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The Dynamics of Talent Drain in China: A Study on Eastern Chinese University Students' Study Abroad Intentions

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Abstract

Since the reform and opening-up policy, the intentions of university students in Eastern China to study abroad have become increasingly intense, diverse, and complex. With the changing landscape of study abroad intentions among university students, strategies at various levels have also evolved accordingly. In contemporary times, government, universities, intermediaries, and families should collaborate on macro-guidance, promotional guidance, assistance, and rational education to help university students develop a correct perspective on studying abroad. This paper further analyzes the phenomenon of talent drain in China and provides reasonable solutions based on this foundation.

Keywords: University students, Study abroad intentions, Talent drain, Solutions.

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1. Introduction

In the late 1980s, the reform and opening-up policy awakened the awareness of Chinese university students about studying abroad. As the reform progressed, the phenomenon of university students studying abroad gradually entered a heated state. While university students' study abroad intentions exhibit strong subjectivity, various objective factors, such as government policies, universities, intermediaries, and families, also play a significant role in guiding these intentions. At different historical stages, not only have university students' study abroad intentions undergone changes, but the strategies to guide them have also evolved accordingly. Different guidance strategies are required for different periods of study abroad phenomena, problems, and diverse intentions. In the contemporary era, the government, universities, intermediaries, and families in Eastern China should consider the characteristics and issues of the present while building upon the development of guidance strategies at different stages.

2. Characteristics of Changes in Study Abroad Intentions

This study primarily focuses on universities in Eastern China and examines the changes in study abroad intentions among contemporary university students in the region. Eastern China has consistently held a leading position in education nationwide. Since the reform and opening-up policy, Eastern China has been a key province for development and open policies, witnessing significant economic and educational growth. With the improvement in living standards, the region has early exposure to foreign influences. Studying abroad, initially reserved for the elite, gradually became a viable path for ordinary university students in Eastern China. During the early stages of the reform and opening-up, university students in this region were sensitive to studying abroad. Coupled with favorable economic conditions, self-funded study abroad became a common phenomenon starting from the 1990s. Today, study abroad intentions among university students are characterized by strong desires, diverse demands, and complex intentions. Due to high value judgments placed on studying abroad, idealistic aspirations, herd mentality, and significant domestic employment pressures, an increasing number of university students in Eastern China are setting studying abroad as their next academic goal. While the study abroad trend has exposed numerous issues, people are gradually returning to rationality and addressing the complexities of study abroad intentions while exploring appropriate strategies.

3. Changes in Guidance Strategies for University Students

As university students' study abroad intentions change, the attitudes of the government, universities, intermediaries, and families, as well as the guidance strategies to address the issues arising from study abroad intentions, have also evolved.

The First Stage: During the initial stages of the reform and opening-up, the government encouraged university students to study abroad to cultivate talents and accelerate national development. Various policies were introduced to support students studying abroad, with some being sent abroad on scholarships. However, from the late 1980s, as the number of students studying abroad increased, the government's policy shifted towards "dispatch as needed, ensure quality, and align learning and application." During this period, universities actively cooperated with the government to select and send outstanding talents abroad. Families with financial means found ways to support their children's self-funded study abroad, and this became a point of pride.

The Second Stage: In the 1990s, as China's reform and opening-up continued to deepen and the national economy grew rapidly, studying abroad became a trend, and more students were attracted to foreign countries with higher economic standards and better living conditions. National study abroad policies also evolved to align with the changing intentions of university students. In 1992, Deng Xiaoping encouraged students studying abroad to return and contribute to their country. In 1993, a policy supporting study abroad, encouraging return, and allowing free movement was introduced. Many universities also adopted cooperative programs with foreign universities, such as "3+2" or "4+1," to help students acquire more knowledge and enhance the quality of education.

The Third Stage: In the 21st century, China's study abroad landscape became more diverse, with students going abroad

for various purposes. This period saw the emergence of a more complex and problematic study abroad environment. At the government level, there was a shift towards encouraging overseas students to return and contribute to the country. Initiatives like the "Yangtze River Scholars Award Program" and the "New Century Excellent Talents Support Program" were introduced, providing support for returnees' entrepreneurship. The government not only made efforts to attract talent but also implemented stability measures. The government also improved talent evaluation systems to ensure quality. During this stage, study abroad intermediaries proliferated, and some unscrupulous agencies exploited students, harming their interests. In response, the government increased oversight of study abroad intermediaries. Universities began to focus on guiding students studying abroad while families, after initially valuing study abroad as an achievement, started to help their children make more rational choices.

4. Analysis of Strategies to Address Changes in Study Abroad Intentions

In the process of examining the changes in study abroad intentions among Eastern Chinese university students, it is evident that the attitudes of the government, universities, intermediaries, and families have been evolving. From the initial stages of study abroad intentions to the present, where intentions have become diverse and complex, a return to rationality is noticeable, with a focus on maximizing the role of each stakeholder.

Government - Macro-Guidance: The government plays a key role in policy formulation and supervision. Over the years, government policies regarding university students studying abroad have adapted to changing circumstances. The policies have shifted from encouraging students to study abroad to prioritizing the return of talent and talent retention. In the contemporary context, government policies should focus on the quality of overseas talent cultivation and improve talent evaluation systems. Regulations and oversight of educational institutions and intermediaries involved in talent cultivation should be enhanced at the regional level to align with national policies and address the specific realities of Eastern China.

Universities - Promotional Guidance: Universities are essential in shaping the atmosphere and educational guidance for study abroad intentions. University education has a significant influence on the formation of study abroad intentions among students. Educational institutions in Eastern China, including prestigious universities like "985" and "211" institutions, have contributed to the diversification of study abroad intentions. As an extension of university education, studying abroad enhances the quality of talent development. In the era of economic globalization, universities should integrate their talent development plans with strategies for cultivating overseas talent. Cooperation with foreign universities and promoting international educational exchanges should be emphasized. Universities have a responsibility to guide students towards rational and healthy study abroad intentions through education and promotion.

Intermediaries - Assistance and Support: Study abroad intermediaries have emerged with the rise of self-funded study abroad. According to statistics from the Ministry of Education, in 2012, there were a total of 395,000 Chinese studying abroad, with 368,400 being self-funded, and 87.5% of self-funded students chose to use intermediary services. Intermediaries should function as non-profit organizations assisting students in navigating the study abroad process. However, there is a multitude of intermediaries in Eastern China, and many are profit-driven, resulting in inconsistent

service quality. Some intermediaries have misled students by suggesting that sufficient funds can guarantee successful study abroad. Proper regulation and oversight of intermediaries are crucial. Uniform qualifications and service standards should be established to ensure that intermediaries provide reliable services.

Families - Rational Education: Families are the primary source of support for university students pursuing self-funded study abroad. Whether a student can study abroad often depends on both financial and emotional support from their family. The formation of study abroad intentions is influenced by family values and discussions. In Eastern China, where many families have favorable economic conditions, there has been a tendency to engage in comparison among parents regarding their children's achievements. Since the reform and opening-up, self-funded study abroad has become more common, and many families take pride in sending their children abroad. Some students choose to study abroad due to their parents' expectations, with the hope of working and living in the host country. However, as economic conditions improve, society is gradually returning to rationality in its approach to study abroad, and parents are becoming more reasonable. This rationality should be incorporated into family education, fostering a positive and healthy study abroad attitude among contemporary university students. Besides the support from family, the students themselves can also seek support from overseas for a fully funded experience. For example, even if you are first-generation student with a background of poverty ^[1], you still have chances to go to top institutions in developed countries with a strong academic publishing record ^{[2][3][4][5][6][7][8][9][10][11][12][13][14][15][16]}.

5. Study Abroad and Talent Drain in China

Since the initiation of the reform and opening-up policy in China, the country has witnessed a massive wave of students studying abroad and a strong desire among these students to return to their homeland upon completion of their education. Simultaneously, China has become an increasingly popular destination for international students seeking education and opportunities. However, beneath these developments lies a pressing issue – a talent "deficit." As of the end of 2012, China had sent a total of 2.64 million students to study abroad, but only 1.09 million had returned to the country. This substantial gap of over 1.5 million represents a significant talent "deficit" resulting from the outflow of students. The trend of Chinese students studying abroad shows no signs of slowing down, with annual numbers increasing consistently.

In recent years, China has seen a surge in the number of students returning from overseas education. In 2008, only 69,300 students returned to China, but by 2012, this number had dramatically risen to 272,900. However, analysts caution against equating quantity with quality. Many of these returnees are individuals who pursued education abroad with family financial support and may not necessarily possess specialized skills or talents. High-end talent with notable expertise or patents gained abroad remains a minority among returnees. The brain drain, especially in fields like science and engineering, continues to be a concern. Statistics indicate that the average retention rate in these areas stands at a mere 87%.

It is important to note that while the number of returnees has increased, China still faces a persistent "talent deficit" issue. The gap between the number of students studying abroad and those returning remains significant. Moreover, China's

talent loss primarily benefits other countries, particularly developed nations, who gain from the contributions of highly educated individuals trained in China.

Despite the efforts of the Chinese government, which has implemented initiatives such as the "Thousand Talents Program" and established entrepreneurship hubs for returning students, challenges persist in retaining and attracting high-end talent. Experts have identified several key areas of concern. **Material Focus:** Many of China's talent retention efforts have centered on providing financial incentives and housing to returnees. While these material conditions are essential, they often overshadow improvements needed in entrepreneurial environments and research systems. **Missed Opportunities:** China's efforts to attract talent from overseas have not been fully optimized. The focus has primarily been on material conditions rather than creating an ideal ecosystem for high-achieving individuals to thrive. **Global Competition:** Developed nations have inherent advantages in talent retention due to well-established research ecosystems, and they continue to attract global talent. China must actively compete to keep pace.

Addressing the talent drain and transforming China into a talent magnet requires a multifaceted approach. **Creating an Ideal Environment:** China should improve its business and research environments to attract and retain top talent. This includes addressing issues like intellectual property protection, innovation support, and providing a conducive environment for entrepreneurship. **Fostering Innovation:** Encouraging innovation and knowledge creation should be at the forefront of China's economic model. This will not only attract talent but also nurture homegrown expertise. **Leveraging Government Initiatives:** While the "Thousand Talents Program" and similar initiatives have been effective to some extent, continuous improvements and adaptations are necessary. Government programs should align better with the evolving needs of the global talent pool. **International Collaboration:** Collaboration with international educational institutions, research centers, and enterprises can help China tap into a wider pool of talent. **Economic Sustainability:** Ensuring sustained economic growth will create an attractive environment for both domestic and international talent.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, guiding the study abroad intentions of contemporary university students in Eastern China towards positive and healthy development requires the coordinated efforts of the government, universities, intermediaries, and families. Each stakeholder must play their respective roles and collaborate at different levels to help university students establish a correct perspective on studying abroad. The challenge of talent drain is complex, and a one-size-fits-all solution is not sufficient. By improving the environment for innovation, fostering international collaboration, and continually adapting government initiatives, China can work toward becoming a global hub for talent and innovation. This transformation is essential for the country to thrive in the knowledge-driven economy of the 21st century.

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