Research

Commercial higher education strategies for recruiting international students in China: a catalyst or obstacle for sustainable education and learning?

Lei Zhou[1,2] · Gazi Mahabubul Alam[2]

Abstract

In this modern era of commercialized higher education, learning and qualifications have become the essential commodities that drive nations' economic progress. Free market principles related to consumerism appear to dictate and shape the operational framework of higher education. While a market-driven strategy may yield benefits in promoting the internationalization of higher education, it could potentially come at the expense of sustainable development of universities and proper learning. Employing a qualitative method, this study explores whether the commercialized nature and marketing of internationalized higher education contributes to or hinders its viability. It does this by comparing the practices between a Double First-Class university and a non-Double First-Class university. Findings underscore the need for more attention to be paid to creating a sustainable higher education system. Colleges and universities should strategically rebrand themselves by innovating their management and teaching systems to foster more competent international human resources, leading to sustainable universities and better prepared international students.

1 Introduction

The fundamental purpose of education in the modern world is to boost a nation's economic development by elevating individuals' productivity and skills [1]. Ideally, "a sustainable higher Education (HE) system may be defined in terms of the network of local, national and international HE institutions and their systems that sustain the core functions of HE, including the delivery of teaching and learning, research, and outreach, by addressing social, economic, and environmental targets and constraints influencing the HE institutional context" [2] (p.2). Moreover, it may also support "the aims of sustainable development by advancing citizens' knowledge and skills to meet the needs of society and the economy and by promoting stewardship of the natural and built environment" [2] (p.2).

In the era of "commercialization of HE", it is often treated as a commodity that can be consumed rather than pursued for its intrinsic value [1]. Changes in government policies and funding for higher education universities (HEIs), coupled with a decline in domestic students' enrollments, have made possible cross-border education [3]. The imperative to explore alternative funding avenues has prompted many HEIs to adopt aggressive marketing strategies to attract many

✉ Gazi Mahabubul Alam, gazi.mahabubul@upm.edu.my | [1]Faculty of International Studies, Yibin University, Yibin, China. [2]Department of Foundation of Education, Faculty of Educational Studies, University Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia.

Discover

international students [3]. These endeavors to increase revenue through the recruitment of international students have proven effective, with international student mobility (ISM) evolving into a multi-billion-dollar industry, contributing nearly $40 billion to the United States of America, each year [4]. The competition for market share in this landscape underscores the significance of analyzing international students' preferences as consumers [5]. Their consumer-driven behaviors exert a profound influence on and shape the landscape of higher education. Hence, the internationalization of higher education (IHE) and the choice to study abroad are profoundly shaped by commercial marketing approaches that dominate the whole process.

Predictably, developing countries have recently entered this realm. Currently functioning as a world economic power, China aspires to become the world's biggest academic hub and has increased its share of international students by adopting diverse marketing strategies [6, 7]. It is noted, however, that current strategies in China's HE internationalization have been the subject of criticism. Notably, the significant financial backing for international students, juxtaposed with their lackluster academic achievements, and substantial discrepancies in admission requirements, tuition fees, and accommodation conditions between domestic and international students, have aroused intense debates [8, 9]. Absorbing international students and improving their retention of graduates has become part of the nation's political strategy, and a key for China's metropolises, provinces, and HEIs [8]. In the highly competitive industry, it is imperative to investigate if China's attempts to recruit international students can serve as a catalyst or present an obstacle to the sustainability of higher education.

1.1 Scope of the research and knowledge gaps: objectives and research questions

Studies have increasingly focused on international students' individual challenges, such as their social, psychological adjustment or their acculturation [10–12]. Others concentrate on institutional strategies to attract international students, including expansion of cooperation with universities around the world [13] or institution branding [14]. In the digital age, scholars emphasize the significance of digital marketing strategies, advocating approaches, for example, advertising through the internet [15], design of websites [14], AI-enabled voice assistants [16], and utilizing social media platforms [17] to appeal to international students. Also, the employment of agents for enlisting foreign students has become a major point of discussion [18].

Although most of the studies on the marketing of international students have been conducted in the Western context [19], internationalization of higher education within the east Asia has lately received a greater policy attention [9]. China is no exception to this trend since it has greatly prioritized accommodating international students [6]. In order to progress this current phenomenon, the Chinese government launched a program in 2015 which is known as the Double First-Class initiative. The fundamental aim of this program is to enhance the international reputation of Chinese universities [9].

As a part of such an endeavor, 42 elite universities were branded as "World First-Class Universities", while 95 universities were labeled as "First-Class Disciplines Initiative" [9]. These 95 universities should ideally provide more focus to strengthen some of the disciplines for which they are specialized, while their elite counterparts must concentrate to brand the university itself without just focusing to some particular disciplines. Factually, 137 universities which are included within these two categories; are referred to as "Double First-Class" universities. The remaining universities are termed as non-Double First-Class universities.

While elite universities, particularly Double First-Class universities have increasingly concentrated on the execution of internationalization of marketing strategies to recruit students from overseas. A gap within the current knowledge exists in the examination of practices in attracting international students in Chinese non-Double First-Class universities and their contribution to a sustainable HE system. This study is groundbreaking in China because it endeavors to fill this gap in the knowledge by comparing the international student marketing strategies of Double and non-Double First-Class universities. It has implications for other developing nations that embrace commercialized approaches aimed at facilitating higher enrollments of international students. Based on this argument the research questions are stated below:

RQ 1. What rationales have led to the chosen recruitment strategies for international students by Chinese universities?
RQ 2. Are there differences in the recruitment strategies employed by Chinese universities to attract international students?
RQ 3. Do these strategies contribute to or impede the establishment of a sustainable higher education system in China?

2 Literature review

2.1 Sustainable development, sustainable education, and sustainable learning and education

Since the 1970s, there has been a greater focus on SD, with various initiatives, conferences, and international actions taking place. [20, 21]. Coined by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), SD is defined as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" [22] (p. 43). This paradigm shift recognizes the inherent interconnection of society, the economy, and the environment and places a premium on the potential of individuals while underscoring the necessity of ensuring their well-being [23].

In order for SD to work, establishing a system of sustained education and learning with well-suited policies is crucial for preserving the environment and national development [23, 24]. According to Alam and Sterling, sustainable education (SE) involves delivering knowledge which fosters balanced development of a country in its environmental, social and economic aspects, while addressing human needs [23–25]. Sustainable education (SE) integrates sustainability ideas and goals into its design and delivery of learning [26]. Hence, the focus of sustainable education and learning broadly covers any topic that is related to the quality of education and national and international developmental agendas.

Another notion closely related to SD and SE is sustainable learning and education (SLE). It represents a pedagogical approach rooted in sustainability principles, but not education about or for sustainability. Sustainable learning is commonly defined as learning that persists (and could be transferrable) after its original exposure and could entail a process of "learning to learn" [26]. Beyond simply retaining knowledge and skills, sustainable learning entails "ongoing, purposeful, responsive and proactive learning; the learner effectively builds and rebuilds her or his knowledge and skills base as circumstances change" [26] (p. 3). The purpose of SLE is to develop and disseminate sustainable education frameworks and pedagogical approaches. These aim to imbue individuals with the competencies and attitudes necessary to excel in complex, demanding, and constantly evolving situations, thereby fostering improvement in the world [26].

On the other hand, sustainability at HEIs serves as a key factor in creating today's and tomorrow's sustainable societies [27], as universities are commonly seen as having a significant moral obligation to serve as physical exemplars of sustainability and as hubs for research and instructional expertise [20]. Through integrating the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with teaching and instruction, HEIs are cultivating individuals with the potential to assess critically and achieve the SDGs [25]. Yet, HEIs often encounter criticism for inefficient or unsustainable practices, producing leaders who are ill-equipped to address pressing sustainability issues and graduates lacking literacy about ecological systems [20]. Given HE's purpose of addressing sustainability challenges and educating individuals for sustainability, a reconsideration of the university's goal and approaches to learning becomes essential. Thus, being a course or training program, the incorporation of SLE into HE might be an important strategy for HEIs to support SD and SE.

The sustainable and healthy development of international student education is pivotal to both the global SD and SE scenarios. However, the current recruitment strategies in China's international student education, such as providing generous financial support for international students, lowering admission criteria and tuition fees, and improving accommodation conditions, have sparked a debate on the effectiveness of these strategies in promoting SD and SE that leads to more international students enrolling [8, 9]. This study intent to contribute to the knowledge development on the topic of sustainable learning and international students' higher education as defined by Alam, Hays and Reinder, and Alam and Forhad [25, 26, 28].

2.2 Rationales for international student recruitment

The rationales behind IHE are conventionally classified into four categories: social/cultural, political, academic, and economic [29]. This categorization extends to the rationales encouraging nations to get as many foreign students as they can. Economically, the universities and colleges now believe that selling their services and programs abroad is a good way to diversify their revenue sources, compensating for diminishing or stagnant governmental funding [3]. International students who are full fee-paying are seen not only as immediate contributors to universities' revenue, pivotal for economic stability, but as contributors to building nations' economies [8]. Politically speaking, governments view the recruitment of international students as a way to project a country's 'soft power' [8, 12, 30]. Serving as youthful ambassadors, international students, with a deeper understanding of their host country's economic and political interests, play an important role in bridging connections or forging alliances between hosting and origin nations [8].

Academically, international students' enrollment enhances competitiveness, boosts reputation, and strengthens the image or brand [31]. These factors are seen as effective indicators that a nation's HE system is robust [32]. International students enrolled in research programs contribute to the academic vitality of the institution by proactively conducting projects and cooperating with supervisors on papers as co-authors [8]. Culturally, international students are acknowledged for contributing to culture diversity, infusing diverse perspectives into curricula and campuses [33], bolstering intercultural comprehension and communication, and the usage of a common language [34].

Nevertheless, Knight argues while there are diverse drivers and benefits to increased trade, self-interest is a common element behind them all [6]. As a globally traded commodity, the rationales for international students vary from country to country. Developed and advanced economies primarily aim to generate income or profits, while some emerging economies may be driven by dollar diplomacy in their efforts to appeal to international students. Nevertheless, the shared concern for all countries is to maximize their own economic interests.

2.3 Marketing approaches for international students

Until the 1980s, the research on marketing was relatively obscure and widely unknown among many universities and colleges [35]. Over time, marketing evolved into a tool that could aid HEIs in navigating an increasingly competitive and cut-throat environment [36]. With the march of globalization and free market economic principles in the early twenty-first century, universities and colleges started exploring new markets to increase their enrollments, incorporating concepts of marketing like "student market segmentation, institutional/country image, and positioning and branding, to compete in the global market" for international students [36] (p. 7).

Presently, HEIs worldwide employ various strategies to appeal to international students [8]. These approaches encompass creating an environment on campus that fosters academic and social support, joining in fairs of international education or recruiting activities, establishing global strategic partnerships, employing agents, and providing transnational programs [8, 34, 37]. Universities also leverage current international students, alumni, social media, or other information technologies in their advertising and marketing campaigns [8]. In the international education industry, traditional HE marketers now face challenges from marketing professionals in emerging nations. Subsequently, understanding the key HE markets and how international marketing is shaping the conversation around higher education in these markets is essential for international marketers and management of universities [7].

2.4 Sustainable HE and sustainable IHE

In response to the demand that HEIs take the lead in guiding society toward a more sustainable future, the concept of sustainable HE has evolved [38]. Positioned as a distinctive yet interdisciplinary field within sustainability of science and education [39], sustainable HE involves universities in defining learning objectives, implementing empowering pedagogies, and integrating sustainability policies and strategies into their management frameworks [40]. Considering their social obligation to promote knowledge, produce leaders, and promote general social progress and engagement [40], universities are expected to function as centers for innovation and excellence of sustainability [41].

IHE is recognized as a crucial factor in promoting HEIs' SD [42]. It provides a platform for cross-disciplinary cooperation, international networking, and exchange of ideas within HEIs, faculty members, academics, and students [42]. Additionally, IHE bolsters the chances for improving teaching and learning methods, diversifying approaches of delivery, and increasing mobility of students, international programs, and education universities [42]. It increases output and transforms the higher education system into a 'factory' for producing professionals capable of excelling in a highly competitive global environment [43]. Consequently, IHE functions as an effective way to promote the sustainability of HE.

3 Research context

3.1 The "double first-class initiative" in China

The inception of the Double First-Class Initiative initiated by the Chinese government in 2015, aiming at establishing world-class universities and advancing first-class disciplines, reflects a substantial commitment by the government to address changing education dynamics both domestically and internationally [44]. It signifies the nation's ambition to elevate a chosen set of research universities and disciplines to become the best in the world [45]. In September

2017, a list of universities and disciplines was unveiled and it encompassed 42 universities chosen for the World First-Class Universities Initiative and a total of 95 universities identified under the First-Class Disciplines Initiative [46]. These universities are collectively designated as Double First-Class universities, while those universities not included in the list of the Double First-Class Initiative are referred to as non-Double First-Class universities. Unlike the two previous Chinese prestigious university projects, Project 985 and Project 211, which aimed to create centers of excellence, the novel initiative effectively perpetuates the hierarchical structure in Chinese HE. At the same time, it seeks to inject fresh dynamism into the pool of elite universities. The universities and disciplines identified under this initiative receive elevated status and increased resources, particularly through direct government budgetary allocations [46], thereby holding more advantages in attracting both domestic and international students, when compared with non-Double First-Class universities.

3.2 International students in China

The internationalization of Chinese learning universities took off in the late 1990s, and as a result, the number of overseas students enrolled in them has greatly increased [9]. Over a decade, from 2009 onward, the number of international students in China experienced significant growth, soaring from 238,184 to 492,185. However, despite this general upward trajectory, the growth rate exhibited some instability, marked by two periods of decline, first from 2012 to 2015 and then from 2016 to 2018. In 2018, the growth rate reached its lowest point, falling to below 1%. Furthermore, the regional distribution of students' origins is currently unbalanced with 76.52% from Asia and Africa, while the remaining 23.48% originate from Europe, the Americas, and Oceania [47]. China's approach to international student education has encountered criticism for distinct problems, such as involvement in "dollar diplomacy" (utilizing a nation's economic strength to extend its global influence) [9] and recruiting international students at high cost [48]. Concerns have been raised that the rapid surge in the scale of international students may lead to a decline in the quality of higher education, including the potential diminishment of standards due to linguistic challenges and passive classroom engagement [48].

The lack of assimilation training and management for foreign students, coupled with disparities in admission requirements, tuition, and conditions of accommodation between domestic and international students, has raised growing attention. This concern revolves around the possible mishandling and mismanagement of public education resources [49]. It prompts the question of whether China's HEIs' market-driven strategy could provide tangible benefits aligned with the objectives of IHE. Any real advantages obtained may be at the expense of SD of the national education system.

4 Research design

The research design of this study is covered in this section, and a qualitative approach has been adopted. Explained here are the methods used to gather and analyze the data, a discussion of sample strategies and triangulation, and concluding thoughts on the value of coding and maintaining confidentiality.

4.1 Method

Important research issues necessitate an in-depth exploration so that a holistic understanding is achieved [50]. Hence, for this investigation, the qualitative methodology has been selected because it is considered to be the best approach. According to Patton, qualitative research aims to depict distinctive situations in a particular environment and the interactions that unfold within them [51]. This study's objective is to delve into the rationales compelling China's HEIs to participate in the recruitment of international students, scrutinize the marketing practices, and evaluate sustainability of policies and how all these impact on the education of international students. Instead of deducing postulates for testing [52], this paper aims to gather data to understand the rationales, strategies, and significance of commercial marketing strategies aimed to encourage international students to go to China. The data were gathered from two universities that are distinct types: a Double First-Class institution, denoted as S University (SU), and a non-Double First-Class university, identified as C University (CU). This choice was deliberate, aiming to investigate the differences in the recruitment strategies and management of international students.

4.2 Secondary data collection and analysis

The initial phase involved gathering secondary data to scrutinize the prevailing marketing strategies employed by both universities and the underlying reasons motivating HEIs to attract international students. This encompassed an extensive examination of China's policies concerning international students, with the objective of dissecting the nation's rationales for boosting the enrollment numbers of international students. Furthermore, admission brochures were subjected to analysis to extract information pertaining to admission prerequisites, available scholarships, and other relevant details.

4.3 Primary data collection, analysis, sampling, and triangulation

To obtain primary data, both interviews and focus group interviews (FGIs) were devised, to get information from three distinctive groups: the management, faculty members, and international students. Interviews with management personnel and faculty members aimed to elicit their perspectives on recruitment approaches and implications for sustainable university education. On the other hand, FGIs served to gather feedback from international students regarding present approaches for their enrollment, management, and potential areas for improvement. As CU does not provide Masters or above programs, all academic staff and international students interviewed were from the undergraduate level.

Individualistic tools were developed to collect data and answer the research questions (Table 1). The collection of primary data unfolded in three stages, engaging 20 respondents (Table 2). At the initial stage, four international students representing one undergraduate grade level were chosen from an institution for a separate FGI. The second stage involved interviews with faculty members, with four teachers selected from different levels or grades to ensure diverse perspectives.

At the final stage, two leaders chosen from each institution were interviewed, these being the director or deputy director who is responsible for international students-related matters, as well as a division chief in charge of the specific execution of foreign students' issues. Such sequencing ensured that vital information obtained at the first two stages would be elaborated on by senior administrators. Consequently, 18 interviews and three FGIs were undertaken (Table 2). The interviews generally ranged between 30 and 60 min, while FGIs lasted for nearly one hour. Triangulation was guaranteed by employing specific methods of data collection which were document reviews, interviews, and FGIs. The data collected was then transcribed before it could be analyzed. The data analysis, using NVivo software, revealed a multitude of codes during the initial phase. These codes served as a means to interpret what the data meant. Then these codes were arranged into three categories, i.e., rationales for commercial marketing strategies aiming to attract international students, the strategies developed in the universities, and perceived influences of such strategies (Table 3).

4.4 Coding and confidentiality

Preceding the interviews and FGIs, respondents were provided with an interview request letter and an informed consent via email. These documents described the study's aims, research questions, research procedures, and protecting the confidentiality of all participants. Permission for recording and transcribing the interviews and discussions was sought prior to the commencement of each interview or FGI. In order to ensure the anonymity of respondents, distinct codes were designated to administrators (AD), academics (AC), and international students (IS). An abbreviation for the university was added to the codes, along with a number range, in order to differentiate the universities. For instance, CIS 2 denotes the second foreign student from CU, while SAD 1 stands for the first SU administrator (Table 4).

5 Findings and discussion

Following the themes that emerged through NVivo, this section deals with the findings and discussion on the rationales for attracting international students at both the national and institutional levels, the marketing strategies employed by the universities, and the influences perceived by relevant stakeholders. These are all primarily involved

Table 1 Data collection instruments for the three research questions

Research questions	Primary instrument(s)	Auxiliary instrument(s)	Method
RQ 1. What rationales have led to the chosen recruitment strategies for international students by Chinese universities?	Document reviews	Interviews	Qualitative
RQ 2. Are there differences in the recruitment strategies employed by Chinese universities to attract international students?	Interviews	Document reviews	Qualitative
RQ 3. Do these strategies contribute to or impede the establishment of a sustainable higher education system in China?	Interviews; focus group interviews	Literature reviews	Qualitative

Authors' own compilation

Table 2 Sample and sampling

Institution	Stakeholder				Total
	Director/Deputy Director	Section chief	Academics	Students	
SU	1	1	4	4	10
CU	1	1	4	4	10
Total	2	2	8	8	20

Authors' own compilation

in increasing international student enrollments, the lowering of admission requirements and problems occurring in the HEIs' management of international students.

5.1 Rationales for international students

Traditionally, rationales for IHE have been categorized into four types, these being social/cultural, political, academic, and economic [27]. It is essential to differentiate between rationales at various stakeholder, specifically at the institutional level and national level [53]. Further elaboration on these is documented below.

5.1.1 National rationales

China established the Study in China Program in 2010 with the goal of increasing the number of foreign students to 500,000 by 2020, making China the most popular destination for foreign students in Asia [54]. To achieve this goal, corresponding policies and regulations were issued, reflecting China's rationales for international students (Table 5). On the academic front, the focus lies in nurturing leading professionals in industries for origin nations [55]. A broader goal is equipping highly-qualified academics to teach international students, foster distinctive institutional characteristics, and create high-quality disciplinary clusters [55, 56]. The objective of this strategy is to enhance global education cooperation and exchange but also make Chinese higher education more globally powerful [55].

From a political standpoint, China makes it abundantly evident that it is dedicated to developing a sizable cohort of exceptional foreign students who have a thorough comprehension of its foreign policy, society, economy, political system, and culture, fostering positive opinions about China [54, 56, 57]. This approach effectively utilizes the propaganda potential of international students in China to advocate for its values and ideals, striving for international students to align with the core values of China's government and people. National rationales of IHE can be divided into five types: "human resource development, strategic alliances, commercial trading, nation-building, and socio-cultural development" [53] (p.11). Essentially, China aims to enhance international collaboration and exchange by cultivating human resources for other nations, especially nations along the Belt and Road. This endeavor seeks to establish strategic partnerships and contribute to nation-building. Its overarching goal is to establish China's dominance in trade with developing nations, replace those relationships with the world's developed or Western nations, and take the lead role in a new global environment.

5.1.2 Rationales of universities

Data from the interviewed management personnel of the two universities indicates three key themes: adherence to government policies, revenue generation, and international branding and enhancement of global visibility. The initial theme, "alignment with governmental policies" was uniformly stated by all administrators from both universities. The statement of CAD 1 is representative of the views expressed here:

> "Ever since the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) was first introduced, China has emphasized the development of culture and economy cooperation with the countries along the route. Being implementers of governmental policies and facilitators to IHE, a highly efficient strategy for HEIs in alignment with the BRI is to produce human capital for this region. Therefore, since 2016, the number of international students in my university has nearly tripled."

Conversely, the emphasis on "revenue generation" was exclusively cited by the respondents from CU. As elucidated by CAD 1, the provincial Department of Education conducts an annual evaluation on provincial universities in order to rank them. The main subject of this evaluation is non-Double First-Class universities. The total score for this evaluation

Table 3 Codes of the interviews

Category of the codes	Subcodes	Key words
Rationales	Alignment with governmental policies	Belt and Road Initiative; implementers of governmental policies
	Revenue generation	Internationalization evaluation; financial allocation
	International branding and enhancement of global visibility	world-class status; global ranking; the number of international students
Strategies	Scholarships	types of scholarships; the amount of the scholarships
	Requirements for admission:	high school diploma; language proficiency
influences	The overlook in the process of the educational management	curricula; quality assurance system; the absence of guidance and assistance in learning and life

Authors' own compilation

Table 4 Codes for respondents

Respondent	University	
	SU	CU
Director/Deputy director	SAD 1	CAD 1
Section Chief	SAD 2	CAD 2
Academics 1 to 4	SAC 1 to 4	CAC 1 to 4
International students 1 to 4	SIS 1 to 4	CIS 1 to 4

Authors' own compilation

is 100 points. Of which, five points are specially allocated to measure the institutional internationalization efforts. Within these five points, 1.5 points are particularly allotted on basis of a university's capacity in maintaining a targeted ratio for international student in against of local students. The ranking status of a university is directly linked to how much funding it should receive from the provincial government, which serves as the primary source of money for non-Double First-Class universities. This significant financial incentive encourages the leaders of these universities to expand the number of international students, so that more revenue is generated.

The third theme, international branding and global visibility enhancement was only articulated by SU's respondents. SAD 1 stated that as a Double-First university, increasing the number of international students enrolled at SU is a top priority for boosting its global ranking:

> "SU is striving to attain world-class status, predominantly evaluated through global rankings such as the "Times Higher Education Ranking", "QS World University Ranking", and "Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)". The indicator of "foreign students" significantly affects three rankings and could be improved rapidly. So, SU prioritizes increasing the number of international students and improving the quality of their education."

Hence, non-Double First-Class universities are primarily motivated by the imperative to generate more revenue by improving their evaluations which are carried out by the provincial government, since it controls the universities' purse strings. On the other hand, Double First-Class universities prioritize enhancing their global ranking and visibility by recruiting international students. Both types of universities are obligated to operate in accordance with government policies on internationalization. Hence, the size of international student enrollments is hugely significant for both categories of universities.

5.2 The number of international students and their regional distribution

SU hosts more than 3,000 international students while CU accommodates more than 700, respectively. Such variation highlights the impact of institutional type on the number of international students. Double First-Class universities, like SU, are likely to be more attractive to international students. Furthermore, the SU recruits students from more than 90 countries of five continents, whereas CU's international student population originates from around 40 nations across 4 continents. Both SU and CU predominantly get their international students from throughout Asia, respectively 59% and 84% (Figs. 1 and 2). This major presence of Asian students reflects a pattern of 'Asianization' in the international student cohort, emphasizing China's interest in cooperating with those nations along the BRI route. Unlike CU, SU hosts a larger number of foreign students from Europe (20%) and Oceania (3%) (Fig. 1). This suggests that Double First-Class universities are more appealing to students from developed economies than non-Double First-Class universities.

5.3 Marketing strategies for international students

Drawing from administrators' responses, a total of eleven recruitment approaches were evident in the two universities (Table 6). The first eight strategies were practices that the two universities shared. However, CU exclusively utilized the employment of agents, whereas SU implemented the development of English programs and recommendations from the Confucius Institute.

International students' recruitment in both universities primarily features scholarships as a shared strategy. A detailed analysis indicated a total of seven types of scholarship in the two universities (Table 7). In comparison with SU (four kinds of scholarships), CU offers more scholarships (six kinds), but they both provide two shared scholarships namely the Scholarship for Belt and Road, and Scholarship for Sister City (Table 7). CU expands the chance for international students

Table 5 China's policies and regulations for international students

Policy/Regulation	Year	Main content	Rationale	References
Study in China Program	2010	• Establish a service provision system for international students corresponding to the country's international standing, educational size and tier • Produce a substantial amount of highly qualified academic staff to teach international students in China • Promote universities in China as having distinct characteristics in international education and possess high-level disciplinary clusters • Nurture many high-level international students who possess knowledge about and hold a friendly disposition towards China	Academic Political	[54]
Advance Belt and Road Education Initiative	2016	• Establish the "Silk Road Chinese Government Scholarship" to develop outstanding individuals from the nations along the route into industry leaders with extraordinary skills	Academic	[55]
Several Opinions on Opening Up Education in the New Era	2016	• Actively utilize international students and teachers in China to propagate or promote Chinese ideals and values	Political	[56]
Regulations for the Admission and Education of International Students in Schools	2017	• Strengthen educational exchange and collaboration with foreign nations, elevating internationalization of China's education	Academic	[57]
Quality Standards for Higher Education of International Students in China (Trial)	2018	• Foreign students learning in China should have a basic understanding of its history, geography, society, and economy. As well, they should be acquainted with China's political system and foreign policies. It is essential for them to align with mainstream values and embrace public moral concepts that pervade Chinese society. Furthermore, they should cultivate a robust comprehension of legal principles and ethical awareness	Political	[58]

Authors' own compilation based on analysis of the relevant documents

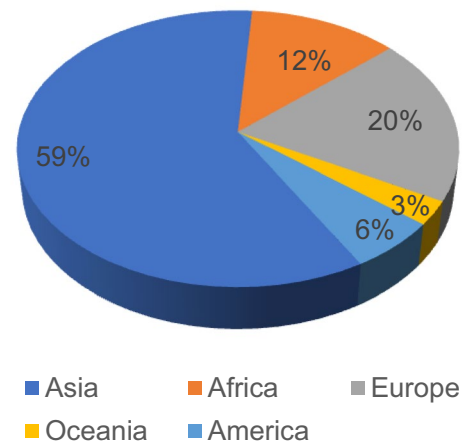**Fig. 1** Regional distribution of SU's international students. Authors' own compilation

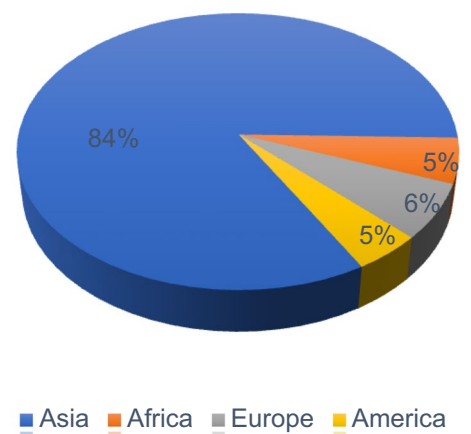**Fig. 2** Regional distribution of CU's international students. Authors' own compilation

Table 6 Strategies for recruitment

Recruitment strategy	SU	CU
Scholarship	√	√
Oversea universities of Chinese training	√	√
Foreign governments	√	√
Global educational fairs	√	√
Social connections	√	√
Global partners	√	√
Social media/internet/information technology	√	√
Education Consultant Companies	√	√
Agents		√
English programs	√	
Institutes of Confucius	√	

Authors' own compilation

to obtain the provincial Government Scholarship, an option exclusive to non-Double First-Class provincial universities. SU exclusively offers the Governmental Scholarship of China and Scholarship of the Confucius Institute, and CU offers the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Arts Scholarship and their institution's scholarship, which further diversifies its scholarship offerings.

Governmental Scholarship of China and Scholarship of the Confucius Institute cover fees for tuition and accommodation, in addition to providing a monthly stipend of 2,500 Yuan for every student. Similarly, Provincial Governmental

Table 7 International students' scholarships

Scholarship	SU	CU
Governmental Scholarship of China	√	
Provincial Governmental Scholarship		√
Scholarship for Belt and Road	√	√
Scholarship for Sister City	√	√
Scholarship of the Confucius Institute	√	
Scholarship for ASEAN Arts		√
Institution's Scholarship		√

Authors' own compilation

Scholarship, Scholarship for Belt and Road, Scholarship for Sister City, and CU's Institution's Scholarship offer an annual amount of 20,000 Yuan, respectively, for each student. The largest amount of scholarships is offered by the ASEAN Arts Scholarship, amounting to 30,000 Yuan per student every year. According to administrators, around 60% of international students at SU and 100% at CU qualify for scholarships. Strongly suggested here is that at least 60% of international students can enjoy education that is already paid for, and a certain proportion of them would even receive financial assistance to cover their living expenses. A majority of CU's international students acknowledged that the scholarships offered were the most enticing factor for them.

Nevertheless, administrators at both universities recognized that the sustainability of government scholarships depends on decisions made by different levels of government, while universities' scholarships are contingent upon the decisions of those in charge of the university. Changes may occur if governments opt to discontinue scholarship programs or if changes occur in who leads the institution. Therefore, adopting scholarships as a marketing approach to increase the numbers of international students may not be a viable long-term strategy. As per SAD 2, their university employs a well-rounded recruitment strategy, with no single approach demonstrating significantly superior results. SAD 1 attributes this equilibrium to their institutional international ranking and profile. Conversely, CAD 2 reports that the primary method at CU involves recommendations from global partners, constituting more than 40% of their enrollment. This is a consequence of CU's collaboration with 173 universities in 47 countries and regions, as well as the operation of four Sino-Foreign Cooperative educational programs.

In contrast, SU takes pride in its extensive network of more than 250 global partners in more than 35 countries. This suggests that while SU excels in the quantity of global partnerships, CU holds a comparative advantage in terms of diversity among countries. CAD 2 commented that a considerable percentage of students (35%) from CU originated from Laos and had been exclusively enrolled through collaboration with a provincial education department in that country. Such batch recruitment was promoted by a Chinese intermediary who is currently working in a government department in Laos.

The management personnel at SU claimed that their recruiting approaches are viable in the long-term, attributing the attractiveness to international students was based on the university's commitment to education quality and international visibility. These aspects are highly prioritized and actively pursued by SU. On the other hand, CU's leaders acknowledged that although continued recommendations from partners may face disruptions due to changes in leadership at mutual universities, the university's continuous endeavors to broaden international collaboration will systematically increase the number of international students. All other strategies were not identified as sustainable approaches for the recruitment of international students.

As a result, enhancing universities by improving the quality of education and continuous efforts to strengthen international collaboration are recognized as sustainable approaches for attracting international students in the two universities. It is evident that most current practices in them are not perceived as having a long-term future.

5.4 Requirements for admission: lowering for more?

In addition to holding a high school diploma, language proficiency is a crucial prerequisite for studying in China. Individuals whose mother tongue is not Chinese or English are expected to take the appropriate proficiency exams and receive the bare minimum of scores. According to the Ministry of Education of China (MOE), students' competency in subjects in Chinese must at least match Level 4 of the "Chinese Proficiency Test" (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi—HSK). When

it comes to courses taught in a foreign language, HEIs need to be very clear about the level of competence required for that language as part of their entry requirements [58].

Language proficiency standards differ from institution to institution. For instance, at SU, candidates applying for majors taught in Chinese need to achieve a score of 180 or above in HSK 5, whereas CU sets the requirement at HSK 4 or above. In the case of programs taught by English, SU mandates non-native English speakers to provide a certificate of Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) with a score of at least 80 or a certificate of The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) with a score of at least 6.0. Meanwhile CU only requires a score report of an English Proficiency test. This disparity suggests that language requirements are governed by the rules applied by the types of universities.

Furthermore, as emphasized by the administrators at both universities, even though the MOE has established criteria for language proficiency, international students enrolled exclusively based on these standards frequently encounter difficulties in meeting the requirements for specific academic programs. SIS 4 with an HSK 5 certificate, also encounters difficulties in keeping pace with her teachers and Chinese classroom peers. Moreover, students from CU consistently experience frustration and anxiety arising from language barriers, resulting in elevated rates of absenteeism and exam failures. With this in mind, academic performance serves as a crucial indicator of students' learning capabilities and attitudes, reflecting the quality of international students. According to the MOE, in order to ensure that set admission requirements are met, colleges and universities must either administer entrance exams or carry out academic evaluations for international applicants [57]. Nevertheless, such unified entrance exams or criteria for academic evaluation were not observed in China. Consequently, both universities do not require written exams or interviews as part of the admission process.

Therefore, the current requirements for language proficiency along with the lax oversight of academic performance led to a poorer caliber of international students. Although administrators concede that there is room for improvement by, firstly, enforcing stricter language proficiency requirements and secondly, adding written exams or interviews, they express concerns that raising admission standards may significantly reduce the number of international students and undermine their original recruitment goals.

5.5 Management of international students: an overlooked field?

The process of administering international students is a multifaceted system that encompasses planning for teaching, execution of teaching plans, supervision, feedback, and improvements. However, many HEIs usually disregard the quality of education received by foreign students because they make up a small portion of the student body. The MOE prioritizes the importance of HEIs establishing a robust administrative system for foreign students, continuously improving it, and assimilating the management and services for both local and international students [58]. Despite these directives, the practical execution of assimilating management policies has raised numerous concerns.

Administrators such as CAD 2 and CAC 4 have raised concerns about the lack of integration of curricula for international students within the overall university system. CAC 1 contended that the majority of training programs of international students in their universities are patterned after those tailored for domestic students. They fall short in effectively addressing the distinctive requirements that international students in China need. Additionally, administrators have highlighted the lack of a solid quality assurance system in the education of international students. Several international students reported not having the same opportunities as their Chinese counterparts to assess their teachers' instruction methods, revealing regulatory discrepancies in supervising the education that is taught to international students. SAD 1 contended that managing international students results in an incomplete assimilation process and marked disregard for the needs of individual international students.

International students themselves have stated their concerns. For example, SIS 2 highlighted the challenges in participating in classes with Chinese students. Language barriers and assumptions about the Chinese students' understanding often made it difficult for international students to grasp course requirements. Furthermore, many international students noted the absence of guidance and assistance when difficulties arose in their studies, and tailored psychological counseling, resulting in emotional distress and a sense of frustration when confronted with life and learning challenges. In this regard, the management and care that needs to be shown to international students is an overlooked field.

In summary, both universities have a common objective of enrolling more international students. Double First-Class Universities, taking advantage of their global presence, substantial financial resources, and more access to top-tier talents, have the means to attract high-quality international students throughout the world compared to their non-Double First-Class counterparts. Consequently, the latter often offer more scholarships to enhance their appeal to international students to make up for this shortfall.

5.6 Discussion

The above discussions firstly highlight the key rationales that drive the setting of strategies for the recruitment of international students before further explanations about the strategies and their implications are made.

The findings above indicate that while alignment with the national policies and strategic deployment is the common rationale driving both types of universities to pursue the expansion of international students' enrollment, Double First-Class universities are more likely to be driven by the rationale for global visibility and a higher profile, whereas non-Double First-Class universities are struggling to increase their revenues through provincial governments' financial allocations.

These distinct aspirations drive the implementation of diverse marketing strategies aimed at attracting international students in both types of universities. While providing as many scholarships as possible and deliberately lowering the requirements for admission serve as the main ways to attract international students, Double First-Class universities are also pursuing this goal by enhancing the quality of English programs and expanding the international cooperation. To compete with their Double First-Class peers, non Double First-Class universities have to expand their scholarship offerings, and implement lower admission criteria to be more inclusive.

However, on one hand, most of these strategies appear to be unsustainable approaches; on the other hand, blindly pursuing more international students conceals the risks of deliberately neglecting the quality of teaching and overall education of international students, as well as poor management and services offered to international students.

As previously stated, SE should be delivered in such a way as to encompass economic growth, social advancement, and developing human capital as a balanced way [23–25]. At the core of these objectives lies the recognition of the pivotal role played by individual needs and personal development. Human capital emerges as the primary driver for realizing both economic prosperity and social advancement. However, the current practices in the education of international students at certain Chinese HEIs have led to a discrepancy between the urgent need to enroll as many as possible, and the very real oversight in ensuring the quality of the education provided to international students. Thus, these commercialized strategies have virtually impeded the establishment of a sustainable higher education system in China. Despite some Double First-Class universities taking steps to address this situation through measures such as devising English programs and expanding international cooperation, much more effort needs to be made to achieve the SD in education and learning as they apply to the education of international students in China.

6 Concluding remarks: implications, further research and limitations

The above analysis reveals that both national and institutional requirements have driven China's HEIs to strive to increase the enrollments of international students. Such an over-emphasis on the number of international students results in the employment of sometimes contradictory marketing strategies and the subsequent dual neglect of the quality of international students and how they are taught. In this competition, Double First-Class universities inherently have a much stronger appeal to international students, owing to their global visibility and profile. Responding to the competition posed by these elite universities, non-Double First-Class universities find it imperative for them to offer a broader range and larger number of scholarships to international students, but at the cost of lowering their admission requirements.

The collected data indicates that, apart from improving universities' branding and enhancing international cooperation, no other strategies seem viable for the long-term sustainability of recruitment of international students. Additionally, existing approaches in the administration of international students and their needs frequently overlook the growth of those individuals with real talent. Such disregard goes against one of the key tenets of the SDGs, which highlights the necessity to guarantee fair and high-quality education for every individual [59]. Therefore, for the SD of international students' education, Chinese HEIs must reevaluate their existing policies and practices. Instead of lowering admission thresholds and providing additional scholarships to attract low-quality international students, HEIs in China should consider how to improve their systems, processes and mechanisms so that they are sustainable.

For example, HEIs are advised to conduct comprehensive assessments of high school academic evaluation systems in various countries. They can also standardize and enhance admission criteria so that only high-quality international students are admitted. Reforms in the scholarship system specifically for international students could be introduced,

gradually transitioning to a unified scholarship system with consistent assessment standards for both international and domestic students. University departments or faculties need to undertake collaborative efforts to improve the overall quality of services offered to international students. What is especially required is a concerted effort to devise high-quality English programs and provide training for more professional and qualified international teachers, thereby enhancing the overall appeal of the universities to international students. Only through ongoing reform and improvement can the SD of international students' education in China be achieved. Additionally, considering incorporating SLE into its design and delivery of courses for international students would also be an advisable and innovative strategy for China's HEIs to improve the quality of the cultivation of international students.

The lessons drawn from China's approach to international students' education should prompt other nations, particularly those fervently striving to expand their international student enrollments for a seat in a global ranking table, to reevaluate their priorities and how to achieve them. Neglecting the importance of the quality of higher education in pursuit of higher numbers will ultimately compromise the personal and professional developments of individuals. Some emerging countries especially the Gulf nations and in East Asia, such as Malaysia, Singapore, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates would be greatly benefit as they are making huge investments in the internationalization of their higher education systems.

In terms of limitations, the findings documented in this paper may not be applicable to HEIs in other regions of China or to those in other nations, since only two examples of different kinds of universities were examined here. While a qualitative method may offer detailed insights into certain organizations and especially in the higher education system, it is very difficult to what extent the findings can be generalized more broadly. Hence, a quantitative methodology conducted across different regions or nations and including a larger population sample using the same variables identified in this study should be undertaken. Moreover, nations and their government, political and administrative processes are very different. Furthermore, the administrative and policy frameworks of a nation and its provinces may be very different and not work as a unified process. Hence, distinct study reflecting the pattern of the nation is well regarded following its national and educational administrative legacy and history—a postulate applicable either for revolutionary or evolutionary approach in educational development.

Data availability Materials and data are available upon request.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate All authors agree to publish the article in the journal Discover Sustainability.

Research involving human participants and/or animals Not applicable.

Competing interests There are no competing interests in the writing of this article.

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