Emerging Trends in Global Education a Qualitative Analysis of Thailand's Ascendance as a Preferred Destination for Management Studies

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Abstract

This research aims to uncover the motivations of Chinese students opting for management studies in Thailand and to proffer strategic insights for augmenting the internationalization of higher education management in Thailand and elevating the caliber of study abroad services provided to international students. The research employed a questionnaire survey method targeting Chinese students studying management in Thailand, including 27 doctoral students, 70 undergraduates, and 32 master students, collecting over 122 valid responses. The study analyzed these responses using thematic analysis and grounded theory to identify relevant themes and keywords, construct a coding system, and develop a theoretical model of Chinese students' choice of Thailand as a destination for management studies. Additionally, the study built a knowledge map to elucidate this motivation. The findings were found as follows: 1. geographical and economic considerations, educational system advantages, cultural and social engagement, personal and professional development, misinformation, and exploration and curiosity––these factors contribute to Chinese students' decisions to study management in Thailand; 2. factors among practical considerations, the pursuit of personal, and professional enrichment, indicate a complex interaction.

Keywords: Thailand education; international education; Chinese students; management, education cooperation

Introduction

In recent years, the substantial influx of Chinese students pursuing education abroad has emerged as a pivotal factor in the intensifying competition to attract international students across Southeast Asia and North Asia (Wen & Hu, 2019). The burgeoning middle class significantly influences this trend in China, a demographic shift that has brought about a heightened awareness among Chinese families regarding the opportunities and critical importance of international education (Ren & Qi, 2024). This newfound emphasis on global learning experiences reflects broader socio-economic transformations within China, underscoring the growing prioritization of educational attainment and the pursuit of academic excellence on a global stage (Ren & Qi, 2024).

In the evolving landscape of global education, the choice of studying abroad destinations is increasingly reflecting shifts in economic, cultural, and geopolitical dynamics (Cranston & Esson, 2024). For over a century and a half, Thailand has embraced the Commonwealth education system, ensuring a stable and consistent development in the quality and level of its higher education (Hou et al., 2020). Although the number of Chinese students in Thai universities has seen a significant increase, from 13,000 in 2013 to over 31,000 by the end of 2015, and more broadly, students from over 190 countries by the first semester of 2022, there remains a discernible discrepancy in the development of management studies between Thailand and traditional education powerhouses like Europe, the United States, Australia, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Macao (Thomas, 2020).

Thailand emerges as a "new favorite" destination for international students, particularly from China, there is an imperative need to critically assess and enhance the study abroad services and academic experience in management disciplines. There are more than 350 higher education institutions (HEIs) in Thailand, almost every one of which has a management major, and management in more than 70 universities is an international program, recruiting Chinese students at the undergraduate, master, and doctoral levels (Boonsuk & Fang, 2022).

Figure 1 presents a comprehensive analysis of the enrollment trends of Chinese students in Thai higher education institutions over a five-year period, from 2018 to 2022, which effectively demonstrates a consistent and significant increase in the number of Chinese students choosing Thailand as their study abroad destination. Figure 1 serves as a pivotal foundation for understanding the dynamics of international student mobility to Thailand, highlighting the country's growing appeal as a center for higher education among Chinese students.
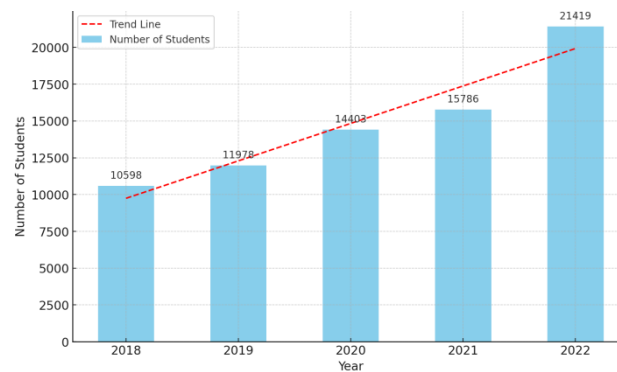
Figure 1. Analysis of the Increasing Trend of Chinese Students in Thailand: 2018–2022.

(Source: made by this research)

On the other hand, the Chinese Ministry of Education has registered more than 600 study-abroad agency companies to promote it. The Ministry of Education of China (2023) announced that management and education are the two most popular subjects for Chinese students studying abroad. This is especially evident in Southeast Asian countries.

As the influx of Chinese students continues to rise and Thai higher education institutions increasingly offer international management programs, understanding the motivations and experiences of these students in Thailand becomes imperative for the sustainable development of the country's higher education sector (Chiang & Chen, 2022; Pongsin et al., 2023). Enhancing the quality of higher education services and boosting international competitiveness are crucial steps toward attracting more Chinese students to study in Thailand (Pongsin et al., 2023). This necessitates a comprehensive examination of their motivations for choosing Thailand as a study destination and an in-depth analysis of their study-abroad experiences within the country. By doing so, Thailand can better tailor its educational offerings and support services to meet the needs and expectations of Chinese students, thereby reinforcing its position as a desirable destination for international education.

Research objective

1. To elucidate the underlying motivations of Chinese students opting for management studies in Thailand.

2. To proffer strategic insights for augmenting the internationalization of higher education management in Thailand and elevating the caliber of study abroad services provided to international students.

Literature Review

International programs in management in Thai higher education institutions

International programs in management within Thai higher education institutions are designed to align with global standards and are often conducted in English to prepare students for the international job market (Crocco & Pitiyanuwat, 2022). These programs are a response to the broader initiative of internationalizing Thai higher education, driven by the demands of globalization and the increasing mobility of students and professionals (Pongsin et al., 2023). The objective is to equip students with a global perspective on management practices and theories, ensuring they are competitive in the global marketplace. This effort is part of Thailand's strategic response to economic globalization, which, following the economic crisis of the late 1990s, necessitated significant education reforms at all levels to enhance the country's educational offerings and meet international standards.

Recent research in this area includes studies on the impact of economic globalization on Thai higher education, efforts to transition to more internationalized campuses, the collaborative provision of graduate education in the CLMV countries (Chalapati & Chalapati, 2020; Hines & Dockiao, 2021; Pongsin et al., 2023; Sujarittanonta et al., 2016), and the strategic blend of internationalization with local cultural identity (Boonsuk & Ambele, 2021; Waters & Day, 2022). For instance, Chalapati and Chalapati (2020) highlights the reforms initiated due to the economic crisis, aiming at internationalizing higher education, including the establishment of English-medium business graduate programs. Chaiprasit's study evaluates the organizational processes facilitating the transition to more internationalized campuses, driven by global pressures and the ASEAN Community 2015 requirements. Sujarittanonta et al. (2016) examined the success of Thai private universities in CLMV countries, indicating a preference for Thai degrees over Western and Chinese degrees due to economic affordability and socio-cultural perceptions. Waters and Day (2022) investigated an international program in Thailand's private university, employing the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and qualitative interviews. The results reflect different attitudes and perceptions from international students towards institutional policies, teaching styles, local culture, and the dynamics of their identity construction.

However, there are notable gaps in the current research landscape. There is a lack of empirical studies examining the direct outcomes of these international programs on students' employability and career progression in the global market. Additionally, the impact of these programs

on the local economy and society, particularly how they balance internationalization with the preservation of Thai cultural identity, remains underexplored. The experiences of international students within Thai higher education institutions, including the challenges and opportunities for cross–cultural learning and integration, also require further investigation. Lastly, an assessment of the effectiveness of current policies and practices in achieving the goals of internationalization could identify areas for improvement and innovation, providing valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and institutions aiming to enhance the quality and impact of international programs in management within Thai higher education.

International students studying management in higher education institutions in Thailand

International students pursuing management studies in Thai higher education institutions encounter a unique blend of opportunities and challenges, shaped by the cultural, educational, and social landscape of Thailand (Buasuwan, 2018; Mangmeechai & Jirapornvaree, 2019; Pongsin et al., 2023; Waters & Day, 2022). A study by Buasuwan (2018) highlights the experiences of Asian graduate students at a Thai university, revealing that Thailand offers a conducive environment for study. It provides a balance between challenging students intellectually and avoiding cultural alienation, thanks to the combination of Asian and Western values in teaching and learning styles. The study also emphasizes the importance of cooperation within multinational student groups and the acquisition of English language skills, along with exposure to student–centered teaching approaches as key aspects of their educational experience.

The internationalization of Thai higher education is a strategic development aimed at enhancing the global competitiveness of its institutions (Waters & Day, 2022). The investigation from Waters and Day (2022) in Thai private universities illustrates the surge in international program offerings and the establishment of international colleges, aiming to attract a diverse student body from around the world. This effort is part of Thailand's broader initiative to blend international educational standards with "Thainess," a unique cultural identity that appeals to international students by offering a distinctive educational experience.

Factors influencing the choice of Thailand as a study destination for ASEAN and international students have been explored by Mangmeechai and Jirapornvaree (2019). Their study identifies the quality of teachers, political and security conditions, and future career prospects as significant determinants. The research suggests that Thailand's position as an education hub in ASEAN is

bolstered by its internationally recognized expertise in fields such as agriculture, public health, and education, making it an attractive destination for students from developing countries seeking quality higher education.

These studies collectively underscore the multifaceted appeal of Thailand as a destination for management studies, highlighting the country's efforts to provide an educational experience that is both globally competitive and culturally enriching.

Motivations for studying in Thailand

The motivations for studying in Thailand are multifaceted, reflecting the diverse aspirations and backgrounds of international students (Mangmeechai & Jirapornvaree, 2019; Snodin et al., 2021). Mangmeechai and Jirapornvaree (2019) identify several key factors influencing the decision to pursue higher education in Thailand. Among these, the quality of teachers emerged as the most significant, affecting the choices of international students. Political stability and security are particularly important to international students, while international students prioritize future career prospects. Thailand's potential as an international education hub is underscored by its internationally recognized expertise in agriculture, public health, and education, which attracts students from developing countries.

Snodin et al. (2021) explored the motivations of international academics migrating to Thailand, shedding light on factors that also resonate with student motivations. These include the appeal of lifestyle, a lower cost of living, and the presence of social networks or Thai partners. International academics appreciate the freedom, good student relationships, and the blend of Asian and Western values in the educational environment. However, they face challenges such as language barriers and visa complications, which are important considerations for students as well. These studies collectively highlight the complex interplay of factors motivating students to choose Thailand as their study destination, ranging from academic quality and career prospects to cultural and economic considerations.

Management students from China

The academic and social landscape for Chinese management students, both within China and abroad, is shaped by a variety of factors, including educational policies, cultural adjustments, and the global economy's demands (Arnold & Zhu, 2011; Cao et al., 2018; Yang & de Wit, 2019; Yong & Xudong, 2015). Yang and de Wit (2019) highlight that over half of China's international students are from Asian countries, with a significant number pursuing non-degree programs in

literature. The Chinese government has implemented measures such as scholarships, English-taught courses, and work permits to attract more degree-seeking international students. However, challenges remain in making China a more appealing destination for these students.

The research by Yong and Xudong (2015) focuses on the management strategies needed to assist Chinese students studying abroad, particularly in the U.S., to better integrate into the local culture and education system. Through questionnaires, they analyzed the difficulties faced by these students in adapting to living and learning environments abroad, suggesting that well-designed management strategies are crucial for their success.

Arnold and Zhu (2011) discussed the expansion of student services in Chinese higher education, reflecting the growing need for non-academic student support such as career advice, mental health counseling, and financial aid advice. This development indicates an emergent student development movement in China, adapting to the increased participation in postsecondary education and changing economic and social conditions.

Furthermore, Cao et al. (2018) examines the values of Chinese university students, aiming to understand the perspectives of future leaders and employees in the global economy. Their study suggests that Chinese business students blend traditional Chinese values with Western cultural and economic influences, shaped by the rapid economic development of China. This blend of values indicates a complex integration of cultural identities among Chinese students, which will influence their roles in the global business environment.

These studies collectively provide insights into the experiences and challenges faced by Chinese management students, both domestically and internationally, highlighting the importance of supportive educational policies and practices that facilitate their academic success and cultural integration.

The literature review highlights the multifaceted nature of international education in Thailand, focusing on the experiences of international students, the strategic internationalization of Thai higher education, and the specific challenges and values of Chinese management students. This body of research underscores Thailand's efforts to position itself as an attractive destination for international students through quality education, cultural integration, and policy initiatives. However, there exists a notable gap in understanding the specific motivations driving Chinese students to pursue management studies in Thailand. Investigating these motivations is crucial for several reasons. It can provide valuable insights into the decision-making processes of Chinese students, enabling Thai

institutions to tailor their offerings more effectively and enhance their competitiveness in the global education market. Furthermore, understanding these motivations can contribute to the broader discourse on international student mobility, cross-cultural learning environments, and the dynamics of educational exchange between China and Thailand. Given the economic and geopolitical significance of China and the strategic importance of fostering strong educational links between China and Thailand, this research could offer important implications for policy, practice, and academic collaboration between the two countries.

Research Methodology

Adopting purposive sampling, this study surveyed students from China studying management in Thailand, including 27 doctoral students, 70 undergraduates, and 32 masters. A simple questionnaire was used to survey these samples and ask them to answer their motivations for studying in Thailand. The research collected more than 122 valid answers. Using the thematic analysis method, the study conducted thematic analysis and grounded theory analysis on 122 responses. Through qualitative research data processing, the study excavated relevant topics and keywords, constructed a coding system, and constructed a theoretical model of Chinese students choosing Thailand as a management study destination. Furthermore, the study constructed a knowledge map to explain this motivation.

Research Results

Themes in Educational Migration Motivations

Theme analysis is a qualitative research method used to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within data (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). It organizes and describes the data set in detail, focusing on identifying underlying ideas, meanings, and concepts to interpret various aspects of the research topic. Table 1 presents a synthesized overview of the reasons influencing Chinese individuals to pursue management education in Thailand, and distills the qualitative insights gathered from a variety of personal testimonies into categorized themes, offering an academic interpretation of the underlying motivations and considerations driving this educational migration trend.

The trend of Chinese students choosing Thailand for their management studies can be understood within the broader context of global educational mobility, characterized by a shift towards

more accessible, flexible, and culturally enriching educational environments. This movement reflects an alignment of educational choices with economic pragmatism, professional aspirations, and personal growth objectives. The thematic analysis indicates a nuanced decision–making process where practical considerations such as cost and convenience are intertwined with aspirations for cultural immersion, professional development, and strategic career positioning.

This trend also underscores the importance of social networks and personal recommendations in shaping educational pathways, reflecting a community–oriented approach to navigating international education opportunities. Furthermore, it highlights a growing recognition of the value of educational experiences that offer not just academic credentials but also cultural competency and insights into dynamic regional markets.

In essence, the motivation to study management in Thailand among Chinese students encapsulates a broader search for educational experiences that are economically rational, professionally enriching, and personally fulfilling, set against the backdrop of an increasingly interconnected and competitive global landscape.

Table 1. Motivations for Chinese Students Choosing Thailand for Management Studies: A Thematic Analysis

Theme	Description
Geographical Proximity and Affordability	Thailand's closeness to China makes it a convenient and cost-effective choice for education and living, emphasizing the importance of financial considerations in the decision-making process.
Cultural and Social Environment	The welcoming, tolerant Thai culture, along with the absence of discrimination and the opportunity to immerse in the local and regional lifestyle, is valued for personal growth and understanding.
Educational Flexibility and Accessibility	The perceived ease of graduation, lack of entrance exams, and no requirement for English proficiency tests make Thailand's education system accessible and appealing, often recommended by personal networks.
Professional Development and Opportunities	Studying in a dynamic business environment is seen as advantageous for future careers, offering insights into emerging markets and innovative business practices in Southeast Asia.
Personal Reasons and Social Networks	Decisions are influenced by personal recommendations, previous positive experiences in Thailand, and the support of social networks, highlighting the role of personal connections in choosing where to study.
Strategic Considerations for Career and Education	The strategic value of studying in Thailand for enhancing qualifications, gaining international exposure, and the flexibility of studying while working, aligns educational choices with broader career ambitions and life goals.

Coding analysis

Open coding results

Open coding is the initial analytical process, during this process, data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences. Researchers label these parts with codes—conceptual tags that help identify patterns and themes (Glaser & Hon, 2016). This initial coding phase helps to conceptualize the data and understand what each part represents, which serves as a foundation for developing categories that will be further refined through axial coding to build a theoretical framework. Open coding is essentially the first step in

interpreting raw data into more meaningful units of information. Table 2 uncovers the open coding results to explain the motivation of Chinese students studying management in Thailand.

Table 2. Open Coding Analysis for Chinese Students' Motivations for Studying Management in Thailand

Identified Phrases/Ideas	Preliminary Categories
Proximity to China	Geographical Convenience
Affordability	Economic Advantage
Ease of graduation	Educational System Advantage
Familiar environment	Cultural Familiarity
Respect for doctoral degrees	Academic Prestige
School recommendations	Institutional Endorsement
Lack of pressure to graduate	Academic Environment
Interest in Thai culture	Cultural Engagement
No need for IELTS/TOEFL	Educational Flexibility
Employer recommendations	Professional Endorsement
Public university benefits	Institutional Advantage
Convenience and low consumption	Economic and Lifestyle Advantage
Ability to study while working	Professional Development Opportunity
National advantages ("Land of Smiles", no racial discrimination)	Social and Cultural Environment
Deception by others	Misinformation and Influence
Curiosity about studying abroad	Personal Growth and Exploration

Axis coding

Axial coding is a part of the grounded theory methodology, which is a systematic approach used in social sciences to construct theories through the methodical gathering and analysis of data (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019). After the initial data has been broken down into discrete parts during open coding, axial coding is used to reassemble those data fragments into a coherent model.

Table 3 explores the diverse motivations of Chinese students for pursuing management studies in Thailand, as delineated through a grounded theory approach. The analysis identifies six axial categories that collectively encapsulate the primary factors influencing students' educational decisions: geographical and economic considerations, educational system advantages, cultural and social engagement, personal and professional development, influences of misinformation, and exploration and curiosity.

Geographical and economic considerations emerge as a foundational aspect, with Thailand's proximity to China, affordability, and the cost-effective lifestyle it offers, making it a pragmatic choice for students. This logistical appeal is complemented by the educational system's advantages in Thailand, which is characterized by its flexibility, absence of stringent language proficiency requirements, and the recognized quality of its public universities. These elements collectively render Thailand's educational landscape as particularly accessible and conducive to international students. The allure of Thailand extends beyond practical considerations to encompass cultural and social engagement. Students are motivated by a desire to immerse themselves in the rich Thai culture and benefit from the inclusive and respectful social environment, enhancing their educational experience with cultural richness and diversity. Concurrently, the pursuit of Personal and Professional Development is a significant motivator. The respect for academic qualifications from Thailand, coupled with the opportunity to balance work and study, supports students' career aspirations and personal growth ambitions.

However, the decision-making process is not without challenges, as indicated by the Influences of Misinformation category, which highlights the need for diligent research to navigate potential misinformation. Lastly, exploration and curiosity reflect the intrinsic motivation of students to embark on an educational journey abroad, driven by a spirit of adventure and the pursuit of new experiences.

In sum, this analysis elucidates a multifaceted framework of motivations guiding Chinese students to study management in Thailand, underscoring the interplay between practical considerations, cultural immersion, professional ambitions, and the pursuit of knowledge in shaping their educational trajectories.

Table 3. Axial coding of Chinese students for pursuing management studies in Thailand.

Axial Category	Subcategories (Codes from Open Coding)	Description
Geographical and Economic Considerations	Geographical Proximity, Economic Affordability, Convenience, Low Consumption	This category encompasses factors related to the physical proximity of Thailand to China, the overall affordability of studying and living in Thailand, and the convenient, low–cost lifestyle it offers, making it a financially and logistically appealing option for education.
Educational System Advantages	Educational System Flexibility, No IELTS/TOEFL Required, Public Education Advantages	Highlights the perceived benefits of Thailand's educational system, including flexibility in graduation requirements, no need for language proficiency tests, and the advantages of studying at public universities recognized by the Ministry of Education.
Cultural and Social Engagement	Cultural Familiarity, Interest in Thai Culture, Societal Respect	Focuses on the motivations related to cultural immersion and social engagement, including the familiarity with and interest in Thai culture, as well as the respectful and welcoming attitude of Thai society towards Chinese students.
Personal and Professional Development	Professional Prestige, Work–Study Balance, Career Development Support	Captures the aspirations for professional advancement and personal growth, including the respect and prestige associated with degrees from Thailand, the ability to balance work and study, and the support from employers for career development through education.
Influences of Misinformation	Misinformation Impact	Addresses the negative influence of misinformation or deceit by others on the decision–making process, highlighting the importance of thorough research and informed choices in the pursuit of education abroad.
Exploration and Curiosity	Exploration Drive	Reflects a general curiosity and desire to experience studying abroad, driven by the opportunities for personal exploration and discovery that studying in Thailand offers.

Selective coding and theoretical framework

Selective coding is the final stage in grounded theory where the researcher identifies a core category that all other categories relate to, integrating and refining them into a cohesive theoretical framework that explains the main phenomenon of the study (Behboodi & Piantanida, 2012). Figure 2 portrays the theoretical framework, the selective coding is the motivation, and around the motivation, the dimensions are detailed presented. Figure 3 continues to show the knowledge map to understand the links of different keyword, and reflects the predictors of motivation to choose Thailand as the destination to study Management.
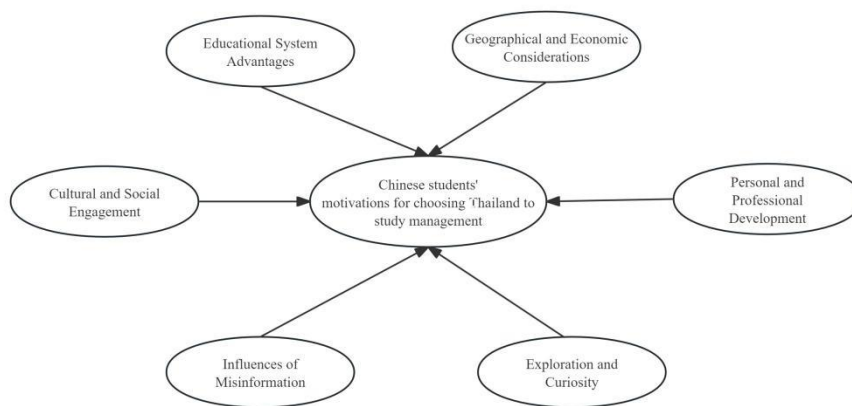

Figure 2. Theoretical framework of Chinese students' motivation for choosing Thailand to study management.

Figure 3. The knowledge map of the Chinese students' motivation for choosing Thailand to study management.

Discussion

This research contributes valuable insights to the existing body of knowledge on international education migration. The convergence of geographical, economic, educational, cultural, social, and personal factors underscores a complex decision–making landscape that extends beyond mere academic considerations. Notably, our study's emphasis on the role of misinformation as a barrier to informed decision–making presents a critical area for further exploration, distinguishing the research from previous studies that may have overlooked this aspect. Additionally, the intrinsic motivation for exploration and curiosity among Chinese students highlights a shift towards valuing personal growth and cross–cultural experiences in educational choices. This aligns with, yet expands upon, suggesting a broader, more nuanced understanding of student mobility (Glass & Cruz, 2022; Luo et al., 2023). Comparatively, the findings resonate with the themes identified in prior research, such as the importance of economic and cultural considerations, while also introducing new dimensions related to misinformation and the pursuit of personal and professional development.

Conclusion

These insights not only contribute to a deeper theoretical understanding of the factors driving educational migration but also have practical implications for policymakers, educators, and students themselves. By addressing the misinformation barrier and fostering environments that support both academic and personal growth, stakeholders can better facilitate the international educational experiences of Chinese students in Thailand. Thai higher education institutions can derive several management implications to enhance their appeal to Chinese students and improve the internationalization of their management programs. Firstly, leveraging Thailand's geographical proximity and economic affordability could be marketed more aggressively to attract Chinese students seeking quality education at a lower cost. Institutions should also highlight the advantages of the Thai educational system, including its less stringent entry requirements and the global recognition of its degrees, in their promotional materials. Furthermore, creating and promoting programs that facilitate cultural and social engagement can help build a more inclusive and welcoming environment for international students. Thai universities could develop partnerships with Chinese institutions to provide clear and reliable information, combating the misinformation that may deter potential students. Additionally, focusing on personal and professional development

opportunities, such as internships and career services tailored to international students, can make Thai institutions more attractive. Finally, embracing the themes of exploration and curiosity in their curricula and extracurricular activities could appeal to students' desires for personal growth and learning beyond traditional academic boundaries. Implementing these strategies could significantly enhance the attractiveness of Thai higher education institutions to Chinese students, contributing to the internationalization goals of these institutions.

Suggestion

Future research should continue to explore these dynamics, particularly in the context of evolving global educational trends and the increasing importance of cross–cultural competencies in professional development.

Knowledge from research

The findings of this study enhance our understanding of why Chinese students pursue management education in Thailand. Key motivations include geographical proximity, affordability, flexible and accessible educational systems, and a welcoming cultural environment. Professional development opportunities and personal growth are also significant factors. The study highlights the impact of misinformation on decision–making and the role of social networks and personal recommendations. These insights provide a comprehensive view of the complex factors driving educational migration, contributing to the broader discourse on global educational mobility.

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