



Marketization of Higher Education in the UK---the choices and expectations of Chinese international students

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Abstract

UK HE under neoliberal politics has become a marketplace, with policy discourses depicting HE as a private commodity and students constructed as consumers. The increasingly market-based UK HE is influencing students' HE experiences and attitudes towards HE. This study focuses on Chinese international students receiving HE in the UK, exploring their decision-making process, attitudes, and the extent to which their expectations are met within this marketised system through the lens of 'student as a consumer'. By conducting semi-structured interviews with 13 Chinese students in a range of HEIs in the UK, this research identifies the aspects that Chinese students consider most when choosing their HEIs: programme setting, institutional reputation and cost. The finding also suggests that despite acknowledging their consumer identity, students are also active learners, and the consumerist discourse is insufficient to fully capture the HE experience of international students. The discussion of self-formation suggests that HE provides the opportunity for students who wish to accomplish self-development, and such experience may be exclusive to international students. Viewing students solely as consumers is over-simplistic. This study provides another perspective on the marketisation of UK HE, highlighting the complex interplay between consumerist identities and the broader educational aspirations of international students.

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1. Introduction

Since the advent of neoliberal philosophy, HE in the UK has undergone far-reaching reform. From the 1980s onwards, the government began to push for HE to be seen as a market product. The process that has shifted from an elite to a mass HE system requires maintaining and improving 'quality', full public funding for HE therefore became unrealistic (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). Tuition fees were introduced to sustain the UK HE system in the face of continuing financial pressures (Tomlinson, 2016). As the UK HE system has expanded to meet social and economic needs, the costs have been gradually passed on to individual students. Higher tuition fees were justified by human capital logic, as the UK government believes that graduates' earnings will increase over time (Alves & Tomlinson, 2021; Tomlinson, 2017). Home student fees for undergraduates in 1998 were £1,000, later £3,000 in 2006 and rose again to £9,000 in 2012 (British Council, 2014). Since then, the teaching grants which have been the primary unit of state funding for programme delivery in English universities, have been replaced by tuition fees (Tomlinson, 2017). For international students, they are usually at least 2-3 times higher. Therefore, the marketisation of HE in the UK and the rise of the student consumer has occurred as funding for HE continues to shift from the state to students as beneficiaries (Naidoo & Williams, 2015). The decline in public funding suggests that HE has been converted from a collective public good to a private good that primarily benefits individuals and therefore entails costs to individuals (Carpentier, 2010; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

There is growing evidence that since the introduction of tuition fees, the ideology of consumerism has permeated into UK higher education institutions (HEIs) (Nixon et al., 2016; Woodall et al., 2014). One major shift is reconceptualisation of students as consumers (Naidoo & Williams, 2015). UK policy appears to very much endorse a transactional model of exchange between students and HEIs, and the dominant policy framework in the UK, following the proposal to increase tuition fees, has been about the role that HE plays in meeting much of private demand. The relationship between the student and the HEIs thus becomes one of exchange, where the student expects their financial investment to be matched by an experience and set of outcomes, as promised by the institution. Consumerist levers enhance student choice and control over the educational process. For example, HEIs are required to publish detailed information on programmes and performance indicators evaluating institutional functioning in order to facilitate students' choices. Consumer rights have been upheld through developing and institutionalising the complaints mechanism (e.g. National et al.) (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). The current dominant narrative 'conceptualises student education as a private consumer exchange between increased costs and a growing imperative to meet post-university returns' (Alves & Tomlinson, 2021, p.183). The policy discourse promotes the idea that economic success in the context of a knowledge-based economy relies on the production of higher value-added goods and services, and that in this context, the responsibility of HE is to 'contribute to Britain's competitive edge in the global marketplace by producing, transferring and disseminating economically productive knowledge' (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005, p.268). Understandings of the goals and nature of education may have been changed. Under market discourse, students seek to 'have a degree' rather than 'become learners'. The increasing marketisation of HE has led to a consumer culture that students and HEIs wish to satisfy only and which denies the transformative power of HE for the individual. Market ideology may be silencing debate about the purpose of HE

(Molesworth et al., 2009). The extent to which the UK's increasingly marketised and commoditised HE system has reshaped the values and expectations of students is the subject of recent analysis (Furedi, 2010; Molesworth et al., 2010).

This study focuses on the context of the UK because 'it was the first country in Europe to adopt quasi-market mechanisms and tuition fees' (Naidoo & Williams, 2015, p.209), and is therefore a mature educational market. Students' expectations of HE are shifting under the process of marketisation. There is a need to discuss UK HE from an international student perspective. However, the ways in which students shape their relationships with institutions remain under-explored. Much research on the marketisation of UK HE was about home students, but the long history and world-class reputation of UK HEIs also attract students from all over the world. In 2018/19, there were 2.38 million students at UK HEIs, of which 1.9 million were home students and 0.48 million international students (HESA, 2020), which shows that UK HE is highly internationalised. In 2019, the UK remains the second most popular destination for international students. Meanwhile, China is also the largest group of international students in the UK, with 141,870 students registered in 2019/2020 (Consoli, 2024). The voices of Chinese students studying for degrees in the UK are rarely heard. Research remains to be done on their HE experience in the UK and their perceptions.

Policy discourses advocate casting students into rational consumers and active decision-makers (Tomlinson, 2017). From these two approaches, this study explores the decision-making process by which Chinese students choose UK HEIs and their expectations of UK HE. It aims to: a. Identify factors influencing students' choices of UK HEI; b. Explore Chinese students' attitudes towards HE in the context of marketisation; c. Assess the extent to which the marketised HE meets Chinese students' expectations. Through discussion of the experiences of Chinese students studying in UK HEIs, this study may provide a different perspective on the marketisation of HE, in addition to consumerism.

2. Literature review

2.1 Students as consumers

2.1.1 Students are structured as consumers

As a result of cuts in state funding for HE, students are not seen as citizens with a right to public services, but are structured to become consumers in their education (Conway et al., 1994; Eagle & Brennan, 2007; King & Bunce, 2019). Consumer-based practices and perceptions are permeating UK HEIs (Nixon et al., 2016; Woodall et al., 2014). Post-Browne discourses utilised an explicit consumerism discourse where students are structured as stakeholders (Darlaston-Jones et al., 2003). This is associated with an increase in the individual student's financial contribution to higher education. Scholars hold different understandings of the same policies and the extent to which the country's HE system has been affected by marketisation. McCulloch (2009) claimed that 'students as consumers' should be encouraged and valued, as it represents the accountability and responsiveness that all HEIs should demonstrate. It is argued that under the national and institutional discourse that promotes student-consumer, students inevitably understand their identities in this way (Brooks, 2018). For example, for most students who participated in Tomlinson's study (2016), consumer status seemed more like a default position. Nixon et al.'s study (2018) also clarified students' perceptions of their consumer identity. Jayadeva, et al.'s study, asked students to make plasticine models to depict their identities, and some made models of coins to indicate that they felt they were seen as a source of income by the HEIs and the government.

On the contrary, Jabbar et al. (2018) suggested that a proportion of students still reject consumerism's ideology and wish to learn, develop and challenge themselves. Tomlinson's studies (2014, 2017) identified the 'positioned consumerism', the position of partial identification and ambivalence towards the dominant discourse. This position means that some students remain distant from consumer identification despite recognising the student-consumer position. While they see themselves as increasingly important stakeholders in HE with considerable bargaining power, they also recognise they have personal responsibility for their learning. Although national policy in England constructs HE as a market and students as customers, such discourse is not universally acknowledged (Woodall et al., 2014). Students in England have complex and wavering views about their client status.

Even in countries where consumer discourse is firmly embedded in policy statements, not everyone shares this understanding. The Spanish-based study (Jayadeva et al., 2021), on the other hand, suggested that the term 'consumer' was inappropriate to use with respect to students, which seemed to be a common view, and the marketisation of HE has fundamentally changed what it means to be a student today. Jayadeva et al. interviewed policymakers including representatives of the central government, a national union, a national employers' organisation, and an organisation representing university leaders. The interviewees all agreed that education is a citizen's right, as education should be a public good. After analysing the Spanish policy document, England's marketisation rationality seemed particularly pronounced (Jayadeva et al., 2021).

2.1.2 Student agency

In educational science, agency refers to autonomous action through education (Jääskelä et al., 2021). However, Molesworth argued that in England, students have been transformed from active learners into passive customers. As students are increasingly aware of their consumer identity, they become more conscious of their customer rights and of gaps between their expectations of service and the actual service they receive (Darlaston-Jones et al., 2003). This could be a shift of rights that 'places more power in the hands of the 'paying customer' who expects their providers to deliver the services and products in ways commensurate with their demands' (Tomlinson, 2014, p.452). A dominant view could be that obtaining a degree is a right paid for. This idea may promote the entertainment model of learning (McMillan & Cheney, 1996). Consistent with such a view, students may lose responsibility for their learning (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005; Bay & Daniel, 2001). Molesworth et al. (2009) and McCulloch (2009) criticised that although the consumer status appears to empower students, it ultimately diminishes students' agency as independent learners as well as marginalises the intrinsic, personal value of education. Students in Tomlinson's study (2015) also claimed that consumerism underestimates the merit and effort of the learner, thus reducing the value of their credentials.

Perhaps one of the government's aspirations is for students to become empowered consumers who can have an impact on the educational process and thus improve their own learning (Naidoo et al., 2011). However, this has been widely discussed by academics. McMillan and Cheney (1996) discussed the application of consumerism to HE, arguing that this metaphor obscures and ignores many aspects of the educational process and is also contrary to the core values of university education. For example, constructivism emphasises the active role of the learner in the construction of knowledge and the manifestation of agency, such as the ability to set goals, make choices and take action in the learning process (Zimmerman & Pons, 1986; Martin, 2004, as cited in Jääskelä et al., 2021, p.792). However, one participant from the Spanish government indicated that the concept of consumerism diverted students' attention from the process of learning and generating knowledge (Jayadeva et al., 2021). It is suggested that students' learning behaviours might have been influenced by consumerism (Miller, 2014; Traianou, 2016; Williams, 2016; Karran, 2019). Consumerism encourages students to take on the role of consumers of the products offered by the institutions and encourages institutions to take on the role of the marketplace in providing for the needs of the students. The role of the students themselves in the production of learning is de-emphasised, thus potentially weakening learning (McCulloch, 2009). Studies have confirmed that some students do not appear to be motivated by an intrinsic interest in their disciplines but primarily by the extrinsic goal of obtaining a degree as a product (Bunce et al., 2017; Bunce & Bennett, 2019; Haywood et al., 2011; Nixon et al., 2011; Rolfe, 2002; Wong & Chiu, 2019). These studies have identified the detrimental effects of the marketisation of HE on both students and academics. This is where consumerism is criticised; it is usually associated with passive learning and thus limits the role of students in HE (Brooks, 2018). They are deprived of being agents on a pathway towards self-formation (McMillan & Cheney, 1996).

2.1.3 Consumers satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is needed when discussing markets. Thus, student satisfaction and the quality of services became part of the work for HE (Schüller & Chalupský, 2011; Maringe & Gibbs, 2009). It is complained that because tuition fees are an essential source of funding for universities, a culture of 'customer service' has developed within HEIs, and 'customers are always right' (Zhang, 2022). Student voices and demands are increasingly important (Wong & Chiu, 2019). HEIs are inclined to encourage students to 'like' and 'be satisfied' with the universities they are in and spend considerable effort to improve student satisfaction (Zhang, 2022). Tomlison pointed out in his study (2016) that students' more client-based attitudes are reflected in negative comments about the organisation's failure to respond to students' needs timely. Staff members in Jayadeva et al.'s study indicated that consumer satisfaction was their priority. Findings from various national backgrounds indicate a change in the relationship between students and staff. Administrators may first assume that it is the staff member's problem when there is a conflict with a student. A faculty member of Temple University was fired for demanding students in an intolerant and abrasive manner (Wilson & Gilligan, 2002). Jayadeva et al. also found similar results. One staff member said she met resistance when she tried to fail a student who had plagiarised. The university feared that it would gain a bad reputation. The university's commitment to customer satisfaction could threaten academic integrity and the intrinsic quality of education (Woodfield et al., 2011, as cited in Zhang, 2022, p.85). In considering HE as a market addressing consumer 'needs' (rather than a public good addressing learners' needs), we turn our attention away from discussions of 'good' teaching and towards the analysis of consumer culture (Molesworth et al., 2009, p.279). As stakeholders, students can demonstrably improve services from HEIs through their choices and evaluation. The possible appeal of the consumer metaphor lies in its apparent challenge to organisational and institutional rights and its claim to individual rights (McCulloch, 2009). As consumers, students are allowed to evaluate their education experience, including making feedback and even complaints about lectures (Jayadeva et al., 2021). Consumerism leads students to believe that they have considerable 'rights' in the HEIs, thus questioning the value of the formal learning experience (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005).

2.1.4 Purchasing commodity?

In the field of marketing, consumer behaviour usually refers to the acquisition of tangible goods or the receipt of non-material experiences (O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy, 2002). The market principle is to persuade consumers to buy a product or service (Anctil, 2008). For example, 'having ideas or skills', such discourse implies a desire for something external, which are purchasable possessions (Molesworth et al., 2009). Students have a similar relationship with degrees as they have with other consumer goods and services (Brooks, 2018). Therefore, it seems uncontroversial that HE in the context of marketisation is primarily oriented towards the provision of services (Jabbar et al., 2018). It is argued that students in the marketplace model seek degrees rather than becoming learners (Brooks, 2017). This is partly supported by Jayadeva et al.'s and King and Bunce's study, where students indicated that they felt they were customers because they were 'purchasing' their education. Studies also suggested that some students believe they are buying a product, namely having a degree in HE (Molesworth et al., 2009; Potts, 2005; Jabbar et al., 2018). The commercialisation of HE refers to "the transformation of educational processes into a form that has an economic worth of its own and has an 'exchange', rather than an intrinsic 'use-value'" (Naidoo &

Jamieson, 2005, p.271). 'Commodification is the process by which things become identified solely in terms of their exchange value.' (McArthur, 2011, p.742). Tomlinson's study (2014; 2017) conducted interviews and focus groups with 68 undergraduate students studying at seven UK HEIs and found that those who strongly identified as consumers often adopted instrumentalist approaches to learning and attempted to calculate the 'value of their HE experience from a financial perspective. They are more likely to adopt a surface rather than a deep learning approach and view education as a commodity. McMillan and Cheney were also critical of this, arguing that the educational experience is inappropriately compartmentalised as a product rather than a process.

However, education cannot be had but experienced. When knowledge and degrees are reconfigured as commodities that can be bought or traded, this means that educational values and purposes are severely marginalised (Emery et al., 2001). Reducing university study to purchase a degree ignores the intellectual value of obtaining a degree, distorts the learning experience and weakens the effort students put into obtaining a degree (Tomlinson, 2014). Most of the students in Tomlinson's study did not see HE as a purchasable product, or that their learning could be reduced to a consumer behaviour. The marketisation of HE 'is simply a packaging and marketing process: the degree is the shiny ribbon on the top of the box. It becomes an object of commodity fetishism, representing nothing other than its exchange value for higher salaries and status.' (McArthur, 2011, p,742).

2.2 Choosing HEI

2.2.1 Reference information

Consumerism gives students greater choice as consumers (Naidoo et al., 2011). The neo-liberal trends imply a growing emphasis on measurables, including the number of graduates, money raised, publications, and PhD completion rates, evaluated by various metrics (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). HEIs are required by the government to publish details on academic programmes as well as data and performance indicators in order to promote student choice, even though the extent to which these indicators can adequately assess and reflect the quality of HE is debatable (Montané et al., 2017, as cited in Alves & Tomlinson, 2021). Information such as university rankings is increasingly used and crucial to student decision-making, especially for international students. Komljenovic et al. (2018) pointed out that in England, rankings act as market information. Reliable information from reputable platforms is critical to students' choice. Key Information Sets (KIS) convey an institution's outcomes on a range of core performance criteria, of which the more important for students is performance on key student and graduate outcomes that UK higher education institutions (HEIs) offer, for fee-paying students to differentiate and choose their HEIs (Tomlinson, 2014; Naidoo & Williams, 2015). By communicating information to students, they are cast as rational consumers and active choice-makers (BIS, 2011, as cited in Tomlinson, 2015, p.570).

Social media can also influence students' decision-making (Constantinides & Stagno, 2012; Rutter et al., 2016; Motta & Barbosa, 2018). A study in the US found that more than 70% of high school students access university websites through their mobile phones, and nearly 40% of students view social media as a valuable resource when making decisions (Rogers & Croke, 2012), which might be able to illustrate that it is common for students to use social media to gather information about HEIs. The websites of Spanish HEIs can be a more obvious comparison to the UK. They

generally reflected an absence of consumerist discourse (Jayadeva et al., 2021). For example, Spanish university websites tend to focus on admission and enrolment rules, student obligations and relevant deadlines and procedures. In contrast, it is more common in the UK to find '10 reasons to study at University X' (Jayadeva et al., 2021). It could be suggested that UK HEIs place great importance on student recommendations and institutional rankings.

A tool for student recommendations is the National Student Survey (NSS), which are also commonly used by working-class students as reference information to assess the institutions' quality and decide which one to apply (Frankham, 2016). Provision of information on academic programmes through performance indicators, league tables and student satisfaction surveys, as well as the institutionalisation of complaints mechanisms (Naidoo et al., 2011), the emergence of such policies is based on the assumption that students will use the information to demand high-quality provisions, thereby applying pressure on HEIs to make their courses highly relevant to the skills they need for their jobs (Naidoo & Williams, 2015). Such quantifiable information may help to commercialise education and establish a direct link between education and employment. Before students enter HE, they 'shop around' as consumers to ensure they get the best value for money. Consequently, HEIs tend to be increasingly focused on scoring high on performance metrics such as NSS and the Teaching Excellence Framework, England (Kohljenovic et al., 2018).

Wise choices include access to quality information and the ability to utilise it. Firstly, students' motivations and orientations in choosing HEIs and programmes may be influenced by factors related to their pre-existing educational backgrounds and social identities, as well as the expected cultural fit between them and the target institutions (Brennan, 2010). Knight (2019) considers the prospectus an essential reference for students to make choices and analyse it. The study found that there is a marked difference between the hot knowledge about HE from family and friends and the cold knowledge from institutional materials such as prospectuses (Ball & Vincent, 1998; Bowl, 2003). This disparity in sources of information can raise equity issues, as not all students have access to credible hot knowledge. As a result, materials provided directly by the institutions tend to be important for students' choices (Ball & Vincent, 1998). Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital may help understand students' motivations for choosing a HEI, re-emphasising that choices are not equal. 'Cultural capital is understood as access to characteristics, knowledge, skills and forms of expression that are culturally valued.' (Bourdieu, 1986, p.243, as cited in Sheng, 2017, p.723). For example, Knight found that some of the photos and visual designs in the prospectus can imply class taste (Maguire et al., 1999) and may also be deliberately used to target different HE markets. Such informational inequality is more likely to favour those with specific types of cultural capital, enabling them to judge which HEIs offer the greatest returns (Reay et al., 2005; Crozier et al., 2008). Thus, the education system allows for the hereditary transmission of cultural capital (Sheng, 2017).

Secondly, students may not be able to make use of information provided by universities or other agencies in the early stage. In fact, students are more likely to refer to information provided by their peers in deciding the programmes they are going to study (McCulloch, 2009). This can disadvantage students from working-class or less-privileged backgrounds who have less information to draw on and less support from their families. They may also make choices based on their own immature assumptions (McCulloch, 2009). This is also supported by Naidoo and

Williams (2015), who indicated that there are differences in the information available to students about their choices, with 'official' information from universities often mediated by a range of social factors and the privileged group typically having greater freedom to 'shop around'. As a result, the information students access is perhaps related to their social and economic status.

2.2.2 Competition between institutions to attract students

Marketisation has fostered greater competition between HEIs (Clark et al., 2007; Naidoo & Williams, 2015). It could be suggested that the way in which HEIs operate has been significantly impacted by viewing students as financial resources. This requires HEIs to make strategic decisions based on market forces, so institutional leaders have to consider competitiveness, efficiency, and customer satisfaction (Bunce et al., 2016; Naidoo et al., 2011). HEIs invested substantial effort in promoting themselves. HEIs apply intense consumer-orientated marketing campaigns to recruit and retain students (Chapleo, 2010; Haywood et al., 2011). In particular, several studies pointed to the HEIs' dependence on international students (Baldwin & James, 2000; De Vita & Case 2003; Jabbarand & Hardaker, 2013). HEIs also encourage students to act as consumers through regular feedback and requests for service improvements (Williams, 2011). Therefore, government and policy advisers believe consumer choice fosters competition between HEIs, thus making institutions more responsive to the needs of multiple stakeholders, resulting in more inclusive and higher-quality teaching (Naidoo et al., 2011). The business model enables HEIs to benefit from competitive market pressures and improve the quality of teaching and resources (Department for Business, Innovation, and Skills, 2011, 2016; Naidoo et al., 2011).

2.3 Increased expectations of HE---value for money

'The spread of market-driven higher education is seen to inculcate a set of new attitudes, encompassing: more stringent demands and expectations of how effective higher education is in meeting private contributions; a growing instrumentality where the value of university experience is principally based on its perceived future economic return; and a growing consumerist approach that reduces a degree to a commodity purchase with attendant service and product expectations' (McArthur, 2011, as cited in Tomlinson, p.571). Therefore, it is argued that as consumers, students are entitled to specific types of education and educational outcomes (Brooks, 2018).

Pressure around being well rewarded for greater personal financial contribution is shaping attitudes towards HE. An increase in tuition fees has led to greater expectations from HEIs that match their financial contribution (Naidoo & Williams, 2015), for example, a good degree (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005; Potts, 2005), which, according to Tomlinson (2014, p.456) is 'value for money'. His study in 2016 found evidence of a consumerist identification, with participants' accounts rife with phrases such as 'paying more for', 'expecting greater value' and 'getting more out of'. Students wish to gain more from university study than 'just a degree' but have different

expectations and demands for HE (Komljenovic et al., 2018) also different interpretations of what it means to be involved in HE.

2.3.1 Quality of education

Students in Tomlinson's study (2016) generally expected the programmes offered by their institutions to be significantly upgraded as a result of higher tuition fees, although they understood that the additional fee actually only compensated for the reduction in state expenditures rather than additional profits for the institution. However, McArthur (2011) argued that commercialising the relationship between students and institutions is replacing learning that interacts with the social with instrumentalism (degree certificates as credentials). McArthur (2011) was critical of the emphasis on competition and students as consumers, as he believed they were inconsistent with current understandings of best pedagogical practices. In Nixon et al.'s study (2018), the expectation that corresponds to consumer status was that students were unwilling to work hard and were instead being 'spoon-fed' by university staff. This echoes King and Bunce's study (2019) of university teachers. They indicate that it may project an image of the student as childish and waiting for others to 'serve' them. They also showed a marked disinterest in learning that would not be assessed. According to McArthur (2011), when access to HE becomes a commercial exchange, then as consumers of this commodified knowledge, students actually only need to learn what they choose or prefer to learn or soft skills that employers value (Jabbar et al., 2018). Students in Tomlinson's study who did not see themselves as consumers indicated that many of their peers tended to have a passive and apathetic attitude towards their studies but expected good grades that employers wanted (Tomlinson, 2014; 2017). A related phenomenon is the domestication of specific disciplines that survive only by emphasising the overt aspects of their relevance to work (McArthur, 2011). Furthermore, a degree from a better university can provide better social status and lifelong opportunities than others (Naidoo & Williams, 2015). Such awareness has led to teaching quality being less important than status indicators.

2.3.2 Employment

It might be argued that students' aspiration to a degree is in the hope that it will secure a job. It is also indicated that one of the most apparent ways HE is being used for economic goals is to encourage employability initiatives (McArthur, 2011). In other words, HE provides human capital. 'The human capital theoretical framework assumes a clear correspondence between educational credentials positions in the labour market.' (Alves & Tomlinson, 2021, p.180). The logic of the human capital framework is that students are the direct beneficiaries of the economic benefits HE brings in the future (Alves & Tomlinson, 2021). Reports such as OECD (2018) indicated that HE graduates do achieve better social positions compared to those who do not have HE degrees. HE is seen as a necessary and valuable investment in securing future employment, which goes some way to rationalising the increase in private investment (Alves & Tomlinson, 2021). Tomlinson (2016) suggested that students as rational investors in HE as a means of maximising future economic outcomes. The economic metaphor 'investment' was used to explain the utilitarian relationship between HE and returns, reflecting aspirations for future employment and the perception of

HE as a form of employment insurance. As a result, the increased HE cost has reinforced concerns about obtaining a return on investment. Given the tuition fees paid, students expect a return on their financial investment in the form of jobs (Jayadeva et al., 2021). It could be argued that the meaning of HE for some students is economically orientated. The focus on consumerism brings instrumental goals to the HEIs. In Nixon et al.'s study (2018), HE is seen as a pathway to jobs and material wealth, reinforcing the discourse of education as a private investment (Naidoo & Williams, 2015).

Employability seems to dominate students' values and motivations towards HE and how they perceive the overall purpose of their studies. One of the criticisms of HE is also that they do not always provide an education that equips students for working life (Bennett et al., 1999). In the UK, it had been recommended that the employability of graduates be enhanced across university curricula, and this was therefore explicitly on the HE agenda. The focus on employability in HE also seems to be a global trend. International students expect HEIs to provide guidance to careers (Zhang, 2022). Students are encouraged to seek help from their institutions to ensure they get a return on their human capital investment (Alves & Tomlinson, 2021). Student expectation-driven programmes are highly relevant to employment (McCulloch, 2009). Consequently, elements of competition between HEIs also include how they reframe their pedagogy strategies and even their programmes to address the employability agenda (Alves & Tomlinson, 2021).

The customer-oriented approach to instruction reinforces the direct vocational goals over the educational benefits of HE (Zhang, 2022). Students may prioritise future employability over more intrinsic goals or values (Tomlinson, 2015). Even those in 'elite' HE are unlikely to learn without any instrumental concern for future outcomes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, as cited in Tomlinson, 2015, p.574). This is also supported by Molesworth et al. (2009), indicating that one of the main reasons for attending HE is to increase one's employability. A student may feel that he/she has paid high tuition fees but failed to secure the desired job, which is not in line with the expectations as a consumer, just as the expected client/supplier contract had broken down (Zhang, 2022). Although not all HE policies exhibit the same apparent market-based logic as the UK, in interviews with Spanish policy influencers, Jayadeva et al. captured a more precise view that HE should prepare people for the labour market. Therefore, it might be concluded that even in a less marketised HE system, policy discourse is still employment-oriented. One specific manifestation could be that many curriculums involve lots of team projects, which is considered one of the essential career skills. In addition to concerns about whether degrees lead to quality employment and social mobility, there is a question of whether the knowledge and skills gained in HE are valued by employers. This is also where some students were dissatisfied with the quality of education, classroom practices and teaching materials that seemed highly relevant to finding a job after graduation (Jayadeva et al., 2021).

The next generation from low-income backgrounds can earn more than their parents did, which is probably one of the most visible manifestations of social mobility. HE is also a positional commodity (Marginson, 2011). When considering what they want to gain from HEIs, students' equation of an honoured degree with improved chances to get a desired job means they place a high value on relative achievement and maximise its positional impact (Tomlinson, 2015). However, in an oversupply of graduate talent, the relative position of degree certificates does not seem to serve as an insurance (Tomlinson, 2016). Such concern can be even more true for students from lower-

ranked HEIs. As a result, having a degree does not necessarily mean social mobility. Fee-related and competition-based marketisation, as well as changes in the UK graduate labour market, have been linked to global macro-level shifts both in the supply and demand of graduate labour and the restructuring of the occupational middle class (Blacker, 2013). The path to the middle class, previously provided by a degree, is not now guaranteed (Bratti et al., 2008).

2.3.3 HE experience

Darlaston-Jones et al.'s study (2003) found that students' actual HE experiences did not meet expectations. First-year students from the School of Psychology at Edith Cowan University were asked to report their expectations to teaching and administrative staff, and the reality of their experience, using the same questionnaire in two time points. They also interviewed students from second to fourth year. Both qualitative and quantitative data showed gaps between expectations and experiences. Students expected the university to provide instrumental support, such as what services were available to them, where and how to access information, and what employment opportunities were available to them on graduation. However, they did not appear to have been informed or introduced in detail to these supports offered by the university. Similar findings were presented in Tomlinson's work (2015), suggesting that students might have a correspondingly low tolerance for pedagogical and institutional experiences because of the mismatch between the quality of their HE experience and their personal investments.

On the other hand, students are likely to be engaged in life projects such as part-time jobs, hobbies and extracurricular activities during their university period. Therefore, today's university experience may not be dissimilar to other social experiences (Tomlinson, 2014). Many students in Jayadeva et al.'s study had to work part-time due to financial pressures and their time was allocated to paid work. Close to 60% of students in England were working while studying, and these works were neither related to their field of study nor furthered their careers, thus sacrificing their academic performance and overall experience as a student.

2.4 Chinese students

The UK government has adopted a revenue-generating strategy for HEIs to realise financial benefits by recruiting large international students (Iannelli & Huang, 2014). Thus positioning international students increasingly as economic subjects. The UK has been one of the countries receiving the largest amount of Chinese students in HE (Liu, 2021; Lomer et al., 2018). Whilst the UK remains attractive to Chinese students, global competition for HE is intensifying, with Australia and New Zealand, for example, offering promising career prospects for international students and more lenient immigration policies than the UK and US (Yang et al., 2022). Research (e.g. Kettle, 2017; Consoli, 2024) shows that international students choose to pursue HE in English-speaking countries to gain a competitive advantage in their careers. Students as consumers wish to obtain internationally competitive and globally recognised qualifications to enhance their personal brand and economic value (Moufahim & Lim, 2014).

Given that international students pay higher tuition fees, they may resonate more strongly with the consumer identity, leading to higher expectations of post-graduation rewards.

The financial aspect is crucial in understanding the consumer identity among international students. Chinese students invest not only in tuition fees but also includes living expenses, travel costs, and the emotional and social challenges of studying abroad. Such economic considerations can influence their expectations and perceptions of value, which might be higher than those of home students who spend less. Consequently, international students may feel a greater sense of entitlement to quality education and outcomes that justify their investment. However, there is a complex interplay between financial investment and outcomes. Morrison et al. (2005) analysed differences in students' academic performance in UK HE and found that international students tend to achieve fewer honours degrees than home students. Similarly, Richardson's study in 2008 investigated variations in the HE academic performance of ethnic minorities at UK HEIs and found that ethnic minorities were less likely to obtain a distinction degree than white students, with 65% of whites achieving first- or upper-second class degree, compared to 51% of Chinese. In other words, as consumers who bid more, Chinese students gain less than home students, at least in terms of academic results. That does not necessarily suggest that there should be a direct positive relationship between grades and tuition fees, but the disparity does not seem to align with the concept of value for money, where benefits received should be proportionate with the investment. For international students, who typically face higher tuition fees and additional costs associated with studying abroad, it might be reasonable that their expectation of receiving high returns in terms of educational outcomes and career opportunities is significant. However, when the academic achievements of Chinese students fall short of those of their domestic peers, it raises questions about the fairness and effectiveness of the educational system in meeting the needs and expectations of these students. Woodall, Hiller, and Resnick's study in 2014 suggests that the perceived value of education for international students is not solely tied to academic achievements but also to the overall investment and sacrifices made, which include cultural adjustment, overcoming language barriers and challenges of living in a foreign country, in addition to financial costs. Chinese students' expectations of UK HE and perception of value for money are closely related to these broader experiences.

2.5 Research questions

Marketisation has changed HE and the student experience, and students' expectations appear to be changing in the marketised HE environment. It is likely that consumerist identification is still intensifying. The extent to which the increasingly marketised and commodified HE system in the UK has changed students' values and expectations has been discussed and analysed, but there is still a need to explore how contemporary students understand their relationship with HEIs. To achieve the research aims, research questions are designed as follows:

1. What do Chinese students consider when choosing their HEIs?
2. To what extent do they have choices?
3. What role do they see themselves in HE?

4. What are Chinese student's expectations of HE?

3. Methodology

I will answer these research questions by adopting a qualitative research design. This study utilized semi-structured interviews to explore Chinese student experiences of institution selection and their thoughts on the marketization of HE.

The relationship between theory and research can be categorized as theory guiding research and theory as an outcome of research (Bryman, 2011). Three primary research approaches in social science studies are: inductive theory, deductive theory, and combined inductive-deductive theory (Zhang, 2022). Deductive theory means that researchers normally deduce a hypothesis and design a research method to test the hypothesis based on existing theories (Bryman, 2011). Inductive theory is the condense of large amounts of raw text data into short summaries designed to make explicit links between the research objectives and the summaries derived from the raw data (Thomas, 2003, as cited in Zhang, 2022, p.89). Based on previous studies on students as consumers, it is hypothesized that students have consumer-like perceptions of their identity. According to student agency and Bourdieu's social capital framework, it is assumed that students, especially Chinese students, differed from local students in their freedom to choose their HEIs. This research aimed to understand Chinese students' experiences of their HE in the UK and expected them to provide diverse answers. Therefore, the combined inductive-deductive theory in designing data analysis should be appropriate.

Research methodology depends on the nature of the research as well as the field of study (Cohen et al., 2007; Creswell, 2015). It is necessary for researchers to take into account the nature of the research, specifically the research population and the research questions. 'Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem' (Creswell, 2009, p.4, as cited in Thanh & Thanh, 2015, p.26). According to Willis, qualitative approaches generally provide rich reports, which are considered critical for interpretation. The purpose of this research is to get a better understanding of how Chinese students choose UK HEIs and what their experience in the UK is like, 13 Chinese students currently receiving HE in the UK were interviewed, including undergraduate and postgraduate students. The commonality of the sample was that they all pay tuition for the price of international students. 'Qualitative research can be construed as a research strategy that usually emphasizes words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data' (Bryman, 2011, p.27). Therefore, by adopting a qualitative approach, the researcher is allowed to gather rich and in-depth data (Cohen et al., 2007). This study aims to gain insight into a phenomenon (marketization of HE), to explore how social settings influence human beings through the surrounding environment (the impact of marketized UK HE on the perceptions and feelings of Chinese students) (Brundrett & Rhodes, 2014). In educational research, if researchers seek the understanding and experience of a group of students, the qualitative approach is considered suitable.

One epistemology that qualitative design follows is interpretivism. Interpretivism values subjectivity and therefore guides the study of subjectivity. The interpretivism approach emphasizes the significance of events for participants rather than the collection of so-called 'facts' (Zhang, 2022). By using an interpretivist approach, this study aims to understand not only the factual factors influencing students' choices but also deeper, subjective meanings and personal interpretations that drive these decisions. The interpretive paradigm seeks answers to research by

developing and supporting multiple understandings of an individual's worldview, so it helps to discover how students perceive their experiences and the significance they attribute to their choices and expectations within the context of marketization. Unlike positivism, which often seeks one standard, interpretivism accepts multiple perspectives and versions of truth and is therefore considered a more inclusive paradigm (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). Interpretivism's embrace of multiple perspectives allows research to produce a more comprehensive understanding of the situation (Klein & Meyers, 1998; Morehouse, 2012). Moreover, the researcher constructs and interprets his understanding from the data collected. In other words, interpretivism supports scholars in exploring the world by interpreting their understanding of individuals (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). The interpretivist position takes into account the particularity of human experience rather than being 'reduced to the interaction of variables' (Hughes & Sharrock, 1997, p.102). The core belief of the interpretive paradigm is that reality is socially constructed (Willis, 2007). Willis's statement supports the choice of interpretivism for educational researchers who aim to explore a phenomenon in a group of students (Thanh & Thanh, 2015).

3.1 Participants

The research adopted a purposeful sampling strategy. Individuals were intentionally selected that can best help to understand the central phenomenon' (Creswell, 2015), from which access was gained to 9 respondents. The criteria for selecting participants for this research was broad, intended to represent as many different backgrounds as possible, which may lead to various perceptions of the marketization of HE in the UK. The researchers first determined to include undergraduate, master's, and PhD students; students who received their undergraduate education in China and those who received HE in non-Mainland China before coming to the UK; and students from different institutions and disciplines. The purposeful approach was supplemented with a snowball sampling strategy. An additional 4 students were interviewed through this method to bring the total to 13 interviews. This allows perspectives to be gained from a wide range of stakeholders with different characteristics and also enables the researcher to take an interactive role when getting to know about the social context the participants are living. Table 1 describes the information about the participants' current institutions, programmes and stages.

Table 1 Description of the participants

Name	HEI	Programme	Stage
Flora	University of Warwick	Business and Management	PhD
Sally	University of Leeds	Political Communication	MA
Tina	University College London	Urban design	March
Elle	University of Southampton	Economics and Finance	Undergraduate
Anne	The University of Edinburgh	East Asian Studies	MSc

Alex	The University of Manchester	Politics	PhD
Zelda	University of Cambridge	Sociology	PhD
Wendy	University of Bristol	International business and strategy	MSc
Lee	University of Oxford	Education	MSc
Eddy	University of Oxford	Global and Area Studies	MPhil
Pelly	King's College London	Critical Theory	MA
Cecilia	The University of Edinburgh	TESOL	MSc
Lynsey	University College London	Biology and Chemistry	Undergraduate

3.2 Data collection

The use of interviews in research marks a shift away from treating human subjects as simple manipulable objects, stripping data away from the individual ontology, and towards treating knowledge as human-generated (Kvale, 1996, as cited in Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p.267). Interviewing is the process of people exchanging views on topics of common interest, which value the centrality of human interaction in the production of knowledge, and emphasizes the socially situated nature of the research data (Kvale, 1996, as cited in Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p.267). This research seeks participants' subjective feelings and thoughts, and the interview may bring the researcher in close contact with the participants, enabling participants to discuss their interpretations of the issue and how they perceive the situation from their point of view. So, interviews can be part of life (Cohen et al., 2007; Newby, 2010). It not only provides information to help understand the phenomenon but also provides individuals with voices that can easily be ignored (Creswell, 2015). Through in-depth conversations with participants, an understanding of the Chinese student experience in the context of the marketization of HE is generated. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 participants, which generally lasted between 30 to 50 minutes.

A semi-structured interview is the type of interview that requires the researcher to prepare interview questions in advance. It also allows the researcher the flexibility to ask exploratory and prompting questions during the process (Cohen et al., 2007). Semi-structured interviews enable participants to 'project their own ways of defining the world' (Cohen et al., 2007, p.146), and also allow participants to 'raise and pursue issues and matters that might not have been included in a pre-devised schedule' (Denzin, 1970; Silverman, 1993, as cited in Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p.147). Therefore, semi-structured interviews are, firstly, more flexible, both in terms of the interview process and the exploration and analysis of the threads; secondly, providing detailed and rich information that can support data analysis (Robson, 2011). Interviews will be analyzed and interpreted to address research questions and to meet research aims.

Table 2 lists the interview questions, these questions were designed to encourage participants to talk in detail and depth about what they were experiencing and what they thought (Galletta, 2013). The interview schedule was designed according to four themes, consistent with the research aims and research questions of this study.

Questions 1-2 are introductory questions, guiding participants to give more detail about their educational experience, which were considered relevant to their opinions on their education; questions 3-7 are about student choices, for identifying factors that they considered when choosing, to what extent did they have choices; question 8-9 are to explore their expectations and whether they think their HEIs meet their expectations; question 10-13 are about money, attempting to clarify whether, when paying such tuition, the student identify themselves as consumers and whether they feel 'value for money'. The researcher also used a number of follow-up questions and prompts to encourage more discussion with participants (Galletta, 2013).

The interview questions were discussed with the supervisor. The interview for the pilot study was conducted prior to the formal interviews with a Chinese student doing postgraduate study at Oxford, who was not one of the participants of this research. The data collected were only used to test the digital device, timing and order of questions, and were not admitted to the findings of this research.

After setting the dates of the interviews, questions were sent in advance for the participants to prepare or to indicate if they declined to answer specific questions. Permissions were sought from the participants to record. All interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams. A separate audio recorder was used to record the interview, and then Microsoft Word was used to transcribe. All the audio recordings were destroyed after the transcriptions were finished. In total, this research involved around nine hours of collection and transcription of audio recordings.

Table 2 Interview Questions

Interview Questions

1. What is your educational experience? Which HEI are you in and what do you study?
 2. Have you taken foundation or pre-sessional English course before? If yes, how do you feel about this?
 3. Why did you choose the UK?
 4. How did you choose your institution? What did you consider?
 5. What resources or information did you refer to?
 6. Did you feel like you had many choices when choosing the institution or the program?
 7. Is it the first choice? How did you feel when you got the offer from this university?
How did you feel about the whole application process?
 8. What do you want to gain from your HEI or your whole HE time?
 9. What do you think is the most important thing that HE gives you?
 10. How much is your tuition? What do you think of your tuition fee?
 11. Would you think that you are 'purchasing' something from your institution? If so, what are you purchasing?
 12. Do you get financial income through part-time jobs, etc.?
 13. Do you think what you gained from HE is worth the tuition?
-

3.3 Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis tends to focus on interpretation. Transcriptions were analyzed using thematic analysis, which is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). It allows rich details to be presented to organize and describe the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This research used inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-driven) approaches. Initial themes were pre-determined based on previous literature, such as: Student choices; Expectations to HE; Attitudes towards tuition fees. Sub-themes for each theme were then generated based on participants' responses. All raw data, annotations, notes, etc., are saved, and these notes document the evolution of analyses (King & Bunce, 2020).

The data familiarization involves listening to audio recordings and reading and re-reading transcriptions. Meanwhile, the researcher used a deductive approach to coding based on pre-determined themes. New ideas were also noted by reading the text, drawing out the deeper and more conceptual meanings based on participants' answers. Data were then coded inductively to generate new themes (Benefits and outcomes from HE; As consumers) and sub-themes in addition to the pre-determined initial ones. All the codes were summarized and collated in a table with the data extracts. Each theme and sub-theme organized clusters of codes, providing a meaningful and clear picture of the entire dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2012, as cited in King & Bunce, 2020, p.7). The themes and sub-themes were reviewed and scrutinized to see if they aligned with the coded extracts as well as the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006), ensuring that they had 'internal homogeneity' (meaningful data cohesion within the themes) and 'external heterogeneity' (clear differences between the themes) (Patton, 1990, as cited in King & Bunce, 2020, p.7). A final check was used to relate to the research question and literature, ensuring that the selected themes and sub-themes covered the most important, research question-relevant elements of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.4 Positionality

It is essential to discuss positionality in qualitative research because researchers are also research instruments in the data collection process and are part of the world they study (Adeagbo, 2020). It is argued that no study is free of researcher bias and assumptions (Sword, 1999). Therefore, it is necessary for the researcher to recognize his or her position in the research, the impact on the people being researched, the questions being designed and asked, the data being collected, and the interpretations being made (Berger, 2015). I am a Chinese international student, I completed my undergraduate study in the UK. I do think my undergraduate university provided a good 'service' to students, both in terms of academics and life. However, I personally did not have a sense of being a consumer, as it was not how I perceived the power relationship between HEIs and students to be. Meanwhile, the cost of studying abroad made me wonder if it was really worth it. I believe that almost all international students have experienced this ambivalence in identity or complicated attitudes about investment and return.

Interpretation and presentation of ideas, reflection on the relationship between the participants and the researcher, epistemological perspectives and concepts of power, which have become unavoidable in the discussion of qualitative methodology (Adeagbo, 2020). Trust-giving relationships between researchers and participants should be

established and strengthened (Hubbard et al., 2010; Neuman & Neuman, 2015). Based on the study of positions, two opposing doctrines are presented: the outsider and the insider (Adeagbo, 2020). The outsider portrays a stranger who is detached, emotionally detached and remains objective in the research process (Buscatto, 2016; Chawla-Duggan, 2007; Engward & Davis, 2015; Innes, 2009). These qualities often impede emotional connection with participants (Adeagbo, 2020). On the contrary, the advantage of insiders is that, because of their shared experiences and qualities, insider researchers tend to be more likely to engage with the participants (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Participants may also be more willing to share their experiences and perspectives with a researcher who they feel understands their situations (De Tona, 2006). My position here includes, but is not limited to: gender(female), nationality(China), field of study(Higher Education), international student status, language habits, bias, and emotional reactions to participants. Since both I and my participants were native Chinese speakers, I chose to conduct the interview using our mother tongue so that the participants were not restricted in their expression by the language, also facilitate better understandings between us. I attempted to position myself as 'the insider'. Given the specificity of this research topic, making participants feel that the researcher is on their side may make them more willing to express themselves. The feedback I received from many participants indicated that the topic encouraged them to talk a lot. This may be evidence that researchers' 'biases' can have an impact on the language used, the questions posed, or the attention paid to other non-verbal information, thus affecting the way in which knowledge is constructed and outputted (Kacen & Chaitin, 2006). The researcher's position can also be fluid. I consciously managed my position during the study by appropriately sharing some of my personal experiences to show understanding with my participants during the interviews, encouraging them to express their feelings, but not projecting my own views during the data analysis process. Research credibility and rigour were therefore maximized through continuous self-reflection throughout the research process.

3.5 Ethical consideration

This research was approved by the Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) before the research started. Participants were provided with the written information sheet, and the participants were voluntary to be involved. It was emphasized that participants had the right to withdraw before the data was analyzed. Any electronic documents, including signed consent forms and transcription, are stored securely on password password-protected, University of Oxford OneDrive account. This research does not involve sensitive information. To maintain anonymity, the names of the participants listed in the table above have been changed. All information in this study was carefully protected.

As sometimes the findings need to be contextualized with personal experiences, there could be a risk that participants' identities will be revealed. For example, suppose a participant is in a programme with few Chinese students. In that case, his particular personal experience will make it easy for his institution or other readers to identify him. Therefore, I did not present the year in which they are enrolled, for example, year 3 of undergraduate, to ensure that the population does not shrink further. I also avoided elaborating on descriptions of participants' personal experiences when interpreting the data. In addition, when the participant's description of the institution is

highly directed (e.g., criticizing a bad tuition experience or phenomenon that is not common to other institutions) and may have an impact on the institution's reputation, I did not quote directly but simply summarized and asked the participant if it was okay to present the data in this way. In doing so, both the individual identities and HEIs' reputations are protected.

4. Findings

In this section, matters related to student's choice of HEIs are first presented. What students expected to gain from their HE in the UK and what they gained during their time in the UK are then discussed separately to assess the extent to which UK HE meets students' expectations, which leads to student's attitudes towards tuition fees and UK HE, as well as whether they see themselves as consumers.

Theme 1: student choices

The first theme firstly discusses what aspects do Chinese students consider when choosing their HEIs in the UK, mainly the institution's reputation, programme settings and cost considerations. Then, it presents the information and sources Chinese students refer to, including official and unofficial. Aspects considered and the reference information together result in their freedom to choose.

Aspects considered

Some participants prioritize programme settings over the institutions. For example, Zelda was more concerned about the curriculum experience that comes with the programme, which was why she did not choose another higher-ranked institution. Flora was very determined to do a PhD, she only cared about whether the programme matched her research interests and what kind of training and resources the faculty could provide to support her doing her project for her two applications (one for the master, one for the PhD) to the UK.

I hope their training can be more structured.....can be tailored to my needs I mean, so that is one important reason I didn't go for Cambridge, cuz PhDs at Cambridge are 3-years, no courses, no training, they don't have such kind of things, so I think in terms of training, the excessive lack of it, makes me no longer consider it. So the support, the resources and the training, any one is actually a veto to me, if any of the three aspects are not good enough, I will not consider this programme any more. (Flora)

Participants who are more institutionally orientated, on the other hand, are primarily due to employment considerations, as they believe that the reputation of HEIs determines whether it is easy or difficult to find a job, and the reputation is also a kind of endorsement. Rankings can be one of the representations of a HEI's reputation.

In China, there are ranking requirements for everything, the higher the better, especially the top 50. So I didn't mind what major or course I was gonna study, I was more like.....whichever one I could get into, all I wanted was a higher-ranked university. (Pelly)

Based on the educational backgrounds of the participants who are doing postgraduate programmes in the UK, it is found that those who have already completed their undergraduate at what are generally considered prestigious universities in China value the programme more than institutions; students from less prestigious institutions tend to go for a higher-ranking HEI. According to the participants, this is a common phenomenon in China relevant to the use of qualifications for job-seeking purposes, which will be discussed later.

Costs also influenced student choices, including regional expenses and programme fees. Some students showed sensitivity towards money when making decisions. For example, Cecilia made it clear that she did not apply to institutions in London due to the higher living costs compared to other parts of the UK. Plus, her parents only

allowed the money to be spent on the top 50 HEIs, so she actually did not have many options during the application process. For students like her, money can be an inhibitor (Stephenson et al., 2016).

For Flora and Eddy, the reason they finally chose their current institutions was because the institutions were able to offer the most financial support.

A big part of the reason I came to Oxford was money. I'm glad I don't have to think too much about fees.
(Eddy)

According to Eddy, University of Oxford covered his programme fee, which directly halves this overall spending in the UK. This does not mean his family cannot afford it. In fact, we might assume that families who are willing to send their children to study abroad can afford to do so, tuition fees or regional differences are still within budget for them, but it also makes sense that people want to get the most out of the least amount of money they spent.

Reference information

Rankings are information that students all refer to and have access to. QS (Quacquarelli Symonds) World University Rankings is the most referenced list, with aids of THE (Times Higher Education) and U.S. News. 11 out of 13 participants looked at QS primarily, proving how influential and popular this ranking is. According to the participants, it is because QS is almost the only criterion for employers in China to judge HEIs. However, participants who completed their undergraduate in the US noted that they trusted U.S. News more.

I don't use QS, it makes no sense to me. (Lee)

Many studies have questioned the validity of QS. It is found that the ranking of universities in the Commonwealth of Nations countries is relatively high (Huang, 2012). It is hard not to suspect that this ranking created by a private company is dominating the UK HE market, particularly the overseas market, and facilitating international student choice.

Students who are not in their first year abroad, or have previously received a UK education, tend to use the university website to search for information about the programmes. This may reflect the students' socio-economic background or academic abilities. However, several students have reported that the official information about programmes posted on HEI's website was not that detailed either. Such a lack of transparency confuses students.

Their course settings all look the same, at least on the university's websites, I didn't see any difference, their courses are all called pretty much the same thing, like environmental chemistry, chemistry and environment, something like that. (Lynsey)

In addition to the information available online, 'Word of mouth' is also an information source. The information that Flora and Zelda got was from seniors or previous exchange students from their undergraduate universities, which are top universities in China, and such information was non-related to rankings. Another example is the international branch universities of some UK universities in China. The curricula as well as the governance and management structures of such branch universities are replicated mainly from the UK universities. Such branch universities can be seen as overseas campuses in China and Chinese students also get a degree from the 'home' university. Therefore, with a UK bachelor's degree, almost all undergraduate students from there apply for overseas master's, so it is

common for them to share information. An opposite example is Eddy who was randomly allocated to his college at Oxford. He did not get much advice about the colleges from anyone. Information like that is probably exclusive to Oxbridge staff and students. Such networking might be considered a form of capital.

It is common for Chinese students to use social media to search for posts and comments about the actual learning experience and student life from previous students. For example, a popular social media app called the Red Book.

The Red Book was the one I looked at the most. For example, I was applying to The University of Edinburgh, I searched like, applying to Edinburgh; success rate; online application process; also like, how to write a personal statement, learning/living experience at Edingburgh.....I got lots of help from there. (Cecilia)

I was browsing the red book and it's all like, 'Don't come to IC!', so I just.....not gonna go. And UCL.....you know, on the red book, they all said that UCL is much less stressful, looks quite chill, then I thought ok I'm not gonna torture myself. (Lynsey)

However, as a public platform, anyone can post any content here, including agents. This is the default that many Chinese students apply for an overseas master's through an agent. There are information gaps among agents. Pelly signed up with two agents and found they gave her very different application packages. One was quite conservative and only applied to universities out of the top 50, the other helped her get offers from Edinburgh and KCL. Cecilia eventually completed the application independently, as she did not think her agent was trustworthy.

When I asked something about the programmes, they could not answer. (Cecilia)

On the other hand, the information that agents choose to post also contributes to the information cocoon to some extent. For students who have not studied abroad, it can be difficult for them to get more information than an agent can provide.

It might be argued that reference information is somehow related to social and cultural capital. Students with higher socio-economic status can have easier access to high-quality information (Obermeit, 2012). Apart from the university websites and social media that are open to everyone, the educational backgrounds of applicants, and their networking, all determine what kind of information they can access.

Freedom to choose

Freedom to choose might depend on the student's requirements for the programme. Applicants who were more institutionally orientated usually had no requirements for courses, they applied to several programmes within one HEI, or more programmes in total, and therefore more likely to have more choices. Looking back at her master's application, Flora said she wasn't happy with the two offers she got. Both programmes let her feel she would not get relevant support for her PhD application from the university.

I'm pretty sure that I'm going to do a PhD. So for me, most of the master's programmes in the UK are not solid enough, and also have inappropriate timelines for PhD application. (Flora)

In contrast, Flora had several options during her PhD applications. She got 3 full-funding offers, any of which she was happy with. She thinks the initiative was on her side. However, such an initiative does not belong to all applicants.

Some applicants were more like, whichever institution accepts or funds him/her, he/she just went. They were the ones that were being chosen rather than actively choosing.

On the other hand, UK HEIs also classified the universities in mainland China into different tiers, and each tier has different GPA requirements. Many students had no chance to apply because their undergraduate universities were not on the 'list'. Some UK HEIs have their own lists, only students from HEIs on the list are allowed to apply.

Sometimes, students are 'forced' into a HEI. Most of the popular HEIs that Chinese students apply to require them to pay an initial instalment of the tuition fees to secure their offers, usually about 2000 GBP. Some HEIs had been withholding application decisions so that applicants could only choose one of the offers and pay the initial instalment, thus missing out on their most preferred university, even if they eventually got an offer from that.

As a result, Chinese students' choice is a multi-determined process associated with their socio-cultural backgrounds. While students may seem to act like rational consumers in their decisions to pursue HE in the UK and choose HEIs, many are actually 'forced' to make the specific decision to some extent.

Theme 2: Expectations

This theme explores what Chinese students expect to gain from receiving HE in the UK.

Qualification

When asked what they want to gain from UK HEIs or this HE period, qualifications are usually the first to be mentioned. Participants need a degree for different purposes. Most of the participants in this study agreed that having a HE qualification is for employment.

I just want a qualification to get a job, I'm totally employment orientated. (Wendy; Pelly)

For participants who did their undergraduate in China, they think that an overseas HE qualification from a prestigious university can enhance their competitiveness in the job market, which is why for some participants, ranking is the first thing they consider. Some also indicated that they expect a higher qualification, master's or PhD, to compensate for not being outstanding in their first qualifications, i.e. not from a top institution.

My undergrad background is not strong enough, even if I get a master's qualification from KCL, it doesn't make up for the weakness of my undergrad. On the other hand, my major is.....to be honest not that practical. If I have a PhD qualification, I may be more competitive in the job market. I mean when it comes to employment, I think..... no one will say like, I'm overqualified, they will only say I'm not enough. (Pelly)

Even students with an excellent undergraduate background also expressed the necessity of a master's qualification in the job market. Eddy had no intention of doing a master's degree after finishing his undergraduate studies, but after two years gap, he felt he had to do a master's for employment considerations. It might be concluded that one of the things that Chinese students expect from a qualification is that it will provide security for future employment.

What some students expect from a UK master's qualification is that they can use this degree to apply for a PhD. Pelly wishes to have a merit master's degree to apply for a PhD. Alex had similar views when applying for his master's programme in the UK.

I just want a sheet of paper.....endorsement..... something certificate. That is to say with this paper, it'll be easier for me to get a job, or to apply PhD. (Alex)

Alex is now doing PhD at the University of Manchester. He thinks it would have been almost impossible for him to get a PhD offer without this UK master's degree.

In addition, as a graduate of an international branch university, Alex and Anne indicated that most of the students in this institution expect that this bachelor's degree awarded by the home university will enable them to progress more easily for postgraduate studies overseas.

The value of the branch is the progress of the bachelor's to master's, it is a 'springboard', if you're not aiming for further studies overseas, then it's useless. (Alex)

The advantages of a UK bachelor's degree in UK postgraduate application are also mentioned by Elle, especially compared to a Chinese HE qualification. For some students, the expectation of a UK HE degree is the convenience of access to further studies. In summary, students' expectations of qualifications are expectations of future outcomes.

Life experience

In addition to a physical certificate, it is found that Chinese students also expect to gain the experience of living in a completely new environment, as studying abroad not only means receiving education but also a holistic life experience. This is probably the particular expectations that attract international students.

I hope I can step out of the surroundings I'm familiar with.....and have more opportunities, make new friends, see what life is like there. (Wendy)

Sally did her undergraduate in the UK and is now pursuing her master's at University of Leeds, and her expectations of the two periods are quite different.

I was hoping that this (undergraduate) programme, this experience, to like..... push myself to step out of my comfort zone, that was my goal, and I had much stress in undergrad, I survived (laughing). And now I feel like it's a short year, I want to go to Europe, cuz I don't have pressure to study further, I want my life to be more relaxed and have some good memories. (Sally)

For participants who had lived in the US for several years, one of the reasons they came to the UK to do a master's after finishing their undergraduate studies in the US, was that they wanted to experience a different education system.

I mean there are very few universities like Oxford, and that kind of experience, that kind of student life, it's pretty unique, I just want to enjoy as much as possible. (Eddy)

For international students, studying abroad is an experience that is entirely different from their previous life. It can be reasonable for students to have higher expectations such as enriching their lives, for example, vibrant campus life and extracurricular activities. Such expectations may influence how HEIs design their programmes and services, and what is the focus of their promotion strategies of enrolment. Whether UK HE meets Chinese students' expectations will be discussed in the following themes.

Theme 3: Benefits and outcomes from HE

This theme presents what Chinese students think HE or HEIs have given them, what they benefit from receiving HE in the UK.

Course-related experience

Despite the few session hours, most participants said they gained a good course experience and are generally satisfied with the content of their modules, as they think they did learn something. As a PhD student, Flora is satisfied that her HEI provides her with a wide range of training and workshops that will help her push her research forward, such as modules on research methods and field courses in economics, which she thinks are reasonable.

Limited session hours require students to be more autonomous in learning. Tutors do not teach everything in the class, it is more about students doing more in-depth research themselves. This is a clear difference between education in China and the UK perceived by participants.

It's like, tutors make an introduction to you for like 30%, and you need to figure out the rest of the 70%.
(Anne)

Such an education mode has changed students' thinking patterns. Anne and Cecilia indicated they are encouraged to explore a topic more.

In the beginning, my essays were kind of descriptive, and I thought I was superficial. Then I found that tutors here prefer to explore it in-depth, asking me why, why, why, and then extending this point, which I think is quite good. It has greatly developed my critical thinking. (Cecelia)

Anne also said she found herself thinking more holistically and critically.

Like our tutors are particularly looking at, like, in your essay, this statement, what does this statement bring? What's the purpose of this statement? What can be concluded from this statement? There's a complete flow. (Anne)

Therefore, it is suggested that the UK HE system may reinforce students as active learners and develop their independent learning and critical thinking abilities, which, according to Elle, is a lifelong reward.

Personal change

Students' mental health appears to have generally improved, which, in Elle's opinion, is a more meaningful thing to her.

For me, I would not say this knowledge is my biggest gain, though they (the faculty) do teach me a lot. Honestly, all this financial and economic stuff I've learnt isn't something that can only be learnt in the UK, right? But the vibe is different. I feel like the general vibe of this university is.....relaxing, peaceful, and I'm infected by that, I'm way less anxious, my life has been much happier since I came here. (Elle)

Elle also said she suffered greatly in previous high-pressure, exam-based and score-prioritized education, which she believes should not be the purpose of education. Like Elle's feeling, Wendy and Cecilia also said they have become more confident and extroverted in this inclusive environment. Besides the academic support from the faculty, the people they met here also gave them moral support.

The life experience of studying abroad can also contribute to personal growth. Students have become significantly more independent. This includes making decisions in life, the courage to live in an unfamiliar place, and stress-resistant capabilities, such traits that benefit from the experience of studying abroad, which could be hard to acquire for those who have never left home.

I've experienced more here than in my previous undergrad years in China. If I just stayed in that small town, I would not have grown into what I am now. (Pelly)

These personal changes make them feel like they are becoming a better person. Students in this study seem more inclined to view HE per se, emphasizing the personal benefits that studying abroad may bring them (e.g. personal development) and giving less consideration to the future financial rewards. It might be suggested that HE as a process of student self-formation should not be underestimated. They are encouraged to explore their identities, values and aspirations. HE seems to give students more than just a certificate, which may align with student expectations to benefit from HE beyond academic qualifications. Whether or not HE meets the expectations of students and whether or not students are otherwise satisfied with what they gain from UK HE can be important to HEIs. Institutions need to maintain satisfaction and attractiveness to international students to ensure their continued financial income and international reputation in a competitive marketized environment. As a result, it might be argued that these outcomes of receiving HE in the UK can be a critical component of the student-as-consumer model. Individual's judgement of what they gain from HE can determine their attitudes towards tuition fees.

Theme 4: attitudes towards tuition fees

This theme discusses whether Chinese students think the tuition fees are worth it since they pay about three times the price of a home student. Regarding this, students' attitudes show a rather pronounced difference.

Value for money

Interestingly, compared to official courses, some participants who had attended pre-sessional English courses indicated that the language course did have substantial help for official courses. Hence, they felt the tuition fees for language courses were worth it. Sally indicated it can be necessary for students who have never been trained in academic writing. Wendy also said that the language course did help her prepare for the official courses by developing her familiarity with the use of tools such as Blackboard, as well as her understanding of some of the requirements for writing essays, such as the necessity of presenting critical thinking in essays. Therefore, it is considered a service provided by HEIs for offer holders to be well prepared linguistically and culturally, thus achieving better academic outcomes. Apart from the usefulness of the language skills taught in the pre-sessional English course, more importantly, the greater value of a pre-sessional English course may be to 'buy insurance' for success in exchange for an unconditional offer (Pelly; Zleda). Participants think that the tuition fees for language classes were reasonable as they provide a quality education that leads to the successful completion of their studies. This might have become a competitive advantage in the education market and therefore enhances institution attractiveness.

The importance of self-fulfillment and enjoyment in studying abroad cannot be underestimated, which does not work with the typical economic principles of costs and benefits. Anne believes that if she hadn't spent this money to study abroad, she would not have discovered her passion for doing research, or met these excellent people. Wendy thinks she is trading the measurable money for a year of experience that gives her a chance to grow.

From an academic perspective, they taught me knowledge, this degree from Southampton also helped me in my master's application. And in terms of my life, I would say I had a perfect time here. And socially, I've made lots of good friends. So overall I would say I am happy. (Elle)

Zelda rejected a PhD offer with funding from another UK HEI but chose Cambridge without funding, which she thinks was worthwhile. Here is the reason.

The symbolic value of Oxbridge is not like others; this is the value of this title. (Zelda)

The identity of a 'Cambridge student', the academic and employment resources as well as networking provided by University of Cambridge, and the student life at Cambridge, are the things that make Zelda think value for money. In summary, not all gains and losses can be measured by money. Combined with the previously discussed changes in thinking patterns or enrichment of life experience, these are things they think are more valuable.

Negative feelings

Almost all participants have to admit that the tuition is objectively expensive. Participants who think the tuition fees are not worth it indicated that it is too expensive regarding a few session hours or other student support.

I have much resentment about the tuition for my master's. Firstly, there are less sessions. Secondly, you know when you're an undergraduate, if you're writing coursework or something, you can ask your tutor to take a look at your first draft and give you some feedback in advance, but master's students don't have that, I mean you can just walk in during office hour, but they don't seem to have scheduled specific time for every student to do this. (Sally)

As Sally did her undergraduate in the UK, she felt the comparison. For example, her undergraduate tuition fee was £18,000 per year, which is much cheaper than her master's. She is also clearly resentful because she is paying a higher price but not getting the same treatment.

Undergraduate students also expressed dissatisfaction with tuition fees. Lynsey said the lectures were more like an introduction, what students learned was from the resources recommended by the faculty. She indicated that the resources provided were limited, and it was inconvenient for her to get the resources she needed, such as a lack of physical books, which were difficult to borrow as everyone was asking. She also mentioned that their tutors were not helpful, either there was no feedback on coursework, or they could not even find the tutor when making a tutorial appointment, which does not just happen at one HEI.

I feel like I can only learn by myself. I don't get any help from tutors. The whole uni.....it looks like it's helpful, but if you are gonna get help from them, you sacrifice more. I paid £32,000, I get nothing! (Lynsey)

Tina mentioned that many people in China think that a one-year master's programme is a bit short, some industries may not recognize such a qualification, which may be one of the reasons why some participants are dissatisfied with the tuition fees.

Compared to, let's say tuition fees (HEIs) in Europe, versus £35,000, it's a fraction of that. And it's a two-year (programme), and of course you learn more in two years. So I don't feel it's (£35,000) worth it. What I've learnt from UCL, like software or something, they are advanced, but I won't have the chance to use them in the future. (Tina)

It is also claimed that some master's programme lacks substance. According to Cecilia, some workshops seem to be a waste of time to her.

I think whether the workshop is effective depends on how the tutor is leading and whether your classmates are brainstorming, but I don't have such feelings. (Cecilia)

As Lee said, simply looking at the money, it is for sure way too expensive, and it seems that UK HE fails to meet students' expectations of educational services. However, outcomes such as personal growth and life skills seem to align with education expectations that go beyond tangible gains such as certificates. HE cannot be fully equated with a value product, and many of the features of the study abroad experience are not comparable to typical consumer behaviours. Students have different understandings of what HE or studying abroad means, some of which are materially driven and some of which are not strongly economically orientated (Tomlinson, 2017). According to Telford and Masson (2005, as cited in Voss Gruber & Szigin, 2007, p.949), 'the perceived quality of the educational service depends on students' expectations and values'.

Theme 5: As consumers

There are no sub-themes under this theme. Many participants in this study do have a feeling of purchasing something from HE or their HEIs, just as they 'buy insurance' from the pre-sessional English courses.

I purchase a certificate. I purchase its ranking. (Lynsey)

I think I buy for the service, a full service, like attending classes, or some facilities, like the library, and then like the career service, they provide you with career guidance.....also if my coursework doesn't make sense at all, I would tell myself like, I paid the money, so they have to give me some feedback, right? I would say I paid for it, then I deserve it. (Sally)

Some did state that they recognize their consumer identity, but are at a lower position in their relationship with the institution. For example, Lynsey thinks she is not getting enough support from the faculty. Many participants indicated that they were struggling to get a certificate even though they were the ones who paid money. This, according to Alex, is an imbalance of power.

It is suggested that the feeling of purchase is probably related to the actual tuition fees paid. Students with scholarships did not have a strong feeling about purchasing a certificate. For example, instead of saying he was paying for a master's degree, Eddy felt he was more like buying student life at Oxford.

If I'm going to participate in some.....sort of college life, student life, I may need to buy something, like an entrance fee for attending some activities. But except that I don't think I'm purchasing a degree or something, cuz I didn't pay that much for that. (Eddy)

This might explain that even in a marketized context, HE is not simply a transaction of money and certificates. This is where HE defies typical market logic. HE is a process; how 'consumers' engage in this process, including but not

limited to academic endeavours and experiencing student life, may ultimately determine what outcomes they get from HE.

Another point is that the market mechanism itself places students as consumers. Many participants mentioned that the materials and process for applying HEIs in the UK is probably the simplest and the most convenient compared to other regions such as the US, Europe or Hong Kong. Most programmes do not require applicants to provide the GRE (Graduate Record Examination) or GMAT (Graduate Management Admissions Test) or a description of the modules they have taken. Therefore, participants such as Cecilia said that she did not need to make many efforts to prepare for other exams, and there were almost no interviews, so she felt it was easier to apply. In addition, unlike the US or Hongkong which require applicants to physically send IELTS, GMAT or GRE transcripts to their administrations, the UK HEIs only require applicants to upload electronic copies. It might be debatable whether or not UK HEIs intend to provide the most convenience for potential 'consumers', with many participants indicating that the relatively easy application materials and process, as well as the higher success rate, were the reasons they applied for the UK. This looks like a strategy of attracting consumers, gaining more access to prestigious HEIs with more minor application 'costs'. Furthermore, compared to Europe and the US, Flora feels the UK knows China's HE system best. As discussed, they classified Chinese HEIs into different tiers, corresponding to different GPA requirements, which, in her opinion, is hard to evaluate whether it is a positive or negative sign of the marketization of HE.

5. Discussion

This section is organised in two parts. The first part discusses the critical role of rankings in Chinese students' choice of HEIs, and even the UK as a study destination, based on the findings of the institutional reputation as one of the considerations in students' choice concerning the employment of Chinese graduates. The second part focuses on the role of students in HE and discusses the self-formation in the narrative of students as consumers.

5.1 Ranking and employment

Institutional reputation is one of the crucial factors for students choosing HEIs. This study found that QS ranking plays a significant role in the HE market by influencing the reputation and attractiveness of HEIs. The focus on HEI rankings is a powerful indicator of the integration of market values into the HE sector (Bowl, 2018). High rankings signal the perceived prestige of institutions, making them more appealing to international students. Students rely on rankings, especially QS, to make informed decisions about HEIs. The launch of the QS ranking made information accessible and instantaneous to the consumers, i.e. potential students. Since its foundation, QS advertised itself as a world-leading specialist and information provider in the HE industry (Sowter et al., 2017). As Hazelkorn (2011, p.37) noted, 'Students – especially international students – are both an object of desire and a diligent user of rankings'. It might be argued that QS dominates the education market of students as consumers, as well as Chinese students' choices. Although the company claims that the purpose of QS was to help students and their families, the fact is that governments and university management have already used it to set strategic objectives (Sharma, 2010, as cited in Hazelkorn, 2011, p.14). Increasingly, policymakers in popular overseas education destinations such as the UK are constructing HE as a tool for boosting national economic development in the age of globalisation and commoditised capital (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009, as cited in Moufahim & Lim, 2015, p.440). Tight (2013) referred to students as 'pawns', indicating that 'they deployed within government and employer agendas on a wider politico-economic stage' (as cited in Tomlinson, 2016, p.16).

HEIs invest heavily in international rankings to make themselves more attractive to students, as tuition fees are an essential income component for many UK HEIs. HEIs need to attract students, especially international students, to ensure a steady income. This reinforces the importance of rankings, which proves the lucrativeness of the education industry. Rybiński and Wodecki (2022) pointed out that UK HEIs popular with Chinese applicants monitor rankings and even try to manipulate the data provided to these ranking systems. It is also evident from the data in this study that the HEIs mentioned with high frequency perform very favourably in the QS ranking, proving that QS strengthens the reputation of the HEIs among international students. With the marketisation of HE, decisions about where to study have become expensive and risky. Chinese students, as rational consumers, seek to maximise their investment in education. Ranking is the most accessible performance system to the public (Sowter et al., 2017). For policymakers, it is a tool for setting the mission for HEIs, such as attracting international students; for students, it is part of their 'wise' choices (Marginson, 2007, as cited in Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012, p.286). Although the act of referring to objective information makes students appear to be rational consumers, this consumerist behaviour is limited by different modes of information processing and prevailing social attitudes (Tavares & Cardoso, 2013). Thus, we might argue that students' choices are already limited to these HEIs when they refer to QS ranking.

As presented in the findings, Chinese students value QS ranking because it can significantly impact their future employment outcomes, which is a mainstream view in China. Employers in China prefer candidates from high-ranked HEIs. With the rapid expansion of HE in China, the number of graduates has increased yearly, exceeding the number that the labour market can absorb, which puts pressure on the government to create more job opportunities. Meanwhile, the increasing number of students returning from overseas HEIs has intensified the competition for graduates' employment (Mok & Han, 2016). Studying abroad has thus become a trend. The Chinese job market's competitive nature means that candidates must distinguish themselves. The relative positional value of degree certificates has become a concern in the context of a talent surplus of large numbers of HE graduates (Tomlinson, 2016). Students perceive that the reputation and brand of the graduating institution are linked to their personal reputation and brand, and therefore students as consumers seek to increase their personal economic value and thus satisfy employers (Moufahim & Lim, 2015).

UK HE has a reputation for providing high-quality education and has been a favoured destination for Chinese students. Chinese students are attracted to the global reputation of UK universities and the UK university brand, as constructed by the rankings (Moufahim & Lim, 2015). It is perceived by society that graduates with an overseas qualification are more likely to have better employability prospects. Chinese students also believe that education in the UK still plays a vital role in securing a better labour market position (Brooks & Waters, 2009, as cited in Moufahim & Lim, 2015, p.440). This investment in studying abroad, for some people, is driven by the expectation of future career rewards. Even participants did not specify employment-related purposes when asked about their expectations of HE, but seeking rankings reflects their demand. Students are aware of the symbolic value (rather than the functional value) of prestigious HEIs, viewing HE as a positional good where a higher-ranked university can mean more and better lifelong opportunities (Naidoo & Williams, 2015).

The sample for this study includes students who came to the UK to pursue a master's degree after completing their undergraduate studies in China. With the increasing number of Chinese students studying abroad, an overseas undergraduate qualification is gradually losing extra currency in the Chinese labour market, and in some cases, a master's qualification is prioritised for the overseas aspect (Li, 2013). Students are generally aware of the need for higher qualifications in the context of credential inflation, particularly in China's competitive labour market. A master's qualification seems to be a necessity. Some participants in this study see overseas education as an alternative to the competitive and stressful exam-based domestic education, they all indicated that applying for a UK master's programme is much easier than taking the domestic postgraduate entrance examinations. The popularity of master's education is a result of growing demand from students and employers. The one-year master's programme in the UK can be said to meet the needs of Chinese students who want to get a master's degree quickly, as well as enhance their competitiveness in the job market. While the one-year master's programme perhaps makes Chinese students feel like 'purchasing' (compared to undergraduate and PhD programmes), as they are very clear that they do not expect themselves to learn anything that can be applied to future careers from this short period. Families who can afford it may consider this a good deal in terms of time and the credibility of the qualification. This might exacerbate the perception of international students as consumers by HEIs.

5.2 HE as self-formation

The consumer concept may exclude the student's agency as a learner, as introduced in the literature review section. However, this study found that despite most participants recognising their consumer identity more or less, they are also active learners. After all, 'Learning is harder work than consumption.' (Marginson, 2024, p.749). Many Chinese students choose to study abroad not only to take it as a pathway to occupations and social status but also because cross-border HE provides resources and experiences to themselves. The marketised HE has not prevented the larger possibility of subjectification in students' lived experiences both inside and outside the classroom (Tomlinson, 2022). This study found that cross-border HE is a process of self-formation. 'Self-formation as a primary purpose of higher education ... It expounds on the proposition that student agency is both a condition for students' self-formation and an outcome. (Klemencic, forthcoming, as cited in Marginson, 2024, p.775). By developing the capacity for an autonomous and independent agency, students can build the capacity for conscious and critical learning to regulate self-formation (Marginson, 2023). In the continuing process of self-formation, student subjects are not shaped by teachers or institutions but manage their own learning and life, shaping themselves in dynamic change (Marginson, 2013). Therefore, self-formation asserts greater agency of students themselves.

The student gains from HE found in this study are not quite the same as in previous literature focusing more on external achievements such as career resources or networking. Students experience their student life including engagement with disciplinary knowledge as well as activities beyond the classroom in order to develop themselves. This, according to Margaret Archer, is a core feature of self-formation specific to HE. Marginson's previous study (2023) established four essential aspects of self-formation in HE: the learner's autonomy, reflexive agency, the will to learn, and immersion in disciplinary knowledge (p.750). HE as self-formation is perceptible to individuals, as described by these participants, both in the classroom and student life. Data suggests the embodiment of personal agency in genuine engagement with subject learning. The course-related experiences discussed in the findings are considered the outcomes of these four self-formation aspects. Students wish to learn knowledge and enjoy being immersed in the knowledge, their autonomy of learning is enhanced, also become more reflective of what they have learnt as well as their thinking patterns. Some students emerge from this process with a desire to pursue academia. As Marginson suggested, full engagement with knowledge changes the self. The development of critical thinking, reflection and reasoning skills in individuals in HE is an essential aspect of student self-formation (Yang, 2021), which is also evidenced in this study. The marketised HE models knowledge as a personalised commodity with potential economic value, which obscures the nature of knowledge (Tomlinson, 2022). According to Bernstein (2000), different disciplines cultivate different kinds of reflexive consciousness that shape 'who we are, who we think we can become and what we think we can do' (McLean et al., 2013, p. 265). On the other hand, experiences beyond the classroom are also profoundly formative. At HEIs, students begin to move away from their families and the communities they are familiar with and engage more closely with the larger society, enhancing their social attributes such as socialising (Yang, 2021). New networks and friendships arise in cross-border HE, which provokes new thoughts on self-formation (Montgomery, 2010). Interviews with participants of this study found that they have made many excellent friends, including Chinese and other international students, and the interaction with these people is inspirational for them.

The concept of self-formation can be used to explain the student agency of Chinese students in this study. International students tend to be highly autonomous in their self-formation. Although all HE can be seen as a process of self-formation, cross-border education requires particularly strong agency, as it involves significant changes over a compressed period. Many cross-border students experience sharp contrasts between, on the one hand, the evolving inner self and, on the other hand, old and new social selves. There can be continuous practical challenges, frequent personal changes and heightened (if not hyper-active) conscious reflexivity (Marginson, 2023, p.34). As the participants mentioned, studying abroad, even moving around different countries, is to experience, whether through learning or being immersed in another environment. Some students deliberately change their environments by moving across borders to achieve self-formation. They are able to manage their lives and studies reflectively. Such terrors or joys of shaping oneself in a series of novel choices during life abroad are widely felt (Marginson, 2013). As Marginson (2024) suggested, students shape themselves from the cultural encounters and plurality of cross-border learning, much of which occurs outside the classroom. Students in this study are separated from their families and may face the pressure of survival, making them more independent. The social space and the field of knowledge provided by HE, especially cross-border HE, can lead to a change in students' agency. Students are not passively being 'fed-up' knowledge but are active participants with the agency to learn. They can decide their own educational experiences, including the way they learn and what extracurricular activities they participate in. They take responsibility for their own learning outcomes and engage in self-directed learning.

Neoliberal HE encourages competition, resulting in the need for performance measurement, which, according to Biesta (2009), is gradually becoming the end of education. Personal development becomes less valued in the commodification of education (Barnes & Jenkins, 2014; Ranson, 2003; Sayer, 2011, as cited in Yang, 2021, p.1177). Tomlinson (2022, as cited in Marginson, 2023, p.33) also criticised those neoliberal valuations of HE that focus on short-term financial returns and performance measures of personal gain and institutional prestige, neglecting non-pecuniary goals. Consumerism and marketisation limit the value of HE (Alves & Tomlinson, 2021). Student as consumer is understood from an economic and social instrumentalist perspective. Student satisfaction and the rewards from HE dominate the narrative of HE, which undermines the focus on autonomy and thus hinders the development of individual agency (Maringe et al., 2010; Mccaig & Taylor, 2014; Taylor, 2017, as cited in Yang, 2021, p.1177). Self-formation may more broadly conceptualise the benefits of HE for individuals. The self-formation that comes from studying abroad is more than just a financial investment or an act of consumption; it encompasses investment in the self as human capital, the economic attributes, and credentials gained in education (Marginson, 2013), which students in this study believe that this personal development will benefit them for the rest of their lives. 'The idea of self-formation also focuses on inner directness and self-will', and cross-border HE is a way for international students to grow, which evokes the advanced capacity in individual agency (Marginson, 2013, p.18). Students in this study still value the broader benefits of HE. Self-formation appeared to be more important than financial rewards among participants in this study; careers and incomes were rarely the whole thing they sought, despite the greater cost of being an international student. International HE as self-formation includes a broader range of self-improvement behaviours including, but not limited to, the acquisition of knowledge, the construction of social networks as well as the fostering of functional relationships, the acquisition of new values and beliefs, and the growth of personal capabilities (Marginson, 2013). Therefore, the assertion of HE as self-formation is a robust

response to the closed position of students as consumers (Marginson, 2024). Self-formation occurs naturally in students and could be more visible in international students. This concept makes us rethink the relationship between students and HEIs.

5.3 Limitations and implications

The main issue with this study might be the biased sample. Firstly, the sample of undergraduate students in this study was relatively small, and therefore, the results of this study may be more inclined to present the thoughts of postgraduate students and lack an understanding of the undergraduate group. Secondly, there is also a lack of diversity in terms of disciplines. Course-related experiences can vary considerably from discipline to discipline, directly related to students' perceptions of HE. Thirdly, due to the snowball sampling strategy, all 13 students were from the Russell Group Universities, solidly in the top 100 on the QS rankings. As mentioned earlier, QS top 100 is a crucial indicator for Chinese students. Therefore, this is a lack of understanding of non-Russell Group students and HEIs that are not in the top 100, for example, whether they consider a qualification with a less favourable ranking to be value for money. Therefore, it is believed that a more diverse sample is needed.

This study did not directly investigate the participants' financial status, as it may be a sensitive question to ask. We might assume that being an international student might somewhat reflect the family's financial situation. The impact of this objective factor could be that students in this study did not seem to explicitly express concerns about employment, since their families may be able to provide some opportunities. This may provoke a paradox: Does studying abroad enhance their employability, providing opportunities for better jobs? Or are the families who can afford to study abroad relatively well-off, allowing them not to worry about getting a job, even if they have not had the experience and qualification of studying abroad? Since no students in the sample were formally employed or working with their existing qualifications before deciding to further their studies, the answer to this question may not be known. It could be challenging to measure how much an overseas educational experience or master's/PhD qualification plays a role in the job market.

In addition, this study discussed the marketisation of UK HE from the student perspective. Students are not the only group of people affected by neoliberal policies. Institutions and teachers are structured as service providers, corresponding to students as consumers. The marketisation disturbs the balance between teaching, academic research and management (Harris, 2005). Therefore, the views of teachers and university staff can provide a more comprehensive understanding of this topic. For example, to what extent do student assessment and complaint mechanisms influence their work, and whether teachers are pressured by such mechanisms (e.g. NSS) to entertain and satisfy students? More research is needed to explore how the marketisation of HE has affected their work, as well as changes in the form and structure of the curriculum under the pressure of marketisation and commodification. Other stakeholder groups could also be studied, such as comparing the difference between students' expectations of HE and the expectations other stakeholders think they want (Voss et al., 2007).

A final implication for future studies could be to include a quantitative approach. For example, investigating the selection of HEIs by Chinese students may contribute to understanding the complex selection process, influencing

factors and reference information. Future research could delve deeper into the relationship between student background or cultural capital and the reference information in order to construct a statistical model to explain student choices.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated how Chinese students choose their HEIs, what are their attitudes towards the marketised UK HE and to what extent does UK HE meet their expectations through the lens of 'student as consumer'. By interviewing Chinese students currently receiving HE in the UK, we can answer the research questions. Programme setting, institutional reputation and costs were the primary considerations when Chinese students made decisions. Given the information cocoon, Chinese students' choices can be somewhat restricted to whether the programme matches the needs and the requirements set by institutions for international students. Students recognise the consumer identity, but this does not affect their agency in self-formation, which is also part of the expectations of HE beyond obtaining a qualification. Rather than excluding themselves from opportunities to gain powerful knowledge because of their consumer status, they are more willing to expand their intellectual horizon. The idea that consumerism fundamentally undermines the pedagogical relationship is therefore contested. It is proposed that the dominant metaphor used to describe the relationship between students and HEIs, i.e. student as consumer, is one-sided and particularly incompatible with international students.

Consumerist discourse has been widely used to explain students' relationship with HE. Much of students' consumer behaviour 'default' is conceptual and does not necessarily fully reflect their attitudes towards UK HE and their personal behaviours in HE (Tomlinson, 2017). It is undeniable that utilitarian values and attitudes are shaping students' attitudes towards HE, which is reflected in their increasing focus on 'returns' such as degree outcomes and employability. With the rising tuition fees for international students and the pressure on UK HEIs to meet the demands of many stakeholders (government, employer, students and their families), consumerist identification will likely continue and intensify (Tomlinson, 2017). The study reveals the complex and ambivalent nature of the contemporary HE experiences, where different values and identities intersect as well as different ways of understanding the HE experience may be the characteristics of marketised UK HE. Clearly, students have different interpretations of what HE means, and therefore the value of HE is constructed in multiple ways, not exclusively economic orientated (Tomlinson, 2017). This study on international students complements the framework of students and the UK HE market, i.e. HE as self-formation rather than simply 'student as consumer'.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Participant information sheet

Marketization of HE in the UK---the choices and expectations of international students

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: [EDUC_C1A_24_074]

1. Introductory paragraph

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part.

2. Why is this research being conducted?

In the context of marketization of higher education, this study aims to: a. identify factors influencing international students' choices of HE institutions; b. explore students' attitudes towards HE; c. assess the extent to which HE meets students' expectations.

3. Why have I been invited to take part?

You are invited to take part as you are an international HE student studying in the UK. This study will need 15 participants. There's no specific criteria for the selection of participants.

4. Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you to decide whether to take part. You can withdraw yourself from the research, without giving a reason, and without negative consequences, by advising me of this decision. If you decide to withdraw then all information you have provided will be deleted.

5. What will happen to me if I take part in the research?

The interview can be conducted either in-person or online. Consent form will be sent to you and you will need to sign if you would like to be interviewed, then send it back to the researcher. The topic of the interview is about your views and experience of higher education. You will be provided with the interview questions in advance. With your consent, I would like to audio record so I can have an accurate record of our conversation. The interview will last about 1 hour, semi-structured. You will only need to be interviewed once. Normally you do not need to do anything further. You can stop the interview at any time without any reason. Anonymity is ensured.

6. What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?

You will be asked about the programme you are studying and the higher education institution you are in, and whether you are a home student or international student. You are not required to provide your name, age, gender,

year of study, nationality, race, etc. If you think that any personal information you have provided may enable you to be identified, I will remove it from research outputs.

7. Are there any benefits in taking part?

There will be no direct or personal benefit to you from taking part in this research.

8. What information will be collected and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research objectives?

I'm interested in your educational experience and your views on higher education. The information you provide will help me better understand the marketized higher education system as well as higher education students in order to answer my research questions. All data will be stored on the University of Oxford Nexus365 OneDrive for Business file storage service, which is approved by the University for all research data storage.

The researcher and her supervisor will have access to the research data.

9. Will the research be published? Could I be identified from any publications or other research outputs?

The findings from the research will be written up in a dissertation. If you are afraid of being identified from the research output, you can send your request via email to the researcher. If the researcher hasn't finished data collection, your data will be deleted.

I would like your permission to use direct quotations in any research outputs.

A copy of my thesis/ dissertation will be deposited both in print and online in the Oxford University Research Archive where it will be publicly available to facilitate its use in future research.

10. Data Protection

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the research. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from the University's Information Compliance web site at <https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights>.

11. Who has reviewed this research?

This research has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. (Ethics reference: EDUC_C1A_24_074).

12. Who do I contact if I have a concern about the research or I wish to complain?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this research, please contact Jiaxin Zhai (jiaxin.zhai@education.ox.ac.uk) or James Robson (+44 1865274044/ james.robson@education.ox.ac.uk), and we will do our best to answer your query. I will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt

with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible:

The Chair, Social Sciences & Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee;

Email: ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk; Address: Research Services, University of Oxford, Boundary Brook House, Churchill Drive, Headington, Oxford OX3 7GB

13. Further Information and Contact Details

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

Jiaxin Zhai

Department of Education

15 Norham Gardens, OX2 6PY

University tel: no

University email: sant6519@ox.ac.uk

Appendix B: Consent form

Consent to take part in Marketization of Higher Education in the UK---the choices and expectations of international students.

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) approval reference: **EDUC_C1A_24_074**

Purpose of Study: In the context of marketization of higher education, this study aims to: a. identify factors influencing international students' choices of HE institutions; b. explore students' attitudes towards HE; c. assess the extent to which HE meets students' expectations.

Please initial each box if you agree with the statement

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above research. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any point until **01/Jun/2024**], without giving any reason.

I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.

I understand the extent to which I could be identifiable from the dissertation.

I consent to being audio recorded.

I understand how audio will be used in research outputs.

Use of quotations: Please indicate your preference (select *one* option):

a) I do not wish to be quoted. **or**

b) I agree to the use of quotations in research outputs if I am not identifiable. **or**

c) I agree to the use of direct quotations, attributed to my name, in research outputs.

I give permission for you to contact me again to clarify information.

I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.

Dear Jiaxin,

Research ethics approval

Research title: Marketization of HE in the UK—the choices and expectations of international students.

Research ethics reference: EDUC_C1A_24_074

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the University's procedures for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to confirm that, on the basis of the information provided to the DREC, ethics approval has now been granted for this study.

Please note the following:

Personal data: It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all personal data collected during the project is managed in accordance with the University's [guidance and legal requirements](#).

In-person activities: Any data collection involving in-person interactions with participants must have an up-to-date fieldwork risk assessment in place; further guidance is available from the Safety Office's [website](#).

Amendments: Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the information in your ethics application as submitted at date of this approval, as all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. The amendment form is available on the [SSH IDREC webpage](#).

We welcome feedback on your experience of the ethical review process and suggestions for improvement. Please email any comments to staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk / student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk or ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk.

Yours sincerely

Robert Klassen



DREC Member