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Research Article

Research of Competitive Pressure on Undergraduates' Intention to Study Abroad in Chinese Non-elite Universities

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With the development of the Chinese economy, it is difficult to find an ideal job after graduating from undergraduate studies, and more and more students are choosing to take the postgraduate entrance examination. Due to the limited academic resources of non-elite universities, many students encounter relatively more difficulties during the postgraduate entrance examination process. China is the world's largest exporter of international students, and hundreds of thousands of Chinese students choose to study abroad every year. At the same time, there are also fierce marketing challenges for study abroad agents and overseas universities serving Chinese students. In the context of the increasing competitive pressure on Chinese college students, this study conducted an empirical study on the intention of students from non-well-known universities in China. A total of 345 questionnaires were collected from 17 non-elite universities in 4 Chinese provinces, and the results showed that social influence, innovativeness, perceived risk, and competitive pressure have significant effects on the intention to study abroad. Innovativeness positively moderates the relationship between competitive pressure and students' intention to study abroad. The results of the study not only provide practical advice for university students considering studying abroad but also detailed marketing recommendations for study abroad agents and overseas universities.

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Introduction

In 2023, China's Ministry of Education officially announced: The number of applicants for the 2023 China Master's Admission Examination will be 4.74 million. Not surprisingly, the number of postgraduate applicants in 2023 continues to show an upward trend, with 170,000 more applicants in China in 2023 compared to 2022, a year-on-year increase of 3.7%. At a time when the difficulty of the postgraduate entrance examination in China is rising, more and more students

choose to take the postgraduate entrance examination and study abroad at the same time to prepare for both. On the one hand, it guarantees further education, and on the other hand, it can also help face the postgraduate entrance examination with a better attitude.

There are many benefits to studying abroad for a master's degree. First of all, you can broaden your horizons and increase your knowledge. Studying abroad is the most direct way to get in touch with foreign customs, cultures, and traditions, and to learn international knowledge. By studying abroad, young Chinese people will definitely be able to gain a lot of

different experiences and really open their eyes. Going abroad means more and better job opportunities. With the increasing number of undergraduate graduates in China, it is easier to find a job when you go abroad to study for a master's degree and then return to China. Especially in private or foreign companies, the competitiveness of returnees is much higher than that of domestic graduate students. Studying abroad will help young Chinese learn to be more independent. They have to rent their own houses and cook their own food. Unlike when they were back home, where their mom and dad guaranteed their life. Therefore, during the study abroad period, life experience can cultivate the independence of Chinese young people, whether it is a good opportunity for international students to exercise their life skills, financial management skills, or communication skills. Language learning is very dependent on the environment, and I can exercise my foreign language potential well in my living environment in a foreign language, and after studying abroad for a period of time, my English potential will have a good room for improvement. Many countries now offer work visas to overseas students after graduation. Many people believe that if they work overseas for a few years and then return to China to find a job, they will be more competitive.

Chinese students can apply to universities in multiple countries at the same time, including the world's top universities. The 2023 QS World University Rankings are the largest ever, with a total of 1,418 universities in 100 countries and regions, and 71 universities in China (mainland), which means that if you look at the global goals, there are still 1,347 of the more than 1,400 excellent universities in the world distributed around the world.

In the QS World University Rankings Top 200 list, there are 8 Chinese universities on the list, including Peking University, Tsinghua University, Fudan University, Zhejiang University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and the remaining 192 high-quality universities are located around the world, including the United States, the United Kingdom, France, South Korea, Japan, and other European countries. These areas are also popular places for Chinese students to study abroad because they have abundant higher education resources, teachers with a high level of scientific research, and students can receive a higher quality education. In mainstream study abroad countries and regions, such as the United Kingdom and Hong Kong, taught master's degrees are generally one-year programs. In recent years, most master's programs in the United States are considered employment-oriented, and it takes about 1-2 years to

obtain a master's degree. It takes at least 7 years for Chinese college students to start from undergraduate to graduate school.

It can be seen from the above that overseas graduate studies can not only obtain the same master's degree but also shorten the time by 1-2 years compared with China. Studying abroad not only allows you to complete a master's degree in a relatively short period of time but also has an advantage over studying in China in terms of the improvement of the overall strength of the teaching and living environment of all foreign languages. Most overseas experiences will be certified as extra points when applying for jobs. If you pay a little attention to job search websites, you will find that many foreign companies and overseas business positions require candidates to have overseas study experience, and usually, the salary for these positions is higher than the market average.

The most valuable thing about studying abroad is that it can bring a broader experience and vision, which is an intangible gain and personal improvement. On an international campus, students can experience the local customs and traditions up close, meet classmates or teachers from different nationalities and regions, and feel the cultural diversity and internationalization. These experiences of living, studying, and researching abroad will benefit people for a lifetime in the future, and they are also shining points on the resume when applying for jobs.

Literature review

In order to help American students better integrate into local life, Petersen et al. (2011) created a psychometric table and added some innovative measurement factors. Zhuang et al. (2015) investigated control, behavior, and subject beliefs affecting value in study abroad intentions. Petersdotter et al. (2017) indicate that studying abroad can improve the ability of self-efficacy. Varela (2017) found that two characteristics of a study abroad program – immersion and program content – can reduce the effectiveness of studying abroad. Cardwell (2020) identified that confidence and maturity, as well as a deeper understanding of the subject and breakthroughs in academic patterns, contribute to higher academic achievement among international students. Giorgio (2021) found that those who participate in study abroad programs earn more after graduation than those who do not. By studying the determinants and individual influences in studying abroad, Nets (2021) points out the importance of

emphasizing the heterogeneity of effects on study abroad research.

Hypothesis

Although these previous studies contain most of the research points on studying abroad, there are few empirical studies based on non-elite undergraduate graduates from the Chinese mainland going abroad to study for master's degrees. Compared with undergraduate graduates from elite universities, the study abroad behavior of non-elite university graduates is rarely cared about by mainstream scholars, which may be due to the fact that the Chinese government always invests more research funds in elite universities. At the same time, some new factors have rarely been reflected in previous studies; for example, when China's economy was good in the past, there was little employment pressure on college students. And now, in China's economic downturn, college graduates are facing various competitive pressures. Studying abroad for a master's degree can not only enhance your competitiveness but also may help avoid a few years of low economic growth in China. Therefore:

- H1: Competitive pressure positively affects students' studying abroad intention.

Studying abroad can also be subject to some potential risks. It may bring a lot of loneliness to international students because they are in an unfamiliar environment, their families are far away from them, their life habits are completely different from the culture, and it is easy to fall into loneliness and frustration. In foreign countries, international students will encounter a lot of new cultures, and some international students cannot adapt due to their fear and discomfort with the culture, which will affect the effectiveness of studying abroad. When studying abroad, you should also consider political risks, such as encountering political instability abroad, which may lead to political risks, resulting in the inability of international students to return home safely. International students should abide by local laws and regulations and not commit crimes; otherwise, they will face significant legal risks. Therefore:

- H2: Perceived risk negatively affects students' studying abroad intention.

Personal innovation ability refers to the pioneering, exploratory, improving, and adaptive nature of individuals in thinking, action, decision-making, etc. People with innovativeness can not only find problems

but also find solutions to them, create something new, and have the ability to stay ahead of others. Innovativeness is particularly important in studying abroad because it can help international students improve their efficiency, create higher value, accept foreign cultures efficiently, carry out new experiments, and establish good interpersonal relationships. Therefore:

- H3: Innovativeness positively affects students' studying abroad intention.

With the strong development of the economy, China's economic strength has gradually increased, and the people's living standards have gradually improved, and studying abroad has become the choice of more and more people. Study abroad activities have never stopped, and people still hope to get a better future through studying abroad. Internationalization and globalization have become the inevitable trend and important strategic choice for the long-term growth and long-term success of the most competitive enterprises in the future, and to achieve rapid growth, help cutting-edge innovation, and build long-term competitiveness, it is inseparable from the attraction of international talents and the construction of international teams. Under this general trend, international students will become the focus of attention for the high-quality development of the organization's internationalization. The emergence of various self-media allows more people to see the living conditions of students from different countries at any time and can directly communicate with self-media anchors to get the latest advice on studying abroad. While more and more people around me choose to study abroad, undergraduates from non-prestigious universities may also be considering which country to go to continue their graduate education. Therefore:

- H4: Social influence positively affects students' studying abroad intention.

Both students and parents have higher performance expectations for studying abroad. Studying abroad provides an opportunity to attend a leading educational institution abroad. By being exposed to advanced teaching methods and research outputs, students can enhance their academic abilities and gain a deeper knowledge of the subject. Studying abroad also provides students with a wider range of subject options, which helps deepen their interest and develop professional skills. Studying abroad is an opportunity to communicate and interact with people from different cultural backgrounds. By learning and living with

students and professors from different countries and cultures, international students can broaden their international perspectives and increase their understanding and respect for other cultures. This cross-cultural experience helps international students develop intercultural communication skills and global awareness. Studying abroad provides an immersive linguistic environment where students can improve their language skills more quickly. By interacting with students and communities whose native language is not their own, international students can improve their language skills such as speaking, listening, reading, and writing, and gain a higher level of language fluency. The studying abroad experience is a powerful asset in the job market. By studying abroad, international students can obtain globally recognized academic qualifications, which give them a certain competitive advantage in the employment process. In addition, the study abroad experience can also demonstrate the expanded soft skills of international students such as intercultural communication skills, adaptability, independent thinking, and problem-solving skills, which have a positive impact on employment and career development. Studying abroad is an opportunity to live and grow independently, and students need to face new environments, challenges, and self-management. By living independently and facing difficulties, international students can improve their self-confidence, adaptability, and problem-solving skills. In addition, studying abroad also brings rich interpersonal relationships and international friendships, providing opportunities for international students to develop in areas such as interpersonal communication, leadership, and teamwork. In short, the meaning and purpose of studying abroad are to improve academic ability, broaden subject knowledge, increase cross-cultural communication and understanding, improve language

ability, enhance employment competitiveness, and achieve personal growth and self-development. Studying abroad is not only a unique experience but also a valuable opportunity in your life to build a solid foundation for personal and professional development. Therefore:

- H5: Performance expectation positively affects students' studying abroad intention.

Individual innovation always influences people's choices. Those who are highly innovative are generally motivated to try new things and have the ability to solve problems efficiently. When faced with huge competitive pressure, those college students with high innovation ability are likely to be more willing to study abroad in order to improve their comprehensive ability. Individual innovation always influences people's choices. Those who are highly innovative are generally motivated to try new things and have the ability to solve problems efficiently. When faced with huge competitive pressure, those college students with high innovation ability are likely to be more willing to study abroad in order to improve their comprehensive ability. This means that the more innovative college students are, the more willing they are to choose to study abroad in the face of high competitive pressure.

- H6: Innovativeness positively moderates the relationship between competitive pressure and students' studying abroad intention.

Figure 1 is the research model. There are five hypotheses in the research model. There are altogether six hypotheses in the research model. H6 means Innovativeness may positively moderate the relationship between competitive pressure and students' studying abroad intention.

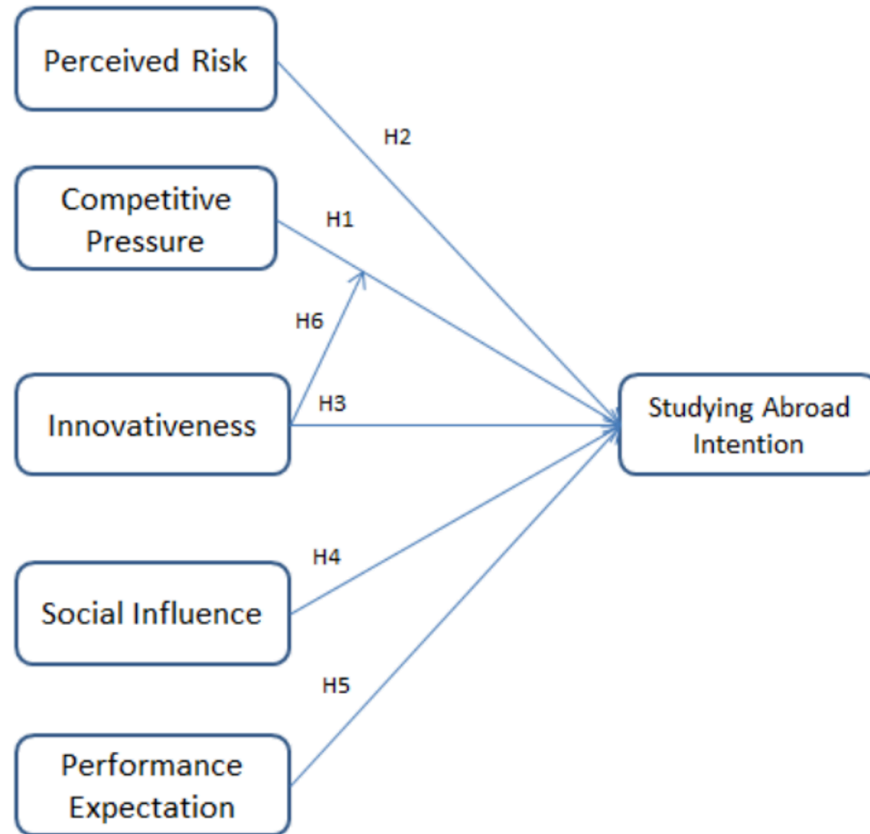


Figure 1. Research model

Methodology

In this study, questionnaires were used to collect research data. The questionnaire was distributed among students from 17 non-elite schools in 4 provinces in China. The survey period was from July 9 to July 28, 2023. A total of 469 questionnaires were collected, and 345 were left after removing invalid questionnaires. The effective utilization rate of the questionnaire was 73.5%. The PLS-SEM method was used in this study because it is more suitable for new

studies and there are multiple ways to measure the reliability and validity of the research model.

Results

Table 1 indicates demographic statistics of the survey. The number of male and female students who participated in the questionnaire was not much different, and since most of the non-elite schools are located in small cities in China, the annual consumption of students is not high.

Category	Subject	N	%
Gender	Male	190	54.7%
	Female	155	45.3%
Grade	Freshman	80	23.6%
	Sophomore	69	19.8%
	Junior	91	26.2%
	Senior	105	30.4%
Age	Under18	74	21.9%
	18-22	152	43.8%
	22-28	109	31.4%
	More than 28	10	2.9%
Annual consumption	< 1,500\$	14	4.6%
	1,500-3,000\$	57	16.4%
	3,000-5,000\$	192	55.3%
	>5,000\$	82	23.7%
Majors	Engineering	51	15.2%
	Science	74	21.3%
	Business	132	38.0%
	Liberal Arts	58	16.7%
	Others	30	8.8%

Table 1. Demographic statistics

Table 2 shows convergent validity and composite reliabilities testing results. When all Cronbach's α and composite reliability values are above 0.7, the reliability

test result is satisfying. When all AVE values are above 0.5, the validity test is satisfying. When all values in Table 3 are less than 0.85, the discriminant validity of the research model is supported.

Construct	Item	Standardized loading	AVE	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's α
Social Influence	SI1	0.962	0.703	0.877	0.789
	SI2	0.966			
	SI3	0.969			
Performance expectation	PE1	0.971	0.918	0.971	0.956
	PE2	0.975			
	PE3	0.967			
Innovativeness	IN1	0.950	0.905	0.966	0.948
	IN2	0.949			
	IN3	0.961			
Perceived risk	PR1	0.899	0.915	0.970	0.953
	PR2	0.993			
	PR3	0.868			
Competitive pressure	CP1	0.984	0.888	0.960	0.937
	CP2	0.980			
	CP3	0.983			
Intention	I1	0.974	0.915	0.970	0.953
	I2	0.978			
	I3	0.972			

Table 2. Convergent validity, composite reliabilities testing results

(SI social influence, PE Performance expectation, IN I Intention)
Innovativeness, PR perceived risk, CP Competitive pressure,

	IN	PR	I	SI	PE	CP	IN*CP
IN							
PR	0.673						
I	0.717	0.369					
SI	0.640	0.530	0.668				
PE	0.658	0.776	0.482	0.659			
CP	0.736	0.755	0.580	0.650	0.797		
IN*CP	0.331	0.377	0.086	0.349	0.400	0.414	

Table 3. Discriminant validity (Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio)

(SI social influence, PE Performance expectation, IN Intention)
Innovativeness, PR perceived risk, CP Competitive pressure,

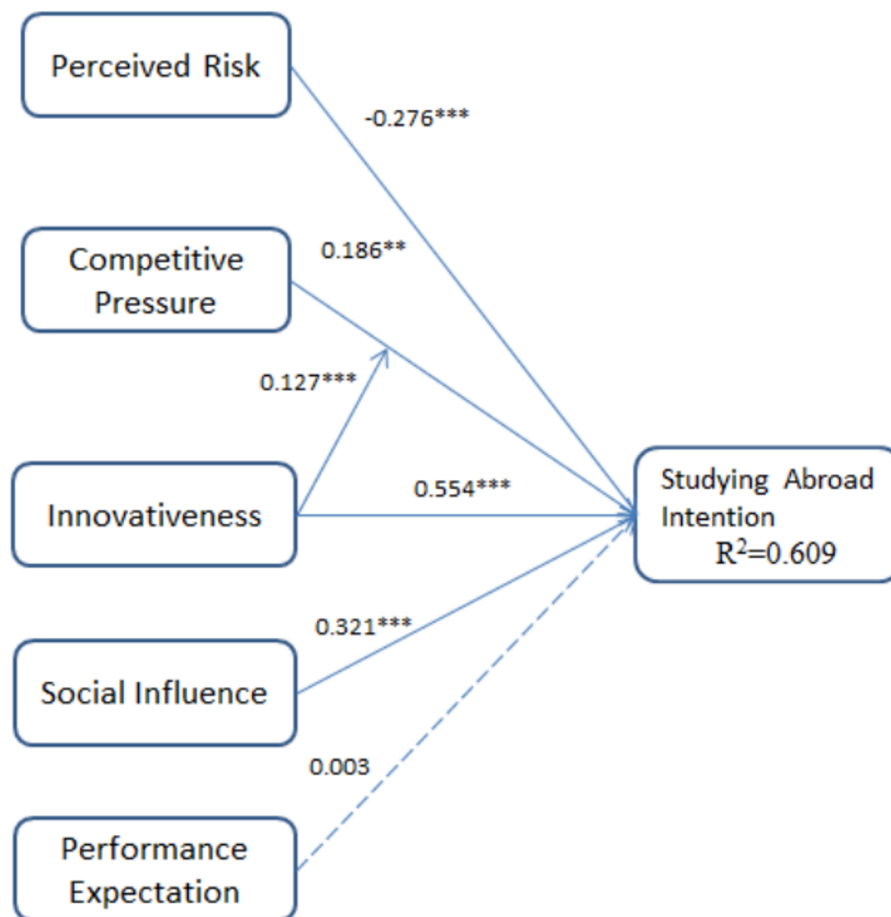


Figure 2. Research Results *** (P<0.01); ** (P<0.05); * (P<0.1)

Figure 2 shows the results of the research. Competitive pressure positively affects students' intention to study abroad with a coefficient value of 0.186 (P<0.05). Perceived risk negatively affects students' intention to study abroad with a coefficient value of -0.276 (P<0.01). Innovativeness positively affects students' intention to study abroad with a coefficient value of 0.554 (P<0.01). Social influence positively affects students' intention to study abroad with a coefficient value of 0.321 (P<0.01). Innovativeness positively moderates the relationship between competitive pressure and students' intention to study abroad with a coefficient value of 0.127 (P<0.01). Unfortunately, performance expectation doesn't affect students' intention to study abroad because its coefficient value is 0.003 (P>0.1). The R square value is 0.609, which indicates that social influence, performance expectation, innovativeness, perceived risk, and competitive pressure, taken together, can explain 60.9% of the variance in the intention to study abroad.

Implications

Competitive pressure shows a positive effect on students' intention to study abroad, which indicates that intense pressure on students at China's non-elite universities today is driving more people to study abroad. Study abroad agents can categorize the various pressures faced by students in mainland China today and inform clients how to overcome these pressures through studying abroad. Foreign universities that want to recruit students directly from mainland China can make a comparison plan for master's programs in the two countries, so as to point out the advantages of studying abroad for master's degrees compared to those in mainland China. In short, in the marketing process of study abroad agencies and foreign universities, it is best to show customers that studying abroad brings students a variety of ability improvements, so that customers believe that they are more competitive in

employment after completing a master's program abroad than a master's degree in mainland China.

Perceived risk can negatively affect students' intention to study abroad, which shows that college students in mainland China are a little worried about the uncertain risks of studying abroad. Obviously, students who study abroad often need to adapt to different cultural backgrounds and may face problems such as language barriers, cultural conflicts, and interpersonal difficulties. International students need to seek psychological counseling, learn about the customs of a new culture, and learn about local laws, education, and medical care. In addition, international students need to learn to respect and accept the differences of other cultures and avoid language or behavioral conflicts. To reduce students' perception of risk, agents and overseas universities can prepare materials such as safety manuals and living and study guides. For universities in cities where terrorist attacks are frequent, more attention should be paid to campus security. These universities should inform prospective international students of the specific measures they have in place to keep students safe. For those students who are not wealthy, universities should also indicate in their brochures the types of scholarships and how they can be obtained. Of course, the price and coverage of medical insurance and personal accident insurance should also be explained in detail to the students, and it is best to give the students the freedom to choose the type of insurance.

The results show that innovativeness positively affects students' intention to study abroad. Agents and overseas universities can nurture students' personal innovation from the first year and teach them to solve problems from different cultural perspectives. There are many ways to enhance the innovation of university students, such as regular knowledge or sports competitions, and the selection of outstanding students to visit or exchange with overseas universities. Agents and overseas universities can arrange for professors from overseas universities to conduct social media counseling for students before they decide to study abroad. These efforts can enable students to obtain more information about studying abroad, which can help them make a suitable study abroad plan. In order to better stimulate the enthusiasm of college students to try new things, study abroad agents and overseas universities can use artificial intelligence technology to formulate different study abroad plans for different students. The assistance of artificial intelligence can provide a very complete study abroad program for different college students according to their grades,

gender, age, major, preferences, wealth, language ability, and other characteristics. Learning how to use AI software, such as Chat-GPT, will increase the innovativeness of college students like never before.

Social influence positively affects students' intention to study abroad. Study abroad agents and overseas universities can set up their own accounts on well-known social media apps in mainland China and publish advertisements regularly. It's a good idea for agents and overseas universities to launch their own celebrities to run regular live streams on social media, interact with university students, answer questions at any time, and reward those who actively participate. Agents and overseas universities can also provide funding for students returning home during the holidays to act as marketing spokespersons and organize study abroad experience sharing sessions in their own cities.

Innovativeness positively moderates the relationship between competitive pressure and students' intention to study abroad. This result indicates that with the improvement of personal innovation, competitive pressure will have a more significant and positive impact on the intention to study abroad. Competitive pressures and innovation may seem unrelated, but in fact, they are closely linked. First, competition can lead people to over-pursue superficial success and neglect real innovation. In a competitive environment, people tend to focus only on how to achieve better results and higher evaluations and ignore the importance of innovation. Secondly, competition can also lead people to fall into inertial thinking, indulge in existing routines and patterns, and find it difficult to create new ideas. Therefore, in order to truly gain strong competitiveness, people must increase their ability to innovate and bypass the various restrictions imposed on college students by Chinese society. People tend to get used to working and living in what they are good at, but doing so can lead to a loss of opportunities to explore other areas. Therefore, intermediaries and overseas universities should encourage Chinese university students to have the courage to try and explore new fields, learn about different industries and cultures, broaden their horizons, and find new opportunities. Agents and overseas universities can form partnerships with Chinese university students to help them find people abroad with similar interests and goals, work together to explore new areas and opportunities, and break the mold together.

Discussion and Future Research

Contemporary Chinese society admires successful people, and students from well-known universities have a high exposure rate, but students from ordinary universities are basically not in the public eye. It is difficult for them to attract media attention, and society does not have high expectations for them, feeling that they should live an ordinary life. After the tempering of the examination-oriented education mechanism, they unconsciously develop a gentle and silent temperament, are very well-behaved in class, are accustomed to sitting in their seats and taking notes, rarely ask questions to teachers, and have almost no chance to hear reports from Nobel laureates or the richest people on the Forbes list. Although there are still vacancies in the market, the better the company, the more academic qualifications are required. Graduating from a prestigious university is the minimum requirement for a very good company, preferably from a world-renowned university.

Academic discrimination is not limited to the workplace but even occurs when college students are entering graduate school. If you are a student at an ordinary university, you may also be subject to a certain bias during the graduate school interview. Even if they break through all difficulties and succeed in the graduate school entrance examination, once others tell them that they are from a regular undergraduate college, they may still encounter unfriendly eyes from others.

Studying abroad can help ordinary university graduates obtain better educational resources than those in mainland China, allowing them to learn world-leading professional skills. The education level and faculty of institutions of higher learning in the United Kingdom, the United States, France, Germany, Japan, and South Korea are significantly ahead of universities in mainland China. Writing papers, searching for data, and doing experiments are not only to pass the strict graduation threshold but also to consolidate the professional knowledge and skills of international students and lay a solid foundation for students' future career development.

The internationalization and cultural diversity of foreign universities are not only reflected in the course content but also in the composition of the student body from all over the world. The process of communicating with students from all over the world is actually a collision of different cultures and ways of thinking,

which can enrich the perspective and way of thinking of international students.

While this study identified some significant factors influencing the intention of Chinese university students to study abroad, there were some elements of future research that were not included in this study. First of all, this study only focused on undergraduate students and did not conduct a questionnaire survey on master's students. Secondly, the recommendations of this study are mainly aimed at study abroad agents and overseas universities, ignoring the research direction of joint education between universities in mainland China and overseas universities. In the future, follow-up research can be carried out on Sino-foreign joint education.

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