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Marketing Strategies for Internationalization in China's Higher Education: An Ally or Barrier for Sustainable Development?

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Abstract: In this era of the commodification of higher education, the dominating concept of higher education now is that it functions as a commercial product for the purpose of national economic development. Consequently, the free market rules linked to consumerism seem to rule and shape how higher education should operate. A market-driven strategy may offer a benefit targeting the internationalization of higher education at the cost of sustainable development. This study investigates whether a commercialized strategy in the marketing of internationalized higher education helps or hinders sustainable progress in higher education. Adopting a qualitative method, this paper—the first of its kind in China—aims to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the rationales and current marketing strategies for international students. Here, the goal is to examine whether such strategies promote or hinder the development of sustainable education. The findings revealed that many internationalization marketing strategies may not survive well into the long term, and greater attention should be paid to enhancing the quality of international students and the quality of education they receive, as well as a sustainable higher education system. Institutions of higher education should rebrand themselves by enhancing the quality of what and how they teach, and cultivating competent international human resources.

Keywords: internationalization; international students; marketing strategies; provincial higher education institutions; sustainable development



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1. Introduction

The core function of education is to enhance national development by increasing people's productivity and skills [1,2]. In this era of the commodification of higher education (HE), the notion of HE existing as a “global commodity” is that learning can be purchased by a consumer, instead of being something to undertake for its own sake, such as personal enjoyment in studying [2,3]. The inclusion of education as one of the 12 service sectors in the General Agreement on Trade in Services serves as concrete evidence that the import and export of education programs and services generates significant potential for lucrative trade opportunities [4].

The expansion of cross-border education has been made possible by changes in government policy and funding arrangements for higher education institutions (HEIs) and a decline in domestic student enrollment [5,6]. The need to seek alternative funding sources has led many universities and colleges to aggressively develop marketing strategies to attract more international students [5–7]. The efforts to generate income from international students appears to be successful, as international student mobility (ISM) has evolved into a multi-billion-dollar enterprise, yielding approximately \$40 billion in annual revenue for the United States alone [8]. This competition in market share makes international students' preferences as consumers a very interesting subject to analyze [9]. Their consumer-based

behaviors rule and shape the nature of HE. Hence, the internationalization of higher education (IHE) and the decision to undertake overseas study are greatly guided by commercial marketing strategies that can govern the whole process.

China, now functioning as an advanced market economy, is aspiring to be a new academic hub; hence, it has steadily improved its market share of international students by implementing aggressive marketing strategies [10–12]. However, the current practices in internationalization strategies in China's HE sector have received some criticism. For instance, the substantial financial support extended to international students, coupled with their underwhelming academic performance, and the significant disparities in admission criteria between domestic and international students have garnered widespread public attention and ignited sharp debates [13]. Attracting international students and enhancing their post-graduation retention has emerged as a key national-level political strategy, as well as a priority for major cities, provinces, and universities in China [13]. In this fiercely competitive market, it is important to explore whether China's efforts to attract international students can be an ally or barrier in the sustainable development of HE.

Research Gap and Scope: Objective and Questions

The HE landscape has undergone significant changes in the past decade due to the internationalization of the student learning process [14]. A growing body of studies now focus on international students and some scholars advocate for a national-level policy for marketing HE to this cohort [7–16]. Kizilbash and Lomer, among others, support branding national HE systems to augment countries' market shares [17,18].

Others concentrate on institutional marketing strategies for international students by enhancing academic quality and institutional reputation [6] or university branding [19]. In this modern digital era, scholars emphasize the significance of electronic/online approaches, suggesting strategies such as internet advertising [20], website design [19], AI-enabled voice assistants [21], and leveraging social media platforms [22,23] to attract international students. The role of education agents in recruiting international students has also garnered much attention [24–26]. While the majority of research on marketing education for international students is conducted in Western countries [27], Chinese scholars predominantly focus their attention on the implementation of international marketing strategies in prestigious universities [12,13]. There is a dearth of research examining the role of Chinese provincial universities' practice in attracting international students, and a sustainable HE system. This study is the first of its kind in China that tries to bridge this void by comparing the recruitment strategies for international students between central and provincial universities in China. As such, this study aims to better understand the national and institutional rationales for international students in China, and the current marketing strategies employed by China's HEIs. This is undertaken in order to ensure whether these strategies promote or impede the sustainable development of international students' education. The following research questions are developed to achieve these objectives:

- RQ 1. How are the rationales being justified for the marketing strategies adopted?
- RQ 2. Do institutions' marketing strategies in attracting international students differ?
- RQ 3. Can these strategies help or hinder a sustainable higher education system?

2. Literature Review

This section is a literature review on sustainable development and sustainable education, followed by a discussion of the rationales for international students. Thereafter, it delves into the current marketing strategies employed by HEIs.

2.1. Sustainable Development and Sustainable Education

Sustainable development became a “buzzword term” during the 1970s [28], notably popularized globally by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). The WCED defined sustainable development as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” [29] (p. 43).

This transformative paradigm prioritizes human potential while aligning with the imperative to ensure that social, economic, and ecological well-being are viable, simultaneously acknowledging their profound interconnectedness [30].

However, environmental and national development relies on the establishment of a sustainable education and learning system with appropriate policies in place [30,31]. Alam and Sterling state that sustainable education refers to the delivery of knowledge that ensures balanced national progress, encompassing economic and social development while also considering human needs [30–32]. Consequently, there is increasing acknowledgement of the significance of education in sustainable development, and of the unique role that universities assume in guiding individuals, institutions, and societies toward a future characterized by greater sustainability [33].

HE is widely acknowledged as bearing a greater moral responsibility in serving as a physical exemplar of sustainability and hub for research and educational expertise [28]. By incorporating the goals of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into teaching and learning, universities are preparing future graduates to critically evaluate and constructively engage with the SDGs, thereby contributing to the global sustainability agenda [33]. However, universities are often criticized for their unsustainable practices, such as producing leaders who are unable to tackle pressing sustainability issues, as well as producing graduates who lack ecological literacy and are ill equipped to contribute to a sustainable future [28]. In HE, with the purpose of addressing sustainability problems and educating the citizenry to embrace sustainability, a fundamental reconsideration of universities' purpose and educational approaches is essential [28].

2.2. Rationales for ISM: Income Generation or Dollar Diplomacy

The rationales for internationalization have traditionally been categorized into four groups: social/cultural, political, academic, and economic [34,35]. This category also applies to the rationales driving countries to compete for international students. Economically, many countries, and particularly the HEIs in them, view selling education services and programs internationally as a means to diversify sources of income and compensate for diminishing or stagnant public funding [5]. Full fee-paying international students are considered to not only provide universities with immediate income crucial for their financial stability but also help to build national economies [13]. Politically, governments have considered recruiting international students as a form of implementing economic policy or as a means of selling a nation's "soft power" [13,18,36,37]. International students, acting as youthful ambassadors, who, having developed a deeper understanding of the economic and political interests of their host country, emerge as playing a vital role in building connections between host and source nations [13,38].

Academically, the enrollment of international students elevates competitiveness, bolsters reputation, and fortifies brand image [39,40]. These elements are considered to be effective indicators of the robustness of a nation's HE system [41]. International students enrolled in research programs also enhance the academic viability of the university by actively participating in research projects and collaborating with their supervisors as co-authors on papers [13,39]. Culturally, international students are recognized for their contribution to cultural diversity, their infusion of various worldviews into courses and campuses [39], fostering intercultural understanding and communication, and their utilization of a shared language [42].

2.3. Marketing Strategies for International Students

Up until the 1980s, the concept of marketing research was not widely known and generally unpopular among many HEIs [43]. Later, marketing gradually became one of the tools that could assist HEIs in surviving within an increasingly competitive environment [44]. As globalization advanced in the early 21st century, HEIs began seeking new markets to expand their enrollment numbers, and increasingly employed marketing concepts, including "student market segmentation, institutional/country image, and

positioning and branding, to compete in the global market” for recruiting international students [44] (p. 7).

Currently, universities in different countries employ a range of strategies to attract international students [13]. These strategies include establishing a campus environment that is academically and socially supportive, participating in international education fairs and recruitment events, building international strategic alliances, utilizing recruitment agents, and offering transnational programs [24,42,45,46]. Currently enrolled international students and alumni, as well as social media and other information technologies, have also been deployed in universities’ advertising and marketing campaigns [13,22]. Traditional HE marketers are facing competition with emerging nations’ marketing professionals in the international education market [47]. It is thus imperative for international marketers and university administrators to better understand, firstly, the major markets of HE, and secondly, how international marketing shapes the educational discourse in these markets [6].

2.4. Sustainable HE and Sustainable IHE

The concept of sustainable HE has arisen in answer to the call for universities to take the lead in guiding society toward a more viable future [48,49]. It is regarded as a unique yet interdisciplinary field of study and practice within the realm of sustainability science and education [50–52]. HE is widely acknowledged as a significant driver for advancing sustainable development [53–55]. Given their societal responsibility to advance knowledge, nurture leaders, and contribute to overall societal advancement and participation [55], HEIs are expected to serve as hubs of sustainability innovation and excellence [56].

IHE is also considered a crucial element in advancing the sustainable development of HE [57] since it offers a platform for interdisciplinary collaboration, global networking, and the exchange of ideas among institutions, faculty staff, researchers, and students [58]. Also, it fosters opportunities for innovative teaching methods, diversified delivery approaches, and the increased mobility of students, programs, and education institutions [58]. It enhances productivity and reshapes the education system into a platform for cultivating high-achieving professionals who can excel in a fiercely competitive global context [58]. In this way, IHE serves as an efficient means to contribute to the sustainability of higher education.

3. Research Design

The rationale for using a qualitative approach is explained before specifying the region and universities. The process includes outlining the method of data collection and analysis, discussing the sampling techniques and triangulation, and concluding with comments on the importance of coding and confidentiality.

3.1. Method

The research problems outlined above require exploration for a comprehensive understanding [59], so for this study, the qualitative method was chosen as the best approach. As Patton argues, qualitative research is an endeavor to comprehend unique situations within a specific context and the interactions occurring therein [60]. This study aims to explore what has motivated China’s HEIs to join in the campaign for international students, and their subsequent marketing practices, as well as the sustainability of these policies and international students’ education. We collect data to construct concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than deducing postulates or hypotheses for testing [61]. For these reasons, the qualitative method is ideal for this study.

3.2. Regions and Universities Selection

China consists of 34 provinces, municipalities, autonomous regions, and special administrative regions, categorized into four economic zones: the Eastern, Western, Central, and Northeastern regions [62]. Of these, the Western region, covering 70.6% of the national

land area, stands out as the largest, hosting 763 universities and colleges, accounting for 24.83% of the overall number of HEIs in China [63].

Sichuan, located in the Western region, is noteworthy for several reasons. With a population of 83,674,866, it constitutes 6% of China's total population, ranking fifth nationwide. In 2021, Sichuan's GDP reached approximately CNY5.39 trillion, firmly establishing it as a leading entity in the region [64] (Figure 1). Currently, Sichuan hosts 137 HEIs, holding the top position in the Western region [63] (Figure 2). This underscores the pivotal role of Sichuan's HE system, shaping its economic sustainability, social progress, and the advancement of the Western region. It has broader implications for the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River and the entire nation. Consequently, Sichuan is selected as the focal region.

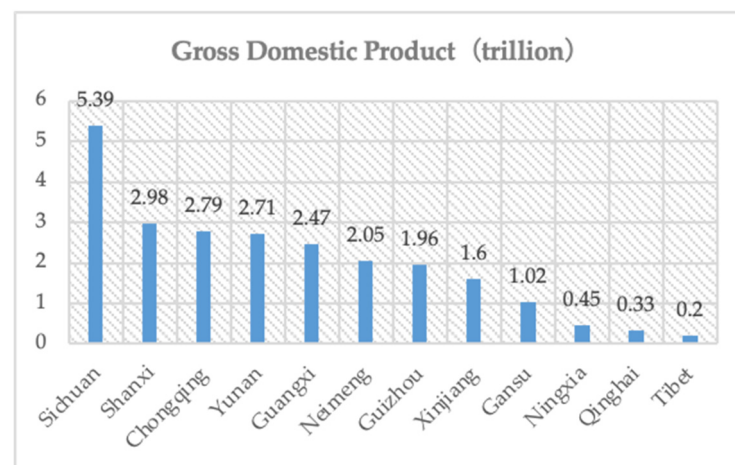


Figure 1. The Western region's 2021 GDP. Note: Compiled data prepared by authors.

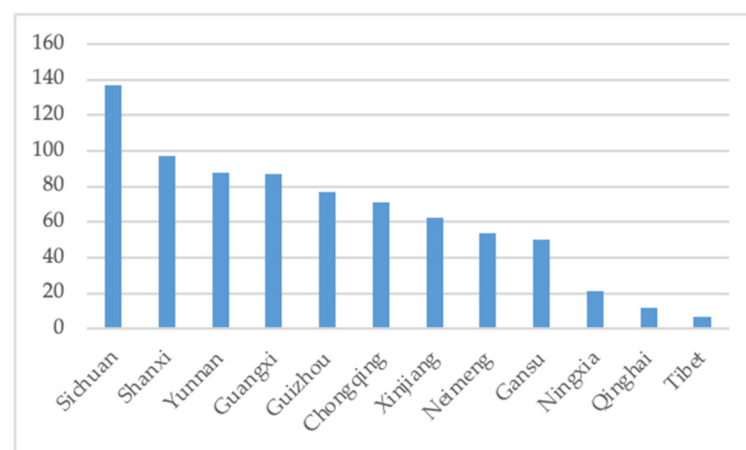


Figure 2. The number of regular HEIs in the Western region. Note: Compiled data prepared by authors.

Based on the affiliation of institutions, China's HEIs fall into central universities and provincial universities. HEIs that receive funding and are directly managed by the MOE and other relevant departments under the State Council fall under the category of central universities. Meanwhile, those that receive funding from and are under the direct management of province-level governments belong to the category of provincial HEIs [65].

Currently, there are 3072 HEIs in China, of which 2820 are regular HEIs. Among these HEIs, only 118 are central universities [66]. While the central universities primarily focus on national development and bear the responsibility of cultivating industry-related

professionals, provincial HEIs are entrusted with the task of nurturing a larger proportion of China's local talents [63].

3.3. Secondary Data Collection and Analysis

The secondary data were first collected to investigate the current marketing strategies implemented by these institutions and the rationales driving HEIs to attract international students. This entailed a comprehensive review of various national policies in China pertaining to international students, aiming to dissect the nation's incentives for expanding international student enrollment numbers. Admission brochures were also analyzed to gain information regarding admission requirements and scholarships, among others.

3.4. Primary Data Collection, Analysis, Sampling, and Triangulation

To gather the primary data, a combination of semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews (FGIs) was organized, involving three respondent groups: administrators, academic staff, and international students. While the semi-structured interviews with administrators and academics of international students aimed to extract their viewpoints on marketing strategies and their consequential effects on sustainable education, the FGIs were employed to gather international students' feedback on the existing practices in their recruitment and management, and prospects for improvement. Since not all universities offer masters or doctoral programs, all the academics and international students who were interviewed were at the undergraduate level.

Based on an individualistic approach, tools were developed to collect the data and address the research questions (Table 1).

Table 1. Data collection tools for RQs 1 to 3.

Research Question	Primary Tool(s)	Auxiliary Tool(s)	Method
How are the rationales being justified for the marketing strategies adopted?	Document reviews	Interviews	Qualitative
Do institutions' marketing strategies in attracting international students differ?	Interviews	Document reviews	Qualitative
Can these strategies help or hinder a sustainable higher education system?	Interviews; focus group interviews	Literature reviews	Qualitative

Note: Prepared by authors.

The primary data collection was divided into three phases, involving a total of 30 respondents (Table 2). In the first phase, four international students, each representing one of the four undergraduate grade levels, were selected from each institution to participate in separate FGIs. During the second phase, interviews were conducted with academics. To ensure a broad range of perspectives, four teachers were chosen from each grade level within each institution.

Table 2. Sample and sampling.

University	Types of Stakeholders				Total
	Director/Deputy Director	Section Chief	Academics	Students	
AU	1	1	4	4	10
BU	1	1	4	4	10
CU	1	1	4	4	10
Total	3	3	12	12	30

Note: Authors' creation.

In the last phase, two administrators from each university were interviewed. This included either the director or deputy director in charge of international students, as well as a section chief responsible for the specific management and execution of international

students' affairs within the Department of International Affairs. This sequence ensured that the important information gathered during the first two phases could be clarified by senior leaders. Thus, a total of 18 semi-structured interviews and 3 FGIs were conducted (Table 2). Generally, the interviews lasted for 30 to 50 min, whereas the FGIs lasted for approximately 1 h. Data collection methods, namely document reviews, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and FGIs, were used to ensure triangulation.

3.5. Coding and Confidentiality

Prior to the interviews and FGIs, an interview request letter, as well as an informed consent form, were sent to respondents via e-mail, in which an outline of the study including the purpose, research questions, procedures, and strategies to protect participants' confidentiality were clarified. Permission to record and transcribe the interviews and discussions was obtained at the beginning of the interviews or FGIs. In order to protect the respondents' anonymity, codes were assigned to the administrators, academics, and international students, respectively, as AD, AC, and IS. In order to differentiate them from each other, a university abbreviation was prefixed to these codes, followed by a numerical range. For instance, BAD 1 denotes the first administrator from BU, while CIS 2 signifies the second international student from CU. Both directors/deputy directors and section chiefs were classified as administrators.

4. Findings and Discussion

In this section, we justify the national and institutional rationales before reporting the enrollment numbers and regional distribution of international students in selected institutions. We discuss the recruitment strategies for international students, followed by stakeholders' views on the management of international students' education.

4.1. Rationales Driving HEIs to Recruit International Students

Rationales are traditionally divided into four types. However, given the growing prevalence and complexity of internationalization, it is crucial to discern between the motivations at various levels of stakeholders, particularly at the institutional and national levels [67]. These are explained in more detail below.

4.1.1. Rationales: Nationalist Perspective and Beyond

In 2010, China launched the Study in China Program to increase the international student population to 500,000 by 2020, positioning China as Asia's largest destination for international students [68]. Subsequent policies and regulations were implemented to achieve this goal, which also reflect China's motives for attracting international students (Table 3). Academically, the focus is on cultivating industry-leading professionals from source countries [69]. However, a greater emphasis is placed on training highly qualified faculty to educate international students, develop distinctive university features, and establish high-caliber disciplinary clusters [68,70]. This approach aims to enhance international education exchange, collaboration, and the internationalization of Chinese education [70].

Politically, China explicitly affirms its dedication to producing a significant cohort of accomplished international students who possess a deep understanding of Chinese culture, history, geography, society, economy, political system, and foreign policies, and hold favorable views of China [68,71,72]. This approach virtually leverages the promotional impact of international students within China to advance the country's values and ideals and allows international students to identify with China's mainstream values [72].

The rationales at the national level driving IHE can be categorized into five groups: human resource development, strategic alliances, commercial trading, nation-building, and socio-cultural development [67]. Fundamentally, China's objective is to expand international exchange and cooperation through developing human capital for other countries, particularly those along the Belt and Road, thereby forging strategic alliances and contributing to nation-building efforts. Its ultimate aim is to dominate commercial trade agreements

with developing nations, reduce its excessive dependence on developed markets, and play a leading role in shaping a new international landscape.

Table 3. Policies and regulations for international students.

Policy/Regulation	Year of Issuing	Main Content	Type of Rationale
Study in China Program	2010	- Establish a system of providing services for international students in China that align with our country's international status, scale of education, and level. - Cultivate a large number of high-level faculty staff for teaching international students in China. - Foster universities with distinctive features in international student education in China and high-level discipline clusters. - Cultivate a large number of high-quality international students who are knowledgeable about and friendly toward China.	Academic Political
Several Opinions on Opening Up Education in the New Era	2016	Actively leverage the promotional role of international students and foreign teachers in China, actively disseminating Chinese ideals.	Political
Advance Belt and Road Education Initiative	2016	Establish the "Silk Road" Chinese Government Scholarship to specifically cultivate industry-leading and outstanding skilled or talented professionals from countries along the route.	Academic
Regulations for the Admission and Education of International Students in Schools	2017	Enhance educational exchange and cooperation with foreign countries and elevate the internationalization of Chinese education.	Academic
Quality Standards for Higher Education of International Students in China (Trial)	2018	International students studying in China should be familiar with basic knowledge of China's history, geography, society, and economy, as well as an understanding of China's political system and foreign policies. They should also be sympathetic to the mainstream values and public moral concepts in Chinese society, and develop a sound understanding of legal concepts and moral consciousness.	Political

Note: Compiled data prepared by authors.

4.1.2. Rationales: Institutional Perspectives and Reality

The responses from administrators in the three universities suggest there are three key motivations: income generation, response to government policies, and international branding and profile enhancement.

"Income generation" was emphasized by both BAD 1 and CAD 1. They noted that the Department of Education in Sichuan Province conducts an annual assessment of institutional internationalization, with international student numbers contributing 1.5 points out of 5. This assessment directly impacts government funding allocation, which serves as the main financial source. This strong financial incentive prompts senior leadership in provincial universities to actively increase international student enrollment, making income generation the primary driving force for these institutions. However, this motivation was not mentioned by respondents at AU.

The second motivation, "response to government policies", was consistently cited by all administrators across the three institutions. BAD 1's statement echoed the opinions of other administrator respondents:

"Ever since the proposal of the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI), our nation has emphasized promoting economic, and cultural collaborations with the countries along the route. As the executors of government policies and providers of international HE, a highly effective approach in response to the BRI for HEIs is to cultivate human resources for this region. Consequently, since 2016, the international student enrollment has nearly tripled in our university".

In contrast, with the exception of AU, none of the respondents from BU and CU mentioned the third motivation, “international branding and profile”. AAD 1 argued that as a central and a double-first university, AU prioritizes enhancing its global ranking by increasing international student enrollments:

“Our university is committed to achieving world-class status, which is primarily measured through global rankings such as ‘Times Higher Education Ranking’, ‘QS World University Ranking’ and ‘Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)’. The metric of ‘international students’ significantly influences all three rankings and can be improved relatively quickly. As a result, our university consistently focuses on increasing the enrollment of international students and enhancing the quality of their education”.

Therefore, provincial universities are mainly driven by income generation, whereas central universities prioritize improving their global ranking. Both types of institutions, however, should be applied to government policies on internationalization. Consequently, the quantity of international students remains significant for all sample universities.

4.2. The Scale of Enrollment and Region Distribution: Internationalization or Asianization?

AU hosts approximately 1000 international students, while BU and CU accommodate over 500 and 100 international students, respectively. This indicates that the number of international students is influenced by the type and geographical location of institutions. Central universities and those located in central regions tend to be more appealing to international students. Equally, AU hosts international students from over 80 countries across five continents, while BU’s international student body represents 50 countries spanning four continents. Both AU and BU have predominantly Asian international student populations, with 65% and 88% of the total number, respectively (Figures 3 and 4). In contrast, CU’s international students exclusively come from six Asian countries, indicating a lack of diversity in both country and region (Figure 5). The high proportion of Asian students in these institutions reflects a trend of Asianization among international students, highlighting China’s focus on international collaboration with countries along the BRI route, particularly with Asian nations.

Compared to BU and CU, AU boasts a higher percentage of international students hailing from Europe (17%) and Oceania (13%) (Figure 3). This indicates that central universities tend to be more attractive to students from developed countries than their provincial counterparts.

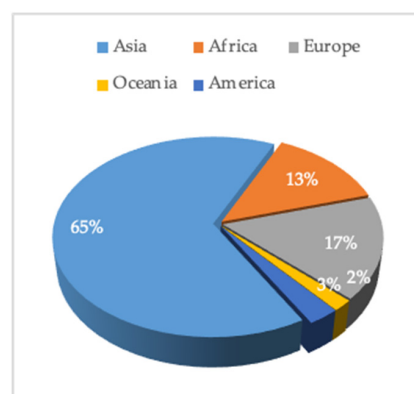


Figure 3. The regional distribution of AU’s international students.

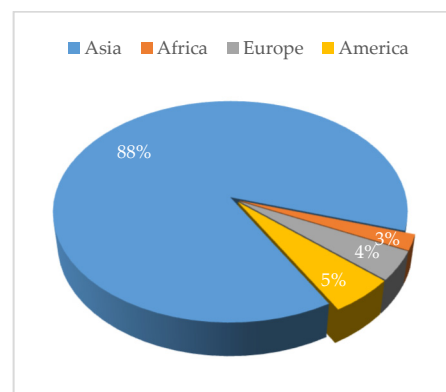


Figure 4. The regional distribution of BU's international students.

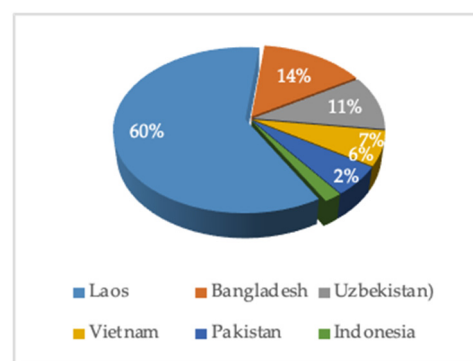


Figure 5. The country distribution of CU's international students. Note: Authors' creation.

4.3. Marketing Strategies: Sustainable or Unsustainable?

Based on the responses from management, 11 recruitment strategies were identified across the three universities (Table 4). Among these strategies, five approaches are commonly employed by all universities: the provision of scholarships, collaboration with overseas Chinese training institutions, collaboration with foreign governments, participation in international educational fairs, and leveraging social connections of international students and faculty members.

Table 4. Recruitment strategies in the three institutions.

Recruitment Strategy	AU	BU	CU
Scholarship	✓	✓	✓
Overseas institutions of Chinese training	✓	✓	✓
Overseas governments	✓	✓	✓
International education fairs	✓	✓	✓
Social connections	✓	✓	✓
International partners	✓	✓	
Social media/internet/information technology	✓	✓	
Educational consulting firm	✓	✓	
Agents		✓	✓
English programs	✓		
Confucius Institute	✓		

Scholarships emerged as a widely mentioned approach in all institutions to attract international students. In total, seven types of scholarships were identified within these institutions (Table 5). Being located in the capital city, Chengdu, AU and BU offer the same two types of scholarships: the Chengdu Belt and Road Scholarship and the Chengdu Sister City Scholarship. Meanwhile, international students at BU and CU have the opportunity to

apply for the Sichuan Government Scholarship, which is available to provincial universities. On the other hand, the Chinese Government Scholarship and Confucius Institute Scholarship are exclusively offered at AU. The Chengdu ASWAN Arts Scholarship is specifically provided at BU, while institutional scholarships are only provided at BU and CU.

The Chinese Government Scholarship and Confucius Institute Scholarship provide free tuition and accommodation, as well as a stipend of CNY 2500 per month for each student, whereas the Sichuan Government Scholarship, Chengdu Belt and Road Scholarship, Chengdu Sister City Scholarship, and BU's institutional scholarship for international students offer the same CNY 20,000 per year per student. The Chengdu ASWAN Arts Scholarship provides the highest scholarship amount, totaling CNY 30,000 annually.

Table 5. Scholarships for undergraduate international students.

Scholarship	AU	BU	CU
Chinese Government Scholarship	✓		
Sichuan Government Scholarship		✓	✓
Chengdu Belt and Road Scholarship	✓	✓	
Chengdu Sister City Scholarship	✓	✓	
Confucius Institute Scholarship	✓		
Chengdu ASWAN Arts Scholarship		✓	
Institutional Scholarship		✓	✓

Note: Compiled data prepared by authors.

CU offers two kinds of institutional scholarships: firstly, an Admission scholarship; and secondly, a Scholarship for Outstanding International Students. While the former covers the tuition fees of all new international students, the latter is provided in three categories: the first prize (CNY 6000 per year and free accommodation), the second prize (CNY 4000 per year and free accommodation), and the third prize (CNY 2000 per year).

According to the administrative respondents, the ratios of international students eligible for scholarships are approximately 50%, 70%, and 100%, respectively, at AU, BU, and CU. Indicated here is that a minimum of 50% of international students can benefit from free education, and some may even receive financial support to cover living expenses. Most student respondents from BU and CU recognized that the most appealing factor for them to study in the relevant schools was the scholarships provided by the institutions.

However, most administrators in the three institutions acknowledged that the sustainability of governmental scholarships is determined by various levels of government, whereas institutional scholarships are subject to the discretion of the leaders in charge of the institutions. This may change if the governments decide to terminate the scholarship programs, or if a leadership transition occurs in the institutions. Hence, using scholarships as a marketing strategy to attract international students is not a viable approach.

In addition to the five commonly used strategies, AU and BU utilize a range of other methods. These include recommendations from international partners and social media and other information technologies, as well as partnerships with education firms. Agent recommendations, however, are exclusively observed in BU and CU. It is noted that AU employs two distinctive approaches, namely recommendations from the Confucius Institute and the provision of English programs.

According to AAD 2, the recruitment strategies at their university are well balanced, with no single approach significantly outperforming the others. AAD 1 attributed this balance to their university's global ranking and visibility. In contrast, BAD 2 stated that the predominant method at BU is recommendations from international partners, comprising over 40% of their recruitment efforts. This is due to BU's collaborations with 156 universities across 40 countries and regions, along with the establishment of four Sino-foreign cooperative education programs.

Conversely, AU boasts having more than 200 global partners spanning over 30 countries, while CU has only 26 global partners in just 14 nations. Given that both AU and BU

are situated in the capital city, it can be inferred that geographical location plays a crucial role in international cooperation, significantly influencing the recruitment of international students. CAD 2 stated that the majority of students (60%) at CU came from Laos and were all recruited through cooperation with one of Laos' provincial education departments, facilitated by a Chinese intermediary working in this government department.

The administrators at AU expressed their confidence in the sustainability of their recruitment strategies. They believed that the appeal to international students is driven by the university's quality of education and global presence, which are highly valued and consistently pursued by AU. BU's administrators admitted that although continued and consistent partners' recommendations may be interrupted by changes in mutual institutions' leadership, the institution's ongoing efforts to expand international cooperation will attract international students in a methodical, stable way. Likewise, CU recognized the potential unsustainability of their approach, as the connection with a foreign government may be severed upon the departure of the intermediary individual.

Consequently, only improving institution branding by improving the quality of education and making ongoing efforts to improve international cooperation are acknowledged as sustainable strategies for international students in the targeted institutions. Meanwhile, many of the current practices in these institutions will not have a long-term future.

4.4. Admission Requirements: Quality Assurance or Lowering the Threshold?

Along with a high school diploma, the other critical precondition for studying in China is language proficiency. Applicants whose native language is neither Chinese nor English must take either Chinese or English language proficiency exams and attain the minimum scores. The MOE specifies that, for subjects taught in Chinese, proficiency must be at least equivalent to Level 4 of the "Chinese Language Proficiency Standards" ($\geq$ HSK 4). For subjects taught in a foreign language, HEIs must explicitly define the required proficiency level in that foreign language within the admission criteria [72].

The language proficiency criteria vary among institutions. For instance, at AU, applicants for majors taught in Chinese must score 180 or above in HSK Level 5, while BU requires HSK Level 4 or above. In contrast, CU prefers HSK Level 4 without specifying it as obligatory. For English-taught programs, AU requires non-native English speakers to submit a TOEFL certificate (minimum score of 80) or an IELTS certificate (minimum score of 6.0), whereas BU only mandates an English proficiency test score report. CU does not offer English programs. This indicates that language requirements are influenced by the type and location of the institutions.

Additionally, as noted by BAD 1, despite the MOE setting language proficiency criteria, international students admitted solely based on these standards often struggle to meet the specific academic program requirements. AIS 4, with an HSK 5 certificate, also faces challenges keeping pace with teachers and Chinese classmates. Meanwhile, at CU, lacking formal language proficiency requirements, faculty members complain that international students' Chinese proficiency severely affects regular teaching. Students from BU and CU commonly express frustration and anxiety due to language barriers, emphasizing their significant contribution to increased absenteeism and exam failure rates.

Academic performance reflects the learning capabilities and attitudes of students [73]; thus, it is an important indicator evaluating the quality of international students. The MOE stipulates HEIs should conduct entrance examinations or academic assessments for international students applying for admission to ensure that the admitted students meet the predetermined admission criteria [72]. However, there is no unified entrance examination or academic criteria for the admission of international students in China. Accordingly, no written exams or interviews have been required in three institutions.

Therefore, the existing language proficiency requirements, coupled with the lack of academic performance evaluation, contribute to the subpar quality of the international student body. Although administrators recognize the potential for enhancement through stricter language proficiency standards and the implementation of written exams or inter-

views, they are concerned that raising the admission requirements may significantly reduce the number of international students, contradicting their initial enrollment rationales.

4.5. *The Process of Educational Management: Assimilation or Individualization?*

The education management process is a complex system involving teaching planning, implementation, inspection, feedback, and improvements. However, international students, constituting a minority of the student body, often have their education quality overlooked by many HEIs. The MOE emphasizes the need for HEIs to establish a sound management system for international students, ensuring that it is continually improved and helps to promote assimilation in the management of and services for both Chinese and international students [72]. However, the actual implementation of assimilation aspects of management has raised many questions. For instance, both BAD 2 and CAD 2 expressed concerns that the curricula for international students are not integrated into the universities' overall curricula. CAC 1 argued:

“Most training programs for international students in our universities are modeled after those designed for Chinese students. They involve the removal of political courses and the incorporation of Chinese language courses as well as courses providing an overview of China. Consequently, these training programs do not effectively cater to the unique educational goals and characteristics of international students in China, impeding their personalized development”.

Moreover, the majority of administrators noted the absence of a robust quality assurance system for international student education. For example, some international students mentioned they did not have the same opportunities to evaluate their teachers' instruction as their Chinese peers. Thus, regulatory gaps in overseeing the quality of international student education are evident. AAD 1 even argued that the so-called assimilation of international students' management actually leads to incomplete assimilation and substantial neglect of the individual needs of international students.

International students also expressed dissatisfaction, with AIS 2 noting the challenge of attending classes alongside Chinese students. Teachers often proceeded with their teaching based on the assumption that the majority of Chinese students understood what was being said, making it difficult for the minority of international students to grasp this requirement. Additionally, most international students in the three universities mentioned a lack of academic guidance, assistance for academic difficulties when these arose, or psychological counseling tailored to them. This resulted in frustration and helplessness when encountering challenges in life and learning.

In conclusion, the three universities share the common goal of expanding international student enrollment. Central universities, with their global visibility, strategic locations, robust financial support, and access to top-tier talents, have a distinct advantage in attracting high-caliber international students from around the world compared to their provincial counterparts. Provincial universities in central areas also benefit from favorable locations and diverse scholarships from financially better-off municipal governments. Consequently, provincial universities in local cities may face more challenges in attracting international students.

In their pursuit of increased numbers, HEIs employ diverse marketing strategies, including providing as many scholarships as possible and lowering the admission requirements. This is at the risk of ignoring the quality of international education and the acculturation, career planning and development, psychological health and academic counseling of international students.

Sustainable education refers to the delivery of education that not only advances a nation's social and economic circumstances, but also nurtures individuals' personal, social, and professional development [30–32]. In a broader sense, it should aim to promote not only the socio-economic interests of humanity as a whole but also how well individuals succeed in life. Fundamentally, national progress is made possible through the actions of individuals. Education lacking the capacity to foster individual development and responsibility is unsustainable.

A sustainable HE system should equip individuals with awareness and competencies in their professional careers. It should address the needs of society, the economy, and the environment to promote social justice, economic prosperity, and protection of the environment. IHE indicates “integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education” [35] (p. 11). Both domains underscore the cultivation of individuals with a global perspective, awareness of sustainable development, and cross-cultural competencies. Thus, the cultivation of globally competent international students is conducive to promoting a sustainable HE system.

5. Implications and Conclusions

The analysis above illustrates that both national and institutional considerations have motivated HEIs in China to actively expand the enrollment of international students. However, the intense focus on increasing the quantity of international students has led to the adoption of marketing strategies that actually result in a dual neglect of both the quality of international students and the quality of their education.

In this process, central universities inherently possess greater attractiveness to international students due to their well-established global partnerships, international reputation, and visibility. In response to the competition posed by these elite institutions, provincial universities find it necessary to provide a wider range of more scholarships to international students, but also lower the required admission thresholds.

The gathered data also suggest that, beyond branding universities and expanding international cooperation, none of the other strategies seem sustainable in the long term for recruiting international students. Furthermore, the current practices in the educational management of international students often neglect the cultivation of competent individuals. This oversight contradicts one of the key principles of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which emphasizes the necessity of ensuring equitable and high-quality education for all individuals [74].

Failing to deliver equal and high-quality education to international students goes against the principles of inclusivity and fairness, potentially leading to issues such as compromised retention rates, hindered academic progress, and ultimately a weakened global academic reputation. For these reasons, it is crucial for HEIs to prioritize inclusive and high-quality education for all students, irrespective of nationality or background, to ensure success and foster a vibrant, diverse learning environment.

To ensure the sustainable development of international student education, China’s HEIs should reconsider their current practices. Rather than lowering the admission standards and offering more scholarships to attract poor-quality international students, HEIs should focus on enhancing the quality of education being offered to these students. This can be achieved through meaningful efforts to elevate institutional internationalization, such as strengthening the development of internationalized curricula, cultivating a competitive international faculty, and establishing internationally competitive disciplines. Additionally, implementing a unified entrance examination system for international students and establishing a standardized system for monitoring and supervising international student education will further enhance the appeal of studying in China. These measures will ultimately contribute to the sustainable development of international students’ education in China.

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