

The Status of Studying Abroad: A Survey of Undergraduate Students in Shanghai University of Engineering Science

ZHANG Bingtian^{[a],*}

^[a]School of Fundamental Studies, Shanghai University of Engineering Science, Shanghai, China.

*Corresponding author.

Supported by the *Cross-Cultural Communications* Course Construction Project of Shanghai University of Engineering Science (k201421001).

Received 18 March 2014; accepted 22 July 2014
Published online 31 August 2014

Abstract

Great importance has been attached to the internationalization of its education in Shanghai University of Engineering Science. One of the ways of internationalizing education is to send its undergraduate students to study abroad. So as to keep track of the status of the undergraduates who hope to go abroad for further study, a survey consisting of 8 questions concerning studying overseas has been conducted among 1,088 junior and senior students. And the reasons have been analyzed and solutions provided.

Key words: Shanghai university of engineering science; Study abroad; Internationalization of education

Zhang, B. T. (2014). The Status of Studying Abroad: A Survey of Undergraduate Students in Shanghai University of Engineering Science. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 10(5), 60-64. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/5267>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/5267>

INTRODUCTION

In the context of economic globalization, cultural diversity and social networking, the international competition in the field of higher education is intensifying, which are demonstrated in such aspects as the philosophy of education, sources of teachers and students, curriculum design, academic exchanges and cooperation, education management, etc.. (Yan & Wan,

2014) Shanghai University of Engineering Science (hereinafter referred to as SUES) is a general full-time university located in Shanghai, China majoring in engineering science and featuring a harmonious development and interdisciplinary communication of various branches of learning. SUES owns 52 special fields of study for undergraduate students with a total number of 12,000 on-campus students (SUES Portal, 2014, July). Like other Chinese universities, SUES attaches great importance to the internationalization of education. At present, SUES carries out its international exchanges chiefly in the following ways: First, SUES regularly enrolls students from abroad; second, it has attracted a number of experts and specialists of different academic backgrounds to teach or do lectures; third, it has established cooperative education programs with a few American, French, Australian, Swedish, Korean and Japanese universities; finally, SUES regularly sends its students to attend summer camps and other short-term training during summer or winter vacations. However, as for students who wish to study abroad when graduating from the university, there is still quite a lot SUES can do to help its students achieve their potentials and dreams. In view of this, an investigation of the status of undergraduate students of SUES has been conducted with the aid of questionnaires so as to analyze the difficulties the students planning to study abroad are confronted with and to seek workable solutions to the challenges.

1. METHODOLOGY

1.1 Sampling and Data Collection

The sample included 1,088 junior and senior students who are preparing for advanced studies or graduation. Respondents consisted of 625 males (57%) and 463 females (43%). Data were collected through an

online survey on **Sojump**¹, a popular Chinese online questionnaire portal, from April 1 to June 30, 2014. All the respondents have participated in the survey voluntarily.

1.2 Measurements

The questionnaire was composed of 15 questions concerning their personal information and preparation for studying abroad. The latter included 8 single-choice questions with 2 to 7 possible choices, namely the purpose of studying abroad, the premier destination for overseas study, the ideal professions for further learning, the primary factor in choosing a university, the ongoing preparation for studying abroad, the way to go abroad, the way of accessing information about studying overseas, the main difficulty in making preparations for studying abroad.

1.3 Data Analysis

Through the online survey portal, data have been calculated automatically and presented in the form of bar charts or pie charts, which accurately reflected the status and challenges the undergraduates were facing.

1.3.1 What Is Your Purpose of Studying Abroad?

As is indicated by the Figure 1, nearly half (46.89%) of the 1,088 students believed that overseas universities offer better education than their Chinese counterparts. They were convinced of learning more knowledge by furthering their study abroad. 30.62% of them chose to go abroad for the purpose of broadening their horizon. In addition, a small proportion of them (10.53%) were thinking of working abroad or even emigrating in the future.

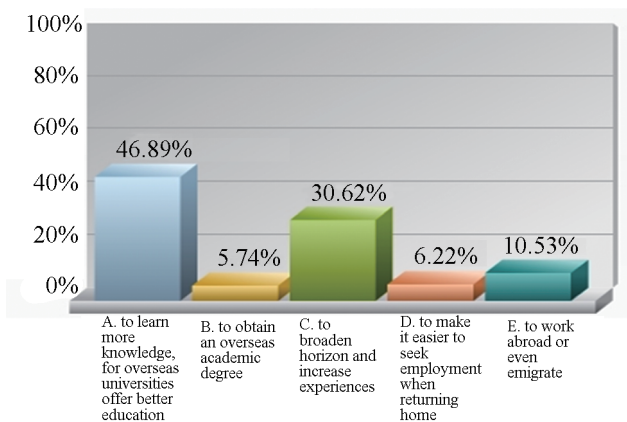


Figure 1
Purpose of Studying Abroad

1.3.2 Where Is Your Premier Destination for Overseas Study?

The Figure 2 clearly shows that 54% of the 1088 students thought their country of choice for studying abroad

was the U.S.A. while other English-speaking countries including Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand were also among the top five ideal destinations for these Chinese students. Japan (7.5%) was the only non-English country they would like to study in.

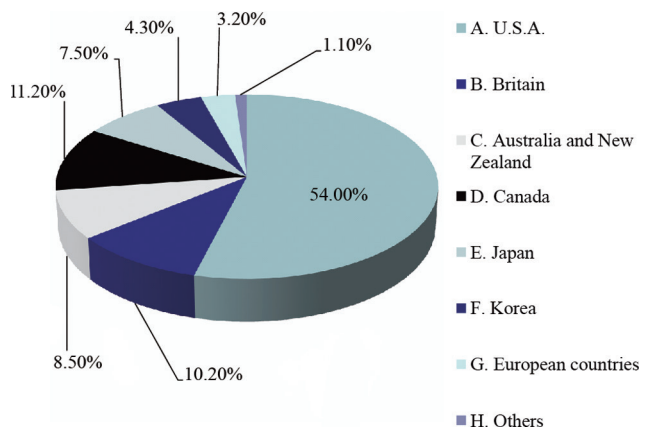


Figure 2
Premier Destination for Overseas Study

1.3.3 Which Is Your Ideal Profession for Further Learning?

With regard to their ideal professions to pursue abroad, 33.97% of the students have selected science and engineering courses while 35.89% have chosen art-related subjects. Another 23.92% have been attracted by business studies programs.

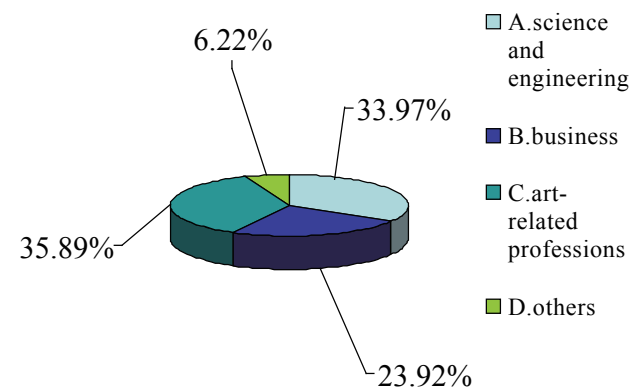


Figure 3
Ideal Profession for Further Learning

1.3.4 What Is the Primary Factor in Choosing a University?

As is demonstrated by the Figure 4, the majors they chose to study ranked top among the various factors in choosing a university. Besides, the reputation and ranking of the university (24.88%) as well as the charm of the country or city they are leaving for (16.75%) also hold their attention.

¹A Questionnaire of Taking part in the Entrance Exams for Postgraduate Schools or Studying Abroad for SUES Undergraduate Students (p.1). (April 1 to June 30). *Viewstat*. [Online]. Retrieved from <http://www.sojump.com/jq/3561301.aspx>

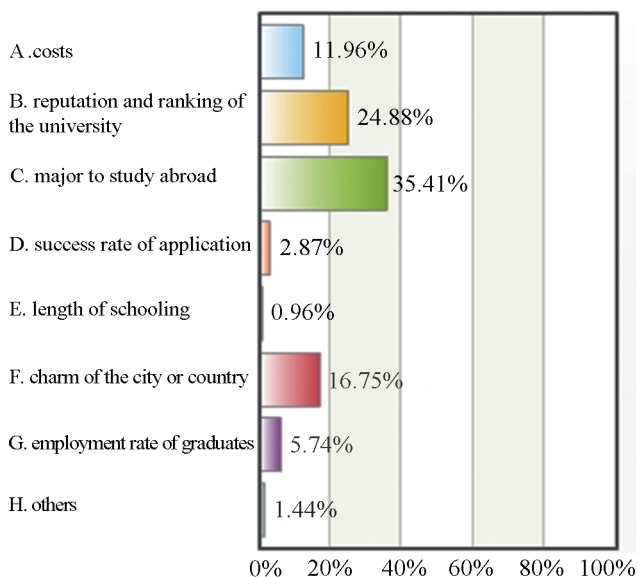


Figure 4
Primary Factor in Choosing a University

1.3.5 Is There Any Ongoing Preparation for Studying Abroad?

The Figure 5 indicates that 68.9% of the students have not done any preparations for pursuing overseas study, ignorant of the procedures and the due requirements whatsoever.

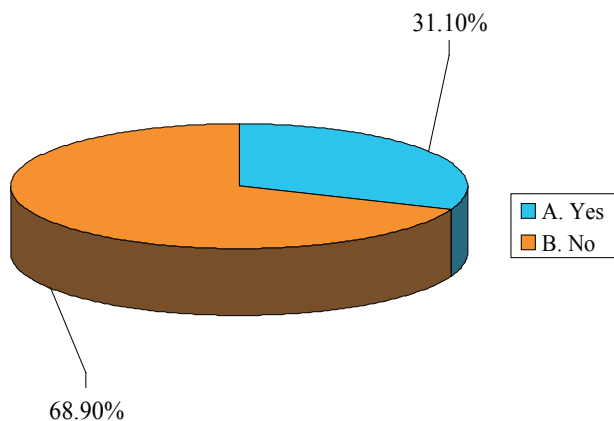


Figure 5
Ongoing Preparation for Studying Abroad

1.3.6 What Is Your Way of Going Abroad?

As the Figure 6 presents, 34.93% of the students would like to apply to foreign universities with their own efforts while 28.23% preferred to turn to education agencies for help. Fewer students were inclined to have recourse to Sino-foreign cooperative programs (23.92%) and Sino-foreign cooperatively-running schools (12.92%).

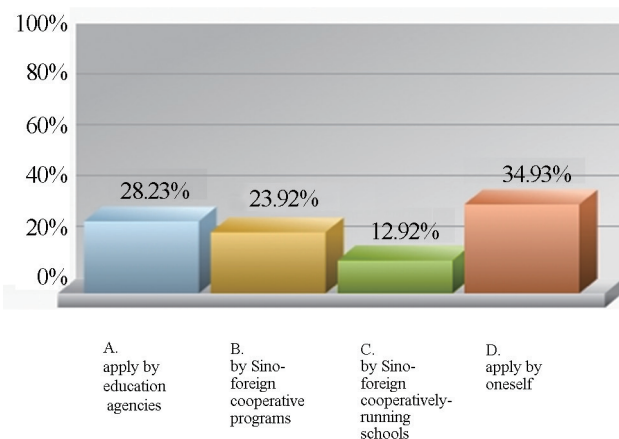


Figure 6
Way of Going Abroad

1.3.7 What Is Your Way of Accessing Information About Studying Overseas?

Judging from the Figure 7, friends and classmates (37.32%) and certain websites and forums (25.36%) were more important information providers than other agencies as regards the ways of accessing information about studying abroad.

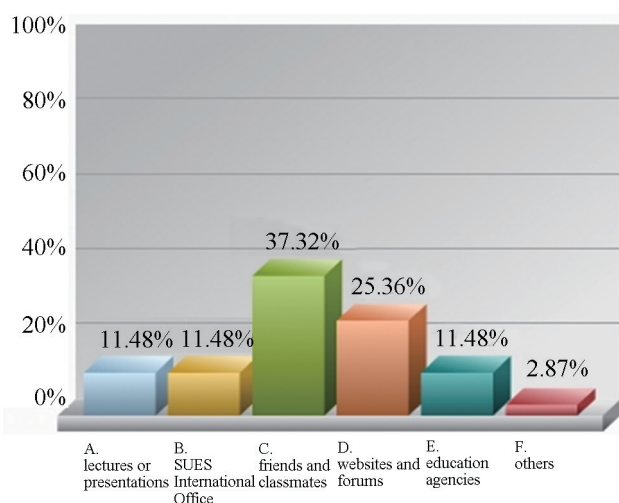


Figure 7
Way of Accessing Information About Studying Overseas

1.3.8 What Is the Main Difficulty in Making Preparations for Studying Abroad?

As the Figure 8 indicates, English exams such as IELTS and TOEFL (35.89%) for undergraduates and GRE and GMAT (16.27%) for postgraduates, outweighing other looming difficulties, were the major obstacles in the students' preparatory period before going overseas.

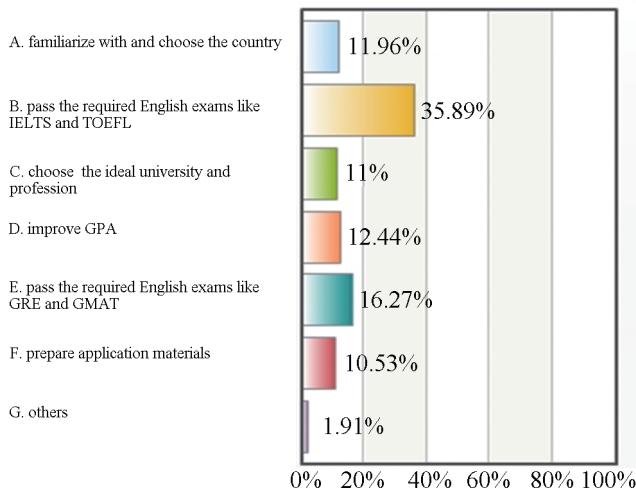


Figure 8
Main Difficulty in Making Preparations for Studying Abroad

2. INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

On the basis of the data analysis in 2.3, four feasible measures should be taken to create more opportunities and more pleasant atmosphere of studying abroad for SUES undergraduate students, which is conducive to the internationalization of education in SUES on the one hand and the future personal development of the students going abroad on the other.

2.1 Strengthen the Management and Publicity of Studying Abroad

Considering the fact that the majority of SUES students chose to study in the U.S.A. and other English-speaking countries if they go abroad, the publicity of other destinations for overseas study should be strengthened by the school administration. As well known, many European countries offer high-quality higher education with English as the medium. In addition, due to the heating economic ties between China and its Asian neighbors, Japan and Korea are also ideal destinations for overseas study.

SUES students assumed that foreign universities could provide better education according to the survey. However, the statement is not completely true. There is no doubt that foreign universities enjoy a high reputation in China owing to their achievements and innovations. However, some overseas institutes of higher learning, not up to par with other world-renowned universities, are merely making profits by enrolling more Chinese students. Therefore, the school administration should take the responsibility to help students distinguish the qualified universities from the questionable ones.

As the functional division of SUES in charge of all international exchanges, the SUES International Office is supposed to step up its publicity of the current cooperative education programs that were barely known to students on campus in accordance with the survey. The SUES

International Office convenes meetings of international exchanges at regular intervals, which has created a golden opportunity for promoting its programs. What's more, the SUES International Office should as well invite some reputable overseas study agencies or intermediaries to do lectures to instruct our students with more professional knowledge. 1

2.2 Promote the Quality Education for All-Around Development

Quality education, a hot spot of the reform of higher education in the world aiming at cultivating all-around talents, is an important reflection on and exploration of the teaching reform in China in the 21st century (Zhao et al., 2014). As a guiding ideology, quality education has become the inevitable choice of China's higher education.

By implementing quality education, Chinese universities including SUES should aim at training students with both a wealth of cultural knowledge and comprehensive capabilities. Our graduates should have not only lofty ideals, but also a strong sense of professionalism, responsibility and mission, with noble morals and high humane cultivation. Only with such qualities and abilities can SUES graduates keep up with the rapid development of today's society.

However, as the survey displays, SUES undergraduates were to a very large extent employment-oriented rather than quality-oriented when choosing their ideal overseas professions for further learning or choosing a university to attend. Their choices can be partially attributed to the high employment pressure of young graduates in China while historical and traditional factors should not be neglected. Before the reform and opening-up policy was implemented in 1978, China's national economy was centralized due to its socialist identity. All economic activities were monopolized by the governments of different levels. Consequently, China's universities became factories that manufactured graduates with extremely specialized skills rather than all-around talents. Obviously, this mode of education has been outdated in the 21st century. As a result, before our students going abroad, a new round of educational reform featuring quality education should be carried out in SUES, thus to develop students' curiosity and thirst for knowledge, to help students' self-learning and independent thinking, to protect the students' spirit of exploration and creativity, and to create an atmosphere for the full development of the students' talents and potentials.

2.3 Offer More Courses in Cross-Cultural Communications, History and Cultures

In the context of globalization, the cross-cultural communicative competence has become an essential quality for modern talents. To develop students' cross-cultural communicative competence is one of the main goals of contemporary higher education. The

conventional teaching model of China's foreign language education centers on imparting knowledge of language and practicing language skills. Long-term ignorance of teaching and learning foreign cultures has seriously affected the cultivation of students' intercultural communicative competence. Many graduates who just go abroad can only communicate in simple foreign language, unable to engage in in-depth cross-cultural communications.

As we can see from the survey, a number of students are planning to study abroad in hopes of broadening their horizons and even working in or immigrating to the country in the future. To survive in a foreign country, the knowledge of its culture and history and the good command of cross-cultural communication skills become the prerequisites.

The existing curriculum needs to be reformed, offering cross-cultural communication courses in addition to the existing courses on foreign languages. Foreign language skills courses, courses of foreign cultures and intercultural communication courses should be given consecutively to enhance students' cross-cultural communication skills and then enable them to become qualified "citizens of the world."

For most students, the biggest obstacle in cultivating intercultural communication competence is the lack of cross-cultural communication environment around campus. For this obstacle, we can take advantage of the online multimedia resources. Multimedia allows our students to experience different cultures, values and traditions in different historical periods, opening a window to understanding a foreign culture, customs, geography, etc..

2.4 Offer More Courses in Various Kinds of English Exams

Traditionally, the most popular assessment instrument for college students in China has always been exams. Consequently, the Chinese way of education has long since been criticized for being too exam-oriented or test-driven. However, the first and foremost condition for students to study abroad is passing the various required English exams such as IELTS, TOEFL, GRE, GMAT, which was also the main difficult SUES undergraduates were faced with in preparing for overseas study, as reflected by the analysis of the survey. Although it is widely acknowledged that the majority of Chinese college students are weaker at English listening and speaking abilities, passing English exams is undoubtedly the first step on the road to success.

For this reason, various training courses on English exams, in the form of electives for example, should be

offered to students who are making due preparations for pursuing study overseas. It should be pointed out that besides introducing the essential test-taking skills training courses should also focus on teaching presentation skills, professional vocabulary, academic writing, and other applicable skills that help students survive their adventures abroad.

CONCLUSION

With the acceleration of globalization, China's ties with other countries in the world are becoming closer. An exceptionally clear example is the increasing number of students to study abroad. On the one hand, China's central government encourages and even sponsors outstanding college and university students to study abroad, as stated in *The 12th Five-Year Plan on National Education Development* by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China released in June, 2012 that the central government will "implement the funding scheme for students to study abroad and by 2015, the number of students sent abroad by the state will reach up to 25,000" (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2012, June). On the other hand, Chinese students like SUES students are willing to study abroad in order to have access to the most advanced professional knowledge, broaden their horizon, experience different cultures and develop independent personality, which will lay a solid foundation for their future success. Therefore, Chinese colleges and universities including SUES should face up to their responsibilities and take due measures to create favorable conditions to facilitate its students study abroad, which is also vital to the increasing two-way exchanges between China and the world.

REFERENCES

- Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2012, June). *The 12th Five-Year Plan on National Education Development* (p.1). [Online]. Retrieved from http://www.moe.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/s6855/201207/xxgk_139702.html
- Sues, P. (2014, July). *About SUES* (p.2). [Online]. Retrieved from <http://dwgk.sues.edu.cn/english/a2.htm>
- Yan, J. M., & Wan, B. (2014). Internationalization development strategy of local colleges and universities-based on the characteristics of the higher education internationalization of Hong Kong. *Journal of Jiangnan University (Social Science Edition)*, 31(2), 93-96.
- Zhao, Y., et al. (2014). Some thoughts on quality education. *Continuing Education*, 1, 10-12.