



# A Comparative Study of Higher Education Institutions in North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany) and Their Marketing Approaches to Student Recruitment from China

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the approaches of selected German universities towards degree course marketing to attract students from abroad, especially China. It contributes to academic research into a rising discipline, international degree course marketing, as well as to provide insights into current practices leading to reflections on the discipline's opportunities and limitations. The paper is structured according to a theoretical literature review and empirical research findings. Initially the concept of culture and cultural theories is reviewed leading to the development of a set of criteria to assess the level of cultural adaptation of marketing material. These assessment criteria are applied to a range of marketing instruments implemented by selected German universities. Members of staff in relevant positions at these universities have been interviewed to reveal their views as practitioners. The outcomes of the research involving document analysis and interviews are complemented with, and compared to, answers provided by Chinese students in Germany to an online survey focusing on their preferences regarding the content of cultural-sensitive marketing material. The results show that in order to be worthwhile, internationalization efforts should include not only the recruitment of foreign students but also their integration into the academic community and their retention as loyal alumni.

**Keywords:** Higher Education, Marketing Approaches, Student Recruitment.

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## **Introduction**

The reform under the Bologna Process in Europe has significantly reshaped the higher education sector. The developments provide European universities with opportunities as well as threats. Due to the harmonisation of degrees, for instance, European universities are becoming more attractive to students from other countries facilitating international student recruitment but, at the same time, stimulating competition.

This paper explores approaches to degree course marketing to recruit students from China by German universities. Previous studies reveal that Germany is the most popular non-English speaking country among Chinese students who make up the largest group of students from the same ethnic background in Germany. However, despite the reciprocal attraction, the cultural differences between Germany and China cannot be denied which – in marketing contexts - entails the question of whether components of the marketing mix require adaptation or not.

The empirical research will first explore the level of adaptation of marketing instruments used by selected German universities for student recruitment from China. In a second step the research aims at revealing whether cultural theories such as Hofstede's (1984, 1986, 2001) five cultural dimensions are relevant in the adaptation process. Finally, a survey among Chinese students studying in Germany provides views and preferences of the 'end-user' or 'recipient' in terms of cultural-sensitive marketing.

The research findings allow insights into current approaches to higher education marketing and student recruitment from China implemented by selected German universities. It is revealed that although cultural adaptation is considered important and is implemented to sometimes impressive levels it is not based on a systematic, theory-led process. Cultural theories are deemed too abstract and hence impractical as universities seem to lack both time and resources to transfer the theoretical concepts into practice. The student perspective reveals surprising insights and leads to the conclusion that universities need to rethink their recruitment approaches.

The results show that in order to be worthwhile, internationalization efforts should include not only the recruitment of foreign students but also their integration into the academic community and their retention as loyal alumni. Therefore, universities should consider international student recruitment as the first phase of a tripartite holistic approach of: recruitment, integration and retention. This will enable universities to benefit from the cultural diversity foreign students bring into the lecture halls and, later on, from growing international networks of loyal alumni and their positive word-of-mouth. In an increasingly international and competitive higher education sector these networks of alumni, who act as multipliers and ambassadors, will significantly help universities to drive forward knowledge exchange, advance research and foster partnerships worldwide.

The objective of this paper is to explore the approaches of selected German universities towards international degree course marketing to attract students from abroad, especially from China. Preceding this objective is the observation of a phenomenon: The Chinese recruitment market is said to differ considerably in culture from the German market, yet the biggest group of international students in Germany originates from China. From a marketing perspective it seems appropriate to investigate whether these cultural differences are



addressed in marketing material used for student recruitment from China and whether cultural theories – as often discussed in marketing literature - are deemed relevant by practitioners for the adaptation process.

The purpose of this paper is therefore to contribute to the academic research into a rising discipline, international degree course marketing, as well as to provide insights into current practices leading to reflections on the discipline's opportunities and limitations.

In order to achieve the objective outlined above the following research questions have been developed:

- Do higher education institutions in Germany adapt their marketing instruments used for student recruitment from abroad, especially from China, in order to overcome cultural differences?
- What criteria play a prominent role in the adaptation process and are cultural theories of any relevance?

The paper is structured on a theoretical (literature review) and empirical (research findings) basis. First, the concept of culture and cultural theories will be reviewed leading to the development of a set of criteria to assess the level of cultural adaptation of marketing material. In the empirical part these assessment criteria will be applied to a range of marketing instruments implemented by selected German universities. In addition, members of staff in relevant positions at these universities have been interviewed to reveal their views as practitioners on both research questions. The outcomes of the document analysis and the interviews are complemented with and compared to answers provided by Chinese students in Germany to an online survey focusing on their preferences regarding the content of cultural-sensitive marketing material.

### **Literature Review**

Over the past two decades higher education institutions have fundamentally extended and intensified their international activities according to Altbach and Knight (2007, p. 290), who ascribe this development to the advancement of globalization, defined as “the economic, political, and societal forces pushing 21st century higher education toward greater international involvement”.

In Europe joint cross-border internationalization efforts have just culminated in the implementation of the Bologna Process. The reform has significantly re-shaped the higher education landscape on the continent, providing universities with great opportunities as well as posing significant challenges. According to the European Commission (2011) “the Bologna Process aims to create a European Higher Education Area by 2010, in which students can choose from a wide and transparent range of high quality courses and benefit from smooth recognition procedures. The Bologna Declaration of June 1999 has put in motion a series of reforms needed to make European Higher Education more compatible and comparable, more competitive and more attractive for Europeans and for students and scholars from other continents”.

Looking at Germany, for example, one of the founding members of the European Union (EU) and the largest EU country by population, universities have recently completed the transition to bachelor and master degree programs under the Bologna Process. The harmonization of degrees facilitates student mobility but will also intensify international



competition among higher education institutions. In addition, German universities have to cope with domestic challenges such as less public funding, rising costs and smaller cohorts due to demographic change. The German higher education sector is hence said to become a buyers' market. As a response, higher education institutions have started to employ marketing strategies to meet these challenges and withstand the competition (Bode et al., 2008, p. 27).

According to Bode et al. (2008, pp. 31-32) there are three levels of marketing in higher education: university, faculty and degree course. It could be argued that the aim of becoming more attractive to students from other European countries as well as from other continents, as per the declaration of 1999, would lead to an increased focus on marketing activities, especially at the third level, i.e. promoting degree courses to recruit international students. It could be further argued that the greater the cultural distance between the potential student and the recruiting university, the greater the necessity to adapt marketing activities in order to accommodate these differences.

In Germany, almost 9 % of all students were foreign in 2009 (GATE-Germany, 2010, p. 13) making it the most popular non-English speaking study location. The Chinese make up the largest group of students from the same ethnic background in Germany with a total share of almost 13 % (Ceyhan, 2011, p. 26).

Bodycott (2009, pp. 351) argues that "Mainland China poses significant cultural differences from other international student recruitment markets" leading him (2009, p. 369) to the conclusion that "to market effectively in Confucian societies requires an intimate understanding and respect for the cultural values that underlie such societies". It can be concluded that the awareness of cultural differences is vital for international higher education marketing professionals, especially when aiming to recruit students from China.

In terms of standardisation versus adaptation in the current context, the degree courses provided in Germany will be the same for both international and national students. In most German states universities do not charge tuition fees. It follows that product (degree course), price (tuition fees) and place (country where the course is provided) cannot be adapted to local taste; they are standardized. Although it can be assumed that degree courses have been adapted to some extent to appeal to an international audience; a least adaptation would have been the design of English-taught modules. It follows that the promotion of international degree courses seems to provide most opportunities for cultural adaptation. The cultural theories introduced earlier provide frameworks to analyze and compare national cultures and will hence help to reveal areas where cultural adaptation is appropriate.

When comparing the two approaches by Hofstede (1984, 1986, 2001) and Schwartz (1999) some similarities are revealed: Hofstede's (1984, 1986, 2001) power distance seems to relate to Schwartz' (1999) hierarchy dimension; masculinity (versus femininity) might comply with mastery and harmony, while individualism (versus collectivism) and uncertainty avoidance seem to be covered by conservatism, egalitarianism as well as intellectual and affective autonomy.

Nevertheless, Hofstede's (1984, 1986, 2001) model appears to be the most accepted one within the marketing discipline (Usunier and Lee, 2009, p. 9). It seems further preferable as it is said to be scientifically sound and empirically tested on a substantial scale, which is



less true for Schwartz' approach. The fact that Hofstede (1984, 1986, 2001) has repeatedly exemplified his cultural dimensions in real-life situations including an educational context is especially helpful for the purpose of this study. Moreover, Hofstede's (1984, 1986, 2001) cultural dimensions seem less complex and hence easier to re-apply. The five cultural dimensions will therefore be used as the basis for the research. The significance of cultural adaptation in an international marketing context and the usefulness of cultural theories in the analysis of national cultures have been exemplified. In summary, looking at cultural differences between China and Germany and their implications within higher education, Chinese students seem to consider the relationship to professors as highly hierarchical which is different in Germany. Solidarity and group cohesion are of great importance to Chinese students and they thrive to balance self-assertion and ambition with social competences. German students, on the other hand, seem more focused on their individual situation and progress. Chinese students favour a structured learning environment and focus on long-term results. While a structured curriculum is equally important for German students, they tend to be more short-term focussed and regard free time as valuable.

## Research Method

In line with the research questions on whether and how German universities adapt their marketing instruments to attract students from China; and whether cultural theories are relevant in the adaptation process a comparative multiple case study design has been chosen. It allows the in-depth investigation of the subject matter using the example of a few selected higher education institutions.

A mixed methods research, carried out in two phases, is considered the most appropriate method to achieve the research objective. In the first phase, a better understanding of the subject matter is sought through a qualitative analysis of relevant marketing material and through qualitative interviews with experts working in the field. The second phase involved the collection of quantifiable feedback from Chinese students in Germany by means of a web-based survey. Chinese students can be considered the end-user or rather recipient of higher education marketing and recruitment activities and their feedback is hence considered vital to complement the overall picture. Bearing the above statements in mind the sample of higher education institutions for the qualitative part of the research has been purposefully selected on the basis of the following criteria:

- All institutions are based in the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia and are subject to the University Autonomy Law enacted in 2007;
- All institutions are based in the urban centre of the Rhineland, a densely populated business and science location at the heart of North Rhine-Westphalia;
- All institutions represent a different form of higher education and fall into one of the following categories: universities and equivalent institutions (incl. technical universities, specific subject universities), universities of applied science (incl. business schools);
- The actors' willingness and ability to participate.

Document analysis is used to investigate existing material ranging from texts, films, works of art, to name just a few, with the aim of interpreting the underlying human thinking, feeling and acting behind their creation (Mayring, 2002, pp. 46-50).

Based on Mayring's (2010, p. 99) general model process, the analysis for the research followed these steps:



- Definition of theoretically-derived main and sub-categories;
- Identification of relevant text passages;
- Extraction and paraphrasing of the identified text passages;
- Summary per category.

To accommodate the comparative case study research design, as a last step, findings were congregated in a general overview to facilitate comparison. Again a judgment sampling method was chosen in order to obtain feedback from only those Chinese students actually studying at the higher education institutions represented in the qualitative research sample. It is further assumed that exchange students are not recruited by universities abroad but are sent to their own institution's partner universities as part of the degree course. Hence, only full-degree Chinese students studying in North Rhine-Westphalia were considered for the quantitative research.

Nevertheless, a web-based survey was used for the quantitative research as Chinese students were expected to be new media-savvy and more responsive to online surveys than traditional ones. Furthermore, the ease of administration and speed of distribution was considered a major advantage. Descriptive statistical methods were deemed most appropriate for the planned research as they allow revealing average perceptions and common preferences with regard to the employment and adaptation of marketing material. In the current case, a combination of three research methods was used, a document analysis, in-depth interviews and a survey in order to obtain data from different sources on the same subject matter.

Following the mixed methods approach described above the details of the results of the study are reported according to the two phases of qualitative interviews and quantitative research undertaken involving key cluster information stages, and these are reported in the analysis and findings below.

### **Analysis and Findings**

General outcomes of the qualitative interviews will be presented first as they allow a better understanding of the overriding marketing orientations and attitudes towards international student recruitment. The degree of cultural adaptation of marketing instruments according to Hofstede (1984, 1986, 2001) will be assessed next. At this stage, the results of the document analysis, the interviews and the student survey will be amalgamated. Finally, light is shed on the adaptation criteria currently applied in practice and the practitioners' view on the relevance of cultural theories.

#### *Qualitative interviews: general findings*

While all sample universities consider internationalization worthwhile in general, the attitude towards international student recruitment and marketing practices in particular varies. At the Cologne Business School (CBS), for instance, national as well as international student recruitment, especially from China, is a priority:

"The marketing department is responsible for attracting more students to the CBS. One of our focuses is to go on fairs. We visit about 30 fairs per year. And we do a lot of online marketing, which includes social media marketing. [...] So these are the activities to attract more students but we have a focus on the German market. [...] There is only one [*author's note: foreign*] region we target which is Asia, or China". (QuIn\_CBS1; L3-13; L36-37)



However, founded in 1993, the CBS is still a relatively 'young' higher education institution which poses a challenge especially on the Chinese recruitment market:

"The colleagues [*author's note*: from the international office] have said that it is very difficult to attract Chinese students because they are looking for higher education institutions with a long history or tradition. [...] Over the years the representatives of the CBS international office have learned that parents and children do not trust any higher education institution that is represented at an educational fair for the first time. Only after seeing a university returning to the fair for a few years, they start to build up trust and can be convinced that this is a good university." (QuIn\_CBS1; L55-64)

In contrast, the two largest and oldest universities within the sample, the technical university, RWTH Aachen, and the multi-faculty University of Cologne, who both consider China a target region, introduced a recruitment process described as 'qualitative selection' in order to cope with the large number of applications from Chinese students:

"For example, we have a cooperation with the Akademische Pruefstelle in Beijing and there people who want to come to Aachen must go through a very intense interview. There we make a selection and we will find out: do they already have the language quality, are they prepared for staying here, do they have the academic quality and through this rigorous selection we show that we have a high standard that we maintain" (QuIn\_RWTH)

"One could perhaps even say that at the beginning of our dealings with China we were overwhelmed by a surge of applications. [...] We have therefore relocated the selection process from Cologne to Beijing with the aim of reducing the number of applications overall and increasing the number of high quality applications. In this sense, it is not an approach of mass-marketing, if you like, but the attempt to implement a qualitative selection in China." (QuIn\_UOC)

At the German Sport University yet another standpoint towards international student recruitment is taken:

"My personal internationalization attitude is I believe in internationalization but internationalization for me means there is not one country you target. We have over 60 nations here at the Sport University and I intend to keep it that way, so I am not really interested in having two or three nations broadly represented here at the Sport University, I would rather have a lot of nations, a lot of cultural diversity here at the Sport University." (QuIn\_GSU)

Places at the subject-specific German Sport University are in high demand, which has also led to a very selective application process for national as well as international students and a rather cautious approach to student recruitment:

"Again, from my perspective, the Sport University is very special. We do not have any problems in terms of applications. For the last academic year we had over 5,000 applicants for 500 spots and they ran through the aptitude test, a physical test; 55 per cent fail the aptitude test so we still have the luxury of choosing from the best, physically best, if you like, and also from the mentally best because we obviously also consider the high school exam grade. [...] That is why recruitment is not a top priority for the Sport University." (QuIn\_GSU)

It can be concluded that due to their different profiles and orientations, the sample



universities take different approaches to international student recruitment. The relatively young Cologne Business School is still in the midst of building a strong brand in the Chinese recruitment market, while the long-established and internationally well-known RWTH Aachen and University of Cologne have introduced procedures to select only the best Chinese applicants. The German Sport University benefits from its unique subject focus of its degree courses and concentrates on qualitative selection with no particular regional focus.

#### *Cultural adaptation of marketing instruments*

Ahead of the detailed analysis of cultural adaptation by means of the five culture-specific clusters of information, a brief summary of the qualitative and quantitative research outcomes will be provided. Both summaries will be supported by illustrations for ease of clarity.

#### *Qualitative research: Brief summary of findings*

As part of the qualitative research brochures and websites of the sample institutions have been reviewed and the findings were complemented by practitioners' statements made in the interviews. The overall outcomes indicate which clusters of information the universities have addressed either in their material or in personal encounters with the target audience. The illustration is rather simplified and also includes the personal impression gained by the researcher throughout the research.

As follows from the illustration the Cologne Business School is very strong on emphasising 'hard' factors, such as reputation, quality of study programs as well as employability and networks, whereas the RWTH Aachen and the University of Cologne also address the 'softer' areas, such as messages by the university leadership, peer group networks and endorsements. The German Sport University demonstrates a lower degree of adaptation which is in line with the lower priority given to international student recruitment overall but the area of communicating its high quality study programs can be considered a clear priority.

#### *Quantitative research: Brief summary of findings*

Chinese students studying in Aachen or Cologne were polled on aspects they considered important when choosing a German university to study at. To this end, the sub-categories of the five culture-specific clusters of information were listed randomly and students were asked to rate them as 'very important', 'important' or 'less important' for their decision-making process. Respondents clearly prioritized the harder factors such as quality, reputation, career prospects and rankings over softer factors such as messages from the university leadership, Chinese communities and support programs.

#### *Key Cluster of information 1: Educational System and Academic Leadership*

##### *Educational System*

While the Cologne Business School does not address cultural differences between the Chinese and the German educational system in its overall degree course brochure or on its main websites, the RWTH Aachen subtly touches upon the issue in its degree course brochure by outlining the abilities a successful student must demonstrate and the institution's educational objectives. At the University of Cologne cultural differences in this context are rather addressed in personal encounters:

"You cannot clarify it in advance in written words, as Chinese students will not be able to bring this in connection with a concrete teaching-learning situation. We would probably



have the same difficulties would we be in a similar situation. Therefore, I think the only possible way is a gentle introduction". (QuIn\_UOC; L359-362)

In face-to-face conversations Chinese students are advised on the abilities they need to demonstrate in order to succeed in their studies:

"And this is one of the first issues addressed in every counseling interview. 'Only if you have accepted that the academic or educational system is different, does it make sense to start studying here. And if you are certain, that you are able and willing to work with the appropriate degree of individual organization and self motivation. Otherwise this university is not the right place for you.' These are typical first sentences to start a counseling interview with." (QuIn\_UOC; L320-326)

The German Sport University offers courses to international students on the German culture to help them acclimatize. However, already these courses are highly subject-specific and concentrate on sport-related cultural issues.

"They range from the natural sciences over to humanities and social sciences. What we try to do is we try to tailor them to the needs of the exchange students. And that is why we have one for instance, my own seminar 'German sport culture', which is theoretical and practical because the international students need some kind of let's say sociological lecture activity on German sport and German sport culture so we deal with the German sports structures, things like that." (QuIn\_GSU; L27-33)

The Chinese students surveyed awarded a medium average rating of 2.29 to this subcategory. Bachelor students attach less priority (2.18) to this sort of information than Master students (2.36). This could be due to the fact that Master students, if they completed their undergraduate degree outside of Germany, will be used to a different educational system and hence require information to assess the extent of acclimatization they will have to endure.

The findings also reveal that female students consider 'information on the educational system' only slightly more important (2.33) than their male fellow students (2.25). The population standard deviation for this category is at a comparatively moderate level of 0.67. The Cologne Business School lists the members of its university leadership online, but refrains from further profiling individuals on its websites or in its degree course brochure. The RWTH Aachen, on the other hand, prominently places a comprehensive message by its leader, the rector, on the first page of its degree course brochure. The rector is pictured next to a personal statement in the form of a letter addressed to the student. There is an underlying strategic focus which has been described in the interview as follows:

"Well, first of all, we think that this is really very important, because the rector actually says in person 'welcome' to all the students, there are some welcome events and we think this is important. We have a so to say holistic approach to this, we want to start recruiting people, giving them information, bringing them into the system, making them feel that they are part of the university. We do not think that it is worthwhile having people here who just stay a while and then they go away. We really want to have people here who become part of the whole community, who really contribute to this community, because only then we create this lively academic and intellectually stimulating environment that we want to have." (QuIn\_RWTH; L301-316)



Furthermore, the RWTH Aachen introduces one of its high profile professors at the end of its brochure providing a few details on his achievements and a personal picture. Likewise, the University of Cologne and the German Sport University have included introductory statements by their respective leaders in their brochures. To the Chinese students in the sample messages by the university leadership are of surprisingly low importance. This aspect received an average low rating of 1.76. However, the second highest standard deviation (0.70) was identified for this sub-category indicating a dispersed response pattern which is confirmed when dividing the responses according to level of study and gender. It is revealed that Bachelor students attach slightly more importance to this sub-category (1.82) than Master students (1.71). The preference given by female students is slightly more distinct, they award an average rating of 1.88 to this type of information while their male colleagues rate it at 1.63.

A possible explanation might be that this rather soft aspect of being addressed and made welcome by the most senior members of the institution is more important to younger students who might be more susceptible to parental efforts and hierarchies than older ones. As the survey also reveals, female students attach more priority to their parents' advice than male students. It is likely, that they will also appreciate the guidance and advice provided by senior members of the university more than their male counterparts.

#### *Key cluster of information 2: Peer Group Networks and Endorsements*

##### *Peer Group Networks*

The Cologne Business **School** does not feature links to Chinese communities on its websites or in its brochure. However, it fosters integration and student networks through its 'study buddy' program. Where possible, students of the same ethnical background are asked to become tutors for their younger fellow students.

"We have student buddies and usually Chinese students or we also receive students from Taiwan they have a student buddy who is from our East Asia Management Program and who also speaks Chinese or who is at least interested in China, so usually, and this works quite well." (QuIn\_CBS2; L142-145)

Likewise, the RWTH Aachen offers a 'beBuddy' program on its website with the objective of facilitating integration and initiating peer networks. However, neither on its website nor in its brochure does the RWTH Aachen refer to existing links with Chinese communities. The University of Cologne, on the other hand, works closely with the University's Chinese student group and the Chinese student association in Cologne both of which are introduced on the University's websites in either German or Chinese.

"There is no student group more active or better connected than the University's Chinese student group and incidentally one of the chairpersons is working in my office. And this group, for instance, has just recently produced an image film. [...] This film deals with exactly these issues of networking and integration. We support this student group and it is something their chairperson likes to reiterate in conversations with people from other higher education institutions that 'the way we are supported by the University of Cologne, no other student group in North Rhine-Westphalia is being supported'." (QuIn\_UOC, L466-574)

The German Sport University does not actively link or feature any international or Chinese peer group networks in its brochure or on its websites. Very surprisingly, as originating from a collectivist society, the Chinese students surveyed overall ranked the existence of local



Chinese communities as the least important factor when choosing a university abroad. The average rating is 1.68. The responses are yet again rather heterogeneous with a comparatively moderate standard deviation of 0.67.

There seems to be no significant difference between the responses provided by Bachelor and Master students, but when reviewing responses by gender, it is noticeable that female students awarded the category a considerably higher average rating of 1.78, than their male colleagues (1.56). A possible explanation might be the often assumed higher family orientation in girls who might more proactively seek social contacts to find family-like contacts or make friends quicker while abroad. Also Cologne-based students are more interested in local Chinese-communities than their Aachen-based counterparts. Cologne with its often cited openness and multi-culturally community might hence attract the more sociable students.

The Cologne Business School has used cultural specific imagery, as a kind of visual endorsement, in its Chinese degree course brochure. Furthermore, student testimonials have been incorporated as well. On its website, the Cologne Business School refers to its alumni network and uses endorsements and experience reports by former students. Student ambassadors are not assigned for educational fairs, but a Chinese native representative:

“At the fairs that we used to do so far, we always tried to have a Chinese person with us to talk to them in Chinese, because usually the parents only speak Chinese. [...] It was someone who had studied and worked at our business school at a certain stage and then he moved back to China and then he, yes, he sometimes does a little bit of recruiting for us but not on a very regular basis.” (QuIn\_CBS2; L84-86)

The RWTH Aachen uses testimonials by international students in its degree course brochure and has also produced an image film, accessible online, making extensive use of endorsements by international students, including a Chinese student. The RWTH Aachen also employs student ambassadors at educational fairs and uses its alumni to initiate word-of-mouth:

“We have alumni work in China, we try to bring our alumni to recommend studying here in Aachen and we found this very effective.” (QuIn\_RWTH)

The University of Cologne does not employ student ambassadors at educational fairs as the University’s Chinese liaison office manager, a native Chinese, partly fulfils this role. The University, however, strongly supports the Chinese student group in its viral marketing activities:

“I have just reiterated the significance of the Chinese student groups in terms of integration, and especially the Chinese are exemplary. [...] I think there is no more effective way of spreading the word.” (QuIn\_UOC)

It was mentioned in the interview that a lack of resources is currently preventing the University of Cologne from further extending its efforts to establish a stronger alumni network.

The German Sport University does not seem to use international student endorsements in its brochure and is not represented at educational fairs in China in line with its approach taken towards international student recruitment.



The Chinese students surveyed gave this category a medium average rating of 2.24. The standard deviation rate of 0.60 indicates a moderate dispersion. Peer endorsements could again be considered a rather soft factor. Hence the individual ratings will involve a high degree of personal preference. One possible reason for the distribution of the responses could be the students' different perceptions of endorsements as either reliable statements or yet another marketing tactic.

The demographic-specific responses reveal that endorsements are rather important for Master students than for their junior colleagues. It could be argued that Master students already familiar with academic organisations look for particular insights which they expect to find out from their peers. The replies provided by female and male students did not show a significant difference.

### *Key cluster of information 3: Reputation, Performance and Integration*

#### *Reputation*

The Cologne Business School prominently places information on its positions in the well known German Centre for Higher Education (CHE) ranking, a non-profit reform think tank for higher education, on its websites and highlights its high profile, international orientation and quality education under its 'ten good reasons' section which is repeated in the degree course brochure.

The RWTH Aachen has even dedicated an entire webpage to the topic of reputation and also clearly lists why the RWTH Aachen is a good choice in a summary of bullet points at the end of its degree course brochure. Furthermore, the RWTH Aachen refers to its favourable position in the German WiWo Ranking, a university ranking scheme administered by a well-established German business newspaper. Reputation is considered one of the most crucial profile areas: "One thing, I think, that is very important is that you point to the reputation of the institution, making clear that it is worthwhile coming here and that the certificate that you earn in the end is really helping you later on in the job market, either academic or industrial job market. This is, I think, very important information, this is mostly requested and required." (QuIn\_RWTH)

There are indications that parents are especially interested in facts about academic reputation or rankings and proactively seek this information at educational fairs:

"Parents we have at the general fairs, then we have a lot of parents who come to us and ask 'what is Aachen, can you name the place in an international ranking, what do you offer for my children'. Sometimes parents with their children but sometimes the parents have the more active part. They are actually pushing their children towards the stall, telling them in Chinese what questions to ask." (QuIn\_RWTH)

The University of Cologne is equally aware of the influence rankings can have on potential Chinese students and their parents and they also offer a possible explanation:

"Yes, especially in China, rankings play a significant role. Of course, this is also due to a lack of other criteria. Rankings help to overcome uncertainties." (QuIn\_UOC)

Nevertheless, rankings seem missing so far in the marketing material but communications on reputation at the University of Cologne can be expected to be reinforced following the success in the Excellence Initiative.



The German Sport University is the sole sport university in Germany and enjoys a high visibility and reputation nationally as well as internationally. It might be due to its unique profile that the institution takes a slightly different approach in the current context:

“We do not really have to rely on rankings, because being so.. , it is such a unique construction that... , ... the further you move away from the Sport University the better the people know about the Sport University or the better the image is as well at times. So we are not really relying on rankings or recommendations.” (QuIn\_GSU)

Reputation is the second most important factor for the Chinese students responding to the survey. This category was awarded an average high rating of 2.71 with a very low standard deviation of 0.46. The response pattern reflects the students' high culturally determined masculinity and long-term orientation. They absolutely prioritise a good quality education to obtain an excellent degree and have the best career prospects. Of course, 'filial piety', the concept explained earlier, will play a significant role as well: Chinese students are expected to care for their parents when they are elderly; a first-class degree from a renowned university will help.

#### *Performance and Integration*

The Cologne Business School offers a tailored, in-house preparatory program called 'Prep 4 CBS' specifically to Chinese students which it promotes online and in its degree course brochure:

“So what we offer mainly for the Chinese students so far is, we have a so called 'prep 4 CBS' program which is a program that prepares the Chinese students for studies in Germany and mainly studies at universities of applied sciences in English for the economics and business studies, because Chinese students usually are not admitted into the German universities right away.” (QuIn\_CBS2)

The RWTH Aachen refers to its language support programs in its degree course brochure and offers other extra-curricular support:

“We offer intercultural communications workshops still on a voluntary basis, maybe we should force them, so that they get credits for it.” (QuIn\_RWTH)

At the same time, however, the RWTH Aachen expects their students to be well-prepared and to demonstrate strong academic capabilities already at the point of application:

“And actually in the admission process we are looking at a certain fit, in so far that we say, we know that Chinese students come from a very different educational background and cultural background and we look at the students and try to find those who show that they have understood that they are going abroad, they are having a really different experience.” (QuIn\_RWTH)

Following repeated enquiries from parents, the University of Cologne, who likewise practices a qualitative selection process, has introduced a model project which offers international students an assisted starting phase:

“The chances of Chinese students to successfully complete their studies, is also of great importance. Several HIS57 surveys revealed dramatic results in this context triggering questions from parents, such as 'what are you doing to improve my child's chances to study successfully at your university'. [...] and our answer there is 'Studienstart international',



which is a structured introduction into the degree program, a model project, for foreign students at the University of Cologne.” (QuIn\_UOC)

As most of its degree courses are offered in German the German Sport University offers courses to improve students’ language skills:

“Now what we have done and that is a very important project, which we also do at the International Office we have implemented a language course, an intensive German language course.” (QuIn\_GSU)

Chinese students questioned awarded the third lowest rating (2.06) to ‘support on campus’. At the same time, the response pattern resulted in the highest standard deviation calculated in this analysis of 0.76. The ambiguity might be due to differences in the individual student’s language skills – language courses were given as an example of support programs in the questionnaire. It is also possible that this particular sub-category was kept too general as support is a far-reaching term and might have been interpreted differently by the individual respondent. When comparing answers of the different demographic groups it transpires that ‘support on campus’ is slightly more important to Master students and also to male students which could again be due to the fact that Master students, who have completed their Bachelor degree outside of Germany, might need to acquire particular language skills quickly. It is also

often assumed that male students are less language savvy and might hence require more support than their female counterparts.

#### *Key cluster of information 4: Study Program and Location*

##### *Study Program*

On its website and in its degree course brochure the Cologne Business School provides detailed information on the content and structure of its degree courses. The institution also refers to its courses’ accreditations by the Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation to underline its programs’ high quality and recognition. In this context the CBS uses its tuition fees as another indicator for the high quality education it provides:

“It is of course not the first selling point, but of course we publish them [*author’s note*: tuition fees]. [...] It is something my colleagues told me that potential students and especially their parents come to the educational fairs and ask around how much each university charges for a program and then they tend to decide in favour of the most expensive one as they perceive this one to be the best quality offer. So for, especially for the Chinese market it makes sense to use our tuition fees as an indicator for a high quality program”. (QuIn\_CBS1)

The RWTH Aachen also covers its degree courses in great detail in its brochure as well as on its websites. Where the need arises, the lack of tuition fees is explained to international students to reassure them of the educational programs’ quality:

“We try to explain what is actually the case, of course, people come to us and ask: ‘if you don’t charge anything it is not worth anything’ and we say ‘no, we have certain regulations how you can enter the system, and once you enter the system, once you are found eligible, the State of North Rhine-Westphalia sponsors your stay, it is not that the stay is really not



worth anything. So we have high quality courses but it is all sponsored for those people who we found eligible but we then reserve ourselves the possibility to make a choice.” (QuIn\_RWTH)

The University of Cologne provides a basic overview of its English-language programs online and lays out its offerings in its degree course brochure, increasingly referring to its websites for more information:

“We have our own brochures and increasingly aim to design and use them as some sort of web navigators. So we provide people with the URLs, as this way we do not need to update our printed material, but instead have postcards or small brochures containing links to the relevant web pages. There is no more targeted approach.” (QuIn\_UOC)

The importance of quality programs is well known at the University of Cologne. Here the practitioner refers to the students’ preference of ‘hard’ factors over ‘soft’ factors.

“I think, Chinese students focus exclusively on the subject related context. The really high potential students, which are the ones we want to attract, do not care about any particular support or comfort programs. And they would cope two years without any social integration. They just focus on completing their degree program and then they return back home” (QuIn\_UOC)

The German Sport University currently provides detailed information on its study programs mainly online, while it has been stressed during the interview that a complete study program brochure in English will be made available soon. Meanwhile general information on institutes, courses and degrees are also offered in the university’s general brochure. Due to the absence of tuition fees international students often requires extra information:

“It is very difficult to convince them that we are an academic institution of high quality not asking for tuition fees. The way I go about it is I try to explain the whole education system in Germany which is totally different to overseas and I always invite them to come and see for themselves because once they come here, once the students and lecturers come here they are convinced of the quality and the facility management of the Sport University.” (QuIn\_GSU)

The quality of degree courses is the most important of all sub-categories polled in the survey. Chinese students awarded the highest average rating of 2.79 to this category with the lowest standard deviation recorded in this survey of 0.40. Probably even more so than the university’s overall reputation, for Chinese students the quality of the degree program is decisive for the best possible career prospects.

International rankings were given a rather medium average rating of 2.32. The standard deviation is also moderate at a level of 0.58. When analyzing the demographic-specific responses it is revealed that Master students attach a higher priority to international rankings than Bachelor students. Again, as postgraduate students are already familiar with academic organizations they might look for specific assessment criteria rather reflected in rankings than elsewhere. Also female students seem to be more focused on international rankings than their male colleagues. Given female students’ higher tendency to adhere to parental advice, they might have also assumed their parents’ appreciation of international rankings.



The Cologne Business School promotes its location and campus both online and in its brochure. It has also translated a profiling video into Chinese which highlights aspects of its Cologne-based campus.

The RWTH Aachen has likewise produced several English-language videos about its campus facilities and urban location in Aachen and provides detailed information online.

The University of Cologne uses some campus images in its Chinese degree course brochure and provides a video which is produced by the University's Chinese student group and which is made up of student testimonials on its websites. The video caters for the specific needs of international, and especially Chinese, students:

"One key message that just came to my mind when you asked about messages for parents, for example, is safety. [...] So images that you can go to bars, things like this we include in the videos of course. That for example is a key message, and we have asked students to specifically discuss and address this and other key messages identified in the video." (QuIn\_UOC)

The German Sport University also tailors its information on location and campus facilities to an international audience:

"Yes, an example differentiation: accommodation. All international students, all the exchange students that come here are guaranteed a place in the dormitories if they want it which 100 per cent always take advantage of because it is far more inexpensive than if you look for an apartment or dorm somewhere else. That is specific information for the internationals." (QuIn\_GSU)

Yet again, the importance of the study location was ranked relatively low by Chinese students at an average of 2.06. The standard deviation, however, is quite high at 0.70. Again, 'study location' can be regarded as a rather soft assessment factor and ratings will include a high degree of personal preference. When reviewing the responses according to study level and gender it becomes evident that Bachelor students attach a higher priority to the study location. It could be assumed that Master students as they will be more focused on entering their professional life soon are less interested in environmental 'comfort' factors. Female students, it is revealed, consider the study location more important than their male colleagues, which again might be due to them being rather socially oriented wanting to connect with local Chinese communities, for instance. Differences in the responses by Aachen-based and Cologne-based students are minor but nevertheless insightful. The study location is slightly more important to Cologne-based students, which is not surprising as Cologne is considered a very attractive location in itself especially for students due to various attractions and a broad range of leisure facilities.

#### *Key cluster of information 5: Employability and Networks* *Employability and Networks*

As a business school the CBS obviously places great emphasis on employability and maintains a close dialogue with businesses to make its degree courses most relevant:

"We talked to companies and asked them what they are looking for in graduates. So we tried to develop study programs that met these requirements including practical experience, language skills, international study experience etc. As a consequence we included a



compulsory internship in our programs. So we convince our students with the argument that we teach them the skills employers are looking for.” (QuIn\_CBS1)

The CBS has further placed references to its academic and corporate networks prominently on its website. It not only lists its over 60 partner universities but also presents its business partners who support events for and from students. In its brochures the CBS emphasizes its academic partnerships.

Likewise, the RWTH Aachen refers to its academic, research and business networks on its website and its brochure where it also refers to famous and successful alumni. The University of Cologne predominantly emphasizes its academic and research networks but seems to refrain from profiling corporate relationships. The university also seems to communicate restrictively on employment, as pointed out in the interview, the focus rather is on:

“Offering high quality degree programs and making them internationally visible” (QuIn\_UOC)

The German Sport University features its international network of partner universities online and emphasizing future areas of employment for its graduates when listing its degree programs. In its brochure, again the list of international academic partner institutions is featured.

For Chinese students ‘career prospects’ and ‘academic and corporate networks’ are the third and fourth most important aspects when choosing a university abroad. These categories were awarded an average high rating of 2.65 and 2.35 respectively. The standard deviation is comparatively moderate at a rate of 0.54 and 0.64. It seems obvious that Master students would attach a higher priority to the issue of ‘career prospects’ than their junior fellow students as they are very likely at a more job-oriented phase in their life. Responses by female and male students are relatively homogenous while Aachen-based students attach a higher priority to career prospects than their Cologne colleagues, which could be ascribed to their focus on highly technical and business-oriented courses. Likewise, Master students pay more attention to academic and corporate networks of the universities than Bachelor students which again might be due to them starting to search for a job soon where these networks could prove helpful.

#### *Qualitative interviews: Adaptation criteria and the relevance of cultural theories*

The first part of the analysis – based on Hofstede’s (1984, 1986, 2001) cultural dimensions - revealed that marketing instruments to attract international students from China have been adapted albeit to varying degrees. The second part is to find out what adaptation criteria are applied in practice and whether cultural theories such as Hofstede’s (1984, 1986, 2001) are of any relevance in the adaptation process.

The Cologne Business School suggests that the main criteria for cultural adaptation of marketing material will be experience or, in lieu of it, cultural theories:

“Two things are most important: On the one hand it is most important that you have some experience of the market. After having taken part in about five educational fairs you know quite well of what they want to hear and how to develop the brochures, for example. If you do not have any experience then the cultural theories would be very helpful to make a start.



Because you definitely cannot adapt German brochures one to one to the Chinese market because of the differences and you have to know them. So such theories, like Hofstede's, will help you." (QuIn\_CBS1)

However, making cultural theories applicable in a marketing context is thought to require extra resources:

"Well, I would definitely go further into the cultural, how can you approach, or how can you adapt your marketing to the cultural needs of the students or of the Chinese, so this is something that we would do. We always plan to go deeper into this and also provide brochures that really hit this point but this is something we need time for and resources, which is always very difficult [...]." (QuIn\_CBS2)

"I think it makes sense, of course the theories will not give you the whole answer, they will not tell you straight away how to produce an ideal brochure. I think these theories rather show you the way of discovering the cultural differences and there are some differences between the cultures. I think you would probably develop a better brochure if you know the cultural differences, than if you did not know them." (QuIn\_CBS1)

Experience plays a major role in the adaptation process at the RWTH Aachen. Here the technical university clearly benefits from a diverse pool of human resources with rich cultural expertise and experiences:

"Actually, we rely on experience and on the point of view of the Chinese people who work here. [...] Basically, we stick together our heads and we talk about these things that we want to publish and then we put together these experiences we have. [...] So, we take all these information and try to create something what we believe works in China and then of course there is the evaluation if we find that a brochure is rather causing consternation instead of giving information we withdraw it and work on it until it works." (QuIn\_RWTH)

Cultural theories are considered important at the RWTH Aachen without wanting to enter into a scientific debate. Instead the technical university has found other effective solutions to take practical advantage of cultural theories:

"I find this very interesting but actually I think that these theories come into what we do quite indirectly. It is not useful for us to reflect on these theories directly and go into scientific discussions of the merits and deficits of the theories like Hofstede's (' 1984, 1986, 2001) but they come into some of our instruments indirectly because people who think about these things have already integrated them to a certain degree, for example, I think that very much back at the head, people at the DAAD know these theories see the things they are observe through this lens that these theories create and bring this into their information that they prepare for us. And we, so to say, get the ready product." (QuIn\_RWTH)

From the previous statements it can be concluded that cultural theories are considered relevant but impractical because of their complexity; unless people are well versed in cultural analysis or cultural sciences as the University of Cologne points out:

"I think that they [*author's note: cultural dimensions*] are only relevant if you have someone with an expertise in this area and who determines that cultural dimensions can be employed as an instrument of quality control for student support, for marketing... as a shared task. (QuIn\_UOC)



Cultural theories do not play a role in the adaptation process at the German Sport University, yet the importance of cultural adaptation is stressed:

“But in general in the work we do of course we have to differentiate between the different cultures. We obviously treat them all the same but we are totally aware of the cultural differences and we try to accommodate those cultural differences.” (QuIn\_GSU)

In summary, cultural theories are considered relevant by the majority of the sample universities but at the same time concerns are expressed about their applicability in practical marketing contexts. Where no prior knowledge exists, limited resources seem to prevent institutions from transferring theories into practical contexts. Hence, the universities actively pursuing international student recruitment tend to rely on their own or their colleagues' experiences or expertise or otherwise draw upon external advisors' capabilities.

### **Discussion of the Research Findings**

As part of the qualitative research brochures and websites of the sample institutions have been reviewed and the findings were complemented by practitioners' statements made in the interviews. The overall outcomes indicate which clusters of information the universities have addressed either in their material or in personal encounters with the target audience. The illustration is rather simplified and also includes the personal impression gained by the researchers throughout the research. The Cologne Business School is very strong on emphasizing 'hard' factors, such as reputation, quality of study programs as well as employability and networks, whereas the RWTH Aachen and the University of Cologne also address the 'softer' areas, such as messages by the university leadership, peer group networks and endorsements. The German Sport University demonstrates a lower degree of adaptation which is in line with the lower priority given to international student recruitment overall but the area of communicating its high quality study programs can be considered a clear priority.

Chinese students studying in Aachen or Cologne were polled on aspects they considered important when choosing a German university to study at. To this end, the sub-categories of the five culture-specific clusters of information were listed randomly and students were asked to rate them as 'very important', 'important' or 'less important' for their decision-making process.

The sub-categories in the order of their average rating (highest to lowest from left to right) were given. The average rating was indicated for each sub-category. The population standard deviation was also provided. The frequency of occurrence where the standard deviation is at a moderate or high level could be ascribed to the fact that the rating options only included nuances of the same adjective: 'important'. It did not abet polarized replies which options such as: 'important', 'not important', 'detrimental', would have done.

Respondents clearly prioritized the harder factors such as quality, reputation, career prospects and rankings over softer factors such as messages from the university leadership, Chinese communities and support programs.



## Conclusions

The results of the research also allow a more general conclusion with reference to overall strategic recruitment approaches. It reveals that, ideally, international student recruitment should be considered as one part of a three-part approach: recruitment, integration and retention. Internationalization provides universities with the opportunity to build strong international networks of alumni which help to increase the institution's international visibility and enhance its reputation (QuIn\_UOC; L420-425). If a university fails to establish these sustainable contacts the purpose of internationalization can be considered at least partly unfulfilled.

The RWTH Aachen has embraced such a tripartite, holistic approach of student recruitment and retention by aiming to create "a lively academic and intellectually stimulating environment" (QuIn\_RWTH; L313-136) which everyone, including current and former students, are encouraged to form part of. This approach seems even more sensible when taking into account the RWTH Aachen's outlook on future developments within international higher education (QuIn\_RWTH; L347-360). With the prospect of growing international cooperative, academic networks it becomes even more important to encourage students building a strong attachment to their university as they are likely to study at more than just one. They could hence turn into strong networkers and multipliers for each of their alma maters if integration and retention are strategically pursued. In this context, higher education institutions could benefit from implementing strategies to recruit students and then move them up the 'ladder of loyalty'.

What follows is that soft factors serve not only the purpose of making Chinese students feel comfortable in the new environment but also of encouraging integration and the formation of academic attachment. With the growing importance of networks in everyday life, private or professional, students will benefit from these emerging academic networks as well their universities. Hence, the mutual benefits need to be emphasized and made transparent in marketing communications which will lead to the soft factors rising in their significance again for Chinese students.

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