Research Article

Factors Influencing the Decision-Making Processes of Chinese Graduate Students to Study in Thailand: A Grounded Theory Approach

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the motivations and decision-making processes of Chinese graduate students in selecting Thailand as their study destination, utilizing a grounded theory approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 40 master's and doctoral students from Khon Kaen University and Chiang Mai University. The analysis revealed two primary categories of motivations: internal and external. Internal motivations include study impressions, individual experiences, career status, and future aspirations, reflecting personal growth and career development needs. External motivations encompass study abroad observations, environmental factors, policy frameworks, and social influences, highlighting the role of external conditions in shaping decisions. Findings indicate that external motivations, particularly the study abroad environment and policy support, play a dominant role in influencing students' decisions, while internal motivations focus on personal development goals. This research provides insights into the multifaceted nature of study abroad decisions and contributes to understanding the dynamics of international talent mobility. The findings also offer practical implications for policymakers and educational institutions in improving support for international students.

Introduction

The competition for global talent has intensified due to advancements in technology and industry. Countries are striving to gain a strategic advantage in this new era. In this intense international talent competition, globalized talent, who possess cross-cultural communication skills and understand international rules, have become the focal point of this competition and contest (Liu, Shen, & Liu, 2013; Du, Duan, & Xia, 2019; Ma & Zhang, 2019). As China continues to expand its openness and advance the "Belt and Road" initiative, the demand for international talent has sharply risen (Liu, 2015; Du & Ma, 2017). Sending students abroad as part of cross-border talent cultivation collaboration is one of the primary methods for countries to train global talent. Although cross-border talent cultivation is often influenced

by political, economic, and cultural factors between nations or regions, it essentially represents the internationalization of these aspects, including education (Raghuram, 2021). Therefore, cross-border talent cultivation is not only an important means for countries and regions to achieve innovative development but also a key tool for cultural exchange and shaping international image (Ge, 2020; Zhou & Yuan, 2021). The global mobility of Chinese students provides critical support for China's talent strategy, accelerating the country's development into a major center for global talent and innovation.

　　　The rapid expansion of global student mobility is one of the most notable international phenomena of the 21st century. Scholars in the field of education regard the cross-border movement of students as the result of learning behavior, thus focusing on international students' curriculum design, teaching methods, and cross-cultural adaptation (Ye, 2020; Bui, Selvarajah & Vine, 2021). However, in the context of rapid globalization, knowledge exchange, and information development, the cross-border movement of global students has gone beyond the narrow scope of education, becoming intertwined with the world's complex economic, cultural, and political factors (Freeman, 2010; Hou, Du, Duan & et al., 2019; Hou, Du, Liu & et al., 2019). Most existing research, from a liberal perspective, views student mobility as a free choice made by individuals after comparing cost differences (Choudaha, 2017; Teichler, 2017). However, recent studies have begun to reflect on this theoretical framework. Bamberger et al., from the national scale, explored the connections and contradictions of neoliberalism in understanding the internationalization of higher education, arguing that neoliberalism cannot fully explain the motivations, behaviors, and nature of higher education internationalization in many countries (Bamberger, Morris & Yemini, 2019). Fakunle, from the perspective of individual students, also critically examined neoliberalism, noting that it overlooks non-economic factors in the student mobility process, such as the role of national-level internationalization policies (Fakunle, 2021).

　　　This theoretical framework proposes that student mobility is not solely a result of individuals' rational and independent decision-making. Instead, political, institutional, and relational structures of nations play a critical role in shaping these decisions. As global competition intensifies, the race for talent in science, technology, and innovation has expanded into the domain of international education. Notably, some developed countries have even begun imposing restrictions on traditional talent exchange programs. In this complex and competitive environment, understanding the spatiotemporal dynamics of China's interdependence with other nations in cross-border talent cultivation becomes essential. Is student mobility primarily driven by the pursuit of quality educational resources through geographic migration, or are there deeper systemic mechanisms at play (Lee, 2014; Hou, Du, Duan et al., 2019; Hou, Du, Liu et al., 2020)? This study addresses these questions by examining the motivations and mechanisms underlying student mobility, particularly in the context of Thailand—a country that holds a strategic role in China's "Belt and Road" initiative. By analyzing the multiple factors influencing Chinese graduate students' decisions to study in Thailand, this research seeks to uncover the internal logic and external dynamics shaping this mobility process. The findings will contribute to both theoretical understanding and practical applications in the field of international talent mobility.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the internal and external factors influencing Chinese graduate students' motivations to study in Thailand.

2. To categorize and conceptualize these factors using attribution theory and grounded research methods.

3. To analyze the role of policy, institutional structures, and social influences in shaping the decision-making process.

Research Methodology

1. Research Subjects

The study focused on 40 Chinese graduate students (master's and doctoral levels) enrolled at Chiang Mai University and Khon Kaen University. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that they met the criteria relevant to the research objectives, including enrollment within the past three years. This approach facilitated the identification of diverse experiences and motivations.

Table 1 Information on Research Subjects

Gender	University	Number of Master's Students	Number of Doctoral Students	Total Number of Students
Female	Chiang Mai University	7	7	14
Female	Khon Kaen University	7	7	14
Total Females				28
Male	Chiang Mai University	3	3	6
Male	Khon Kaen University	3	3	6
Total Males				12
Total				**40**

2. Research Methods

The decision to pursue graduate studies in Thailand is a complex behavioral process, which cannot be adequately described or revealed through quantitative research due to its richness and subtlety. Currently, there is no conclusive explanation for the motivations of Chinese students pursuing graduate studies in Thailand, making it suitable to use the grounded theory approach for conducting qualitative research. The publication of the classic work *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* by Glaser and Strauss in 1967 marked the birth of Grounded Theory. Grounded Theory is a methodology for discovering theory from data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Since its inception, Grounded Theory has had a clear mission: "to develop theory through qualitative methods" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory can uncover hidden, deeper factors and connections using collected data, and it is effective for explaining the "how" and "why" questions. It is widely applicable to research involving social, processual, and situational issues (Yuan & Zheng, 2023).

The data were analyzed using a grounded theory methodology, which included open coding,

axial coding, and selective coding. This iterative process allowed for the identification of key themes and the development of a conceptual framework categorizing internal and external motivations.

3. Data Collection

This study collected data through in-depth face-to-face interviews with respondents about their experiences during their study abroad period. Some interviews were conducted via video calls due to the respondents' time constraints or travel inconveniences. Respondents were contacted in advance and informed about the interview topics. The interview content focused on the academic adaptation issues of Chinese students during their postgraduate studies in Thailand, aiming to explore how Chinese students describe, understand, and interpret their academic adaptation experiences while studying in Thailand. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. The text data from the interviews were selected as the basic information for analysis. The texts were screened for content related to academic adaptation from the interviews of 40 respondents, and preprocessing was conducted to remove irrelevant information and overly repetitive content. Similar terms with the same meaning were standardized, such as replacing "domestic" with "China," "Thai classmates" with "Thai students," and "Chinese people" or "Chinese classmates" with "Chinese students," etc.

The Conceptual Framework

This study constructs a conceptual framework based on Attribution Theory to analyze the motivations and decision-making processes of Chinese graduate students studying in Thailand. Attribution Theory posits that individuals' attribution of their experiences influences their motivation and decision-making processes. This study applies the theory to explore how different motivations impact Chinese graduate students' study abroad choices. The framework categorizes motivations into internal motivations and external motivations, aligning with Weiner's (1979, 1992) distinction between internal and external attributions.

Internal motivations include study impressions, individual experiences, current career status, and development vision, which are primarily attributed to personal factors. These motivations reflect students' aspirations for academic and career development, as well as their past experiences that influence their study choices.

External motivations consist of study abroad observation, study abroad environment, policy environment, and social relationships, shaped by external conditions. Factors such as visa policies, scholarship opportunities, and institutional reputation play a significant role in influencing students' decisions, while peer recommendations and supervisor guidance also contribute to their choices.

By linking motivation types with attribution theory, this framework explains how personal factors and external conditions together influence students' study abroad decisions. The study findings indicate that different combinations of internal and external motivations drive students' choices, highlighting the interplay between personal aspirations and external conditions. This framework provides a theoretical foundation for analyzing the study abroad decision-making process of Chinese graduate students.
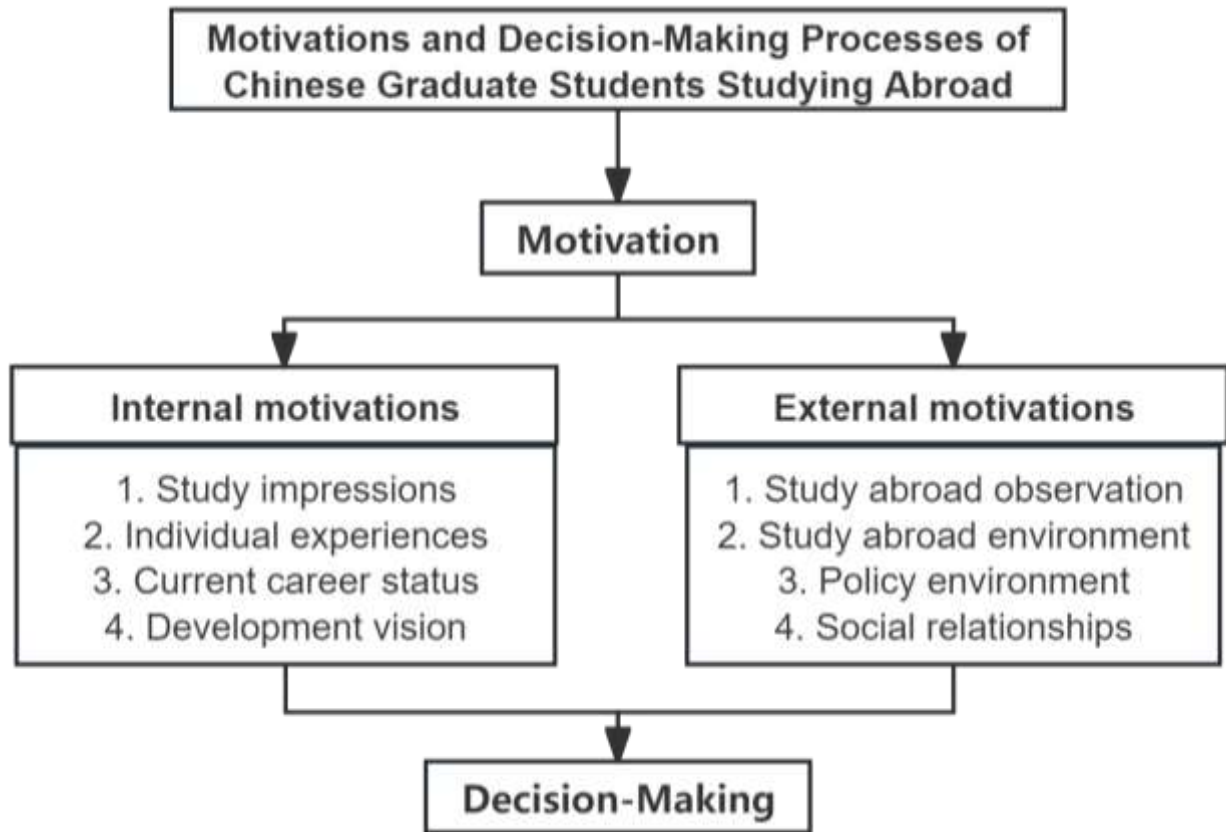
Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Research Results

To understand the overall factors driving Chinese international students to study abroad, this study analyzed the collected textual data from master's and doctoral students at Khon Kaen University (KKU) and Chiang Mai University (CMU) through a step-by-step coding process, utilizing open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding serves as the foundational work in grounded theory research, involving line-by-line analysis, organization, and comparison of the original textual data to uncover initial concepts and generate initial categories (Chen, 2015). This study reinterprets the original data based on the logical connections between concepts and categories. During the open coding phase, a total of 515 conceptualized items were generated. Similar concepts were grouped into the same category, resulting in 25 categorized items (see Table 2). These 25 categories, ranked from the most to the least in terms of frequency, are as follows: study costs, certification policies, developmental challenges, cross-cultural experiences, return on investment observation, promotion potential, academic reputation, family support, life experiences, motivation for personal achievement, returnee benefit policies, visa policies, work experience, academic programs, advanced education systems, language learning opportunities, quality of life observation, career challenges, career goals, peer support, educational background, job satisfaction, supervisor support, faculty strength, and scholarship funding.

Table 2 Information on Research Subjects

Original Text Excerpts	Conceptualization	Categorization
I feel that studying in Thailand allows me to experience and learn about Thailand's history, traditions, social customs, and way of life.	Thai cultural experience	Cross-cultural experience
I've heard that many Thai universities have graduate programs designed similarly to those in Western countries.	Internationalized education	Advanced education system
Since my undergraduate major was Thai, I felt that pursuing a master's degree here would further improve my language skills.	Language improvement	Language learning opportunities
When I was a graduate student, I served as a class advisor and taught Chinese language courses to Thai students. Over time, I became more familiar with the culture and liked it so much that I decided to pursue my PhD in Thailand.	Work experience	Work experience
I did a one-year exchange here before and really enjoyed it, so after graduating, I checked out some schools and decided to come back.	Exchange programs	Educational background
I had traveled to Thailand before and felt it was pretty nice, so when the opportunity arose, I came to study.	Travel experience	Life experiences
I currently work at a university, but due to my academic qualifications, I've always been a contract employee. My undergraduate institution has high requirements for qualifications.	Academic qualification threshold	Developmental challenges
Sometimes I feel that my current qualifications and knowledge are insufficient for my job, which makes me think about pursuing further studies.	Lack of job skills	Career challenges
I didn't particularly like my previous job, so I applied to study here.	Dislike for the job	Job satisfaction
I want to get a PhD so that I can return home and apply for an associate professor title, teach, and mentor students.	Personal career goals	Career goals
The main reason for pursuing a PhD is to get points for promotion back home.	Job title requirement	Promotion potential
I do have a desire to continue studying, especially after I graduated from my master's program and started a business. During that time, the pandemic hit hard, which made me want to go back to school.	Desire for education	Motivation for personal achievement
It seems that people who study abroad tend to find better jobs when they return.	Employment advantage	Return on investment observation

Table 2 Information on Research Subjects (continue)

Original Text Excerpts	Conceptualization	Categorization
Seeing their social media posts, it seems that international students travel a lot during their studies. They seem wealthy and are having a great time.	Freedom in life	Quality of life observation
The ranking of the school in the country is also a factor, because after studying abroad, we still need to consider employment and social reputation.	School reputation	Academic reputation
This school offers a public health program, which only two schools in China have, and they have long waiting lists.	Matching academic program	Academic programs
I checked the resumes of their professors on the official website, and some of them have impressive backgrounds, having studied in Western countries.	Faculty expertise	Faculty strength
Tuition and living costs here are relatively low, so it won't put too much financial pressure on me. Compared to developed countries like the U.S. and Europe, the overall expenses are much more affordable.	High cost-performance ratio	Study costs
At my school, students pursuing a PhD abroad can get partial tuition reimbursement. It used to cover all tuition, but since more people have been going to Southeast Asia for PhDs in recent years, the reimbursement has been reduced.	Influence of school policies	Returnee benefit policies
Our approach is that if we don't get a scholarship, we simply won't go.	Scholarship application	Scholarship funding
It seems that Thai visas are quite easy to obtain. I asked around, and no one has really had any issues.	Ease of obtaining a visa	Visa policies
I would first check if the school is on the Ministry of Education's recognized list, because if the degree isn't recognized after graduation, it would all be for nothing.	Recognition of the school	Certification policies
My parents have a relatively open educational mindset, as they wanted me to come to Thailand to broaden my horizons.	Family educational values	Family support
Compared to domestic programs, there seem to be more available spots in international master's and PhD programs, which is why I came to Khon Kaen based on my professor's recommendation.	Supervisor's academic recommendation	Supervisor support
A classmate mentioned they were applying for a PhD in Southeast Asia and asked if I wanted to join, and I thought, why not? So I applied.	Study abroad companionship	Peer support

Axial coding is the process of linking the initial categorized content generated from open coding, identifying and establishing logical connections between the categories. This allows the initially categorized content to converge more closely in terms of their properties and attributes, thereby forming higher-level core categories (Chen, 2015). Axial coding essentially involves further clustering analysis of the categories, where the focus of the research shifts from the original data to the coding itself. In the axial coding stage of this study, the 25 categories were grouped and assigned new attributes, resulting in eight main categories: study impressions, individual experiences, current career status, development vision, study abroad observation, study abroad environment, policy environment, and social relationships. Finally, through continuous comparison of the original data, two core categories driving the behaviors of international students were identified: internal motivations and proactive external motivations (see Table 3).

Table 3 Three-Level Coding Process of Studying Abroad in Thailand

Open coding	Axial coding	Selective coding
Cross-cultural experience (30), advanced education system (16), language learning opportunities (16)	Study impressions (12.04%)	Internal motivations (46.02%)
Work experience (18), educational background (12), life experiences (24)	Individual experiences (10.49%)	
Developmental challenges (31), career challenges (15), job satisfaction (12)	Current career status (11.26%)	
Career goals (14), promotion potential (26), motivation for personal achievement (23)	Development vision (12.23%)	
Return on investment observation (27), quality of life observation (16)	Study abroad observation (8.35%)	External motivations (53.98%)
Academic reputation (26), academic programs (18), faculty strength (11), study costs (40)	Study abroad environment (18.45%)	
Returnee benefit policies (20), scholarship funding (9), visa policies (20), certification policies (40)	Policy environment (17.28%)	
Family support (26), supervisor support (12), peer support (13)	Social relationships (9.90%)	

The motivations driving Chinese international students to study abroad can be divided into internal and external factors, with internal motivations accounting for 46.02% and external motivations for 53.98%. These two main categories encompass different sub-factors, each influencing the decision-making process of the students.

Internal motivations accounted for 46.02% of the total motivations identified. These

motivations include study impressions (12.04%), individual experiences (10.49%), current career status (11.26%), and development vision (12.23%). Study impressions encompass factors such as cross-cultural experiences, advanced education systems, and language learning opportunities. Individual experiences include previous work, education, and travel experiences that exposed students to international settings and influenced their study choices. Current career status refers to career stagnation, dissatisfaction with jobs, or lack of promotion opportunities, driving students to pursue further education abroad. Development vision relates to long-term career goals, promotion potential, and motivation for personal achievement.

External motivations, comprising 53.98% of the total motivations, include study abroad observation (8.35%), study abroad environment (18.45%), policy environment (17.28%), and social relationships (9.90%). Study abroad observation involves students assessing the experiences of peers who studied abroad, influencing their perception of career benefits and quality of life improvements. Study abroad environment consists of institutional factors such as academic reputation, faculty strength, and tuition costs, which play a role in students' choices. Policy environment includes returnee benefit policies, scholarship funding, visa convenience, and certification recognition, affecting the feasibility of studying abroad. Social relationships involve family, supervisor, and peer support, which provide guidance and encouragement for study abroad decisions.

These findings directly align with the conceptual framework by distinguishing between internal and external motivations and contribute to addressing the research objectives by identifying and categorizing the key motivational factors influencing Chinese graduate students' study abroad decisions. The results provide empirical support for the framework's classification of motivations and their respective influences.

Discussions

This study, grounded in attribution theory, explored the motivations and decision-making processes of Chinese graduate students studying in Thailand. By categorizing motivations into internal and external factors, this research aligns with the theoretical framework and provides an empirical understanding of study abroad decision-making. The findings indicate that internal motivations, including study impressions, individual experiences, current career status, and development vision, are primarily shaped by personal factors and self-perception. These align with internal attributions in Attribution Theory, where students perceive their study abroad decisions as stemming from personal aspirations, career needs, and self-improvement goals. The study confirms that students with strong career ambitions or personal growth motivations are more likely to actively plan for studying abroad, reinforcing the role of internal attributions in shaping proactive decision-making. In contrast, external motivations, such as study abroad observation, study abroad environment, policy environment, and social relationships, correspond to external attributions, where external conditions significantly influence decision-making. The findings highlight that students who choose Thailand as a study destination often do so due to cost-effectiveness, policy support, and peer influence rather than purely academic aspirations. This underscores the practical and utilitarian nature of many students' decisions, shaped by external factors such as economic affordability and degree accessibility.

These findings reinforce the conceptual framework by demonstrating how study abroad motivations align with Attribution Theory. The distinction between internally and externally driven motivations helps explain variations in decision-making processes. Students with internal attributions tend to perceive their decisions as self-determined, seeking career progression and personal development. Meanwhile, students influenced by external factors often base their decisions on financial feasibility, policy advantages, and social influences. This categorization validates the framework's ability to capture the interplay between personal aspirations and external conditions in shaping study abroad choices.

Compared to previous research, which primarily focuses on students studying in developed countries such as Europe and the United States, this study reveals both similarities and differences in study abroad motivations. While students in Western contexts often pursue high-quality education, career development, and personal growth (Liu & Fang, 2011; Yin, Wang, Li, Gui & Zhang, 2020), Chinese students in Thailand place a stronger emphasis on cost-effectiveness and practical considerations. Unlike students in Western destinations who prioritize access to prestigious institutions, students in Thailand tend to focus on economic affordability, shorter study duration, and fewer financial requirements (He, 2020). Additionally, the decision to study in Thailand is closely tied to structural factors in China, such as degree inflation, increasing competition for domestic graduate school admission, and employment pressures (Tian & Gong, 2023). This trend has contributed to a strong utilitarian approach to study abroad, with students viewing Thailand as a strategic alternative to cope with domestic educational and labor market constraints. Furthermore, while studying in Western countries is often associated with long-term career and immigration prospects, students in Thailand are more likely to consider short-term career benefits and degree recognition upon returning to China. Due to the relatively lower international reputation of Thai institutions compared to Western universities, students must navigate the challenges of degree recognition and labor market expectations upon completion of their studies. These findings highlight how study abroad motivations vary by destination and are shaped by broader economic and social conditions.

Originality and Body of Knowledge

This study explores the motivations of Chinese graduate students studying in Thailand, aiming to provide new perspectives for research in this field. While existing studies on study-abroad motivations predominantly focus on students in English-speaking countries, research on Southeast Asia remains relatively limited, particularly regarding the motivations of Chinese graduate students. By analyzing motivations in this context, this study seeks to offer valuable contributions by filling this research gap and expanding existing literature.

A key contribution of this study is its identification of new influencing factors in study abroad decision-making, particularly in the Southeast Asian context. Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasize academic quality and career advancement in Western countries, this research highlights the importance of affordability, policy frameworks, and social influences in shaping Chinese students' decisions to study in Thailand. The study finds that economic considerations, including tuition fees and living costs, are major drivers behind students' choices, distinguishing them from those studying in the

West. Additionally, government policies, visa accessibility, and post-graduation employment opportunities emerge as crucial external motivators, further emphasizing the distinctive characteristics of the Southeast Asian study-abroad experience.

This study also contributes to the broader understanding of study-abroad motivations in non-Western contexts. While previous literature has focused on students in Europe and North America, this research provides insights into Chinese students' motivations in a Southeast Asian setting, an area that has been underexplored. Furthermore, it offers empirical data that can be utilized for comparative research on international student mobility. By contrasting study-abroad motivations in Thailand with those in Western countries, this research highlights the utilitarian approach taken by many Chinese students, emphasizing affordability and practicality over academic prestige. These findings add depth to the existing knowledge of international student decision-making and provide a foundation for future studies on study-abroad trends in emerging destinations.

Conclusions

This study highlights the dominance of external factors, such as affordability and supportive policies, in influencing Chinese graduate students' decisions to study in Thailand. By addressing the interplay of internal and external motivations, the research offers valuable insights into the dynamics of international education in Southeast Asia. The findings emphasize Thailand's potential as a cost-effective and accessible destination, contributing to the broader understanding of global student mobility and informing strategies to enhance the country's appeal to international students.

Recommendations

1. Policymaking Recommendations

Given the significant role that external motivators play in Chinese students' study-abroad decisions, it is essential to implement targeted strategies that address financial, academic, and institutional factors in a comprehensive manner. Financial and policy support should be prioritized to reduce administrative and economic barriers for prospective students. Establishing targeted scholarships and tuition reduction schemes could significantly lower financial burdens, making Thailand a more attractive study destination. Additionally, simplifying visa procedures and strengthening degree recognition agreements with Chinese educational authorities would facilitate smoother transitions for international students, further reinforcing Thailand's appeal as a higher education hub.

At the academic level, language barriers and cultural adaptation challenges continue to affect students' study-abroad experiences. Expanding Thai and English language training programs while introducing structured cross-cultural adaptation initiatives would improve students' ability to integrate into local academic and social environments. Universities should also develop comprehensive mentorship and advisory services to guide students in both their academic pursuits and career planning, ensuring that their study-abroad experience aligns with their long-term aspirations.

Beyond individual student support, strengthening the global competitiveness of Thai universities is crucial for sustaining international student recruitment. Enhancing institutional branding and expanding collaborations with Chinese universities through dual-degree programs and exchange

initiatives would help increase visibility and attract a broader range of students. Moreover, leveraging alumni networks to build strong career pathways for graduates can further solidify the value of a Thai degree in the international job market. By continuously improving academic standards and post-graduation opportunities, Thai universities can further establish themselves as an attractive destination for high-quality yet cost-effective education.

2. Recommendations for Future Research

This study focuses solely on master's and doctoral students from Chiang Mai University and Khon Kaen University, lacking data on other regions of Thailand, such as central and southern Thailand, as well as undergraduate students. This results in a relatively single-source dataset, with limited diversity. Future research should emphasize utilizing multiple channels and diverse data sources to enhance the scientific rigor and persuasiveness of the research conclusions. Additionally, while this study identified three types of study abroad motivations through grounded theory, this does not imply that all possible motivations for studying abroad have been covered. Finally, as qualitative research heavily relies on the subjective judgments of researchers, future studies could apply other empirical methods to verify and refine the findings.

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