

## **GOING OFF THE BEATEN TRACK: EXPLORING CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' MOTIVATIONS IN SELECTING A REGIONAL AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY**

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**ABSTRACT:** Following Tasmania's adoption of its international education policy, an increasing number of Chinese international students have enrolled at the University of Tasmania (UTAS), which is a regional Australian university. This is a variation in trend from the choice of the majority of Chinese international students who attend universities in Australian metropolises. This study aims to understand the motivations of Chinese international students who have made this decision. Through analysing data from 456 (valid) questionnaires and 23 interviews with UTAS Chinese international students, this research indicated that the primary motivators for the UTAS choice were: more competitive tuition fees, a larger number of scholarships, quicker and easier offers, joint education programs, specialist courses, ease of graduation, acceptance of credit transfer, immigration prospects, and recommendations. These identified motivations could be interpreted in four more explicit dimensions: strategic competition with other Australian universities, attractions for students with diverse backgrounds, regional advantage, and specific promotion.

**KEY WORDS:** Motivations, regional Australian higher education, student choice, Chinese international students, Tasmania.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### ***Background***

Globally, Australia plays a significant role in international higher education. According to the latest data from the OECD's *Education at a Glance 2015* (2015), Australia was the world's third largest host country for international higher education. Within the Australian context, international education has been the third largest export for Australia; it was worth AUD 19.4 billion in 2015 (Department of Education and Training, 2016c), mainly from onshore international students (Department of Education and Training, 2016a).

Chinese students are prominent amongst international students in Australian higher education. Chinese international students remain the largest share (e.g. 38.66 per cent in 2015) of all international student enrolments in Australian higher education institutions, which is far ahead of other countries (Department of Education and Training, 2016e). The majority of Chinese international students in Australia were enrolled in higher education. In 2015, the rate was 57 per cent (Department of Education and Training, 2016b). In other words, the enrolment number of Chinese international students in Australian higher education institutions is higher than the total amount of Chinese international students studying in all other levels education in Australia.

In terms of location preferences, however, the majority of Chinese students tend to undertake international higher education courses in Australian metropolises, such as Melbourne or Sydney rather than studying at regional Australian universities. Although the direct data about Chinese international students enrolled in regional Australian universities is unavailable, the most recent statistics from the Australian Government Department of Education and Training (2016f) indicated that only approximately 5 per cent of the total enrolments of Chinese international students in 2015 were in regional Australian areas, but over half (54 per cent) of international students in regional Australia were in the higher education sector rather than in VET (Vocational education and training), ELICOS (English language intensive courses for overseas students), schools and non-award courses.

This research attempts to focus on those Chinese international students' choice of enrolling in a regional Australian higher education institution and to develop a systematic examination of motivating factors which drove Chinese international students to make this distinct choice.

### ***Theoretical Background***

As Chinese international students are a key factor in Australian higher education, numerous studies (e.g. Ballard, 1987; Cuthbert *et al.*, 2008; Robertson *et al.*, 2000; Zheng *et al.*, 2004) have been undertaken with the primary aim of attempting to understand Chinese and other Asian international students' experiences in Australia, the challenges they may face in the Australian education system, and the outcomes of these international education experiences. However, the main focus of these studies has been to access Chinese international students' perceptions of their Australian education experiences after they have started their overseas study journey, rather than assessing their motivations and expectations prior to departure from China. Additionally, little attention has been paid directly to the experiences of Chinese international students in a regional Australian higher education context.

Many studies (e.g. Duan, 1997; Li and Bray, 2007; Pimpa, 2002; Wilkins *et al.*, 2012) have investigated the motivations that have influenced international students' choice of international study destination. Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) push-pull theory has been widely employed to develop an analysis of the two motivational influences: "push" factors operated within the source country and initiated a student's decision to undertake international study" and "pull" factors operated within a host country to make that country relatively attractive to international students" (p. 82). However, the theory does not account for individual preferences and personal characteristics, and focuses largely on the forces external to the individual. It also only takes into account push factors of the source country and pull factors of the host country; thus, ignoring potential pull factors from the source country and push factors from the host country.

Similarly, while the previous literature has focussed substantially on the motivations and perceptions of international students studying in metropolitan universities, much less attention has been paid to international students enrolled in regional universities. There is a need therefore to build clearer understandings about what motivates this latter group of international students to make their decisions.

### ***Regional Australian University***

It is quite complex to develop a comprehensive understanding of a 'regional Australian university', with no official list of regional Australian universities and no single agreed definition. It is quite

understandable that there is no agreed definition of a 'regional Australian university': there are over 70 regional university campuses in Australia (Eversole, 2016), and 99.9 per cent of Australia's land mass can be classified as regional (Department of Education and Training, 2016d).

UTAS has campuses in Tasmania and Sydney, but this research only investigates students on Tasmanian campuses. From the perspective of government funding, the whole of Tasmania for government purposes is regarded as regional Australia. Thus, UTAS could be considered as a regional Australian university in this study.

### ***Influencing Policies***

International education, especially international higher education, has made a significant contribution to Australian regions. Chinese international students form the majority of international students and so their impact on the Australian regions should not be overlooked. In 2012, the Australian Government (2012) released the *Australia in the Asian Century White Paper* in which the opportunities Chinese international students could bring to Australian international higher education were specifically highlighted.

Building on the Australian Government's White Paper (2012), in 2013, the Tasmanian Government (2013) commissioned its own White Paper on *Tasmania's Place in the Asian Century*. This White Paper (Tasmanian Government, 2013) highlighted that China was the top Asian country for international students coming to Tasmania, and that the Tasmanian Government also believed that international education would become increasingly significant to Tasmania. Furthermore, the White Paper (Tasmanian Government, 2013) indicated that UTAS had plans to double its international student intake over the next five years.

### ***Increase in Chinese International Students Enrolments at the University of Tasmania***

Under the impetus of these proactive policies, an increasing number of Chinese international students in recent years have made the decision to "go off the beaten track" by undertaking higher education courses at UTAS, a regional Australian university, rather than follow the majority of their compatriots to universities in the larger Australian cities. This trend can be seen in the enrolment numbers of Chinese international students on UTAS's Tasmanian campuses: the most recent figures (to 26

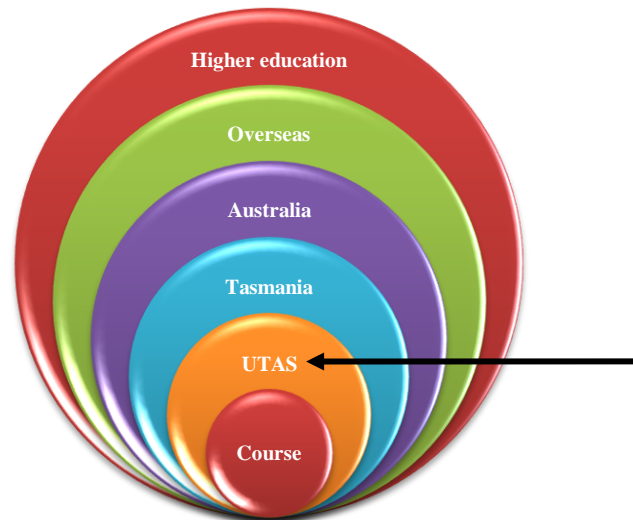
September, 2016) show a steady increase from 1056 in 2014 to 1136 in 2015 to 1446 in 2016 (University of Tasmania, 2016).

### ***Theoretical Framework***

Clearly, as with much other decision-making, the decision as to whether to study at a regional Australian university is often complex and multifaceted. There is substantial literature (e.g. Duan, 1997; Jenkins, 2007; Lawley, 1997; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Pimpa, 2002; Stafford, 2010) which demonstrates that international students' decision-making about higher education is not a one-step process, but encompasses a series of choices. From a cognitive approach, Duan (1997) and Pimpa (2002), respectively, elaborated the major choices that Asian international students made in selecting Australian higher education. Both researchers found the common choices were: to study abroad, country, city, academic course, and university. However, to undertake higher education was another choice in the research of Duan (1997).

In the present study, which was based on Duan's (1997) six choice model, Chinese international students' motivations for selecting regional Australian higher education were examined from six major and distinct choices. As shown in Figure 1, these were (1) to choose to progress to higher education, (2) to choose to study overseas, (3) to select the country (Australia) to study, (4) to select the state (Tasmania), (5) to select the regional Australian university (UTAS), (6) to select the particular course to study. These six choices are also underpinned by a logical process, from making the most general choice (to undertake higher education), to the most specific choice (to choose a particular course). It was found that there were a range of motivations of Chinese international students underlying each choice.

It should also be mentioned that, given the regional university focus, this paper will be on the motivations relating to just one of the six choices, the choice of a particular regional Australian university, UTAS (the arrow in Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Theoretical Framework. Source: the Authors

### ***Research Aim and Question***

The aim of this study was to investigate Chinese international students' motivations influencing their choice of a regional Australian university prior to departure from China. Thus, the research question was: What motivates Chinese international students to choose the University of Tasmania (UTAS), a regional Australian university, in the decision-making process of seeking to undertake Australian international higher education?

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

### ***Case Study***

The research is a case study about UTAS. The sample for this study was all international students from China mainland, Hong Kong, or Macau, who were undergraduates or postgraduates in semester 1, 2015 of UTAS on UTAS Tasmanian campuses. More specifically, the sample size was 835 Chinese international students. The sample did not include any Chinese students at the Sydney campus of UTAS, offshore Chinese students, and Chinese graduates from UTAS.

### ***Methods***

This study adopted a convergent mixed methods design to concurrently gather both qualitative and quantitative data, and then to merge those data to develop a deeper understanding of the research question (Creswell, 2012). The survey was to offer an overview of the general situation of Chinese international students' motivations across a large sample. On the other hand, the semi-structured interview was used to explore the individual factors further and deeper through investigating a small number of interviewees. Because of the complementary and non-overlapping strengths of both methods, this convergent mixed methods research potentially provides a more comprehensive and broader insight into Chinese international students' motivations to select regional Australian higher education, than either method by itself (Creswell, 2012; Johnson and Turner, 2002).

### ***Data Collection***

Data collection methods of this study encompassed a questionnaire and semi-structured individual interview, which were conducted simultaneously in semester 1, 2015 of UTAS.

Designed by the researcher, based on relevant literature, the questionnaire included participants' demographic information, and seven reasons to select study at UTAS, as well as an open-ended section for the respondents to add more factors. A five-point Likert Scale (Likert, 1932) was employed to explore the importance level of all seven factors.

At the same time as the questionnaire data was being collected, interviews were carried out. On the basis of the six choices of theoretical framework, the interview schedule was prepared with one demographic question and six choice-related questions to investigate motivations of selecting a regional Australian university by Chinese international students. Again, this study only paid attention to the question, "Why did you choose to study at UTAS?". Students were expected to recall their initial orientation to choose regional Australian higher education. Interviews were conducted face-to-face at the Hobart campus and the Launceston campus. All interviews were recorded by digital voice devices with the permission of the participants. Mandarin was the language adopted in all interviews.

### ***Data Analysis***

After the data collection, data from questionnaires was analysed using SPSS version 22 and Excel 2010. In SPSS, for the five-point Likert scale, 'very important' was assigned the value 1, value 3 was indicated 'unimportant', and the value of 'never considered' was defined as 5. The significant motivators were identified from questionnaire data analysis.

In addition, data collected from semi-structured interviews was analysed via adopting a systematic grounded theory allied with Strauss and Corbin (1990) and the NVivo 10 software as a platform. This research emphasised data analysis steps of open, axial, and selective coding, and the development of a logic paradigm of the theory generated (Creswell, 2012). In the process of qualitative analysis, what motivated interviewees to choose UTAS was discovered.

A later stage of the analysis seamlessly combined qualitative data and quantitative data through finding the extent to which the two datasets yielded similarity or dissimilarity, and identifying any determinants. This stage analysis enabled the research question to be answered holistically and multidimensionally.

## **3. FINDINGS**

### ***Profiles of Respondents***

The number of responses to the questionnaire was 501, of which 456 were valid, accounting for 54.61 per cent of the whole population size (835). Of those who completed the survey, the proportion of males to females was almost equal (50.2 per cent females, males 49.8 per cent). 97.8 per cent of them were born in the 1980s and 1990s. In terms of the faculty distributions, more than half (52.0 per cent) of the survey respondents were studying in the Tasmanian School of Business and Economics, followed by the second largest population in the Faculty of Science, Engineering and Technology (21.1 per cent). The third faculty was the Australian Maritime College (9.6 per cent). These three groups accounted for 82.7 per cent of Chinese international students at UTAS. Considering degree distributions, the largest questionnaire response was from those undertaking Master Degree programs (51.5 per cent). Next were Bachelor Degree courses (36.0 per cent).

Twenty-three participants voluntarily took part in the semi-structured individual interviews, consisting of 13 males and 10 females, all of whom



were born in 1980s or 1990s. Seven of them were undertaking courses in the Tasmanian School of Business and Economics, and an equal number were studying in the Faculty of Science, Engineering and Technology. The number of participants from the Australian Maritime College was five. Interviewee degree distributions were: 11 enrolled in Bachelor Degree programs, nine undertaking Master Degree courses, and three Doctoral candidates.

### *Motivations*

Chinese international students were asked to rate a list of seven factors motivating their selection to study at UTAS, a regional Australian university. Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics summary of survey motivation data. The reasons in Table 1 were listed based on the sequence of their mean values. The smaller the mean value of a reason represented greater importance of this reason, while a reason with a bigger mean was deemed to be less important. Reasons in Table 1 are the starting point to be discussed in this section supplemented with evidence and additional key factors collected via interviews and an open-ended section in the questionnaire.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics Summary of Questionnaire Data.

Perceived reasons	Mean	SD	VI	I	UI	VUI	NC
	2.12	0.53					
<b>Low tuition costs</b>	1.88	0.77	31.6%	44.3%	16.2%	2.2%	5.7%
<b>Availability of scholarships</b>	1.99	0.81	27.4%	38.8%	20.4%	2.9%	10.5%
<b>Easier/ faster to get an offer of enrolment compared with other Australian universities</b>	2.08	0.80	23.2%	40.6%	24.6%	2.9%	8.8%
<b>The qualification is recognized in China</b>	2.23	0.84	17.1%	36.2%	26.3%	5.0%	15.4%
<b>University reputation/ ranking</b>	2.24	0.73	12.3%	46.7%	27.0%	3.3%	10.7%
<b>Accept transfer credits</b>	2.25	0.82	15.8%	31.6%	28.9%	3.3%	20.4%
<b>Parents/ relatives/ an education agent/ friends recommended it</b>	2.26	0.84	15.1%	33.3%	25.4%	5.0%	21.1%

Notes: (1) SD = Standard Deviation; VI = Very Important; I = Important; UI = Unimportant; VUI = Very Unimportant; NC = Never Considered; (2) Values of Mean and Standard Deviation (SD) for each reason showed in Table 1 do not include participants whose answer was Never Considered (NC). Source: the authors.

*More Competitive Tuition Fees*

The motivation to pick UTAS was driven by the direct financial factor, more competitive tuition fees. Low tuition costs of UTAS were rated by students in their questionnaire responses to be the most important influencing factor (mean of 1.88) among all seven reasons. Also this motivation was highlighted by six of 23 participants in interviews. The majority of Chinese international students coming to study overseas were self-funded, thus the cost of education was a great concern. It was consistently agreed from the responses of surveys and interviews that the cheaper tuition fees of UTAS compared with mainland Australian universities advantaged UTAS. Some interviewees mentioned their UTAS tuition fees were almost only half of tuition costs of mainland Australian universities, and the tuition costs of member universities of the Group of Eight were much higher than UTAS. One interviewee who was undertaking a Master Degree program at UTAS indicated her concern about the cost of tuition fees for overseas study, "If I had not cared about tuition cost, I would have a Bachelor Degree in Australia first rather than gained a Bachelor Degree from a Chinese university". Given their shorter study length, the cost concern may explain why 50 per cent of survey respondents were studying Master courses at UTAS rather than Bachelor programs. Potentially regional Australian universities can make use of the advantage of low tuition fees to compete with metropolitan Australian universities in order to attract more international students. The cost of tuition fees was also discovered to be a factor in the study of Mazzarol and Soutar's push-pull theory (2002). However, differing from the reason discussed by Mazzarol and Soutar in the context of country destination, this study discovered it as an influencing factor for the choice of a higher education institution. More competitive tuition fees of UTAS was a big attraction for Chinese international students, thus UTAS became their affordable choice.

*A Large Number of Scholarships*

A large number of scholarships were another driving force behind the UTAS choice in the financial facet. This motivation ranked the second most important (mean of 1.99) among all seven reasons by survey respondents. Also, one third of interviewees mentioned this point. Besides benefiting from lower tuition fees, interviewees pointed out that students who had good academic records could easily get a 25 per cent of

tuition fee discount scholarship. Even if they did not gain a scholarship when applying for UTAS, this scholarship was still available for them after they commenced their UTAS courses if their UTAS marks were over 80 per cent. Doctoral candidates paid more attention to the availability of scholarships than tuition fees. Extending this point, one Ph.D. candidate interviewee indicated that for those students that graduated from UTAS, it was quite easy to successfully get a UTAS full scholarship if they would like to further study Ph.D. programs. In addition to those scholarships which were commonly obtained by Chinese international students, a large number of other scholarships were available when applying for UTAS, and after having enrolled at UTAS. This finding is in alignment with Andressen (1991), that is, the availability of scholarships may have a significant bearing on the choice of university destination. By and large, combining factors of competitive tuition fees and a large number of scholarships, if choosing to study at UTAS, a regional Australian university, Chinese international students could have fewer expenses compared to study in mainland Australia, so UTAS for them was quite an economical choice.

#### *Quicker and Easier Offers*

One of the most interesting findings of this research was that it was easier and faster to get offers from UTAS compared with other Australian universities. A considerable number of questionnaire respondents chose this reason, and hence this factor had a relatively high mean of 2.08. In addition, within the semi-structured interviews, four Chinese international students further commented that they applied for a few Australian universities at the same time, but the UTAS offer was the earliest one. Furthermore, UTAS gave offers very quickly after Chinese international students submitted their applications. They were not sure whether they would get other offers from mainland Australian universities, so they accepted the earliest offers from UTAS. The strategy effectively pulled Chinese international students to enrol at UTAS. There appears to be no precedents for this finding in the relevant literature.

Apart from this, the lower entrance requirements made it easier for Chinese international students to get an offer from UTAS compared with metropolitan Australian universities. One interviewee would like to undertake a program in a Master of Accounting in Australian higher education, but “if you want to be enrolled into Master of Accounting in University of XXX, a metropolitan Australian university, you need a Bachelor Degree related to accounting, but mine is not”. However, UTAS

did not require a Bachelor Degree related to accounting as a prerequisite to be eligible for the offer of a Master of Accounting, so Chinese international students got an offer of Master of Accounting course more easily. This may explain why many Chinese international students enrolled in the Master of Accounting at UTAS. Lower entrance requirements also were mentioned by other interviewees. Existing literature (e.g. Lee, 2013) examined the possibility to meet the entrance requirements among universities in different countries, but there is little discussion about entrance requirements distinctions between regional Australian universities and universities in metropolitan Australia. Thus, quicker and easier offers secured a place for UTAS in competition with metropolitan Australian universities in relation to capturing Chinese international students' attention.

#### *Joint Education Programs*

Joint education programs were a significant nexus to lead Chinese international students to study at UTAS. In this context, a joint education program refers to a cooperative academic program between an Australia university and a university from another country, in which students completed their studies first in that country and then in Australia, emerging with qualifications from both institutions. There were 23 interviewees 10 of whom were from joint education programs between China and Australia. All of them spent a large amount of time describing their joint education programs and believed this was the dominant factor for them to study at UTAS, a regional Australian university. Lots of interviewees were from "2+2" joint bachelor degree programs which entailed two-year courses in Chinese universities and then two-year courses in UTAS. When students were in these joint bachelor degree programs in China, they had classes from UTAS lecturers and also some Chinese universities required them to adopt the UTAS online learning system. This helped Chinese international students develop a comprehensive understanding of UTAS studying before they came to UTAS leaving a very good impression on UTAS. In addition, English language training as part of those programs in China helped them meet the English entrance requirements of UTAS. Thus, they eventually came to UTAS to study after completing the initial Chinese part. Additionally, some of them recognized that UTAS seemed to be the only choice for them if they wanted to obtain two degrees at the end of the joint education program. Also, there were other forms of joint education

programs where interviewees enrolled in courses run by Chinese vocational tertiary education (similar features as TAFE in Australia) and UTAS, or by polytechnic in Singapore and UTAS. Further reasons to select joint education programs for initial study identified by interviewees were a desire to study overseas, but still use the results of Chinese university entry exams to apply for higher education, and financial considerations. Nevertheless, the location of UTAS in regional Australia, was never considered by them, as long as it was a part of Australia. Relevant literature (e.g. Bodycott, 2009) usually provides valuable insights into the decisive function of joint education programs when international students choose certain higher education institutions. However, the importance of joint education programs as a factor influencing the selection of a regional Australian university is a new finding. Generally, of which had direct and effective characteristics, joint education programs were a key official route mixed with a range of factors for Chinese international students to study at UTAS.

#### *Specialist Courses*

Specialist courses functioned as a powerful driving force behind the UTAS choice made by Chinese international students. Chinese international students, especially those who intended to study specialist courses, such as maritime courses, would choose UTAS, since those courses in Australia were only offered in the Australian Maritime College (AMC), and AMC is a part of UTAS. Apparently, the particularity of those courses limited their choice of Australian higher education institutions. All five interviewees undertaking courses from AMC revealed that this was the main cause for selecting UTAS. Most interviewees did not mind that those courses were in a university located in regional Australia when making the decision to study at UTAS. Also, interviewees noted they were keen to undertake those specialist courses because of personal interests. Seen from this point, specialist courses were the extrinsic motivation for the UTAS choice underlain by the intrinsic driver, interests. Specialist courses as a motivation to pull Chinese international students to study in a regional Australian university are apparently an under-studied area. In conclusion, similar to joint education programs, specialist courses were a direct and effective approach to attract Chinese international students who had special interests in those particular fields.

### *Ease of Graduation*

The motivation of ease of graduation from UTAS greatly influenced Chinese international students to choose regional Australian higher education. Three interviewees in this study reflected that after collecting available resources and comparing relevant information concerning ease of graduation from different Australian universities, UTAS was comparatively easier to graduate from. This played a vital role in the process of selecting UTAS, though this was not a dominant motivation interviewees indicated. Interviewees accessed this information from education agencies, experienced acquaintances, or the internet. This motivation centered around smooth graduation from an Australian university, but it was attributable to two different potential reasons for two different sorts of students, poor academic records and ease of changing majors. This reflected Chinese international students' choice of regional Australian higher education through "pragmatic rationality considering their circumstances, their personal ability and the possibility of their desire and expectations" (Lee, 2013, p. 331) to form a strategic choice. All in all, ease of graduation was a major motivation for Chinese international students under the pragmatic strategy.

### *Acceptance of Credit Transfer*

Acceptance of credit transfer was a crucial factor in encouraging enrolment of Chinese international students at UTAS. A mean value of 2.25 for accepting credit transfer, in the analysis of the questionnaire, indicated quite high importance, although it only ranked sixth of all seven reasons for Chinese international students to select to study at UTAS. What's more, roughly half of interviewees (11 of 23) chose UTAS due to its credit transfer acceptance. Besides nine interviewees who transferred their credits from previous Chinese university programs to UTAS on the basis of the above mentioned joint education programs, another two transferred their diploma credits to progress a Bachelor degree at UTAS. Interviewees noted that they would only choose higher education institutions which could accept their transferred credit, and UTAS had a wide inclusiveness to credit institutions and was flexible in relation to study pathways from different countries and different education levels. This was also a reason for them not to apply for some metropolitan Australian universities since they did not accept their previous credits. Supplementing this direct motive, interviewees also preferred credit

transfer as a time-saving and money-saving approach. Past research did not pay much attention to the importance of acceptance of credit transfer on investigating international students' decision-making to choose certain higher education institutions, but it was an underlying motivation for some Chinese international students to choose UTAS.

### *Immigration Prospects*

In terms of the regional feature of UTAS, immigration prospects were a significant motivation for Chinese international students to choose UTAS as their study destination. A number of studies (e.g. Bodycott, 2009; Li, 2007; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002) identify immigration prospects after graduation as the factors influencing Chinese international students' decision of an overseas study destination. Immigration prospects were fairly unique and special among all factors to motivate Chinese international students to choose UTAS, regarding the special geographic location of UTAS in regional Australia.

Five interviewees considered that this was a significant motivation for them to choose UTAS, and also further explained that for those who planned to immigrate to Australia after completing their courses, UTAS was a wise choice because it is in regional Australia. When they apply for immigration, they have potential to be nominated by the state government and receive extra five points if they have lived and studied in regional Australia for two years. Immigration prospects were the only and central motivation to choose UTAS for two interviewees. For those Chinese international students who had a strong immigration desire, they not only picked the special location, regional Australia, but also attempted to enrol in immigration courses. Immigration courses refer to courses of which related occupations were in the Skilled Occupations List as outlined by the Australian Government Department of Immigration and Border Protection. Once they gained those course degrees when graduating from UTAS, it would be easier for them to immigrate to Australia. This also could explain why most survey participants at UTAS are from the Tasmanian School of Business and Economics, and Faculty of Science, Engineering and Technology on the grounds that the majority of immigration courses at UTAS were in those two faculties. Hence, the preferential immigration treatment from UTAS, a regional Australian university, was the best driver for Chinese international students who intended to immigrate to Australia after graduation.

### *Recommendations*

Recommendations from education agencies, friends, relatives, and parents played a significant role in motivating Chinese international students to study at UTAS. There has been considerable investigation (e.g. Duan, 1997; Pimpa, 2002) into the referents on international students' choice of international higher education in existing research. However, there has been little, if any, recent research into the role of recommendations in the context of regional Australian higher education. Recommendation of parents, relatives, an education agent or friends scored highly, with a mean value of 2.08 in the survey. Some interviewees laid emphasis on the role of education agencies in information provision and persuasion. Having close partnerships with Australian institutions, a large number of education agencies in China assisted Australian institutions to recruit Chinese international students. Chinese international students did not need to pay agencies any counselling fees for institution selection and application assistance, because if Chinese international students finally enrolled at UTAS following the agency recommendation, agencies would get a bonus from UTAS. In addition, interviewees also stated a preference to enrol at UTAS because of a friend, relative or parents recommendations. These were not factors controlled directly by UTAS. One interviewee noted that recommendations to choose UTAS were from his friends and colleagues who had UTAS study experience, and he also came with his friends to study at UTAS. Another interviewee stated that her relative who studied and was working at UTAS recommended UTAS as a suitable choice for her. Well-educated family members' suggestions were always accepted by Chinese international students. Chinese parents had a significant influence on their child's international higher education and a few interviewees pointed out that UTAS was their parents' recommendation. Conversely, many Chinese parents did not make the choice of UTAS for their child. Therefore, in summary, word-of-mouth referral from education agencies, friends, relatives, and parents had a great influence on Chinese international students' choice of UTAS.

### *Other Motivations*

Investigation in this study also discovered some motivations, such as the recognition of a UTAS qualification in China, important in some individual cases, but insufficiently important when viewed against survey



summaries. By contrast, other motivations listed in the questionnaires were important, like university reputation/ranking, but interviewees have incompatible opinions towards this motivation.

#### **4. DISCUSSION AND OUTLOOK**

##### ***Contributions***

This study makes both theoretical and practical contributions. At the theoretical level, this research identifies Chinese international students' motivations for regional Australian higher education. This will probably be the first study in this under-researched field to identify reasons underlying Chinese international students' choice to undertake regional Australian higher education. Furthermore, this research constructs a useful model in developing understanding of motivations for the other five choices (to choose to progress to higher education, to choose to study overseas, to pick Australia, to come to Tasmania to study, to study the course) in the decision-making processes of seeking Australian regional higher education, for Chinese international students, based on the above mentioned theoretical framework. Furthermore, this research is a potential foundation in the interpretation of Chinese international students' decision-making processes, and the further formation of Chinese international students' decision-making models in selecting regional Australian higher education.

In terms of the practical contributions, the findings of this research benefit different stakeholders of Chinese international students' choice of UTAS. For UTAS, this study facilitates developing insights of what Chinese international students expect from UTAS in order to understand the Chinese student market better and to attract a larger number of Chinese international students to study at UTAS. Eventually, it is possible that this study will help UTAS achieve its five-year goal of doubling its international student intake. In relation to other regional Australian higher education institutions, this research could be potentially useful to help understand their own development mechanisms in the international higher education market in order to get a larger share of international students in competition with metropolitan Australian universities. In regards to the Tasmanian government, this research will hopefully provide a worthwhile reference to update state international higher education policies in the future. Considering future Chinese international students, this research will hopefully offer information about current Chinese international students' motivations, and then help them

make better-informed decisions in seeking overseas higher education. Concerning the Chinese government and the Australian government, the findings regarding the motivation of Chinese students might potentially benefit the development of the Australian international higher education industry, deepen the Sino-Australian higher education rapport, and thereby realise the globalisation and the internationalisation of higher education.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

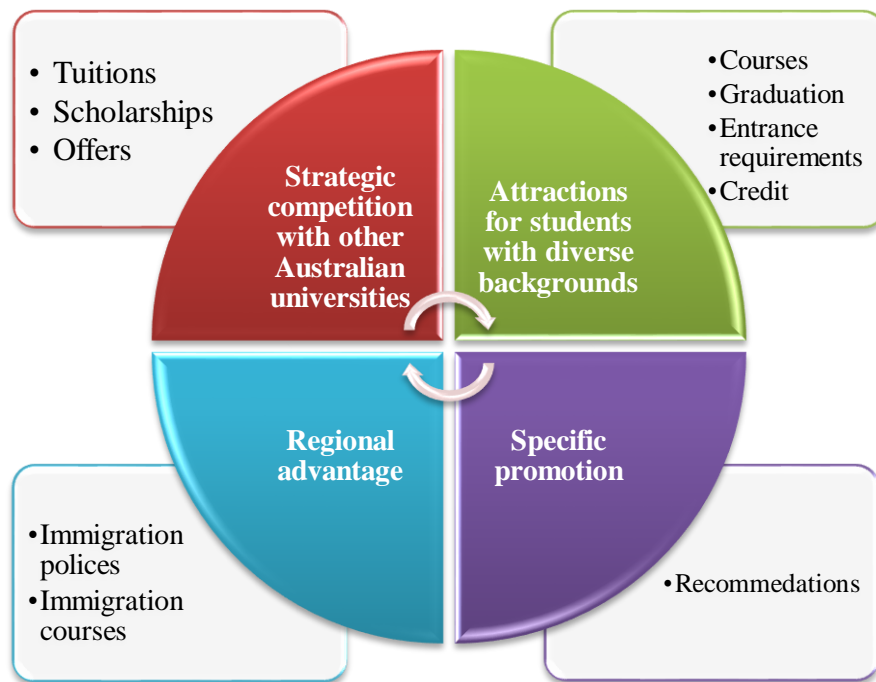
While hopefully providing valuable insights into this topic, this research is not without limitations. Three limitations are worthy of exploration in future research. First, the data collected was ex post facto. In other words, participants who were studying at UTAS recollected what motivated them to select UTAS, a regional Australian university before coming to Australia, so pre-departure motivations in their memories were perhaps distorted by their UTAS experience. The point, motivations before coming to UTAS, had been underlined in the instructions of the questionnaire, and were also repeatedly emphasized in interviews, in attempts to avoid, or minimise responses being influenced by their latter UTAS experiences. Future research could try to investigate Chinese students prior to, or immediately upon, their arrival in Australia. Second, this research is a snapshot of motivations from Chinese international students so far. However, the Australian international higher education market is changing rapidly. Offering similar specialist courses to other Australian universities, or altering Tasmanian immigration policies and so on, will almost certainly directly influence changes in Chinese international students' motivations. Thus, further research is needed to pay attention to changes of Chinese international students' motivations towards the Australian region. Third, this research is a case study of UTAS. This case may or may not be a representative of other regional Australian universities on the grounds that besides the similarities, different Australian regions have distinct features, which may be attractions for Chinese international students. In the future, research conducted in different Australian regions will facilitate the development of a comprehensive insight on Chinese international students' motivations in selecting regional Australian universities.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In order to explore why an increasing number of Chinese international students, perhaps almost certainly under the guidance of the international education policies, “go off the beaten track” to enrol at UTAS, a regional Australian university, instead of following the majority in attending metropolitan Australian universities, this research analysed the UTAS choice of Chinese international students through identifying underlying motivations. This study has addressed the critical question of what motivates Chinese international students to choose UTAS, a regional Australian university, in the decision-making process of seeking to undertake Australian international higher education.

From the research, Chinese international students’ core motivations were categorised into four dimensions (Figure 2): (1) strategic competition with other Australian universities; (2) attractions for students with diverse backgrounds; (3) regional advantage; (4) specific promotion. First, Chinese international students generally realised the strengths of UTAS in competition with other Australian universities. Thus, they were motivated in three aspects: lower tuition costs, a large number of available scholarships for future and current international students, and quicker offers of enrolments as well as lower entrance requirements. Second, diverse types of Chinese international students commonly were attracted by UTAS’s universal inclusiveness. Joint education programs were an official and core approach to bring students from Chinese universities to study at UTAS. Students who were interested in special fields were greatly driven to undertake those specialist courses at UTAS. If Chinese international students had poor previous academic records or would like to transfer to other majors of study, UTAS welcomed them by sending out the signal of ease of graduation. For those Chinese international students who had thoughts to change their majors, lower entrance requirements were also a strong attraction from UTAS. Credit transfer acceptance from UTAS was a crucial motivation for Chinese international students in joint education programs between Chinese universities and UTAS, and those who had different study pathways from different countries or education levels. Third, when it comes to the advantage of regional Australia where UTAS was located, immigration prospects benefiting from immigration policies and immigration courses, became a very significant motivation for Chinese international students who intended to immigrate to Australia after graduation from UTAS. Four, UTAS promoted itself via two types of groups: education agencies; and friends, relatives and parents. Recommendations from those two

groups motivated Chinese international students to select UTAS. In addition, other small-scale motivations were also identified in this study, but they either lacked sufficient evidence to show their importance in making the choice of regional Australian higher education, or participants in this study held different views on those motivations. Motivations from the above four dimensions were not mutually exclusive, instead, different types of Chinese international students enrolled at UTAS were possibly only motivated by one of those factors, or could be attracted simultaneously to a bunch of them.



**Figure 2.** Motivations of Chinese International Students for Selecting Regional Australian Higher Education in a Multidimensional Exploration. Source: the Authors.

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*Going Off the Beaten Track: Exploring Chinese International Students' Motivations in Selecting a Regional Australian University* 119

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