) to explore psychological mechanisms; conduct theory-driven tests of behavioral hypotheses; and explore the impact of digital tools on cross-cultural adaptation.

CONCLUSION

This study addresses a critical gap in international education research: a quantitative comparative analysis of motivations and perceptions between incoming and outgoing international students in China. It identifies shared

challenges and distinct perceptual patterns, emphasizing that personalized support systems are necessary.

Three core findings emerge from the analysis. First, incoming and outgoing students confront shared hurdles: language barriers, social integration challenges, and academic adjustment pressures. Second, their perceptual frameworks are shaped by distinct contextual factors: incoming students report a more acute sense of cultural disparity, while outgoing students grapple primarily with academic and administrative uncertainties abroad. Third, these differences demand tailored support systems—one-size-fits-all strategies fail to address the unique needs of each group.

This research advances the field in three meaningful ways. It moves beyond siloed analyses of either incoming or outgoing students to present an integrated view of mobility as an interconnected ecosystem. It provides empirically validated insights that bridge behavioral science and international education, grounding theoretical discussions of student motivation in real-world perceptual data. It offers actionable evidence for institutions seeking to enhance their global engagement by centering on student voices. Limitations include sample scope and self-report bias. Future longitudinal and cross-national research will strengthen generalizability.

Ultimately, this study reinforces a pivotal message: supporting international students requires inclusive, responsive approaches that honor the diversity of their backgrounds and aspirations. As international education continues to evolve amid shifting geopolitical and technological landscapes, research that focuses on comparative student perspectives remains essential. Only by recognizing the distinct yet interwoven experiences of incoming and outgoing students can institutions and policymakers create cross-cultural learning environments that are fair, meaningful, and transformative—for every student, regardless of their mobility direction.

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In the preparation of this manuscript, we utilized artificial intelligence (AI) tools for content creation with the following capacity:

- 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

This article incorporates AI-generated content for language editing and proofreading. The use of AI tools complied with ethical standards and guidelines for academic integrity. All academic content, logic, data, and citations were independently verified by the authors to ensure accuracy and academic integrity.

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