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**EFFICIENT MANAGEMENT FOR CAPTIVATING FOREIGN STUDENTS  
IN CHINA'S UNIVERSITIES BASED IN RURAL TOWNS - A CASE  
STUDY OF SICHUAN UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING,  
CHINA**

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**Abstract**

As the backbone of nation states, the quality of education reflects the level of sophistication of workforce and of socio-economic development in a country. In China, the high educational standard coupled with the vibrant economy has attracted a huge pool of experts from every corner of the globe. This pool of experts is today busy reshaping the national face of the country by using advanced managerial strategies and techniques. The rapid educational development is the key force behind the progress in science and the successful creation of a robust socialist economy in China. The Chinese government has gone the extra length to create one of the highest educational standards in the world. As Chinese universities today rank among world-class universities in attracting foreign students, which has lead to a sustained pool of foreign students in learning and understanding of different languages and culture, the transfer of technologies and scientific know-how and the improvement in diplomatic ties. However, even though with the high in flock of foreign students in various Chinese universities most universities are yet to benefit as foreign students are less interested in seeking admission in low ranking/ rural cities universities. This article therefore seek to understand why most foreign students prefer some Chinese universities over another and discuss es how and what is needed to be done by the international students office (ISOs) and Chinese government to help attract and retain foreign students in their various institutions. The analysis is base on the experience of the lead author in the course of serving as Office Assistant in the ISO of Sichuan University of Science and Engineering. Based on the questioner survey, we were able to understand the necessary choice factors that lead foreign students to choice one university over the other. As a consequence, it highlights the issues of low and high intakes of foreign students in different universities across China. The study finally recommended pragmatic solutions for low-intake universities to increase on foreign student population.

**Keywords:** International student office; Chinese government; Chinese university; Foreign Students.

**1. Introduction**

The United States (US) is the choice of destination for many foreign students since the middle of the 20th century, due mainly to the high quality of tertiary education and the hope for a greener pasture after graduation in the country. Although the number of international students in the US

is actually on the decline in recent years, the US is still the host to the highest proportion of the 4.1 million international students in the world (IIE, 2013). While China, on the other hand, is currently the second most popular destination for international students in part due to its long history and exciting culture. China has a long history of supporting international students studying in the country, which started in 1950 and has since grown drastically. The Chinese government seeks to improve the quality of its educational system via academic curricula reforms so as to attract more foreign students. With such, China can also be seen from a more holistic angle that could build deeper understanding of the Chinese perspective on humanity and foster language and other cultural exchanges for further opportunities for future development co-operations.

Even though with increase in the number of China's universities allowed to enroll foreign students, so is the number of foreign students studying in China has increased, however, foreign students are for now largely interested in enrolling in universities in major cities around the country. Statistics shows that some 363 universities in 31 provinces in mainland China received a total of 111,000 students from 169 countries across the globe in 2001 and by 2014 the number rose to 377,000 (according to IIE, 2014). Unfortunately, universities/educational institutions which are located in the rural/smaller cities across of China are yet to gain higher admission of foreign students into their institutions. For instance, statistical data from Sichuan University of Science and Engineering international students office shows that foreign students accepting admission into the university have fallen drastically from 85% in 2011 to about 50% in 2015.

As an international student, doubled as office assistant, the aim here is to determine the reasons for which an overwhelming majority of foreign students choose to study in university in the urban areas despite the fact that the quality of education across the whole of China is standardized. To this end, a tailored questionnaire was developed and distributed among foreign students in various universities in different provinces in across China. The survey sought to determine why students choose some universities over others for study.

In short, the main objective of the study is to sensitize and helpless attractive universities in China to increase foreign student enrollment. The study will abundantly highlight the challenges universities and foreign students face and the alternative solutions measures to captivate more foreign students.

## **2. International Student Office (ISO)**

As the name implies, this office is in charge of working foreign teachers (part-time/full-time) and reading students (partial/full scholarship or self-sponsored) in China's universities. The office deals with management and welfare issues of foreign workers and students in the university. Among its roles is to create conducive environment where foreign nationals can feel at home and safe. The International Student Office (ISO) provides the specific function of support and guidance to international students, staff and guests of the respective universities.

### **2.1 Scholarship Application:**

The ISO is in charge of all scholarships for international students, posting necessary scholarship information on school websites or other media where interested students can use for application, award and admission purposes for study in China. The process starts with advertisement of scholarships, receipt of applications, selection of qualified students, award of scholarships (for

scholarship-sponsored) and offer of admission (for both scholarship-sponsored and self-sponsor). This selection, award and admission process, preferences are given to more qualified or outstanding students.

## **2.2. Visa Application:**

Upon acceptance, the ISO handles visa application issues so that the accepted foreign students or workers are given the permit to study or work in the respective universities or institutions.

## **2.3. Educational Activities:**

Foreign grading of students is quite different from that of the Chinese counterparts. The ISO sets the specifics for grading foreign students. More specifically, for students with classes in English, the office hires tutors with English background and most times draw the exam schedule for foreign students different from that for the Chinese counterparts.

## **2.4. Security:**

Most universities or institutions have at least 10 foreigners with different cultures, traditions, idealism and political views, etc., and it is the responsibility of the ISO to see that these nationals get along well. Therefore, the office often writes regulations, in addition to the laws of China, that govern the behavior of all foreign students and workers. The above summary epitomizes the significance of the ISO for the protection and creation of suitable educational environment for quality performance and experience of foreign students in the course of their stay in China.

## **3. Scholarship Availability**

Scholarship is an award of financial support for further education not required to be repaid. Scholarships are awarded to students who meet specific requirement profiles. The Chinese Government Scholarship (CSC) is a major component of university and college financial fund awarded to developing countries especially in Africa by the Chinese government. While it is meant to help candidates from developing countries further education in China's universities, it in turn fosters better relationship between China to the countries of concern. China is now among the top four destinations for foreign students after the US, Britain and Australia, and has various scholarships for students from different countries. Among the most meaningful scholarships for studies in universities in mainland China include:

### **1. Chinese Government Scholarship:**

This scholarship is considered as the most prestigious scholarship in China. It is awarded by the Chinese government mostly to students from developing countries. The scholarship is meant to foster development cooperation, to strengthen mutual understanding and friendship and to encourage economic, cultural and educational exchange between China and recipient countries. The Chinese government scholarship covers tuition, medical Insurance, learning materials, accommodation, living allowance, one-off settlement subsidy and internal travel allowance. Students awarded with CSC are distributed among various China's universities and research institutes by China's Ministry of Education. The areas of study are varied and diverse, including science, technology, agriculture, medicine, economics, law, management, education, history, liberal arts, philosophy, etc.

**2. Chinese Local Government Scholarship:**

Recently, most Chinese local governments have created Chinese Local Government Scholarship (full or partial) to attract more foreign students in various provinces and cities in China. This scholarship caters largely for post-graduate studies. Among the most common provincial scholarships are Beijing government scholarship, Shanghai government scholarship, Jilin government scholarship, Sichuan government scholarship, Nanjing government scholarship, etc.

**3. Confucius Institute Scholarship Program:**

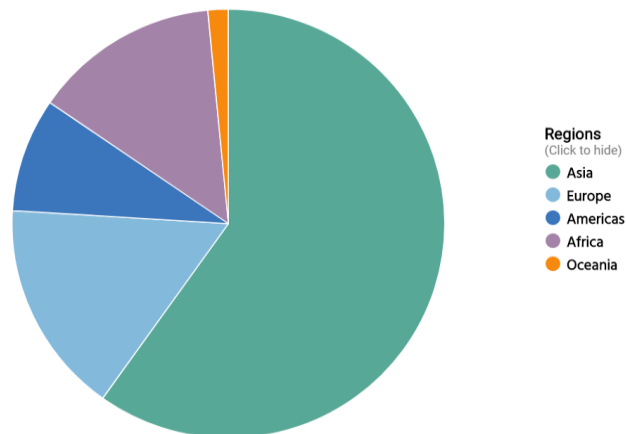
The Confucius Institute Program started in 2004 and is overseen by Hanban, the Confucius Institute affiliate with local colleges and universities around the world. It is meant to promote Chinese language and culture and to facilitate cultural exchange by sponsoring and awarding foreign students, scholars and Chinese language teachers scholarships to study Chinese in over 100 Chinese universities. The scholarship is specifically designed to encourage scholars around the world to study or research on Chinese language and culture.

**4. Chinese University Scholarship:**

After a series of bilateral education cooperation programs and the launching of "Study in China Project" in 2010 (that was meant to attract 500,000 foreign students by end of 2020), many outstanding Chinese universities and colleges worked out their own scholarship schemes to attract, recruit and maintain excellent foreign students, scholars and instructors. Chinese universities scholarship encourages foreign students' dedication to studies as it is only awarded to scholars with good academic performance post-graduate studies.

**4. Foreign Student's Demography in China**

Demography is the growth, structure and movement of population. The strong socio-economic growth and fast city modernization are among the factors influencing student choice study in China. Also the type of scholarship awarded can determine the universities in which foreign students study in China. Students also take into consideration the cost of living in various Chinese cities when deciding which university to choose for studies in China. Students are as well influenced by pieces of advice from friends and family members, and by perceptions of the students on the provinces, cities and institutions to study. In 2013, the Institute of International Education recorded over 350,000 foreign students from 200 countries in 31 provinces who were studying in 746 universities in mainland China. Based on CSC (2013), the top ten provinces, autonomous regions or municipalities with the highest number of foreign students are Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Guangdong, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Liaoning, Shandong, Hubei and Fujian. Also universities in Heilongjiang and Guangxi provinces will have over 10,000 foreign students in the near future due to strong socio-economic development according to a publication made by (CSC, 2013).



Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs (China)

There is a rising trend in the number of students applying and recommending to associates universities in the two provinces for scholarships and studies. And according to the China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) the total number of international students applying for higher-education degrees in China has grew up to 13 percent over the past 10 years and is expected to grow within the coming years. Looking at the intake of foreign students in Chinese universities about 50 percent of international students come from China neighboring countries, such as South Korea, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and Russia etc and students from South Korea account for almost 16 percent of all foreign students studying in China in 2016. As more and more students are seeking admission in Chinese universities, these students are divided by their length of study in the country (Short-term foreign students remain in China with a visa valid for six months or less, whiles Long-term students are enrolled in programs lasting longer than six months).

Even though most foreign students in China are pursuing degree in Chinese culture and language, however there have been an increasing amount of foreign students seeking non-Chinese language degree in Chinese universities such as degree in education, science, engineering, and agriculture. Director of the MOE's Department of International Cooperation and Exchange Xu Tao outlined that medicine, engineering, economics and management etc are some of the most popular non-language degrees pursued by international students in China at recent. And for the demography of foreign students in China, half of all foreign students choose to pursue their studies in institutions base in Beijing, Shanghai or other bigger cities.

### 5. Foreign Student Captivation Problems

Despite the numerous scholarship schemes set up by the Chinese government and other Chinese educational institutes to sponsor and finance international students and scholars to study or work in China, most universities or institutions still continue to struggle with to how to attract and hold-on foreign scholars. Some of the issues the ISO often deal with in this regard are as listed below:

**5.1. Location and Standard of Institution:**

One of the main factors limiting the capacity of ISO to attract and maintain foreign students/scholars is the location and ranking of the institution in the list of the standard of services (education) offered. Foreign students are more likely to attend educational institutions in big cities because small cities are associated with less opportunities and socio-economic development. Also the ranking of the institution is critical in the choices scholars make for studies or teaching. Therefore while high-ranking universities in big cities have problem with excess admission, low-ranking ones in small cities find it hard to enroll sufficient number of students.

**5.2. Available Scholarship Opportunity:**

Most foreign students, especially those from third-world countries, seek for scholarship opportunities for further studies. Universities with more scholarships opportunities therefore attract more students and thus more popular with foreign students. For example, Sichuan University of Science and Engineering finds it hard to attract sufficient number of foreign students because it has limited scholarship opportunities for foreign students. It only awards the Sichuan Provincial Scholarship and the University Scholarship to foreign students. The provincial scholarship are advertised in the hope to capture the interest of foreign students, but end up have few because both the provincial and university scholarships are not full scholarship. The scholarships only cover stipend for insurance, living and basic educational materials.

**5.3. Security:**

Security is not much a problem across most of China, except for natural disasters such as earthquakes, wind/rain storms (including flooding, landslide, etc.) and heatwaves. Sichuan for earthquake and south China for floods could be a repellent to foreign students and scholars. Otherwise, China is one of the most peaceful and secured countries in the world. However, foreign students of first sight of China may be skeptical and therefore elect to choose universities in big cities.

**5.4. Management And Experience:**

Management is the administration of an organization, be it business, non-profitable or educational organization. It is about making decisions on what resources (including personnel and equipment) are available and used to accomplish organizational goals. Chinese universities are in the very early stages of admission of foreign students, meaning that ISOs are hugely inexperienced in dealing with foreign students. However, with proper management, ISOs can easily organize academic and social activities for foreign students, different from those for local Chinese students. This could include taught courses, grading/examination system and academic-driven administration that best fits foreign students. Therefore recruitment of (Chinese) scholars with international experience is what Chinese universities need to attract foreign students. Old foreign students with complete knowledge of Chinese language and culture could be critical in improving the enrollment of foreign students/scholars in low-ranking universities in small cities in China.

**5.5. Dormitory Facilities:**

Another factor foreign students take into account when applying for scholarship is living conditions. Students are more attracted to universities with sound living conditions. Although China is a huge country with varieties of delicious food, foreign students still miss the local foods in the countries of origin. Thus universities with provisions for preparing various foods native to the countries of the foreign students can attract more enrollment. Alternatively, universities should provide the facilities for foreign students to prepare their own local foods in their dormitories. Dormitory for international students symbolize home the students, and it is therefore reasonable to adequate facilities to make the food they like and can afford.

### **6. Foreign student Captivation Solutions**

Despite the numerous scholarship schemes for foreign students, the ISO must critically look into the above factors limiting the captivation of students in order to maintain or even increase enrollment. Thus the solutions suggested below could be critical for increasing the number of foreign students and scholars in institutions of higher education across China. Low-ranking universities/institutions in small cities should work hand-in-hand with their local governments for more publicity to captivate not only foreigners, but also the locals for visitations. For instance, Sichuan University of Science and Engineering, alongside with Zigong Local Government, can promote the city for its dinosaur history, salt factory and annual lantern festival in order to increase visitation. Also both the university and the local government can increase and enrich scholarship opportunities to attract more foreign students.

University can make more travels at the end of every semester as foreign students appreciate such travels around China, especially under the supervision of the ISO which enables students to learn more about the Chinese culture and people. Most foreign students lack the budget it takes to travel around China, especially those on partial scholarships, and therefore largely depend on the university for travels. This will boost the popularity of the university among international students.

Furthermore, it is necessary that the ISO creates frequent on-campus activities where both foreign and Chinese students can interact for mutual learn about the different cultures and peoples. This will have future benefits like fostering international relations between China and other countries. Finally, the ISO can introduce university-promoted work programs for foreign students. Generally, foreign students are not allowed to work in China due to visa limitations. With university-promoted work programs, foreign students can make more money to offset areas not meant by awarded scholarships and also sharpen work skills, which will go to erase any bored and prevent students from feeling home-sick.

### **7. Materials and Methods**

This study set out to analyze the issue on how International Students Office (ISO) can captivate (attract and maintain) sufficient number of foreign students and scholars in the institutions of higher education across smaller cities in China. In addressing this issue, the study determined the various important factors foreign students and scholars take into account when making decisions on which institutions to choose for studies or work in China. The study also examined the

functions and roles of ISO in China’s universities regarding the captivation of foreign students and scholars.

The qualitative method was used to collect data from 50 foreign students in 10 different universities across China, with at least one university each from a provincial-level administrative region. Interviews were conducted through Skype and Wechat (an internet-based phone and video communication medium app), talking directly the selected foreign students about the problems faced and perspectives on the good and bad sides of studying in China’s institutions. This was followed up by sending out questionnaires to the foreign students in the various universities. The questionnaire was designed to solicit information on the factors that influenced the decision of foreign students to seek admissions in each particular university in China. The mode in which the interviews were conducted provided the level of anonymity needed to feel safe to express candid opinions on issues asked in the questionnaire. Thus the factors discussed were the truest thoughts of foreign students in China.

The response rate of the questionnaires was about 90%. The questionnaires used a simple “Yes/No, and Agree/Disagree” responses to determine the factors that attract foreign students considered in studying in China’s universities.

Table. 1. Main issues considered by foreign students to study in China’s universities

Facility	Student number	Degree fraction	Percent
Location and ranking	17	$17/41 \times 360^\circ = 150^\circ$	$17/41 \times 100\% = 42\%$
Scholarship type	10	$10/41 \times 360^\circ = 88^\circ$	$10/41 \times 100\% = 25\%$
Dormitory facility	09	$9/41 \times 360^\circ = 79^\circ$	$9/41 \times 100\% = 22\%$
International students office	05	$5/41 \times 360^\circ = 44^\circ$	$5/41 \times 100\% = 13\%$
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>360°</b>	<b>100%</b>

## 8. Results and Analyses

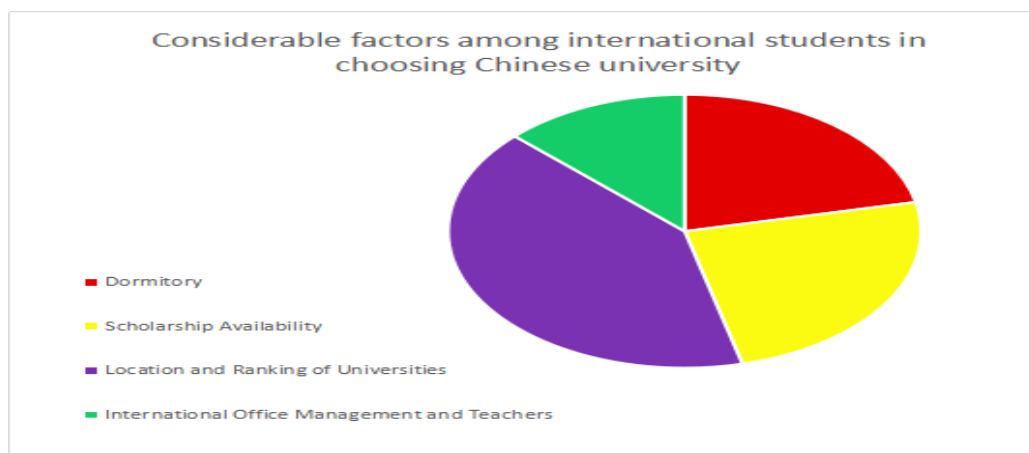


Figure. 1. A Pie chart showing the main and minor factors foreign students consider when taking decisions to study in China’s universities.



- A. **Location and Ranking of Universities:** The survey shows that about 42% of foreign students prioritize the location and ranking of university when choosing or applying to study in Chinese university. This is so because students consider the availability of job opportunities upon graduation as most companies are in habit of hiring graduate from renown universities. From the survey above, one can agree that, if companies can increase/hire more outstanding graduates from local universities then these local universities no matter their location or rankings will start receiving high intake of foreign students.
- B. **Scholarships Availability:** One thing for certain is that the availability of scholarships opportunities in any universities serves as a magnet in attracting students. Most foreign students are from a poor background and are solely dependent on scholarship to help them further their studies, therefore, the availability of scholarship in Chinese universities ranks second in the survey with about 25%, as the more scholarships offered in a region/university increase the chance of gaining an overwhelming number of foreign students.
- C. **Dormitory:** This simply symbolizes home to all foreign students, the survey showed that about 22% of the participant thinks that the living condition for foreign student is one factor that influences students' decision to choose or to continue studying in a specific university. Therefore, another significant role of ISO especially in China's rural cities is to provide a better and conducive living environment for their foreign students.
- D. **International Office Management And Teachers:** According to the questioner survey only about 13% of the students see this as a critical issue. According to most participants, they claimed that most of the teachers and ISO workers have little or no experience when dealing with foreign students. It is vital that the ISO workers have some kind of training especially in dealing with foreign students and workers and above all have a good administrative system and high-caliber teachers (English speaking) will help to capture and maintain foreign students in their respective educational institutions.

## **9. Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **9.1. Conclusions:**

In conclusion, China has had a significant progress in its educational sector, which has lead to the recognition of some of its universities and/or institutions as prestigious comparable to the very institutions of the US. There is a marked increase in the number of foreign students in the various universities across China. As admission ledgers of China's universities and/or institutions show increasing enrollment of foreign students, the country is stepping up the provision of learning materials, conducive infrastructure and iron-clad security to make foreign students feel safe. However, not every institution has yet benefited from in-flock of foreign students in China's institutions. Educational institutions in small cities or with low rankings are yet to fully benefit from the share of what foreign students bring to and take from China. The findings in the study can be used by China's universities to improve their management system in order to attract more foreign students. The paper pointed out the issues faced by ISO and but went on to suggest solution, which could lead to a more even enrollment of foreign students in the myriad universities across China.

### **9.2. Recommendation:**

The study could help increase awareness especially to those Chinese universities that are located in smaller cities on how to attract and to maintain foreign students in their respective educational institutions across China.

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