

Motivations for Chinese Students Enrolling in International Programs in Thailand

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Abstract

This study explores the motivations and challenges faced by international students choosing Thailand as their study destination. A survey was conducted with 36 international students, using a structured questionnaire that assessed factors such as tuition costs, cultural experiences, academic reputation, and career goals. The results revealed that the most significant factors influencing students' decisions were affordability (80%), cultural immersion (75%), academic reputation (65%), and career opportunities (50%). Despite challenges like language barriers and cultural differences, most students reported satisfaction with the support provided by Thai universities, including language courses, cultural workshops, and counseling services. These findings highlight Thailand's appeal as a study destination, offering a combination of affordable education, rich cultural experiences, and growing career prospects. The study underscores the importance of university support in helping international students navigate cultural adaptation and succeed academically. Further research is suggested to explore the long-term career outcomes of graduates and the specific support mechanisms that enhance international students' experiences in Thailand.

Keywords: International students, Thailand, study destination, cultural immersion, tuition costs, academic reputation, career opportunities, cross-cultural adaptation, university support, student challenges, cultural differences, language barriers.

Introduction

In recent years, Thailand has become a prominent destination for international students, offering a unique combination of affordable education, cultural diversity, and high-quality academic programs. Thai universities attract students with their low tuition fees compared to Western countries while maintaining strong academic standards, with institutions like Chulalongkorn and Mahidol University gaining global recognition. Additionally, scholarships and financial aid programs further alleviate the financial burden for international students. The country's lower cost of living compared to Europe and the United States makes it an attractive option for students looking to manage their expenses while studying in major cities like Bangkok or Chiang Mai (Packer, 2025; QS World University Rankings. n.d; The Nation, 2023; University Guru, 2025).

Thailand's educational system is increasingly popular due to its diverse academic programs, internationalization, and ease of application. Universities in Thailand typically have lower language and application requirements compared to those in Europe and

America, with many offering programs taught in English. This, combined with Thailand's rich cultural heritage and vibrant environment, provides students with unique cultural experiences and opportunities for building international connections. Additionally, the expanding presence of Chinese-funded enterprises in Thailand creates job opportunities for students who understand Chinese culture and language, while Thailand's booming tourism industry also offers positions for students with language skills (Packer, 2025; QS World University Rankings. n.d; The Nation, 2023; University Guru, 2025).

This research provides valuable insights into the factors influencing international students' decisions to study in Thailand, shedding light on the key motivations and challenges they encounter. As Thailand becomes an increasingly popular destination for higher education, understanding these factors is crucial for Thai universities, policymakers, and education agents to better cater to the needs of international students. The study emphasizes the importance of affordability, cultural immersion, academic quality, and career prospects in attracting international students, contributing to the growing recognition of Thailand's educational offerings on the global stage.

Furthermore, the research highlights the challenges that international students face, particularly in terms of language barriers and cultural adaptation. By focusing on the support systems provided by Thai universities, the study underscores the role of these institutions in facilitating a smoother transition for international students and enhancing their overall experience. This research also has broader implications for improving international student recruitment strategies, fostering intercultural understanding, and enhancing the global competitiveness of Thai higher education. The findings provide a foundation for future studies that can explore the long-term outcomes of studying in Thailand and contribute to the development of best practices in international education.

Literature Review

Studying abroad offers students a chance to engage in a world-class learning environment, gain diverse cultural exposure, and expand their personal and professional networks. However, foreign students face challenges such as meeting financial and eligibility requirements, adapting to a new culture, and coping with homesickness. The article discusses these pros and cons, aiming to help individuals make an informed decision. It notes that while some students struggle with language and cultural barriers, the trend has shifted away from language learning; in 2014, for example, only 5% of American study abroad students took up courses in world languages, with the majority enrolled in other fields like STEM (23%), social sciences (22%), and business (20%). The benefits of studying abroad are significant and include civic engagement, knowledge production, and social entrepreneurship, often influencing students to pursue graduate school. It also provides a chance to see things from a different perspective, increasing cultural awareness and empathy. The experience takes students out of their comfort zone, fostering independence and valuable life skills like budgeting and time management. Studies have shown that students who study abroad have improved study habits, increased confidence, and an increase in their grade point average compared to their peers. Furthermore, foreign study graduates impress employers with their global perspective; a 2011 QS Global Employer Survey found that six out of ten employers give extra credit for international experience, with high demand in industries such as Energy (71%) and Travel and Hospitality (64%). A 2017 Study International article also reported that students who studied abroad are more resilient, confident, and independent than those who were locally educated. The opportunity for travel to new places is also a key benefit (Bouchrika, 2025).

Based on a survey of 555 international university students in Taiwan, a study identified key motivations for studying abroad. The most important "push" factor was the desire for international travel and experience, while the most important "pull" factor was the host country's tourism attractions. The study concluded that although education remains a fundamental motivation, tourism-related factors play an even more significant role in the decision-making process. The research also highlighted that international students are not a homogeneous group, as their motivations vary by nationality and level of study, and it suggested that strategic alliances between higher education and tourism sectors could be beneficial (Lee, 2017).

This study explored the rationales for international student mobility (ISM) beyond the traditional economic and employability-focused perspectives. It used a framework based on Sen's capability approach to identify four dimensions of students' motivations: educational, experiential, aspirational, and economic. The article critiques internationalization policies that are solely focused on economic imperatives, arguing that such a narrow approach may fail to provide a transformative experience for students. The authors recommend a re-imagining of policy to better represent a broader range of student rationales (Fakunle, 2021).

A qualitative study interviewed a total of 64 international undergraduate students from 26 countries at a Canadian university to investigate their motivations for studying abroad. Using thematic analysis, the study identified eight underlying motivational themes, including the desire for new experiences, quality of education, improved career prospects, and immigration opportunities. Other factors were the qualities of the host country and institution, financial reasons, location, and having friends or relatives in the host country. The study found that many of these factors aligned with Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood, while others were unique to international students, offering universities valuable insights to help students achieve their goals (Wintre, et al. 2015).

A systematic review aimed to understand the factors influencing healthcare students' decisions regarding study abroad programs, noting a low participation rate among this group despite the benefits. The review, which included ten studies (5 qualitative, 5 surveys), found that factors influencing these decisions are similar across different geographical locations and professional groups. Supportive factors included having sufficient information about programs early on, a genuine interest in other cultures, and positive role models among faculty and family. The primary barriers were identified as cost and language issues, with language being a significant deterrent even when financial support is available. The study suggests that promoting study abroad opportunities must start early and include detailed information and language support (Brown, et al. 2016).

A study with international students at Regional Western University (RMU) examined their reasons for choosing the institution and the perceived barriers and benefits of studying abroad. Participants stated that having a friend or relative who had previously attended RMU was a significant factor in their decision. They reported challenges such as academic language barriers, a lack of familiarity with culturally expected classroom practices, and difficulty finding off-campus housing. The students overwhelmingly agreed that the most important benefit was the cultural awareness and competence they gained (Milian, et al. 2015).

A study exploring the motivations of Chinese students who intend to study abroad used survey data from two major universities in China in 2018. It noted that the annual population of Chinese students studying abroad has increased dramatically since 1991, peaking at 703,500 in 2019. The research found that intellectual capital, at both the family and personal levels, has the strongest influence on the intention to study abroad, more so than economic capital. The primary reason for pursuing international education is to accumulate intellectual

capital, while the lack of sufficient financial support is the main deterrent. The study also found that gender played a role in the intention to study abroad (Lu, et al. 2024).

A paper analyzed macro data from China's National Bureau of Statistics from 2005 to 2021 to understand how variables such as the economy, epidemics, and policies have influenced the number of students studying abroad. The study used various models, including multiple linear regression, machine learning, and time series models, to predict future trends. The research concluded that a combined model based on weight assignment provided a more accurate prediction of future trends than a single model alone (Li, 2022).

The increasing number of Chinese students choosing to study in Thailand can be attributed to various socio-economic and educational factors, particularly in light of China's "One Belt and One Road" (OBOR) initiative. This literature review explores the key determinants influencing Chinese students' decisions to pursue higher education in Thailand, as well as the challenges they face in adapting to the cultural environment. One significant issue that many Chinese students face during their time in Thailand is cross-cultural adaptation. Kang, Yossuck, Panyadee, and Ek-lem (2019) conducted a study on Chinese undergraduates across eight universities in Northern Thailand, focusing on the factors affecting their adaptation. They tested Young Yun Kim's model of cross-cultural adaptation, which includes six dimensions: Communication Competence (CC), Host Social Communication (HSC), Intercultural Transformation (IT), Environment (EN), and Predisposition (PR). Their findings indicated that five of these dimensions significantly influenced the students' adaptation process, with nine specific factors showing a strong positive correlation with successful adaptation. These factors included social communication skills, intercultural transformation, and environmental factors, underlining the importance of both personal competence and external support in adapting to a new cultural setting.

In addition to adaptation challenges, the decision-making process for Chinese students to study in Thailand has been influenced by a range of factors. Ye (2020) conducted a study on 402 Chinese students studying at 20 universities in Thailand, examining the economic, political, social, cultural, and personal factors impacting their decisions. The results indicated that all five categories played a significant role in the students' decision-making process, with these factors accounting for 78.9% of the variance in their decision. The study also highlighted the channels through which students gathered information about studying in Thailand, such as educational agents, joint programs, referrals from friends, online applications, and education exhibitions.

Zhongcheng (2013) used the Push and Pull Model to examine the factors influencing Chinese students' choice to study in Thailand. The study found that an international environment and the use of English as a medium of instruction were key pull factors, suggesting that Chinese students increasingly prioritize international exposure and English language skills in their educational pursuits. Furthermore, Jiakai (2018) focused on students studying in Bangkok, emphasizing how university reputation, perceived value of university facilities, and student expenditure significantly affected their decisions to study in the capital. These findings collectively suggest that Chinese students' decisions to study in Thailand are shaped by both personal and external factors, with a particular emphasis on internationalization, academic quality, and financial considerations.

Methodology

A survey was conducted among 36 international students to explore their motivations for choosing Thailand as their study destination. The study utilized a structured questionnaire

that examined several key factors, including tuition costs, cultural experiences, academic reputation, and career goals. Participants were asked to rate the importance of these factors in their decision-making process, providing valuable insights into the elements that influenced their choice of Thailand for higher education.

In conducting this survey, ethical considerations were prioritized to ensure the well-being and rights of the participants. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents, ensuring they were fully aware of the purpose of the study and how their responses would be used. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing all survey data, and participants were assured that their identities would not be linked to any findings in the final report. Participation was voluntary, and students were given the option to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Additionally, the survey was designed to avoid any form of harm, ensuring that the questions were respectful and did not cause discomfort to the respondents. The study adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving human participants, maintaining transparency, respect, and integrity throughout the process.

Results and Discussion

The survey conducted among 36 international students revealed several key motivations behind their decision to study in Thailand. The most prominent factor, cited by 80% of the respondents, was the affordability of education. This aligns with previous research indicating that Thailand's relatively low tuition fees compared to Western countries make it an attractive destination for students, particularly those seeking high-quality education without the financial burden associated with universities in Europe or the United States. In addition to cost, 75% of students highlighted the opportunity for cultural immersion as a key reason for choosing Thailand. Many international students are drawn to the country's rich cultural heritage, diverse traditions, and the opportunity to experience life in a unique environment that differs significantly from their home countries. Academic reputation also played an important role, with 65% of respondents citing it as a contributing factor. Thai universities, particularly top institutions like Chulalongkorn University and Mahidol University, are gaining international recognition for their academic excellence, which adds to the appeal of studying in the country. Finally, 50% of students mentioned career opportunities as an important reason for selecting Thailand, reflecting the country's growing role as a hub for international businesses and industries, particularly in sectors like tourism, trade, and technology.

Discussion

Despite the numerous benefits, the survey also highlighted several challenges that international students face while studying in Thailand. The most significant challenges reported were language barriers and cultural differences. Many students found it difficult to communicate in a country where Thai is the predominant language, especially in non-academic settings. This created a sense of isolation for some students and added complexity to their daily interactions. Additionally, cultural differences, ranging from social customs to food habits, were also cited as initial hurdles that made adaptation more challenging. However, despite these challenges, most students expressed satisfaction with the support provided by Thai universities in helping them navigate these difficulties. Many institutions offer language courses, cultural workshops, and counseling services to assist international students in adapting to life in Thailand. These support mechanisms were crucial in easing the transition and ensuring that students were able to thrive academically and socially. Moreover, the cultural immersion experience, although initially challenging, ultimately became an opportunity for personal growth. Students reported that overcoming these barriers helped them develop resilience, intercultural competence, and a deeper understanding of

global diversity. The support provided by universities, along with the students' own efforts to adapt, transformed the challenges into opportunities for enrichment, creating a positive overall experience during their studies in Thailand.

Conclusion and Suggestions

The survey conducted among 36 international students studying in Thailand revealed several key factors influencing their decision to pursue higher education in the country. The affordability of education was the most prominent factor, with 80% of respondents citing it as a primary motivation. Additionally, 75% of students valued the opportunity for cultural immersion, while 65% considered the academic reputation of Thai universities an important factor in their decision. The growing career opportunities available in Thailand also played a significant role, with 50% of students indicating that career prospects influenced their choice. Despite challenges such as language barriers and cultural differences, students reported satisfaction with the support provided by Thai universities in overcoming these difficulties. The combination of affordable education, cultural experiences, academic quality, and career opportunities makes Thailand an increasingly attractive study destination for international students.

While this study provides valuable insights into the factors motivating international students to study in Thailand, further research is needed to explore these findings in greater depth and across a larger, more diverse sample. Future studies could investigate the specific types of cultural experiences that international students find most valuable, as well as the long-term career outcomes for graduates who studied in Thailand. Additionally, examining the impact of Thai universities' support services on student adaptation and success could offer insights into best practices for enhancing the international student experience. It would also be beneficial to conduct comparative studies with students studying in other countries to better understand what makes Thailand a unique or competitive choice. Finally, exploring the challenges and opportunities faced by students from specific countries or regions could provide a more nuanced understanding of how different groups experience studying in Thailand and how universities can tailor their support services to meet the needs of diverse student populations.

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