



International Student Recruitment Strategies in Finland and China: An Analysis of Website Content

Jokila, Suvi¹

Doctoral Candidate, University of Turku

Copyright the author

Peer-reviewed article; received 26 June 2019; accepted 28 September 2019

Abstract

The recruitment of international students has become a global phenomenon. Prospective candidates planning to study abroad rely on different sources of information in their decision-making processes, provided by different national, institutional and private actors. Thus, more analysis of the mediators facilitating this encounter of recruiters and students is needed. This study analyses how study choices in Finland and China are constructed by analysing the embeddedness of national recruitment strategies in websites, the construction of study choices as capitals and the trust-building devices (dispositifs) employed in the websites. Data consist of textual material from four websites representing educational offerings in Finland and China, targeted for international students searching for information in their study-abroad decision-making. This study puts forward three arguments. First, the analysed websites reflect the national strategies on the recruitment of international students; however, the approaches the websites use vary greatly. Second, websites construct expectations that build on a holistic study-abroad experience. Third, non-governmental websites employ commercially oriented dispositifs to distinguish or affirm choices.

Keywords: study abroad, international student, recruitment, choice, website

Introduction

The recruitment of international students increasingly employs digital mediators, such as websites. Before the emergence of the Internet, information about educational opportunities abroad was highly socially, spatially and temporally embedded within the contexts of international education fairs, brochures, and personal contacts. Technological development has made information more accessible, but the information asymmetry in, between and among students and other actors remain. One of the channels for sharing information about international education to potential applicants is websites. Countries attempting to recruit more international students provide centralised information about

¹Corresponding author: suvi.jokila@utu.fi

study opportunities in their higher education systems, for instance, through national websites such as Study in Finland and social media sites. Students aiming to study abroad browse these different sources for information, shaping the students' expectations for their study-abroad experience.

For students, the global education market structure creates segregated choice spaces in which the degrees offered by the providers do not hold equal value (Marginson, 2006); instead, value is determined by a set of factors constructing individual realities facilitated by wider contexts including for instance global position of host countries and institutions. The value of education or a degree is relational and materialises after graduation. The expectations of the study-abroad programme vary, from employment prospects and enhancement of intercultural communication to tourism (Kenway & Fahey, 2007; Kim, 2016).

This study aims to unpack the construction of choice at the websites as a form of digital mediators employed in international student recruitment. More specifically, the focus is on how international student recruitment strategies are embedded in Finnish and Chinese websites, what expectations these websites generate and what dispositifs are employed in the websites to support study choices and appeal to prospective students. Within the global student market, these countries are not the top destinations. However, China attracts numerous students from Asia (Ma & Zhao, 2018), while Finland proportionally leads the provision of international degree programmes in Europe (Wächter & Maiworm, 2014).

This study contributes to the body of research on international student recruitment (Bolsmann & Miller, 2008; Cantwell, 2015; Haugen, 2013; Jokila, Kallio & Mikkilä-Erdman, 2019; Mosneaga & Agergaard, 2012; Stein & Andreotti, 2016; Urbanovič, Wilkins & Huisman, 2016; Ziguras & Law, 2006; Ziguras & McBurnie, 2015) and students' study-abroad decision-making (e.g. Maringe & Carter, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) by focusing on one particular mediator: websites that facilitate encounters between students and recruiters or host countries. An emerging body of research examines online content in higher education, particularly on websites in (international) higher education (Karram, 2014; Lažetić, 2019; Metcalfe, 2012; Vuori, 2015; Wilkins, 2012), and other mediators in the transition to higher education (Robinson-Pant & Magyar, 2018; van Zanten & Legavre, 2014). However, few studies of websites have focused on the embeddedness of national rationalisations regarding student recruitment and the construction of students' expectations by the websites. In this paper, first, the analytical approach is introduced, followed by a short introduction to the case countries and research methods and finally, the findings and conclusions.

Analytical Approach: Embedded Recruitment Rationales and Balanced Expectations of Websites

This study employs and operates with three concepts to understand and conceptualise the textual construction of websites: embeddedness (Ozga & Jones, 2006) of policy

objectives in the websites, capitals (Bourdieu, 1993) constructing expectations in new localities and dispositifs guiding decision-making (Cochoy, 2007), all introduced here.

As a starting point, this study builds on an argument that the information provided for prospective students constructs an idea of education, which is mediated by the policy-maker's idea of education. According to Williams (2013) and Lažetić (2019), the ways in which higher education is portrayed to prospective students reflect their ideas of education:

Official sources of advice provide a useful indicator of policymakers' views on the purpose of higher education. Such sources encapsulate the message about university that one generation's political elite seeks to disseminate to youngsters in society. As such, the advice offered to young people indicates the nature of the HE sector they are about to encounter and, in so doing, manages their expectations and begins the process of constructing students as consumers (Williams, 2013, p. 69).

Thus, this study analyses the embeddedness of national policy objectives in international student recruitment within the material offered to international students, consequently employing the concept of embeddedness by Ozga and Jones (2006) to illustrate how policies take shape in new local contexts.

With empirical data drawn from websites, such as job recruitment processes (see Cochoy & Dubuisson-Quellier, 2013), these websites are expected to reflect not only the rationalisations for international student recruitment but also applicants' expectations. This encounter between hosts and applicants is considered to be far from unintentional and unstructured and thus can be expected to have marketing elements attached. According to research by Hemsley-Brown (2012), international education applicants and websites operate within the same conceptual framework, highlighting the use of these websites to construct ideas of education. As a result, despite the actual rationalisation for the recruitment being beyond commercially oriented, websites nevertheless construct a choice-maker, in previous literature defined as a consumer (see Williams, 2013); hence, having implications to the subjectivity of the student. This orientation can result in a kind of shopping attitude when the applicants are selecting potential destinations and institutions, attributing instrumental value to education and emphasising the needs both to provide and to receive satisfactory study-abroad experiences (Williams, 2013), which in Holbrook & Hirschman's (1982) terms can be referred as an 'experiential aspect of consumption' (p. 132). This consumerism attached to higher education is related to the broader transformation of the governing structures of higher education institutions (Lažetić, 2019; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005).

Websites organise social relationships between education providers and prospective applicants; the aim of the website is to influence the latter's purchase intention (Cubillo, Sánchez & Cerviño, 2006). During the pre-purchase period (Simões & Soares, 2010), websites have the potential to act as trust-building devices (Karpik, 2010; van Zanten & Legavre, 2014), forming a socio-technical agencement (Cochoy, Trompette & Araujo, 2016) that has agency of its own (Latour, 2007). In websites, abstract educational offerings are textualised and visualised in formats meaningful to students, through what

Cochoy (2004) describes as ‘packaging’. International education is the core service provided to students, akin to what Karpik (2010, p. 10) described as ‘goods and services that are *structured, uncertain and incommensurable*’, in other words, difficult to define and compare. The overall experience and value of study-abroad experiences for students cannot be known. Thus, marketing materials targeted at students imagine ideas of what students can achieve and expect. This process of imagination is what Appadurai (2008) refers to as ‘an organised field of social practices’ (p. 50).

Within the choice space where the student is embodied, students create expectations about their studies abroad, such as intercultural competence, language skills and employability (Kim, 2016), guided by what Rizvi and Lingard (2010) call ‘the social imaginary’ of studying abroad. This study builds on an argument that websites construct students’ expectations for their possible future studies and even beyond, which are analysed here as capitals. As education, often in the format of a degree, poses relative value to its holder due to a variety of factors, including the reputation of the institution, the relational concept of capital is applicable. The study-abroad experience may constitute cultural, social, educational/academic and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1993; Courtois, 2018; Kim, 2016; Lomer et al., 2016). Getting to know new cultures and languages, even when connected with touristic elements (Kenway & Fahey, 2007), are identified objectives for some students and are highlighted by the actors. Social capital is closely linked to cultural capital embodied in social events and networking (Lomer et al. 2016). The educational (Lomer, Papatsiba & Naidoo, 2016) or academic capital (Courtois, 2018) obtained from a degree received abroad does not hold equal value across institutions and countries (Marginson, 2006). Economic capital may take different forms. Studying abroad is often attached to employment opportunities in the future (Kim, 2016). Studying abroad can be seen as stratifying student groups by providing social and cultural capital to privileged students with mobility (Kenway & Fahey, 2007).

Websites developed for information dissemination and the recruitment of international students aim for the captation of prospective students. According to Cochoy (2007), captation encompasses two dimensions, dispositifs, and dispositions, that operate the concept. The connection of these concepts is illuminated in the following citation: ‘*as soon as one is interested in actions that aim to seduce/displace (capter) a public, one notices that these actions usually find support in ad hoc dispositifs, the main characteristic of which is to bring into play the dispositions that one connects (which one assumes or which one attributes) to the targeted public*’ (italics in the original, p. 207). In other words, dispositifs (or technique), such as social networks, appellations, and ranking lists, refer to methods employed to capture attention by engaging with dispositions, such as curiosity and loyalty, to further the aim. These websites, while packaging choice, operate with information asymmetry (Cochoy et al., 2016), which is profoundly about managing expectations. Thus, dispositifs aim to reduce the applicant’s cognitive deficits to affirm the study choice and construct a distinction among the other expected choices. Through Cochoy’s (2007) typology on dispositifs, it can be concluded

that the websites themselves and the kind of micro-dispositifs employed on the websites are immobile and visible dispositifs. In other words, the use of dispositifs can be identified at the website and, in a given time frame, the content is fixed.

International Higher Education Student Recruitment Strategies in Finland and China

As suggested earlier, the recruitment of international students has become a global phenomenon, particularly in countries with developed higher education systems. Hence, as Carney (2009) has noted, '[e]ducational phenomena in one country case must thus be understood in *ongoing* relation to other such cases' (p. 63, emphasis in the original). Despite apparent differences, the two selected country cases, Finland and China, have had a shared aim to expand international student recruitment and establish international English-medium degree programmes since the turn of the 21st century (Jokila *under review*; Kuroda, 2014; Ma & Zhao, 2018). Although these countries have highly different cultures, histories, political systems and sizes, they are both positioned peripherally on the global student market and share the desire to increase global visibility of their education systems (MEC, 2017; MoEC, 2012). In both countries, universities are responsible for recruiting international students, while the central government sets policies and provides information (Jokila *under review*; Ma & Zhao, 2018).

Since the late 1980s, Finland has supported the internationalisation of higher education, along with societal opening and overall development of the higher education system (MoEF, 2001). The early twenty-first century saw greater attention to international student recruitment, leading to increases in student and programme numbers (MoEF, 2009; Wächter & Maiworm, 2014) and strategic student recruitment efforts (Jokila, Kallo & Mikkilä-Erdman, 2019). The Ministry of Education and Culture has set a target to increase the number of international higher education students to 60,000 by 2025 (MEC, 2013). The government's main rationalisations for international student recruitment align with those of many other European countries: skilled immigration, commercial interests and internationalisation at home (Jokila et al., 2019; MEC, 2017).

Since the 1980s, the Chinese government has emphasised international student recruitment with a focus on Chinese language and culture (Huang, 2003). Since China joined the World Trade Organisation in 2001, the number of international students has increased, leading to selected Chinese universities initiating English-medium programmes (Jokila, 2015; Ma & Zhao, 2018). In 2010, the Ministry of Education issued *National Outline for Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020)* (MoEC, 2010) and later detailed implementation of the plan to increase international exchanges in the *Plan for Study in China* (MoEC, 2012). This plan sets the aim for China to become the largest recruiter of international students in Asia and to have 500,000 international students in higher education, elementary and secondary institutions by 2020 (MoEC, 2012); by 2017, China had almost 490,000 international students (MoEC, 2018). This plan also lays out the objective to develop China's higher education

system, education quality and soft power initiatives ‘to generate a large number of graduates who both understand China and contribute to connecting China to the rest of the world’ (MoEC, 2012). This state-driven recruitment policy is embedded in soft power policy through extensive scholarship programmes, with most government funding targeted at degree studies (Huang, 2007; MoEC, 2012, 2018; Pan, 2013; Wu, 2019). One effort under these soft power policies is China’s Belt and Road Initiative intended to strengthen collaboration in education among selected areas and countries within the maritime and silk road (Belt and Road Portal, 2019). More than 60% of international students in China are from countries involved in this initiative (MoEC, 2018). In addition to official policy rationalisations, MoEC (2018) statistics show that China benefits from international students (at least by covering their own costs), of whom almost 90% are self-funded.

Methodological Approach

This study analyses websites as devices constructed for international student recruitment. More specifically, the research questions are as follows: 1) How are international student recruitment strategies embedded in websites in Finland and China?; 2) What expectations do websites potentially construct for international students?; and 3) What dispositifs are employed on websites?

Four websites were selected for the analysis: two Finnish websites, Study in Finland and Finland University; and two Chinese websites, Study in China and China’s University and College Admission System (CUCAS). Selected based on their roles as national website or website with national link (Study in Finland and Study in China) and as non-government or private websites (CUCAS, Finland University), they disseminate information and promote educational opportunities in their given localities. The latter two websites are not official national sites but are assumed to reflect national policy, as they represent universities that rely, for instance, on government funding.

The national website Study in Finland (<http://www.studyinfinland.fi/>) is operated by the Finnish National Agency for Education, which represents all Finnish higher education institutions (14 universities and 24 applied sciences universities). The Finland University website (<https://www.finlanduniversity.com/>) is run by a private, profit-oriented limited-liability company, established in 2014 through the institutional cooperation of four Finnish comprehensive universities. Study in China (www.campuschina.org) was chosen for its links to the Ministry of Education’s website and the China Scholarship Council, demonstrating its official status. CUCAS (www.cucas.edu.cn) is operated by the non-profit organisation China Education Association for International Exchange and the information technology company Chiwest Ltd. Unlike the three other websites, CUCAS provides admission services.

Data were collected from the websites in autumn 2018 and spring 2019. These websites are updated frequently, so print screenshots were taken to retain images of the websites for analysis. As the websites are multi-layered, carefulness in retaining all the

selected material guided the saving of the data. The focus of the analysis was in the main body of the websites, which could be defined as relatively fixed in content. The social media displays and news sections were excluded from the analysis as well as links to other websites such as to specific institutions. The data included descriptive texts of varying length, comparative tables and practical information on admission and entrance to the country. The print screenshot data were analysed as presentations of the websites during the data collection and thereafter was handled like other textual materials. The content analysis of the websites focused on textual data and excluded any data on user logs and similar information. All the data were publicly accessible with no log-in requirements.

The document data analysis involved qualitative inductive and deductive content analysis (Bowen, 2009; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). First, deductive content analysis on the text materials was conducted, focusing on three separate themes reflecting the research questions. First, the embeddedness of recruitment strategies in the websites was analysed based on the two countries' most recent policy documents, *Better Together for a Better World. Policies to Promote Internationalisation in Finnish HE and Research 2017–2025* (MEC, 2017) and *Plan for Study in China* (MoEC, 2012). The website materials were analysed to identify the appearance of these rationalities in the data. Second, drawing on the Bourdeusian notion of capital, the analysis continued to identify four predefined types of capital: educational, cultural, economic and social. Through the analysis, it became evident that these types of capital did not detract from each other, but the analysis was aimed at identifying the dimensions of each. Finally, the dispositifs used on the websites to construct choice were detected through inductive content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

Recruitment Strategies Embedded in the Websites

This section presents the findings on the embeddedness of the rationales within the websites in Finland and China. The analysis shows how international student recruitment strategies are embedded in national websites and that these strategies differ among and within countries.

Finland

Finland outlines a future labour rationale for its recruitment policy (MEC, 2017): 'foreign students and experts are involved in regions' industry and commerce' (translations by the author). This rationale is evident in how the analysed Finnish websites discuss working while studying and after graduation. For example, Study in Finland provides practical advice for job searching: '[n]on-EU students can also apply for an extended residence permit for up to a year after graduation. This is intended to help graduates in their search for work' (Study in Finland). Finland University gives links to other websites offering information on working in Finland and seems to highlight opportunities abroad: '[a]

master's degree from one of Finland University's multidisciplinary member universities opens up a large variety of international career opportunities' (Finland University).

The Finnish websites share practical guidelines on obtaining residence permits, which act as a gatekeeper in the transition to employment. Given the association with skilled immigration and the interests of the institutions, Finnish policymakers have seen international degree programmes as a recruitment channel for prospective Ph.D. students (MEC, 2017). For instance, the Finnish institution-based website states: '[i]f you are a graduate with a drive for research, or simply want to deepen your expertise, then starting a Ph.D. programme might be exactly what you're looking for' (Finland University).

The commercial rationale of the Finnish internationalisation strategy appears in the introduction of fees and discursively creating a market, for instance through service orientation for international students. The national Finnish website stresses the commercial interest in international education less, while the private Finnish website discusses tuition fee structures and merit-based scholarships in detail. This difference could be explained by the institutional interest in tuition fees.

The analysed Finnish websites reference institutional scholarships instead of national scholarships, with the latter often linked to soft power policies. The private website discusses funding as an element in students' decision-making. Finland University states that scholarships are awarded based on students' merits, addressing the competitive logic instead of aid: 'Finland University's member universities offer various scholarships to reward the most talented students for their achievements' (Finland University). Within the Finnish welfare state frame, education is free of charge to all but the higher education students outside EU and EEA countries.

In addition to tuition fees, the Finnish national website cites the country's high cost of living as a factor in decision-making. The private website is more marketing oriented: '[l]iving and studying in Finland doesn't need to be expensive. International students can enjoy many of the benefits of the Finnish welfare state model, including the substantial discounts of food, travel and more that come with student union membership' (Finland University). The private website constructs the student consumer with references to 'you', which can be seen as a commercial orientation: '[w]e offer over 60 [m]aster's [d]egree programmes, ranging from economics to natural sciences. Not sure where to start? Here are ten study areas you can choose your degree from' (Finland University).

In addition to constructing choices for students, the Finnish private website shapes expectations for parents, called co-consumers of international education by Williams (2013). The 'For Parents' section emphasises care for the students: '[s]afe, clean and with a world-renewed education system, Finland is a place where your child can think and learn in peace' (Finland University). Such references to children and the overall construction of the parent-consumer highlight students' position as reliant on parents and focuses on care for students in different areas of life: academic and practical issues, social relationships and future prospects. The expected outputs for internationalisation at home

for Finnish students is evident in connecting the international student body to student unions and other social organisations on the websites.

China

The soft power rationale, as noted, is a central focus of China's international education policy: 'to generate a large number of graduates who both understand China and contribute to connecting China to the rest of the world' (MoEC, 2012). Here, soft power is understood as evident in the means and language used to support this initiative. The website with national link, Study in China, expresses this rationale in its references to the narrative of great Chinese history and culture and to friendly ties with other nations to support the construction of studying in China. Study in China constructs choice through descriptive language choice that introduces the societal and educational contexts to prospective students: '[i]nternational exchanges and cooperation promote China's education to a deeper and further level. Not only does it play an important role in inheriting and developing traditional Chinese culture, but [it] also makes tremendous contributions to the development of world civilisation' (Study in China).

Reflecting the analysed countries' different approaches to international education, the websites' construction of language is revealing. At the policy level, China highlights the strong position of the Chinese language: 'higher education institutions build their own brand-name programmes delivered in Chinese and offer a certain number of degree programmes in English' (MoEC, 2012). The Chinese website with national link refers only to the Chinese language and dialects instead of English: '[t]he standard language in China is Mandarin Chinese, a universal language used by every ethnic group' (Study in China). This emphasis on language can be seen as China's push for soft power policy in culture and language teaching.

Given China's emphasis on the soft power rationalisation in its international education policy, both Chinese websites introduce extensive government scholarship programmes with the following rationale: 'to promote the mutual understanding, cooperation and exchanges in various fields between China and other countries' (Study in China). The commercial rationale for recruiting international students is not explicit in the *Plan for Study in China*, the majority of international students in China are self-paying (MoEC, 2018). Similar to the private Finnish website, the non-governmental Chinese website treats prospective students as the subject in individualised study-abroad choices, addressing students as 'you' and as active decision-makers: 'helping you decide upon an appropriate program to suit your individual needs' (CUCAS). Such rhetoric constructs consumer expectations at the individual level, manifesting the instrumental value attributed to education (Williams, 2013). These references to the individual decision-maker emphasise a care and service orientation, as evident on the non-governmental websites.

In sum, the embeddedness of the future labour and commercial interests is especially evident on the Finnish websites, while the soft power rationale is apparent on the Chinese

website with national link and the commercial rationale on the Chinese non-governmental website. The websites display differences from each other, with the private or non-governmental websites employing commercial approach.

Constructing Study Choices: Educational, Cultural, Economic, and Social Capital

The websites construct the international student subject and reinforce a construction of student identity infused with expectations about capital to guide study choices. The websites differ in how they address choice and prospective students. All the analysed websites, either explicitly or implicitly, construct holistic study choices focusing on what students can expect to experience during and after the study-abroad period. Studying abroad thus is defined not only as education but also as relocation and overall experience. The analysis, based on the notion of Bourdieusian capital, identified four highly interlinked types of capital constructing expectations of holistic study-abroad experiences.

Educational capital, as analysed in the data, is understood as a reference to degrees and education more generally. The government linked sites discuss studying in their given countries more descriptively, while educational capital gained from studying is elaborated in more detail on the non-governmental websites. The educational degrees listed by CUCAS identify China's global position and simultaneously connect the cultural and educational experiences. For example, take the following extract: 'China is striving to build more world-class universities and investing heavily in HE. Aside from China's unique Chinese language, calligraphy, martial arts, and other cultural subjects, Chinese degree programmes in majors such as engineering, science, medicine, economics, and trade, [and] MBA[s], as well as finance, are highly revered' (CUCAS). Finland University similarly connects educational and cultural capital: '[s]tudying overseas is one of the best decisions a student can ever make. And studying in Finland will make that decision an even better one: as one of the world's leading countries of high-quality education, the beautiful nature and safety of Finland—mixed with its state-of-the-art facilities—create an ideal environment for any international student' (Finland University). This emphasis on the holistic experience may reflect the nature of studying abroad and the positionalities of the countries at the global student markets.

All the analysed websites explicitly address cultural capital, expecting students to gain cultural capital and experiences from their given locations. The cultural portrayals of both countries are embedded in the introduction of the nation and the national branding employed to construct favourable images of the countries. Embedding study choices within cultural experiences also have a touristic element. When CUCAS lists five reasons to study in China, the first is travel: '[s]tudying in China is an excellent opportunity to explore the world's most populous country. You will experience China's unique blend of ancient and modern civilisation, as well as its scenic beauty and bustling nightlife' (CUCAS). The connection of such cultural and travelling experiences to studying abroad

constitutes ‘a form of travelling life-stylisation’ (Kenway & Fahey, 2008, 169), positioning students as educational tourists who combine touristic elements and education in an individualistic, experience-oriented approach.

Economic capital is mainly presented as career prospects after graduation. The Finnish national website focuses on the practicalities of gaining residence permits to work in Finland after studying. In the International Student Barometer survey conducted in Finland, almost 80% of international, degree students reported that work opportunities affected their choice of study location (CIMO, 2014) highlighting the significance of the issue.

While the Chinese website with national link does not discuss students’ career prospects, both non-governmental websites stress career prospects as a factor in study choices. The private Finnish website mentions the educational value of a degree gained in Finland for future career prospects: ‘[a] degree from a Finnish university will prepare you for working life anywhere, while you can enjoy all the benefits Finland offers to students’ (Finland University). The Chinese non-governmental website connects the cultural and social capital of the study experience to employment: ‘the current rise of China has made it very clear that people who can speak Chinese and have first-hand experience of living in China are going to have a great advantage in terms of employment’ (CUCAS).

Along with the capitals mentioned above, social capital is promised to come from networks and active student life. Study choices are framed as providing social networks during and after studies. Student associations and other social activities are available during studies, followed by alumni networks after graduation, emphasising the social aspects of studies.

Constructing Distinction and Affirmation

Based on the analysis, websites employ comparative descriptions, rankings and student testimonials defined here as *dispositifs* (Cochoy, 2007). The use and forms of these *dispositifs* vary among the websites. The analysed websites differ in their provided educational advice and how they differentiate (if any) choices from each other.

The first *dispositif*, comparative description, refers to descriptive forms of information for guidance on study choices that the applicant can compare. This *dispositif* employs different levels of distinction as a mean of disposition. Study in Finland introduces higher education institutions in general and provides a link to another portal to search for appropriate programmes. The private Finnish website elaborately describes the member universities and their areas of study, although it does not fully connect them. The Chinese CUCAS website provides more explicit advice on subject choices, institutions, and programmes. The website markets programmes with the following text: ‘[m]ore comprehensive program covered, more professional program analysis, all for your better choice of study!!’ (CUCAS). All the subjects have slogans emphasising different aspects of the programmes. For instance, the medicine programme is called ‘[t]he most cost-

effective program in China' (CUCAS). Subject descriptions further guide the choice of field. The choice to study medicine is portrayed as being based on its outcomes, including social status: '[o]n the one hand, it involves real people's health, even life; it is demanding, yet the payback—a sense of achievement—is not to be compared with any other career. On the other hand, being a doctor usually, mean[s] a respected social status and a fulfilling career' (CUCAS).

The second dispositif, rankings, employ explicit comparisons to differentiate choices from other countries and institutions. Three of the four analysed websites provide various rankings that deploy distinction as its disposition mechanism (Cochoy 2007). The absence of such distinction devices on the Study in China website may be explained by the following extract: '[s]tudying in China is the same as studying in other countries in the world' (Study in China). The rankings differ in who produces them, for what purpose and at what level. The Finnish websites employ rankings developed for purposes other than advice on study choices; for instance, standards of living and global university rankings are compared. Thus, rankings are rematerialised to support study choices: 'ranked among the world's top universities in global university rankings, placing all among the top 2% in the world' (Finland University). This reference recalls the use of education rankings by non-elite institutions to differentiate themselves from the larger mass (Locke, 2014). Hierarchical superiority in certain aspects is also asserted without explicitly referring to specific rankings, thus referring to a form of shared knowledge: 'Finland's world leading higher education system' (Study in Finland). Finland can employ rankings as an intentional strategy as it holds favourable positions in many rankings.

Other rankings are specifically developed by the website provider to share advice with students. The CUCAS website gives comparisons at different levels to provide 'more professional analysis' (CUCAS) to assist students in selecting a programme. For instance, CUCAS compares tuition fees for similar programmes in selected countries (the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany) to show China's lower tuition fees, among other aims. CUCAS emphasises the affordability of living in China by constructing different financial framings of prospective students through differentiated, categorised advice for applicants based on their funding opportunities. Other rankings, such as 'best university cafeteria', highlight the overall experience of studying abroad. The data collected by CUCAS are thus detached from the institutional and national contexts to aid comparisons for study choices. CUCAS even encourages applicants contacting it to develop new university rankings.

The third dispositif, student testimonials, serve as another trust-building device. The websites employ student testimonials to provide first-hand experience and share positive sentiments with students to affirm their study choices. Finland University, Study in China and CUCAS use text (and pictures) to portray various aspects of studies and student life to reduce the opacity in decision-making (Karpik, 2010) and employing affirmation as a disposition (Cochoy 2007). Student testimonials concentrate on the overall experience of

studying abroad. Finland University also uses texts in the shape of student blogs to communicate official matters, such as residence permits, creating a form of affirmation.

Conclusion

For making the decision to study abroad, prospective students navigate different forms of information enabling them to construct expectations on the study abroad experience. Correspondingly, a diverse set of agents including national governments, institutions and private actors construct a textual and visual idea of a very abstract and personal study abroad experience. Thus, it is focal to understand the mediators, such as these websites, enabling the encounter of the hosts and international students. The expectations created within the websites may have profound repercussion to the students' decision-making and later on the overall study abroad experience.

This paper has contributed to the emerging field of digital mediators employed in international student recruitment with the focus on the novel subject of websites as mediators in encounters of host countries' recruiters and prospective students. This study suggests analysing mediators, such as websites, for the representations they produce of international education and the expectations they construct for prospective students. Furthermore, this study, similar to that of van Zanten & Legavre (2014), has suggested employing concepts drawn from economic sociology (Cochoy, 2004, 2007; Karpik, 2010) to understand how digital mediators construct choice. Websites provide a platform for the textualisation and visualisation of studying abroad in the given localities. This use of digital mediators can be seen as particularly focal for countries and institutions that do not hold a widely known reputation; thus, they need to construct their international education markets in many contexts, one being websites.

Similarly, as suggested by Williams (2013) and Lažetić (2019), this study argues that websites, in their advising of prospective students, reflect the national strategies on education, in this case, the recruitment of international students. Thus, the analysis shows that the Finnish websites lean on commercial aspects articulated in tuition fees and skilled immigration with the introduction of work-related practicalities. Chinese websites, particularly the governmental site, build on ties with other countries, while, the non-governmental site also has a commercial orientation. Although not articulated in policy documents, Chinese statistics (MoEC, 2018) show that almost 90% of international students are self-funded, thus also contributing economically to at least cover their costs.

Websites construct expectations that elaborate a holistic study-abroad experience, comprised of expectations that are analysed as capitals. In other words, it is not only the educational content or a degree that the websites both textualise and visualise in their content, but also the overall study-abroad experience. A particular focus is the cultural aspects of relocation when studying abroad, which highlights the position of studying abroad as an overall life experience. According to Williams (2013), these kinds of websites, among other materials, construct expectations that eventually construct a consumer who makes decisions regarding the variety of available options, which may

later reflect on the formation of student identity and devalue educational capital in decision-making (Courtois, 2018). Noticeable in the analysis was the focus on the overall experience of studying abroad, also noted by Lomer et al. (2016) in their study of the UK's education branding.

The websites employ dispositifs in the captation of international students. In particular, non-governmental websites employ commercially oriented dispositifs, such as rankings, to distinguish or affirm the choice. This use of devices can be interpreted as an expression of the commercial interest to provide students with clearly articulated advice.

While this analysis sheds light on these platforms that enable the encounters of recruiters and students, it could be supplemented by a further study on students' uses and perceptions of websites.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Prof. Fazal Rizvi and my supervisors Prof. Risto Rinne, Dr. Johanna Kallo and Prof. Arto Jauhiainen, and also my colleagues at the University of Turku for reading and providing comments on an earlier draft of the manuscript.

References

- Appadurai, A. (2008). Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy. In J. Xavier Inda & R. Rosaldo (Eds.), *The Anthropology of Globalization: A Reader* (pp. 47-65). Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub.
- Belt and Road Portal. (2019). Education action plan for the Belt and Road Initiative. Retrieved from <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/zchj/qwfb/30277.htm>
- Bolsmann, C., & Miller, H. (2008). International student recruitment to universities in England: discourse, rationales and globalization. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 6(1), 75–88. <https://doi:10.1080/14767720701855634>
- Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The field of cultural production: essays on art and literature*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27–40.
- Cantwell, B. (2015). Are international students cash cows? Examining the relationship between new international undergraduate enrollments and institutional revenue at public colleges and universities in the US. *Journal of International Students*, 5(4), 512–525.
- Carney, S. (2009). Negotiating policy in an age of globalization: Exploring educational “policyscapes” in Denmark, Nepal, and China. *Comparative Education Review*, 53(1), 63-88.
- Cochoy, F. (2004). Is the modern consumer a Buridan's donkey? Product packaging and consumer choice. In K. M. Ekström & H. Brembeck (Eds.), *Elusive consumption* (pp. 205–227). Oxford, UK: Berg.
- Cochoy, F. (2007). A brief theory of the ‘captation’ of publics: understanding the market with Little Red Riding Hood. *Theory Culture Society*, 24, 203–223. <https://doi:10.1177/0263276407084704>
- Cochoy, F., & Dubuisson-Quellier, S. (2013). The sociology of market work. *Economic Sociology (European Electronic Newsletter)*, 15(1), 4–11.

- Cochoy, F., Trompette, P., & Araujo, L. (2016). From market agencements to market agencing: an introduction. *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 19(1), 3–16.
<https://doi:10.1080/10253866.2015.1096066>
- Courtois, A. (2018). From ‘academic concern’ to work readiness: student mobility, employability and the devaluation of academic capital on the year abroad. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 40(2), 190–206, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2018.1522241>
- Cubillo, J. M., Sánchez, J., & Cerviño, J. (2006). International students’ decision-making process. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 20(2), 101–115.
<https://doi:10.1108/09513540610646091>
- Elo, S., & Kyngäs, H. (2008). The qualitative content analysis process. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 62(1), 107–115. <https://doi:10.1111/j.1365-2648.2007.04569.x>
- Haugen, H. Ø. (2013). China’s recruitment of African university students: policy efficacy and unintended outcomes. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 11(3), 315–334.
- Hemsley-Brown, J. (2012). ‘The best education in the world’: reality, repetition or cliché? International students’ reasons for choosing an English university. *Studies in Higher Education*, 37(8), 1005–1022.
- Holbrook, M. B. & Hirschman, E. C. (1982). The experiential aspects of consumption: Consumer fantasies, feelings, and fun. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 47(9), 918–934.
- Huang, F. (2003). Policy and practice of the internationalization of higher education in China. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 7(3), 225–240.
- Huang, F. (2007). Internationalisation of higher education in the era of globalization: What have been its implications in China and Japan?. *Higher Education Management and Policy*, 19(1), 1–15.
- Jokila, S. (2015). The internationalization of higher education with Chinese characteristics – Appadurai’s ideas explored. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 35(1), 125–139.
<https://doi:10.1080/02188791.2014.940029>
- Jokila, S., Kallo, J., & Mikkilä-Erdman, M. (2019). From crisis to opportunities: justifying and persuading national policy for international student recruitment. *European Journal of Higher Education*.
- Jokila, S. (under review). From inauguration to commercialisation: incremental transitions redefining the national interest of international degree programmes (IDPs) in Finland.
- Karram, G. (2014). A futile search for values and pedagogy? A discursive analysis of the marketing messages of branch-campus in higher education hubs. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 44(2), 274–296.
- Karpik, L. (2010). *Valuing the unique: the economics of singularities*. Princeton University Press. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kenway, J. & Fahey, J. (2007). Policy incitements to mobility: some speculations and provocations. In D. Epstein, R. Boden, R. Deem, F. Rizvi & S. Wright (Eds). *Geographies of knowledge, geometries of power: Framing the future of higher education* (pp. 161–179). World Yearbook of Education 2008. New York: Routledge.
- Kim, J. (2016). Global cultural capital and global positional competition: international graduate students’ transnational occupational trajectories. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 37(1), 30–50.
<https://doi:10.1080/01425692.2015.1096189>
- Kuroda, C. (2014). The new sphere of international student education in Chinese higher education: a focus on English-medium degree programs. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 18(5), 445–462. <https://doi:10.1177/1028315313519824>
- Latour, B. (2007). *Reassembling the social: an introduction to actor–network theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Lažetić, P. (2019). Students and university websites—consumers of corporate brands or novices in the academic community? *Higher Education*, 77(6), 995–1013. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-018-0315-5>

- Locke, W. (2014). The intensification of rankings logic in an increasing marketised higher education environment. *European Journal of Education, 49*(1), 77–90.
- Lomer, S., Papatsiba, V., & Naidoo, R. (2016). Constructing a national higher education brand for the UK: positional competition and promised capitals. *Studies in Higher Education, 43*(1), 134–153. <https://doi:10.1080/03075079.2016.1157859>
- Ma, J., & Zhao, K. (2018). International student education in China: characteristics, challenges, and future trends. *Higher Education, 76*, 735–751.
- Marginson, S. (2006). Dynamics of national and global competition in higher education. *Higher Education, 52*, 1–39. <https://doi:10.1007/s10734-004-7649-x>
- Maringe, F., & Carter, S. (2007). International students' motivations for studying in UK HE: insights into the choice and decision making of African students. *International Journal of Educational Management, 21*(6), 459–475. <https://doi:10.1108/09513540710780000>
- Mazzarol, T., & Soutar, G. N. (2002). 'Push-pull' factors influencing international student destination choice. *International Journal of Educational Management, 16*(2), 82–90.
- MEC. (2013). *Suomi kansainvälisille koulutusmarkkinoille. Selvitysryhmän muistio. Toimenpideohjelman koulutusviennin edellytysten parantamiseksi [International education markets and Finland]*. Helsinki, Finland: Ministry of Education and Culture.
- MEC. (2017). *Yhteistyössä maailman parasta. Korkeakoulutuksen ja tutkimuksen kansainvälisyyden edistämisen linjaukset 2017–2025 [Better together for better world. Policies to promote internationalization in Finnish higher education and research 2017–2025]*. Helsinki, Finland: Ministry of Education and Culture.
- Metcalfe, A. S. (2012). Imag(in)ing the university: visual sociology and higher education. *The Review of Higher Education, 35*(4), 517–534.
- MoEC. (2010). *国家中长期教育改革和发展规划纲要 [The national outline for medium and long-term education reform and development 2010–2020]*.
- MoEC. (2012). *留学中国计划 [Plan for study in China]*. Retrieved from <http://www.csc.edu.cn/laihua/newsdetail.aspx?cid=191&id=1344>
- MoEC. (2018). Brief report on Chinese overseas students and international students in China 2017. Retrieved from http://en.moe.gov.cn/documents/reports/201901/t20190115_367019.html
- MoEF. (2001). *International strategy for higher education*. Helsinki, Finland: Ministry of Education.
- MoEF. (2009). *Strategy for the internationalisation of higher education institutions in Finland 2009–2015*. Helsinki, Finland: Ministry of Education.
- Mosneaga, A., & Agergaard, J. (2012). Agents of internationalisation? Danish universities' practices for attracting international students. *Globalisation, Societies and Education, 10*(4), 519–538.
- Naidoo, R., & Jamieson, I. M. (2005). Empowering participants or corroding learning? Towards a research agenda on the impact of student consumerism in higher education. *Journal of Education Policy, 20*(3), 267–281.
- Ozga, J., & Jones, R. (2006). Travelling and embedded policy: the case of knowledge transfer. *Journal of Education Policy, 21*(1), 1–17. <https://doi:10.1080/02680930500391462>
- Pan, S. Y. (2013). China's approach to the international market for higher education students: strategies and implications. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 35*(3), 249–263. <https://doi:10.1080/1360080X.2013.786860>
- Rizvi, F., & Lingard, B. (2010). *Globalizing education policy*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Robinson-Pant, A., & Magyar, A. (2018). The recruitment agent in internationalized higher education: commercial broker and cultural mediator. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 22*(3), 225–241.
- Simões, C., & Soares, A. M. (2010). Applying to higher education: information sources and choice factors. *Studies in Higher Education, 35*(4), 371–389. <https://doi:10.1080/03075070903096490>

- Stein, S., & de Andreotti, V. O. (2016). Cash, competition, or charity: international students and the global imaginary. *Higher Education*, 72(2), 225–239 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-015-9949-8>
- Urbanovič, J., Wilkins, S., & Huisman, J. (2016). Issues and challenges for small countries in attracting and hosting international students: the case of Lithuania. *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(3), 491–507 <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2014.942267>
- van Zanten, A., & Legavre, A. (2014). Engineering access to higher education through higher education fairs. *LIEPP Working Paper*, 22, 1–37.
- Vuori, J. (2015). Excellent prospects for beautiful minds: marketing international education. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 29(5), 582–595.
- Wilkins, A. (2012). School choice and the commodification of education: a visual approach to school brochures and websites. *Critical Social Policy*, 32, 69–86.
- Williams, J. (2013). *Consuming higher education: why learning can't be bought*. London, UK: Bloomsbury.
- Wu, H. (2019). Three dimensions of China's 'outward-oriented' higher education internationalization. *Higher Education*, 77(1), 81–96.
- Wächter, B., & Maiworm, F. (Eds.) (2014). *English-taught programmes in European higher education: the state of play in 2014*. Bonn, Germany: Lemmens.
- Ziguras, C., & Law, S. F. (2006). Recruiting international students as skilled immigrants: the global 'skills race' as viewed from Australia and Malaysia. *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 4(1): 59–76. <https://doi:10.1080/14767720600555087>
- Ziguras, C., & McBurnie, G. (2015). *Governing cross-border higher education*. New York, NY: Routledge.