

# *Exploring the Competitiveness of Chinese International Graduates Seeking Employment*

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**Abstract:** The term "involution" was defined as peer pressure to work harder to compete for few resources, which lowers an individual's "effort-to-reward ratio. According to data presented at the recently ended 20th China International Talent Exchange Conference, COVID-19's effects and evolving overseas ties will accelerate the trend of international students returning home to find jobs. After finishing their studies, 777,000 international students will return to China in 2020, and in 2021, it's anticipated that 1,049,000 students would do the same. In such a setting, pertinent study on international students is particularly crucial, yet there aren't many research instances and pertinent findings about their employment competitiveness. To this end, this paper adopts an exploratory empirical study to examine the factors influencing the employment of Chinese students returning to their home countries, to discuss potential issues and the current situation of the competitiveness of international students returning to their home countries in general environment of "inward-looking" high. The study examines potential issues and the existing state of competition among international students who return to China to find jobs in the "inward" higher education environment and offers useful recommendations and findings.

**Keywords:** Involution, Higher education, Employment competitiveness

## 1. Introduction

Higher education has always played a significant role in national strategies, and its continued development is essential to the creation of a knowledge society [1]. This development aims at create "human capital," or the "intellectual capital" that students gain and develop while pursuing their education. As academics have emphasized, knowledge and acquired skills plays a significant role in the socioeconomic progress of nations and regions, and the most valuable resource is knowledge rather than labor, raw materials, or capital since it promotes competitiveness and high levels of development[2].

With the number of university graduates have reached a new high, societal pressure will undoubtedly rise. The number of university graduates in 2022 is projected to be 10.76 million, an increase of 1.67 million year over year (data source: China's Ministry of National Education, National Higher Education Statistics 2021)[3]. Currently, there are a total of 3,012 higher education institutions in China, including 2,756 general higher education institutions (1,270 undergraduate and 1,486 specialists). It is admitted that the coming year will mark a historical transition for China's tens of millions of recent college graduates [4]. Although China has seen a significant increase in the number

of universities and students enrolled in higher education, and the operational conditions of universities have improved, a significant breakthrough has been made; nevertheless, we must also consider the issues that still exist: following the expansion, it is challenging for university graduates to find employment and launch a business. The idea of studying abroad became a possibility for many individuals when the word "involution" first entered the pervasive consciousness. More than 700,000 international students have traveled abroad to study since China inaugurated reforming and opening up [5]. They are spread throughout more than a hundred different nations and areas, and nearly all of the fields of study they offer are majors. Studying abroad to boost competitiveness, acquire access to excellent contacts, and access resources for learning that is more equal than those available at home seems to be the natural decision in a country where all industries are typically experiencing "involution."

Notably, rather than declining, the number of students studying abroad has grown since the outbreak began in 2019 [6]. The National Study Abroad Report 2021, which was unveiled at the International Education Summit 2021, reveals that the number of Chinese students studying abroad is still rising. The data also reveals that 91% of those who had originally planned to study abroad continue to do so, with 55.6% of intending international students stating that their travel plans will not be affected by the situation [7]. Students and parents are under the psychological and physical "double pressure" of the epidemic and the economy, but they are still determined to study abroad, spending more, more, and for a longer period than before the epidemic. This leads some scholars to question whether such a significant investment in education will enable international students to succeed in the domestic "involution" environment [8].

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. The Definition and Status of "Involution"**

German philosopher Immanuel Kant used the term "involution" for the first time in his work "Critique of Judgment" [9]. Gutiérrez and Geertz, C, two anthropologists, perfected the idea of "involution." In "involution," Gutiérrez describes the occurrence of a cultural pattern that, after taking on its ultimate shape, is incapable of stabilizing or evolving into a new form and instead just keeps getting internally more complicated [10]. Geertz discovered that the limited land in Java, a lack of capital, and administrative restrictions on the spread of agriculture outward led to increased labour to meet the country's limited rice production and the internalisation of agriculture, which became more complex and refined. This led to the "growth without development" Geertz once referred to. Geertz describes this "painful and uneconomic" strategy as "the involution of agriculture." [11] The term "involution" is now used to describe the peer pressure to work more to compete for few resources, which lowers an individual's "effort-to-reward ratio". It may be considered an "inflation" of work. Many students in higher education use this word to describe illogical internal or "voluntary" rivalry. It speaks of the struggle among peers to put in greater effort in order to get few resources, which causes a deterioration in the individual's "effort to gain" ratio. It might be considered a "inflation" of effort.

### **2.2. The Definition and Status of Employment Competitiveness**

Employment competitiveness is often used to describe a variety of integrated employability and career development abilities. International Labour Organization (ILO) [12]. In the study it was noted that employment competitiveness is the capacity for a person to find and hold a job, advance professionally, and deal with changes in the workplace. Department for Education and Employment, UK (DFEE) [13]. Employment competitiveness is typically understood in research as the capacity to find and hold a job. Fugate defines employment competitiveness as a person's capacity to recognize and seize career chances both inside and outside the organization during their professional

lives [14]. Since the 1990s, professionals, and academics from all over the world have experimented with and investigated the definition of the structural aspects of employment competitiveness and the choice of influencing variables. The American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), divides the components of competencies required for employment into five categories, namely basic competencies, communication skills, adaptability, group effectiveness, and influencing skills [15]. A comprehensive analysis reveals that although experts and scholars have different research perspectives and evaluation latitudes, they all agree that the employment competitiveness of graduates ultimately depends on professional knowledge, general skills, personal abilities, and personal qualities as the main bearers.

### **3. Method**

This study gathers data from a sample of 294 Chinese students from various study destinations who are getting ready to return to China for employment (male =128, female = 164).

#### **3.1. Questionnaire Process and Sample Information**

The study is based on group exams and individual interviews with international students from various study locations serving as the main test subjects. Each questionnaire was filled out in about 12 minutes. After removing invalid questions, such as those with inattentive or incomplete responses, a total of 294 valid questionnaires was issued, with a 98% effectiveness rate.

#### **3.2. Design of the Questionnaire**

There are several factors influencing the employment of international students, thus to improve the study's validity and reliability, social relationships, and family factors are treated as variables in this study while national policies and socioeconomic level are treated as constants. This places the research sample in a generally fixed setting. The study mainly focuses on the aspects of one's condition, the institution where they are studying, their family history, the nation where they are studying, and employment discrimination. The questionnaire was created from four different perspectives, and from the actual questionnaire responses, the study mainly discussed and researched the impact of each international student's situation on how competitive they are for employment in their home countries, and it concluded the key factors influencing this impact. The online survey application was created to incorporate statistics sorting, statistics framing, and a follow-up open-ended question and answer area where international students may provide further single-choice or open-ended responses on their participation in the survey.

#### **3.3. Questionnaire for Research Evaluation System Methodology Establishment**

The two primary sections of a full employment competitiveness assessment model system should be analyzed from two different perspectives of causes and results, respectively, and the employment competitiveness model should be systematically built from several perspectives. Based on the analysis presented above, this paper develops a model of internal (Fig. 1) and external (Fig. 2) factors that affect the employability of international students returning to China. The factors are depicted in Figs. 1 and 2, respectively, and the model primarily reveals the relationship and the level of influence of each influencing factor on each component element of the employability of international students.

The data were entered into the computer using IBM SPSS Statistics version 26, and the main statistical methods used were exploratory factor analysis, analysis of variance, and correlation analysis. By the construction of the employment competitiveness influence model, the study focused on four aspects of the questionnaire, namely, factors related to one's situation, factors related to the

institution of study, factors related to family background, factors related to the country of destination, and factors related to employment discrimination, and the results were analyzed according to the KMO test (KMO = 0.987) and Bartlett's spherical test ( $p < 0.001$ ). Kaiser's criteria for measuring KMO showed that the questionnaire items were well suited for factor analysis.

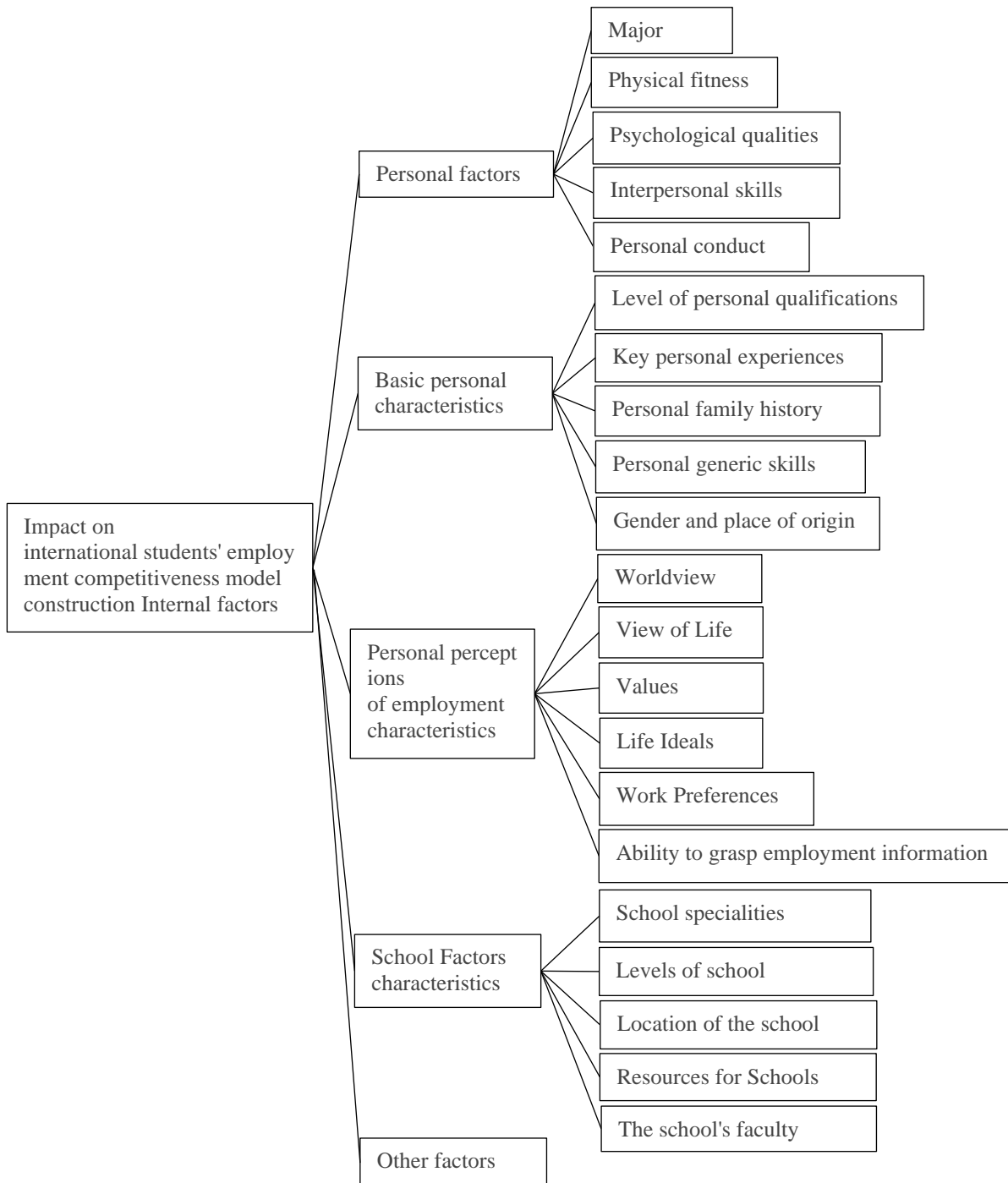


Figure 1: A comprehensive model affecting the employment competitiveness of international students (Internal factors).  
 (Photo credit:Original)

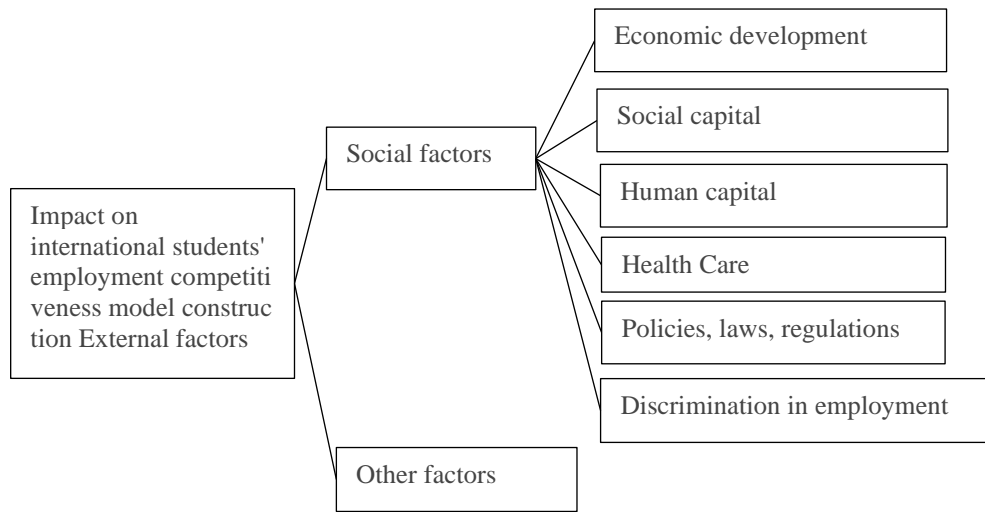


Figure 2: A comprehensive model affecting the employment competitiveness of international students (External factors).  
 (Photo credit:Original)

## 4. Results

### 4.1. The Competitiveness of International Students Returning to their Home Countries for Employment Depends on the Country that they Study Abroad

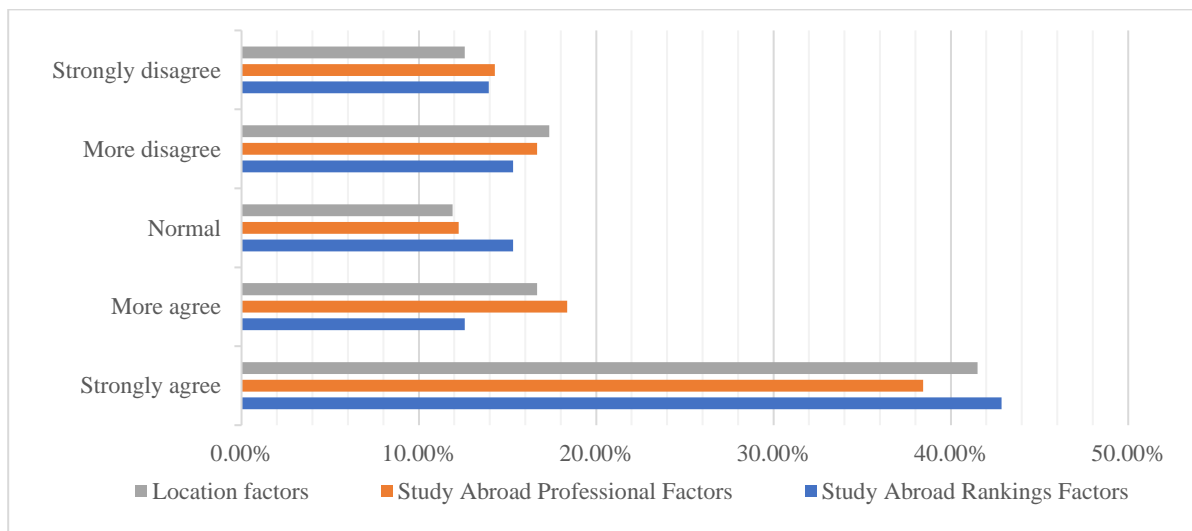


Figure 3: The impact of destination factors on the competitiveness of returning employment  
 (Photo credit: Original).

The ranking of the study abroad institution and the type of school (prestige) was found to have a significant impact on increasing the competitiveness of returning employment in the regression results of the correlation analysis (Figure 3), indicating that the level of competitiveness of returning employment of international students is significantly more significant in economically developed countries and countries with high academic levels and recognition than in other institutions. The rating of the school is a more essential aspect when comparing the same nations, and most students think that a better ranking will make them more competitive for work at home. In the case studies, They also claimed that because of China's "involution", employers give the role of prior education

(i.e., their bachelor's institution) more weight when choosing candidates with the same level of education.

#### 4.2. The Influence of Major Factors on the Competitiveness of International Students Returning to China

choosing a study abroad major has a considerable influence on how competitive the job market would be for graduates when they return to China. The majority of international students pick the well-liked majors (economics, education, management, etc.) with high employment salaries when choosing their study abroad majors. The relationship between a student's area of study and future profession is crucial, and employers typically believe that only a student's field of study and field of employment may result in a meaningful position, particularly in government organizations and institutions of higher education. Due to China's profound "involution," Chinese institutions do not recognize diverse fields of study and only accept the same subject name and subject code for recruiting. Some international students, however, claim that their major has little bearing on their ability to find employment in the future and that the institution from which they graduated has more bearing on this issue than the major they choose. They also claim that the major has less of an impact on this issue during the job search process.

#### 4.3. The Influence of Personal Factors on the Competitiveness of International Students Returning to Their Home Countries for employment

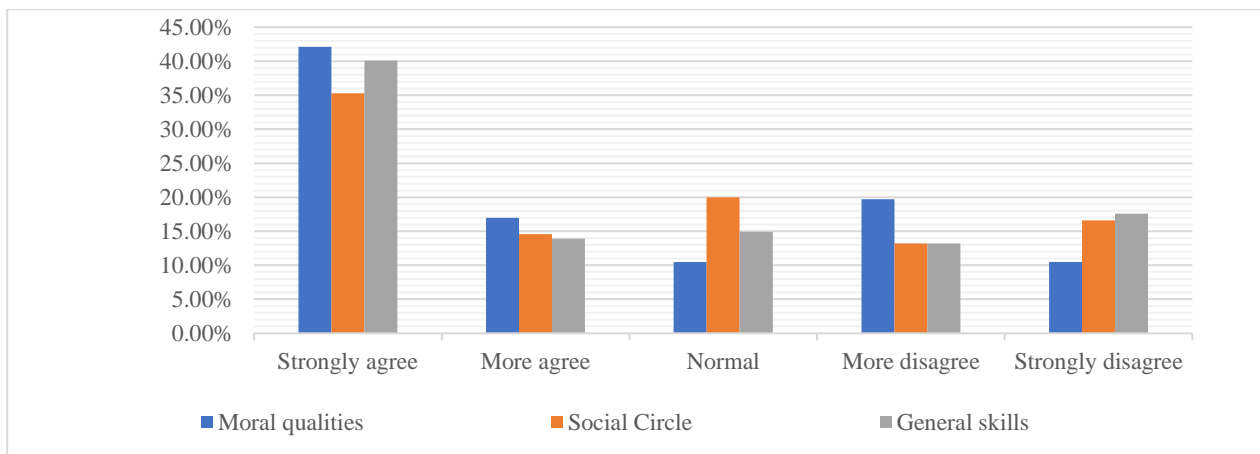


Figure 4. The impact of destination factors on the competitiveness of returning employment (Photo credit:Original).

Receiving scholarships, developing general skills, and possessing positive personal traits are significant in the regression results of the association study. International students may be more competitive when applying for jobs back home if they have appropriate work and internship experience. In the employment hunt, having a GPA (Grade Point Average) over 3.5, additional professional skills certifications, and evidence of high English proficiency (IELTS and TOEFL scores, etc.) are all important. Other non-professional qualifications obtained, work as a student officer, and involvement in campus activities did not have significant regression coefficients in the findings. In the interviews, some international students expressed the opinion that as China's employment "involution" deepens, and many employers are making it more challenging to apply for jobs by mandating the acquisition of professional skills certificates, work experience, and foreign language

proficiency. Particularly between economically prosperous and less developed places, males are sometimes offered greater possibilities than women in certain occupations.

#### **4.4. The Influence of International Students' Families Factors on the Competitiveness of International Students Returning to their Home Countries for Employment**

According to the statistics from the survey, the majority of students are self-funding, with just a tiny proportion of international students having access to university scholarships and government financial aid. The level of study abroad quality is significantly impacted by the availability of financial and emotional support from family. Wealthier families want to send their children to schools with superior facilities and resources. In the interviews with certain international students, it was revealed that in the beginning, because of their financial condition, many international students would work, study, and take part in part-time activities on and off campus to receive scholarships and living costs. Finding a job after returning to China is significantly impacted by both a lack of international work experience and international social activities.

### **5. Discussion**

#### **5.1. Creating an Objective Assessment and a Positive Public Opinion and Atmosphere for International Students**

The discussion session will propose strategies for international students to enhance their competitiveness for employment in their home countries in the "involution" environment. International students have long been stigmatized as high-earning individuals, and because there are issues with the selection of institutions and majors, this lack of understanding has led to international students' inability to find the job of their choice in China for some time due to inaccurate self-evaluation and positioning. Additionally, the false narrative that international students lack self-control and are too ambitious has started to gain traction in public opinion. Because of this, the government and pertinent departments should actively take on the responsibility of regulating the general environment, eliminating psychological and environmental pressure barriers for international students seeking employment, implementing standardized assessment methods as soon as possible for the talents of international students, conducting multidimensional and objective evaluations of international students based on various aspects, including knowledge, ability, character, and personality, and making sure that international students are treated fairly in all aspects of their academic and personal lives. This will make it possible for international students to obtain employment, utilize their abilities to the fullest, and recognize their worth in life in a fair and unbiased environment.

#### **5.2. Setting the Right Values and Planning for International Students to Find a Job Back Home**

The competitiveness of international students in the job market is determined by a variety of internal and external elements, such as interpersonal relationships, foreign language ability, and their general talents, as well as the number of international students returning to China each year. Keeping in mind that China is still a developing nation, there is still a high demand for international students, particularly for senior management and advanced technical personnel. However, many international students find it to be wildly unrealistic to expect to find a well-paying job right away without any prior professional work experience. International students should thus actively alter their perspective on jobs. To actively shift their conception of employment, in addition to developing their professional abilities and foreign language proficiency, they should also thoroughly explore other areas of

knowledge, actively engage in a variety of social and academic activities to broaden their experience, should develop strong professional ethics, pay attention to the control of their psychological condition, develop themselves into multifaceted talents, and concentrate on enhancing their stress tolerance.

### 5.3. Building a Comprehensive Information Interaction Mechanism and Employment Services for International Students

The creation of a database of returning workers' skills and an interactive information platform. International students may miss the optimal period of the recruiting season. For employers to have a clear understanding of the objective situation and subjective intention of the international students, data surveys on the employment tendency and salary expectations of international students can be conducted. Employers can then provide preferential policies for attracting outstanding international talent. The establishment of a positive, fair, efficient, and transparent information exchange mechanism will not only minimize the waste of resources due to information asymmetry but also enhance the understanding between international students and employers, which is very helpful for international students to make employment decisions. It is also important to improve the employment service measures for international students, such as tax incentives and a financial guarantee system, if necessary, to create a good environment for government support. At the same time, coordination among relevant government departments such as education, science and technology, and finance should be strengthened. This will enable the country to truly retain talent and give international students a stronger message to return home for employment and create personal value.

## 6. Conclusion

This study employs an exploratory empirical research methodology to identify the underlying models (internal and external influences) that affects international students' employment in their home countries as well as three key factors influencing the competitiveness of employment for international students in China's "internal" higher education environment. The report also offers useful recommendations and fixes. By further developing the study approach, future studies will continue to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of having overseas students.

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