AN INVESTIGATION OF THE REASONS WHY CHINESE STUDENTS CHOOSE COLLEGES IN IRELAND AS A PLACE TO STUDY

The case of Athlone Institute of Technology

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Signed statement

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Aim/Object

This study was devoted to find out what can attract the Chinese students to study in Ireland as an increasing number of Chinese students choose to study abroad. To find this out, it focused on current Chinese students in Ireland in terms of what were the reasons for their choice. This study used a combination of surveys and interviews to collect data on a research sample of 96 Chinese students in Athlone Institute of Technology. Through the study, it was found that Chinese students attended colleges in Ireland to enhance their chances of working within a global workforce, to get better jobs and attain higher social prestige. They also believed colleges in Ireland to have high quality degrees and that studying in Ireland enhanced their cultural competence. Chinese students used different sources for their information search which later determined their decision making. The leading source of information was the Education and Career Fairs in China, followed by parental and relatives influence, then friends and finally, the least source of information was the online information search and Athlone Institute of Technology's website. These results implied that Irish colleges should try their best to deliver high quality education, maintain their social prestige in China and pay attention to participation in Education and Career Fairs in order to attract more Chinese students. There are other necessary practices for Irish colleges to do, which though not directly affecting students' choices, can encourage students to choose them if they are done. First is to address any challenges for Chinese students. The obvious challenge is that some of the students noted that being in Chinese interaction groups limited their opportunities for interaction with other students from different countries. The students were more desired for interactions and relations with other international students from different nationalities than they were with the Irish and European students since the students interacted more with other Asian and international students, not just Chinese, than they did with the European students. So regarding this disadvantage, the practice this research suggested for Athlone Institute of

Technology, is to form intercultural groups in class and include institutional support to Chinese students, such as having Chinese student involvement in the Student Union.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This chapter specifies the background information for the research idea, the research aims and objectives, research significance, and thesis structure in this chapter, which is a basis for the understanding of the whole research paper.

1.2 Background

The tertiary education market from China is one of the largest in the world (*Bodycott 2009*). China has drastically improved its economic growth in the past decades and so has its demand for high quality professional employees. Talent shave also spurred in education within the country (*Schmidt, 2011*). *(Bodycott，2009)* asserted that with sustained economic growth and developments in China, the numbers of families that have been able to afford to pay for tertiary education has increased, and that most families have focused on getting overseas education. In support of this, *(HM Government Report 2013)* asserted that China is the largest source of international students both in the UK and Ireland, while Ireland is among one of the more popular education destinations in the EU. Over the past few decades, the number of international students choosing to study in Ireland has drastically increased. *Education in Ireland report (2013)* noted that in 2012, Mr. Ciaran Cannon, the Minister for Education and Skills in Ireland signed a memorandum of understanding with China, with the core goal of increasing cooperation between the two nations in the field of higher education. This led to a visit of nine institutes to China in 2012, resulting in the development of links between education institutions of Ireland and those in China (p.44). This indicates Ireland is increasingly taking on a larger role within the international education field *(Education in Ireland, 2013)*. In 2012, the number of international students rose by more than 2% *(Education in Ireland, 2013),* although during the years 2003 and 2012, the number of international students in Ireland accounted for 8.7% of total international tertiary students

(OECD Report, 2011, p.334). In 2012/2013, the share of Chinese students in Ireland accounted for more than 16% of the international students, and thus bypassed the US which used to be the largest source of international students *(Education in Ireland, 2013).* Arguably, assessing the impact that international students have had on Ireland, *(Finn and O'Connell 2012)* noted that the impact has especially had a profound economic impact, because the international students contributed to about €192 million per year to the economy since 2010, in terms of school fees and their expenditures. This implies that international students have played an important role in the growth of Ireland's education sector, both in terms of improving the quality of education that meets international standards and economic contributions. Given the large market for study-abroad in China and the large share of Chinese students among international students in Ireland, it is meaningful to understand why international students from China choose colleges in Ireland. By doing so, this research tells us how colleges in Ireland can seize the opportunities of making greater profits concerning the large study-abroad market in China and contribute to its economic development. For this reason, this is a critical research issue considering the contributions that international students make to Ireland and the rise of Chinese students in Ireland over the past decade.

1.3 Research Aim and Objectives

Based on the background, this research focuses on investigating the reasons for Chinese students studying in Ireland as well as the obstacles they face, so that the local colleges can make full use of their advantages and avoid their disadvantages, to enrol more Chinese students for the sake of contributing to the national profit. Given this, the aim of the study is to investigate the reasons why Chinese students choose to attend colleges in Ireland. To reach the aim, the following objectives are to be reached in the research:

1. To know what factors concerning Ireland drives Chinese students to study there, so as to know what factors cannot be changed by local colleges.

2. To know the hidden reasons for Chinese students to choose to study abroad rather than China, so as to learn the reasons concerning the Chinese market.

3. To identify what sources of information influence their decision making, so as to know what sources of information Irish colleges should make use of to attract more Chinese students.

4. To test what factors concerning Irish colleges influence Chinese students to study there, so as to know what colleges can do to retain more students, namely what benefits accrue to Chinese students from studying in Athlone Institute of Technology?

5. To find out what the benefits and drawbacks are for the Chinese students studying in an Irish College, so as to provide suggestions for the local colleges the ways in which they can become more competent.

1.4 Significance and Rationale for the Study

Given the large number of Chinese students comprising of non-EU students in European countries, it is important to understand the reasons why the Chinese students choose to study in Athlone Institute of Technology. A wide range of studies have investigated why Chinese students chose to study overseas, most of them focusing on higher education sectors of either the US or the UK *(Gill, 2010; Huang, Turner & Chen, 2014).* For instance, *(Huang, Turner and Chen 2014)* found that Chinese students perceived education in overseas countries such as those universities in the UK and the US as being of greater quality and playing a critical role in enhancing their employability. *(Gill 2010)* had similar findings having interviewed eight Chinese postgraduate students who returned to China upon completion of their degree. The students felt they had an emerging sense and awareness of intercultural idealism. This intercultural awareness was especially important for both employers and employees in the increasing intercultural work environment because the environment required people who are culturally sensitive and expansive in their sense of self but yet still embrace and understand

the workings of the Chinese market. Overseas education also provided such students with greater insights and while these examinations have largely been done with the UK and US markets, no study has yet explored this within Ireland's higher education sector. Obviously this presents a research gap and this study seeks to fill it up. For this reason, this study especially focuses on the reasons why students chose to enrol in Irish colleges.

In 2001, the Irish government adapted a new 'Asia strategy' in response to the growing demands of large numbers of young Chinese students for undergraduate education in the West. Irish third level education institutions were encouraged to reach out to the Chinese student market *(Wendy & David, 2001). Education Ireland (2010)* noted that Chinese students' enrolment in tertiary education has been rising at an annual rate of 15%. Since the 1930s, education was seen as a key factor affecting international understanding *(Meras, 1932).* Compared with studying in one's homeland, one of the main reasons to study abroad was to increase the language skill proficiency, particularly the second language *(Kitsantas & Meyers, 2001).* Apart from this academic purpose, another important element was personal development, which often comes along with the increased exposure to a global view and global culture awareness. The students who study abroad in an unfamiliar environment that fosters individualism *(Holland, 2003).* These factors highlight the significance of the study, helping to uncover the reasons why Chinese students choose to study overseas.

1.5 Organisations of the paper

This study is organised into six chapters. The first chapter discusses the background to the research problem, specifies their search aim, and questions the study seeks to answer in order to meet the aim of the study. It also provides the importance, rationale and justification for why the study is being carried out. The second chapter focuses on critically reviewing literatures, namely carrying out a discussion on the theoretical underpinning and the empirical studies that form a conceptual framework for this study. Chapter three tries to

elaborate the methods and methodology employed in the study, with the focus being to discuss the rationale behind the methodology, justification for why a certain method was used whilst another was not and the procedures followed in the study. The fourth chapter presents the results by the methods of the study while the fifth chapter discusses these findings by comparing and linking them with reviewed literature, in order to identify reliability of the research results and new knowledge within the Irish context. The last chapter concludes with the study results, further discussing the implications of the results and areas of further research.

1.6 Summary

This chapter forms a basis for understanding the following sections. While the background and significance of research indicate the meaning of the research topic, how to do the research is presented in the following sections as well as detailed results and what is attained through this research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

How to carry out research or the feasibility of the research topic should be in reference to theoretical supports, which cannot be found from factual evidence. For this reason, in order to justify the research process and the validity of research topics, this chapter focuses on reviewing existing related literature. This will include theoretical data to support the research design and process and also empirical data to prove validity of this research topic, as well as its practical meaning. They are critically reviewed before forming a conceptual framework for this research.

2.2 Theoretical Underpinning: Theory of Reasoned Action

This study utilises *Fishbein and Ajzen's* theory of reasoned actions, which was developed in 1970 in order to investigate the various reasons why Chinese students choose to study in Ireland. This theory pointed out individuals used the information to help them to make rational decisions. Students therefore considered a number of possible outcomes based on a variety of decisions that they were likely to make and then chose the outcome which they perceived as the best *(Southey, 2011). (Celuch and Dill 2011)* asserted that based on this theory, a person's subjective belief strongly influenced the decisions they made. In essence, factors that influenced decision making include attitudes and subjective norms, where the attitude in decision making largely involved the behavioural beliefs that one holds and the evaluations that a person carries out concerning possible outcomes for a given action they take *(Godin, Conner & Sheeran 2005).* The behavioural beliefs and evaluations are largely based on the personal beliefs that the individuals hold. On the other hand, subjective norm element within the theory is largely concerned with the motivation to comply with known norms and beliefs. Individuals draw from what they perceive or other people believe is right to inform their choices or actions. Hence, in this case the person's willingness to fulfil others'

expectations and what is viewed as socially favourable, strongly influence their choices and behaviours *(Celuch & Dill, 2011; Manstead, 2011).* This is as indicated in the model below.
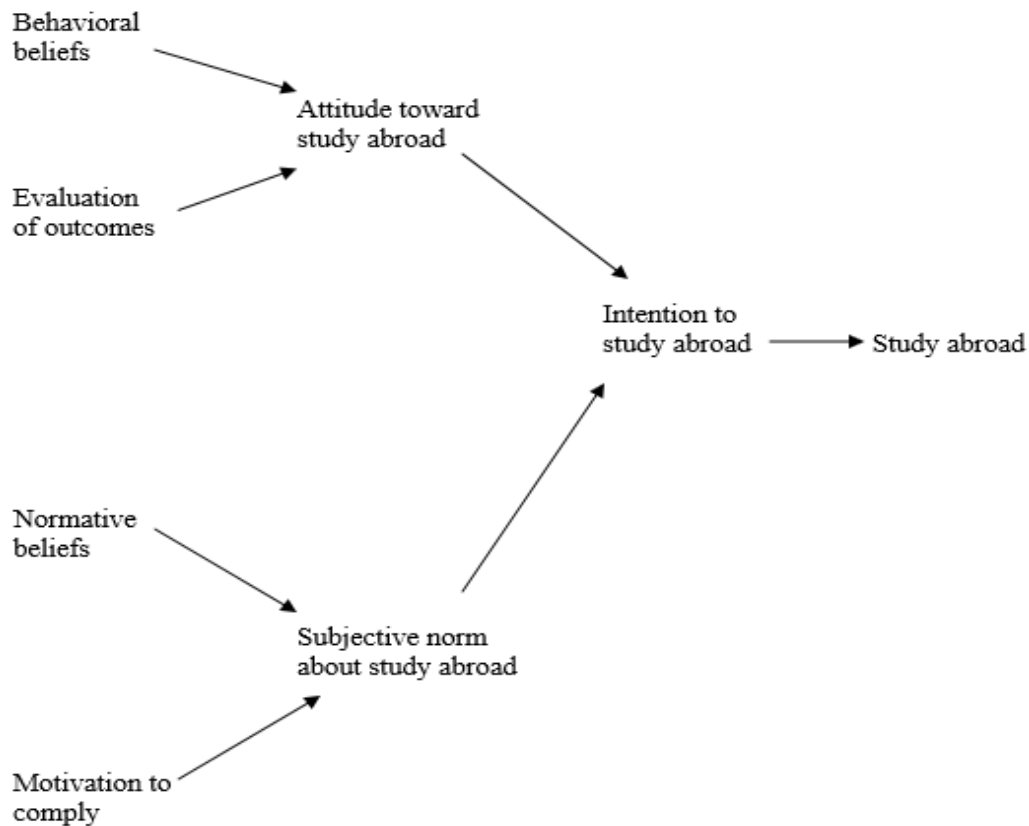
Figure 1: Theory of Reasoned Action: Model of reasons to study Abroad

Source: Adapted from (Peterson 2003, p.29)

These two factors in the theory of reasoned actions, namely subjective norms and attitudes are used in research to understand why students choose to study abroad. *(Peterson 2003)* drew from the theory and developed a model to show factors that determine students' decisions to study abroad. The findings showed that factors such as costs, academic credit, fears, location, and quality of programmes strongly influenced the attitudes that students held to studying abroad. *(Peterson 2003)* asserted that the attitude factors that influenced decision making were largely personal factors, such as interest in the quality of the programmes to be studied, the programmes faculty leaders in the overseas institution, and cost, among others.

On the other hand, the subjective norm elements largely included social factors, for instance, parental influence, peer influence, or social prestige and status in studying abroad among other factors. *(Booker, 2001)* based his study on the theory of reasoned actions and noted that to a large degree, decisions to study abroad are influenced by salient beliefs, both individual and societal perceptions, as well as access to relevant information needed to make decisions. To a larger degree, the action to study abroad was largely influenced by personal interests, students' background and their ability to afford overseas education, the enhancement of future career prospects, the hope of learning more about other parts of the world and experiences and recommendations given by others. By drawing on the theory, *Eder, Smith and Pitts (2010)* asserted that there were both push and pull factors that largely determined the choice of destination for overseas education. The push factors included factors such as language, career prospects, and personal growth, while the pull factors largely included physical geography, the country's cultural habits, college reputation and issues. Furthermore, other structural factors included factors such as cost and visas which tended to be constraints. However, among them college reputation and issues tended to be the strongest pull factor while personal growth tended to be the strongest push factor. These factors determine the expectations and thus influenced the experiences that the students undergo *(Manstead, 2011; Peterson, 2003).*

2.3 Empirical affirmation

2.3.1 Why Chinese students choose to study abroad

While different theories can explain why Chinese students decide to study abroad, empirical studies can test whether they are right, by summarizing for what reasons those students currently studying in foreign universities do so. Some empirical studies also focus on Chinese students abroad.

In 1978, following the different reforms in the Chinese economy pursued by the late leader Deng Xiaoping, who adopted new policies concerning education and promoted the sending of 860 scholars and students to pursue further education abroad. Therefore, Chinese students studying abroad have increased significantly with China eventually becoming one of the main sources of international students (Bodycott, 2009). Mazarin and Souter (2002) conducted a survey in 2001 and noted that more than 60% of Chinese parents invested about a third of their incomes into the education of their children. Such large investments are largely being driven by the belief that a high quality education will provide a better future *(Bodycott, 2009)*. This is consistent with the proposal of normative beliefs influenced by the idea of social norms by *(Peterson 2003)*. Both mean the social norms that studying abroad is influenced by the trend of going abroad in China. This truth has made China become among the leading spenders in the international education field. Hence, with such a high number of students from China over the years, a wide range of studies have examined the reasons why Chinese students choose to study abroad. While Chinese students are found to be interested in studying abroad, which country they will choose would further depend on the student's own consideration and evaluation. The factors included in their considerations were also investigated by some researchers: *(Hung, Chung & Ho. 2000)* stated that the main factors that the students considered when making their choices to study abroad included the high quality of education, the possibility of opportunities for migrating into the country in the future and the cost of living and competitively lower tuition fees. Drawing on *Mazarin and Souter (2002)*, *Li (2007), Hung, Shave, Wang and Diu (2005)* and *Bass (2005)*, similar findings can be noted in consenting that there were ten major factors helping the Chinese choose which countries to study in. These included the tuition cost and cost of living, educational or social links to family members living abroad, the influence and recommendations of parents, relatives and friends, the quality of education and reputation on the overseas institution,

awareness of it, employment prospects, immigration prospects, availability of scholarships, and environmental considerations such as safety, lifestyle, climate, crime and racial discrimination issues.

In my point of view, reputation and philosophy of overseas institutions as well as quality of education played a critical role in a positive experience and initial decision making. However, *Li and Bray (2007)* and *Chen (2008)* also noted that the push factors and pull factors included language, career prospects, personal growth, college reputation and other additional factors such as cultural experience, studious environment, valuation of degree in the home country, and a multicultural environment, all considered to play critical roles. Students were more comfortable with learning in a more multicultural learning environment and further preferred studying in a location and institution whose degrees are valued in the home country and are viewed as being of higher quality. Some of the quality factors that Chinese students take into consideration include factors such as having an academic and social support in the learning programme, availability of learning resources, easiness of employment after study and having an English speaking environment *(Bodycott, 2009).* Examining student applications into postgraduate studies, *Hensley-Brown (2012)* pointed out that most students' reasons for choosing to apply for a given university was perception of quality education in the universities. *Rudd, Djafarova and Waring(2012)* found that the reputation of learning institutions within a country, largely coincided with that of the country with which education standards and global recognition of the country's institutions were concerned. Thus, Chinese students perceive western education as having a more experienced environment that centred on research and innovation and provided prestigious and good quality education. The above shows that the education in foreign countries is considered to be of a higher quality, leading to a brighter future and so on. This drives more and more Chinese students to study in other countries. Those factors explain why Chinese students go to foreign universities to study, for

example Irish colleges. However, they also indicate at times that the institution may not matter as much as the country *(Rudd, Djafarova & Waring, 2012)*. Then the question is whether institutional difference really matters at all.

2.3.2 Ultracompetitive Employment Market in China

The question whether institutional difference matters or not is answered when considering the ultra-competitive employment market currently in China. The labour market in China has been and will continue to face environmental competition. A brief view of the latest labour employment situation abides by the idea. In 2008-2009, financial crisis shocked the global economy, including China, even though it is not as severe as in other countries. With a slowing economic growth rate, there are still an increasing number of high education graduates. Take the year 2013 as an example. There were approximately 7 million students graduating from Chinese universities. Availability of vacancies is lessened because enterprises hire fewer staff; new openings are few when the country's economic growth rate is decreased. This on the one hand means only those really highly qualified can be offered a good job. Otherwise, they will be offered less satisfying jobs and have to give them up for there is a gap between what graduates expect and what the country can offer *(Tom, P., 2013)*. Another aspect, in order to get a job in the current Chinese market, one has to become academically competent. In the future, there will be an increasing number of labour forces. According to population annual statistics report, there will be an apparent surge in the number of qualified and young labour force, who are thought to be aged around twenty-five years old and above, have average education periods from 8.5 to 10.2 years. This number indicates a sharp improvement on the young labour force besides their increasing number. Those people with high levels of education expect themselves to be a gold-collar or

white-collar worker rather than work in the manufacturing industry. However, the fact is that Chinese industries are experiencing transformation, which means there are increasing service industries and fewer manufacturing and agricultural industries. To develop well in the service industries, the foreign enterprises which are competent in providing the services are introduced into Chinese markets. China has rapidly developed in terms of inward foreign investments, and there has been increasing demand for talents *(Cooke, Saini, & Wang, 2014).* In response, there will be a higher requirement on globalization development of Chinese students *(Financial Investment newspaper, 2013).* This means there will be a higher requirement on employees and an increasing number of employees to apply to vacancies in service industries. The current Chinese students have to form their advantages in order to survive in the competitive labour market. *Global Insight Report (2013)* pointed out that as export oriented growth is expected to weaken in the coming years, a greater emphasis is increasingly being placed on enhancing knowledge-and-innovation based growth. This has also resulted in an ultracompetitive environment within the Chinese labour market as millions of Chinese students are pursuing tertiary education. *Raynaud (2012)* noted that one of the impacts of the one child policy expected in the near future is a decline in the number of workers in China, which would result in the decrease of casual labourers and the rise in highly educated professionals. While this would tip China's labour market up the value added chain, it would also mean a greater competitive environment for graduates. *Global Insight Report (2013)* pointed out that even though current export oriented economies are currently growing, it is expected to weaken in the coming years as a greater emphasis is increasingly being placed on enhancing knowledge-and-innovation based growth.

Conducting in-depth interviews, *Sin (2009)* found that one of the key factors for Asian students studying in UK universities was aspiration for social distinction and greater employability in the Chinese market. Arguably, students are expected to have a competitive edge when applying for jobs if they have graduated from a UK university, and further expected that their income levels and status would be elevated. A major motivating factor and benefit for the students in studying abroad was the enhancement of their global labour mobility status, especially for the students from minority groups. Having an international education experience made it possible to get jobs within the global market place since most of the prestigious universities are highly recognized in various organisations around the world *(Brown, 2003; Sin, 2006). Devas (2011)* proposed that the reason for wider participation from middle-class Chinese students is to have an assured career trajectory, while for working class Chinese students, it is to enhance the opportunity to access the privileged social and cultural capital, which is important in helping them realize their career goals. It is known to all that studying in a college provides accesses to the country's advantages like high education environment, language environment and so on. What decides the employment rate of students can be accredited to different colleges. This should be a factor concerning unique colleges.

2.3.3 Sources of information influencing students decision making

After students have a specific college to study in, given their consideration of a specific country, and the kind of college, whether certain college information can be publicized to them is dependent on their sources of information in terms of studying abroad. *Hemsley-Brown (2012)* stated that one of the key sources of information is the universities' websites. An investigation of sixty personal statements for postgraduate students, *Hemsley-Brown (2012)* found that the students had largely used their peers, tutors or courses based at universities. This indicated that they found such expressions and phrases as favourable and reflective of their needs in pursuant of higher education. *Wilkins,*

Balakrishnan and Huisman (2012) explored student's choices of studying abroad and the various sources of information that influenced their decision making. Findings indicated that recommendations from parents, family members and friends played an important role as the initial point of information regarding a given institution abroad. This can largely be in terms of a previous student who has had learning experiences in a given institution and was able to get a good job afterwards. *Bodycott (2009)* had similar viewpoints arguing that parents played a paramount role in decision making as a convenient and crucial source of information. However, a key initial point of information for students who have no contacts abroad has largely been through education career fairs in China, which a lot of universities and colleges around the world attend, in order to provide information with regard to requirements and admission to the students *(Simpson & Tan, 2009).* Considering China is the leading source of international students, *Bodycott (2009)* noted that several University Student Recruiting Agencies have largely set up bases in China, where students can easily apply for degree courses overseas and locally and are also informed about possibilities of getting scholarships. This implies that the college does not set up bases for the Chinese students to gain information and so may miss some potential students. All colleges should follow the habit of Chinese students attaining proper information so as to avoid negative impact on attracting them to study there.

2.3.4 Benefits and challenges Chinese students face for studying overseas

The above factors indicate that colleges should do something in order to attract more Chinese students. For example, they should improve quality of education, change the location in some countries and choose the right channels for publishing information. What has been actually realized by current colleges and what has not, can be shown by the current students' learning experiences. Chinese students are faced with a wide range of benefits and challenges as they are studying in Western Universities. Such benefit challenges have been uncovered by many

research studies. One of the core benefits is that studying overseas, especially in a western context enhances the students' intercultural competence. *Wang, Harding and Mai (2012)* asserted that Chinese students studying in the UK have a better grasp, understanding of cultural intelligence and adaptation and thus are more able to create a cultural synergy that enriches their learning experiences and intercultural competence. Furthermore, the students are better able to fit within the global work environment. Notably, *Huang, Turner and Chen (2014)* found that students believed studying abroad, specifically in the UK enhanced their future career prospects and employability as they are able to acquire skills and knowledge that are necessary for them to work within a global work environment or within a multicultural work environment. *Li (2013)* had similar viewpoints with regard to employability construction *(Andersson, Sadgrove & Valentine, 2012).*It is thus justifiable that intercultural synergy and employability do function concerning choosing the UK universities or the USA colleges. It is justifiable that colleges in Ireland should focus on these two aspects too.

However, there are some challenges for all the Chinese students to study in foreign universities. *Andersson, Sadgrove and Valentine, (2012)* noted that a negative drawback of such prolonged and intense interactions is that in practice students from different cultures or nationalities may tend to self-segregate. If not, there may be few chances for interaction due to differences in preferences as campuses orient certain students on expectations and lifestyles that may not be inclusive. Examining student perspectives of tertiary education programmes in a western nation, *Song-Turner and Willis (2011)* noted that some of the challenges that the students faced included having teaching styles that were new and did not align with their thinking and learning styles. Another challenge facing Chinese students pursuing their studies in western universities is an ineffective grasp of expression in the English language *(Hennebry, Lo & Macaro, 2012). Hennebry, Lo & Macaro (2012)* found

that students faced cultural and linguistic challenges which prevent them from adjusting to an Anglophone learning environment, noting that despite high level linguistic requirements in the admission to the institutions, largely determined by TOEFL(Testing of English as a Foreign Language) courses, students still faced a range of problems in their language skills, particularly oral interaction skills which are essential for participation in seminars and workshops, as well as in proofreading written work. Arguably, such issues have limited the performance of Chinese students in Western universities, even students who had performed well in Chinese universities *(Inanel & Huang, 2013; Tina& Lowe, 2013; Crawford & Wang, 2014)*.However, *Mathias, Bruce and Newton (2013)* while acknowledging the challenges and obstacles that face Chinese students were refuted, arguing that Chinese students tend to adjust well to teaching styles in the west overtime, and thus some of the issues they faced may be similar learning issues to those of other students. Apparently such a disadvantage influences the quality of education. This means Irish colleges like all other foreign colleges should try to avoid the above disadvantages, including few chances for interaction, linguistic challenges and ineffective grasping of teachings in English.

2.3.5 The experience of Chinese students studying abroad

All the above factors directly influence a Chinese student's decision to study in foreign countries and their choice of colleges. The fact is that there are some aspects indirectly influencing their decisions too. By a large degree, the reasons why students choose to join a particular university are largely decided by expectations the students have and this also influenced experiences that those students end up having *(Manstead, 2011; Peterson, 2003)*. Current students' experiences also influence future students' decisions to study abroad. Chinese students' perceived value of higher education is determined by two functional factors which are useful to the degree and the experiential aspect of learning *(Lai, To, Lung, & Lai, 2012)*. Hence, understanding Chinese student experiences is imperative in understanding

some reasons why they choose to join western universities. For this reason, a wide range of studies have investigated the topic of the Chinese student experiences. For instance, *Gao (2008)* investigated the experiences of Chinese students at an English university and noted that their learning experience was largely influenced by their motivation to learn new things in a new environment, including an environment where English language played an important role. However, they found the medium and technique of instruction to be challenging as it differed from what learning was like in China. It was further noticeable that the problem the Chinese students had with living and studying in a country such as the UK was that it was more difficult interacting with British students and Chinese students for they lacked confidence in the English language *(McMahon, 2011). Wang (2012)* found that Chinese students tended to be silent participants in group discussions compared with Western students, due to cultural and social perspectives they hold with regard to learning. For instance, the value is held by almost all Chinese people that a person who makes the most impression is one who is modest about their experience, knowledge and capabilities and avoids being self-congratulatory. This becomes problematic when verbal expression is used as an important indicator of learning and active engagement *(Remedios, Clarke & Hawthorne, 2008, Zhang & Xu, 2007).*Some of the details such as classroom formality, respect for teachers, maintaining group harmony, competitions and face saving strategies such as politeness and listening are some of the challenging factors that prevent involvement in student discussion, especially in a more formal environment such as workshops or seminars *(Wang, 2012).* However, *Li and Campbell (2008)* denied that this may mean that Chinese students do not like or appreciate collaborative learning. They tend to enjoy group work and team learning in an environment that is informal (i.e. after class) more than formal situations (i.e. in class). Furthermore, *Zhou and Xu (2012)* asserted that allowing students their own

choice on academic majors and universities to attend, played an integral role in enhancing both a positive experience, learning motivation and better achievement in their courses.

However, students had many positive experiences too. For instance, campus environment in Anglophone campuses provided Chinese students opportunities for prolonged and intensive forms of contact and interaction with the natives. This aspect of student life enhances understanding of different cultures and interactions with a diversity of people *(Andersson, Sadgrove & Valentine, 2012).* This helped the Chinese students to develop their English language skills and most of the students were pleased with having a competitive edge in understanding different cultural environments when they go back to China *(Gill, 2010).Wang, Harding and Mai (2012)* pointed out that Chinese students studying in the UK have a better grasp and understanding of cultural intelligence and how to adapt and therefore are able to create a cultural synergy that enriches their learning experiences and intercultural competence. The students tend to become individualistic and more independent as a result of their experiences in Western universities, which although may be at odd with collectivist values, they tend not to override or overshadow values that were held. It made the students more open to new ideas and thought patterns *(Tarry, 2011). Gill (2010)* had similar findings by interviewing eight Chinese postgraduate students who returned to China upon completion of their degree. Arguably, the students felt they had an emerging sense of identity that embraced an inter-culture, which was especially important for employees working in an increasingly intercultural work environment, for those companies need people that are culturally sensitive and expansive in their sense of self, yet still embrace and understand the workings of the Chinese market. Overseas education provided such students greater insights. Such intercultural interactions tend to be attained through recreational activities, group discussion and parties which play an important role in helping Chinese meet more native students and interact with them more often. However, *Tian and Lowe (2009)* asserts such

activities were formal and organised by the universities in order to enhance intercultural interaction and communication. However the natural and authentic level of interaction and communication tends to be lacking. *Robson and Turner (2007)* and *Tian and Lowe (2009)* examined some Chinese student experiences and indicated that although initially having expectations of engaging with other individuals from a wide range of cultures, they ended up sticking together with other Asian students, especially as there are now more Asian students in universities. The above indicates that colleges should provide chances for Chinese students to know the local environment and interact with each other so as to get acquainted with the local environment as soon as possible.

Concerning choice of foreign colleges, there were a variety of colleges. However, all the above factors target for Chinese students' choice of colleges in the US or the UK, rather than focusing on Ireland. So there is a gap in research that this study seeks to fill, which is the main content of this research.

2.5 Summary

In summary, many empirical studies have examined reasons for a Chinese student's choice to join colleges overseas, the majority of the studies targeting the US or UK context. The review of literature in this study has been largely focused on the UK context as it is much closer to Ireland. This research assumes that all the factors targeting the UK colleges can also influence a student's choice of college in Ireland. Thus this chapter is a basis for the research design and provides support for the research results.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Based on the second chapter, all the factors influencing a Chinese student's choice of foreign college are assumed to be valid when they choose an Irish college. Whether all of them have an effect is investigated and to do so, this chapter discusses the methods and methodological procedures employed providing justification for choice of each of the methods used. The methodology of the study follows the figure below, having been drawn from *Saunder's et al (2009)* research onion.
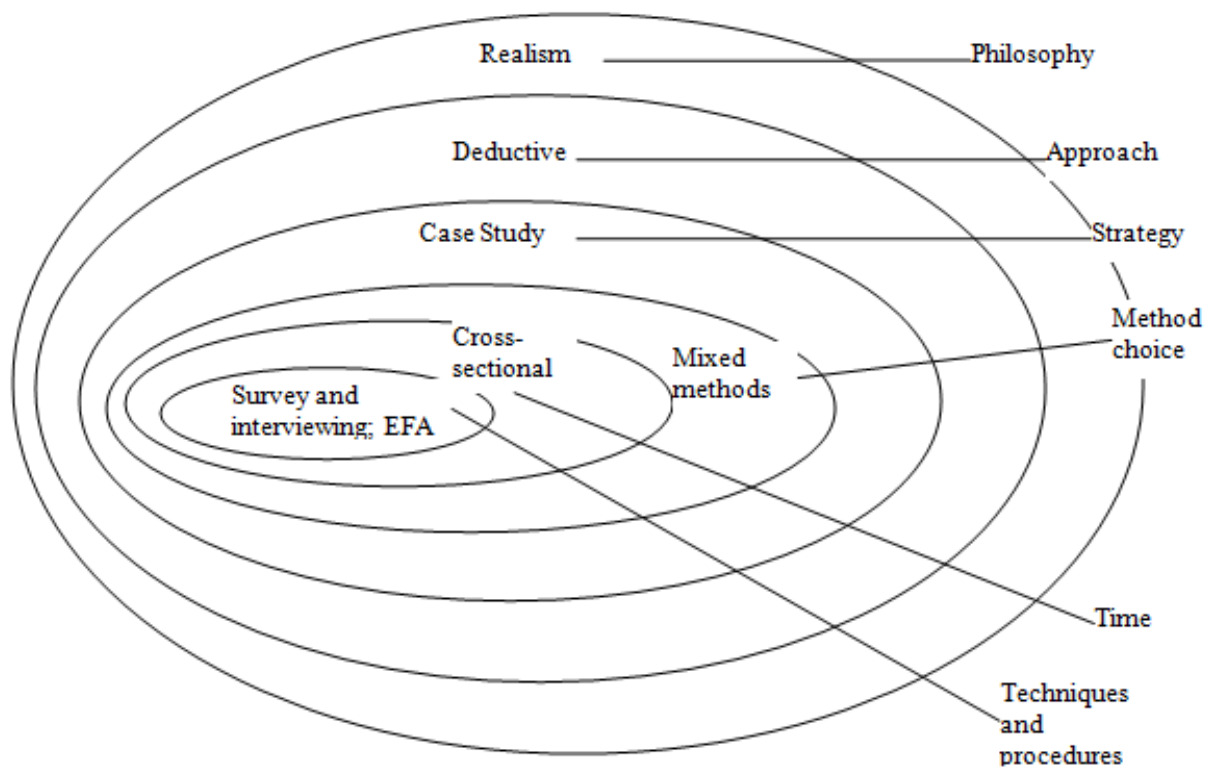
Figure 2: Methodology Adopted in the Study

Source: Adapted from Saunder's et al (2009)

3.2 Research Philosophy and Approach

The research philosophy decides what specific methods can be used in the research as it defines and assesses all the other methodological approaches that are used. *Fisher (2010)* noted that a research philosophy plays a critical role on how the study would be done and the

way insights can be sought from the data collected. Some researchers focus on being more objective (positivists) on one end, and the other researchers being subjective on the other extreme end (interpretivists), with each of these philosophies holding divergent viewpoints regarding how data derived from a given research can be analysed to produce insight and fact. However, mid along a positivist viewpoint and an interpretivist viewpoint lies realism which takes into account both the objective aspect of a research, as well as acknowledging the subjective nature of data collected from respondents. This study is fit for a realism philosophical approach where the focus is on attaining objective knowledge with the interpretation of such knowledge largely based on social conditioning *(Fisher, 2010).* *Saunders, Lewis& Thornhill (2012)* asserted that this type of knowledge or epistemology is a phenomenon that can be observed in order to provide credible truths which are largely defined by the respondent's belief. This philosophy is appropriate for this study for it is focused on collecting respondents' views as to why they choose to study in the Athlone Institute of Technology *(Blaikie, 2010).* The key objective of the research is to develop a methodology that enhances a result that can be generalised to a wider population, yet still not reflecting the subjective realities that the respondents hold.

Furthermore, drawing from the research onion developed by *Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2009),* there are two main research approaches that any study can adopt. These include an approach that is focused on developing a new theory by examining specific observations to reach a more general theory which is inductive and the other one which moves from being a general to a specific conclusion which is deductive *(Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill , 2009; Fisher, 2010).* This study also used a deductive approach of data collection and analysis, where the focus is on testing theoretical or research stipulations and making specific conclusions from more general data *(Fisher, 2010).* This approach is more appropriate for this study as the focus is first starting from a broad spectrum of knowledge examining

reasons Chinese students decide to study abroad. Their sources of information and their experiences abroad are also gained from empirical and theoretical evidence, to form a more specific knowledge and conclusion regarding what reasons they choose to study in Ireland. This approach is especially feasible for this research as it has been mentioned that existing related researches largely focused on some of the largest destination countries such as the US and UK, with none focusing specifically on Ireland. As a result, the main methodology philosophy is that the methods adopted should be able to collect objective views of participants after an assumption is made that all the factors influencing Chinese students' choice of studying in foreign countries also possibly influence their choice of studying in Ireland.

3.3 Research Design and Strategy

Based on the general research philosophy, a research design can be detailed which plays an important role in guiding the research, as it provides the framework or blueprint and determines what techniques are to be adopted throughout the methodology *(Fisher, 2010)*. There are three main research designs used in a research process *(Brown & Suter, 2011)*. They are descriptive, casual, and exploratory research designs. Among them here in this research it is fitting for a descriptive research design. Compared with causal or exploratory research designs, a descriptive one is more fitting to the objectives of the study as it focuses on answering the questions related with how, who, why, what and where *(Creswell, 2009; Brown and Suter, 2011)*. Such design discusses and interprets the degree to which certain issues or phenomenon is present with regard to a topic being researched. *Brown and Suter (2011)* emphasized that the appropriateness for a study in using a descriptive design is that the study does not focus on manipulating variables as is the case of causal design or the qualitative as is exploratory design. This aligns well with this study and further aligns with the objectives of the study. For this reason, the descriptive research design was explored into

use. Both quantitative and qualitative methods are subject to descriptive research design. Among them, this study uses quantitative methodology in carrying out its research for the following reasons. Although descriptive designs may also use the qualitative methodology, in this study quantitative methodology was selected as it aligns well with the objective of the study and the researcher's focus on getting generalizable findings that can be inferred to a larger population in theoretical and empirical evidence, with regard to reasons for Chinese student choices within the Irish university. Although the weakness of using quantitative methodology as compared to qualitative is that the findings would not be rich and in-depth，although the advantage of quantitative research is the objectivity of the findings, free from researcher bias and the generalized quality of the findings *(Bryman & Bell, 2011).*

As a way to verify the data collected in the quantitative methods, the study used a single case study strategy where the focus of the research was a given organisation, which in this case was Athlone Institute of Technology. Athlone Institute of Technology is among the leading Institutes of technology in Ireland having more than six thousand students attending and offering a wide range of post graduate and undergraduate degrees in engineering, business, science, and humanities, Having been established in 1970, the university has over the years expanded in both its size and the spectrum of courses offered *(Athlone Institute of Education, 2013).* Since 2000, Athlone Institute of Technology has invested more the €100 million to improve the campus, course offerings, buildings, research hub and astro-turf pitch and athletics tracks *(Education in Ireland, 2014).* Over this period, it also increased the enrolment of international students. International students in Athlone Institute of Technology are either from EU member countries or from non EU member countries which comprise 9% of students in 2009 *(Athlone Institute of Technology Annual Report, 2009).* This percentage may have increased over the past five years as Athlone Institute of Technology's strategic plan over the period, 2009-2013 *(Athlone Institute of Education, 2013, p.26).*This can be due to

the large number of Chinese students comprising of non-EU students and easy access to the data of the Chinese student population. Although, a single case study strategy may have weaknesses in generalizing the findings, its strength is the depth and richness of the findings within the given specific case that is attained *(Yin, 2003). While Fisher (2010)* said that case studies can be based on any method, either qualitative, quantitative or even a mixture of the two. In this study, the focus is on using only quantitative methods for studying reasons why students choose to enrol or attend Athlone Institute of Technology. As a result, both quantitative and qualitative methods are used in the research.

3.4 Methods of Data Collection

3.4.1 Data Collection

More specifically the study used quantitative methods while data for the study was collected through a student survey using questionnaires. The advantage of using questionnaires to survey respondents is that they are not only low cost, but also allow for a large amount of data to be easily collected from a large number of respondents within a short time *(Bryman& Bell, 2011).* As compared to other data collection techniques such as interviewing, it is less time consuming and cumbersome. It also lowers researcher bias in data interpretations since the researcher does not come into contact with the respondents to influence their answers in any way, for example no influence of facial expressions. Furthermore, there are limited ethical issues due to lower chances of contact with the respondents *(Fisher, 2010).* The targeted population in this case are Chinese students in Athlone Institute of Technology. To invite some of them to questionnaires, the study would also use stratified random sampling in selecting the sample to be surveyed. In this research, the focus is on Chinese students in the 2013/2014 academic year, and derived from schools across Athlone Institute of Technology, such as The School of Business Studies, Engineering, Humanities and Science. Students within these schools would then be randomly selected to take part in the study. *Bryman and*

Bell (2011) noted that stratified random sampling is important as it lowers sampling errors by enabling effective decisions because the samples are chosen from nearly all stratums, which is important in reflecting population representation. The focus was attached on the students enrolled this year because they are the most recent category of students to join Athlone Institute of Technology and thus can remember clearly the factors that influenced their choice of a foreign college. Furthermore, the students may be more aware of the difference in culture in Ireland, and thus understand how their experience is compared to what they expected. For this reason, the study aims to attain a sample of one hundred students, with these randomly selected from Athlone Institute of Technology.

3.4.2 Questionnaire Design

Design of questionnaires is important for effectiveness of the research methods too, since how a survey instrument is designed is imperative in enabling effective data collection that is relevant to the research questions being investigated *(Bryman & Bell, 2011)*. The questionnaire was designed to have closed ended questions, although open ended questions were also included in recommendation analysis. The first section of the questionnaire covered the demographic profile of the participants and was measured using ordinal and nominal scales while the second section covering the issues being investigated would be measured using the five point Likert scale, where 1 reflects "strongly disagree" and 5 reflects "strongly agree". *Fisher (2010)* argued that such closed ended questionnaires are important to enhance the consistency and the relevance of the issues being investigated. Closed ended questionnaires enhanced the measurability of the factors being investigated. The third section which examined students' experiences and recommendations for change was open ended, as indicated in *Appendix 1*. The questions for the closed ended part of the questionnaire were largely derived from the reviewed literatures which provided a wide range of areas and points explaining why Chinese students choose to study abroad and reporting their experiences.

These informed the development of the questionnaire that links to the theoretical and empirical evidence within the Irish context, which has yet to be examined. The questions were arranged based on research questions in the study. For instance, the question "Athlone Institute of Technology offers affordable degrees from Ireland" measures the reasons why the students choose to study in Ireland, while such reasons derived from theoretical and empirical evidence have examined prior reasons why students choose to study abroad. For each of the questions or factors being examined, the various questions examining these factors were assessed using Cronbach's Alpha reliability in order to measure the internal consistency of the factors, all of which showed internal consistency of the questions in measuring each of the factors within the research questions that inform the study.

3.4.3 Data Collection Procedure

The whole investigation process moves on as follows: the researcher provided a request form for the study, to both the Chinese student organisation in the school and the university itself in order to access the Athlone Institute of Technology's internal email addresses of the targeted population, particularly, the 2013/2014 student population within the Business Studies, Engineering, Humanities and Science schools. From these, a number were randomly selected and formal letters of consent sent to them, explaining the objective and purpose of the research as well as assuring confidentiality and anonymity in their responses. The students who returned the consent forms had the questionnaires sent to them and filled in these questionnaires and sent them back to the researcher in one week. The researcher also reminded them mid-week, to complete the questionnaire, in order to ensure greater response rate and further actively engaged in WhatsApp chat groups within the campus in order to encourage greater participation in the study. The collected data were safely stored in flash drive and Google drive, protected by a password in order to enhance the integrity and safety of the data.

3.5 Data Analysis

After the data was collected, SPSS tool was used. In this research, exploratory factor analysis and descriptive statistics analysis were done on the data in order to uncover the degree to which the students affirmed or disapproved various reasons why they enrolled in Athlone Institute of Technology. *Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2009)* noted that choosing an effective method of analysis is important to relevant findings as well as to make interpretations easier. Both exploratory factor analysis and descriptive statistics analysis are effective in investigating the degree to which certain issues or phenomenon is present with regard to a topic being researched, as is the focus of this study and specified in the research design *(Creswell, 2009).* Furthermore, each of the factors was analysed through Cronbach's Alpha in order to determine the internal consistency of the survey element. The open questions were analysed based on content analysis in order to determine core factors that the students identified as impacting their experience in Athlone Institute of Technology.

3.6 Reliability and Validity Issues

Reliability and validity are important elements in any given study, more especially a quantitative study *(Bryman & Bell, 2011).* Methodology in this research is reliable and valid. Reliability is largely concerned with how findings in a study can be replicated where the same methods are used. Furthermore, it reflects the internal consistency of the items being measured in a survey instrument. Also, validity largely concerned how effectively the elements being investigated are actually measured by the survey instrument *(Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill , 2009).* In enhancing the validity and reliability in this study, Cronbach's Alpha were analysed for each of the factors examined in order to determine the internal consistency of the survey element. Furthermore, the pilot study enhanced the validity of the study as it made it possible for the questionnaire instrument to be refined to meet the objectives of the study and easy to the respondents *(Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill , 2009; Fisher, 2010).* All the

data collected is reliable and valid. Before carrying out investigation, an initial pilot test was carried out on ten respondents before the official survey commenced. The core purpose for this was to understand how effective the questionnaire was in collecting data and further refine it to make it more effective and easier for the respondents to answer the questions. In the pilot study, Cronbach's Alpha reliability test was conducted in order to measure the internal consistency of the factors measuring various factors in the study. Areas of weaknesses were improved to make the questions more clear. *Creswell (2009)* argued that a pilot study is imperative in ensuring that the instrument measures will tell what they intended it to say. Thus, this enhances both the validity and reliability of the instrument in collecting the needed data and the research as a whole is reliable and valid.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues tend to affect all studies so it is imperative to examine the ethical considerations which are taken into account for any given study, to ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings *(Fisher, 2010).* In this study, the researcher held all the data collected in confidence and the respondents were not asked to provide any identifying information in order to protect their anonymity. Furthermore, the data was held securely to protect the integrity of the data, and only the respondents accessed it to code it and conduct further analysis. Respondents were required to provide their consents before participation.

3.8 Summary

The above explains why the research used the quantitative methodology in carrying out its study based on a single case study strategy, where the focus of the research was Athlone Institute of Technology. It also explains why a certain research process is effective. The sample in this case was Chinese students in Athlone Institute of Technology. Many methods were taken to make the research valid and reliable. For example, pilot tests were taken to verify the effectiveness of questionnaires while a further qualitative data was collected to test results attained. In analysing the collected data, the SPSS tool was used. In this, exploratory

factor analysis and descriptive statistics analysis were done. This chapter tells to what extent the research process is effective and the research results are worth reading.

4.1 Introduction

When the method is valid, the result is justifiable. In the methods above, this chapter reports results attained in the research methodology objectively in the quantitative and qualitative methods.

4.2 Respondent profile

From the analysed data, it can be noted that the response rate was 96%, with the respondents filling out all of the answers in the questionnaires. From these, as can be noted in *Table 1* below, 56.3% of the respondents were female while 43.8% were male. This may reflect that there were more female Chinese students in Athlone Institute of Technology than male students. In other words, more female students took part in the study. Most of these respondents were 20 years of age as noted in *Table 2* below, with the average age of the respondents being 20.5 years of age, with a standard deviation of 1.8 years.

Table 1: Respondent Gender

Respondent Gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Male	42	43.8	43.8	43.8
Valid	Female	54	56.3	56.3	100.0
	Total	96	100.0	100.0	

Table 2: Respondent Age

Respondent age

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	18	16	16.7	16.7	16.7
	19	16	16.7	16.7	33.3
	20	22	22.9	22.9	56.3
	21	14	14.6	14.6	70.8
	22	8	8.3	8.3	79.2
	23	17	17.7	17.7	96.9
	24	3	3.1	3.1	100.0
	Total	96	100.0	100.0	

An analysis of the schools indicated that the majority of research respondents were from The School of Business Studies (33.3%). As noted in *Figure 3* below, the highest respondents (33.3%) were followed by students from Humanities (24%), Engineering (24%) and finally Science (17.7%). While this may reflect that the sample of Chinese students are mostly from the Business Studies School in Athlone Institute of Technology, as was indicated by the proportion of students from each of the schools, is relative to the total number of Chinese students.
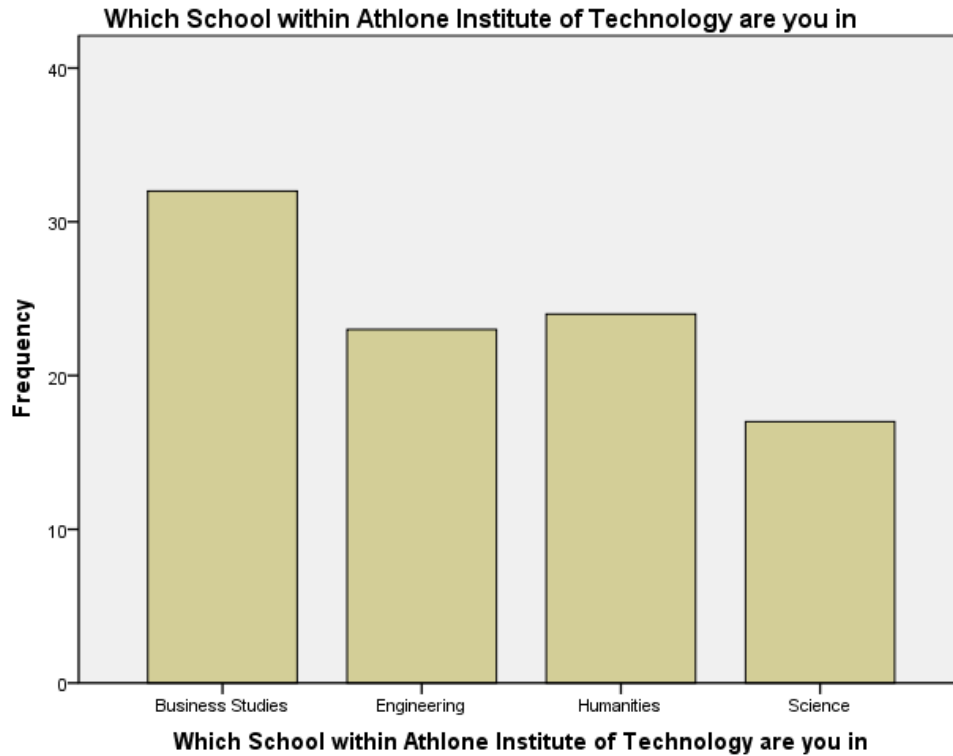
Figure 3: School in which Respondents belonged

Furthermore, an analysis on whether the respondents grew up in Ireland or not, indicated that most of the respondents had not grown up or come from Ireland. As noted in *Figure 4* below, 88.5% of the respondents noted that they had not been raised in Ireland as compared to 11.5%. In *Figure 5* below more than 70% of the respondents noted that they had stayed in Ireland for less than two years, with only 6.3% having stayed more than ten years in the country.
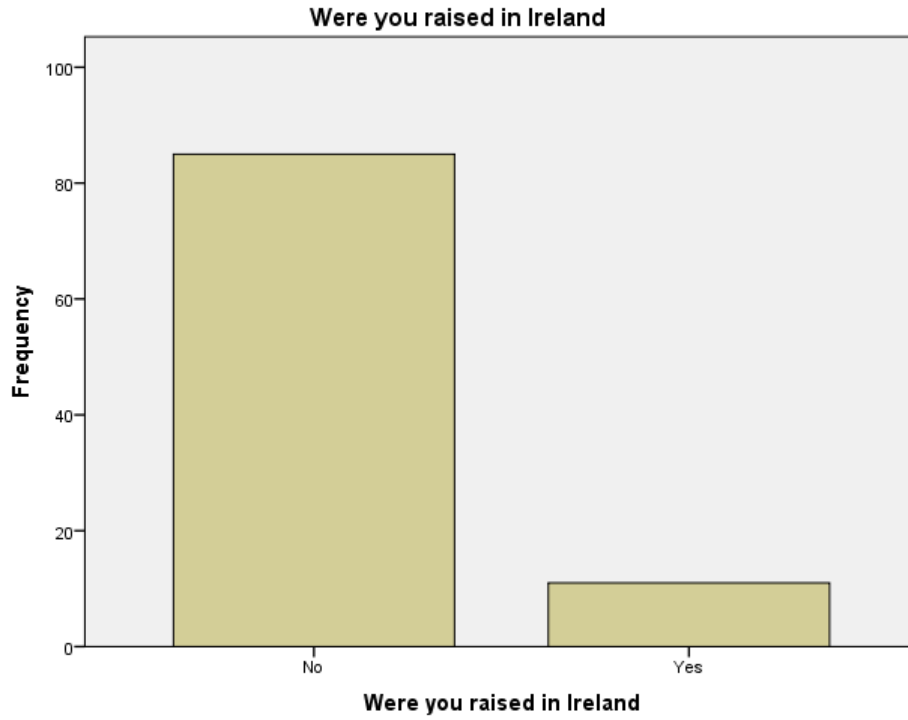
Figure 4: Findings on Chinese students raised in Ireland
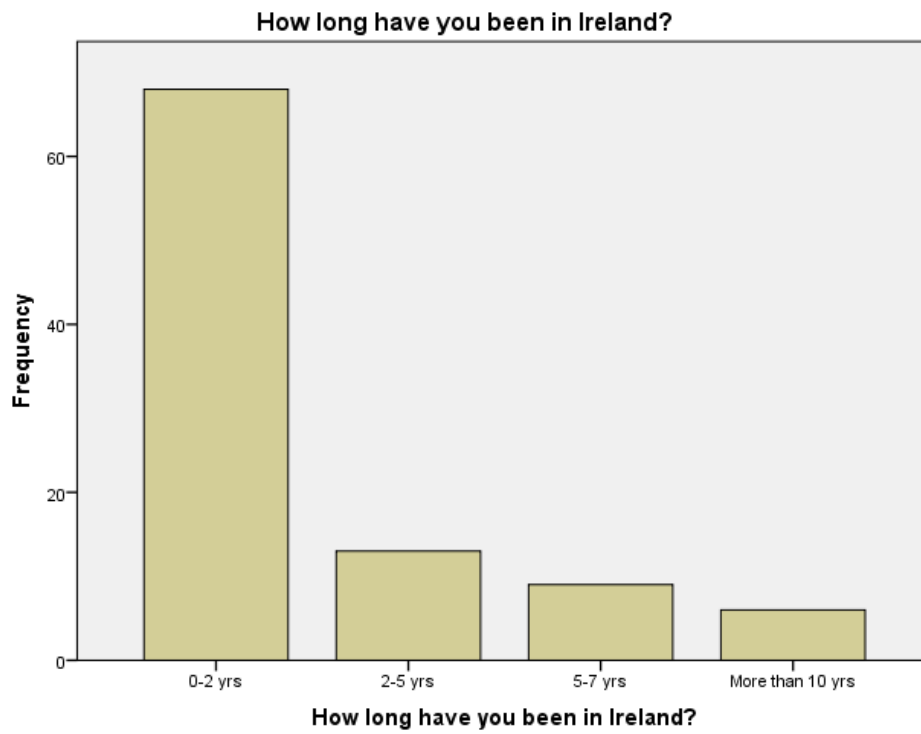
Figure 5: Findings on how long the Chinese students have been in Ireland

4.3 Results

4.3.1 Why Chinese students choose to study in Ireland, specifically Athlone Institute of Technology

Examining the findings regarding why Chinese students choose to study in Athlone Institute of Technology, five items were examined based on a five point Likert scale. These five items had a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.692 which implies that there was a high level of internal consistency for the scale used in measuring the reasons why the students choose to study in Athlone Institute of Technology. This ensured the reliability of the items that measured the Chinese reason to study in Athlone Institute of Technology. In examining the Cronbach's alpha, if each of the items is deleted, it can be noted that, other than from the last item as shown in *Table 3* below, all others had values less than 0.692, implying that the removal of any of these questions would reduce the Cronbach's alpha. Thus, they are relevant in determining Chinese students' responses.

Table 3: Cronbach's Alpha Measurements

Item-Total Statistics

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Squared Multiple Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
Athlone Institute of Technology offers high quality programmes	16.61	3.524	.529	.931	.607

Athlone Institute of Technology has a high reputation and image among Ireland Universities	16.70	3.329	.631	.920	.561
I'm attracted to the area the college is located.	16.61	3.481	.571	.929	.590
Athlone Institute of Technology offers affordable degrees from Ireland	16.75	3.495	.546	.921	.600
Athlone Institute of Technology has a good Pre-sessional English Course	16.78	4.573	.064	.038	.802

The results above showed that the respondents agreed that Athlone Institute of Technology offered high quality education programmes, had a high reputation and image in Ireland, offered affordable degrees and has a good pre-sessional English Course, and was located in a good location. As noted in *Table 4* below, all these factors had Likert values greater than four, implying the respondents agreed with these reasons. It was interesting to note that other than the last item measuring quality of Pre-sessional English Course, none of the respondents disagreed that the examined factors were fundamental in their decision making to choose Athlone Institute of Technology as a school of choice. Based on each of the reasons

examined and the mean values in *Table 4*, it can be noted that the leading reasons was that Athlone Institute of Technology offered quality programmes and the students were attracted to the location of the school. Other reasons were that Athlone Institute of Technology had a good reputation and image in Ireland, followed by the affordability of attending Athlone Institute of Technology, and finally Athlone Institute of Technology had a good pre-sessional English Course.

Table 4: Reasons Chinese Students Choose Athlone Institute of Technology

Statistics

|		Athlone Institute of Technology offers high quality programmes	Athlone Institute of Technology has a high reputation and image among Ireland Universities	I'm attracted to the city the school is located in	Athlone Institute of Technology offers affordable Degrees from Ireland	Athlone Institute of Technology has a good Pre-sessional English Course
N	Valid	96	96	96	96	96
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		4.25	4.17	4.25	4.11	4.08
Median		4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
Std. Deviation		.681	.675	.665	.679	.749
Minimum		3	3	3	3	2

Maximum		5	5	5	5	5

Notably, 47.8% of the respondents agreed that Athlone Institute of Technology offered high quality education, with only 13.5% being unsure about their choice and remaining neutral. On the other hand, 50% of the respondents agreed that Athlone Institute of Technology had a high reputation and image in Ireland as a tertiary education institution, although 13% were unsure regarding this status. However, 31% strongly agreed that it did, and that this was one of the reasons that contributed to the students' choice in enrolling in Athlone Institute of Technology. Interestingly, none of the respondents disapproved of the area in which the school is located and noted that attraction to the local area was among the factors why they may have chosen Athlone Institute of Technology (48%). Furthermore, a larger percentage of respondents however, asserted the value of affordability of Athlone Institute of Technology in getting a degree from Ireland (51%). While some respondents disagreed that a good English programme was part of their reasons (3%), these were only few, with those agreeing that getting into a school with a good English programme was part of their motivation in joining Athlone Institute of Technology (51%) as noted in *Figure 6* below.

Figure 6: Good Pre-sessional English Course as a reason
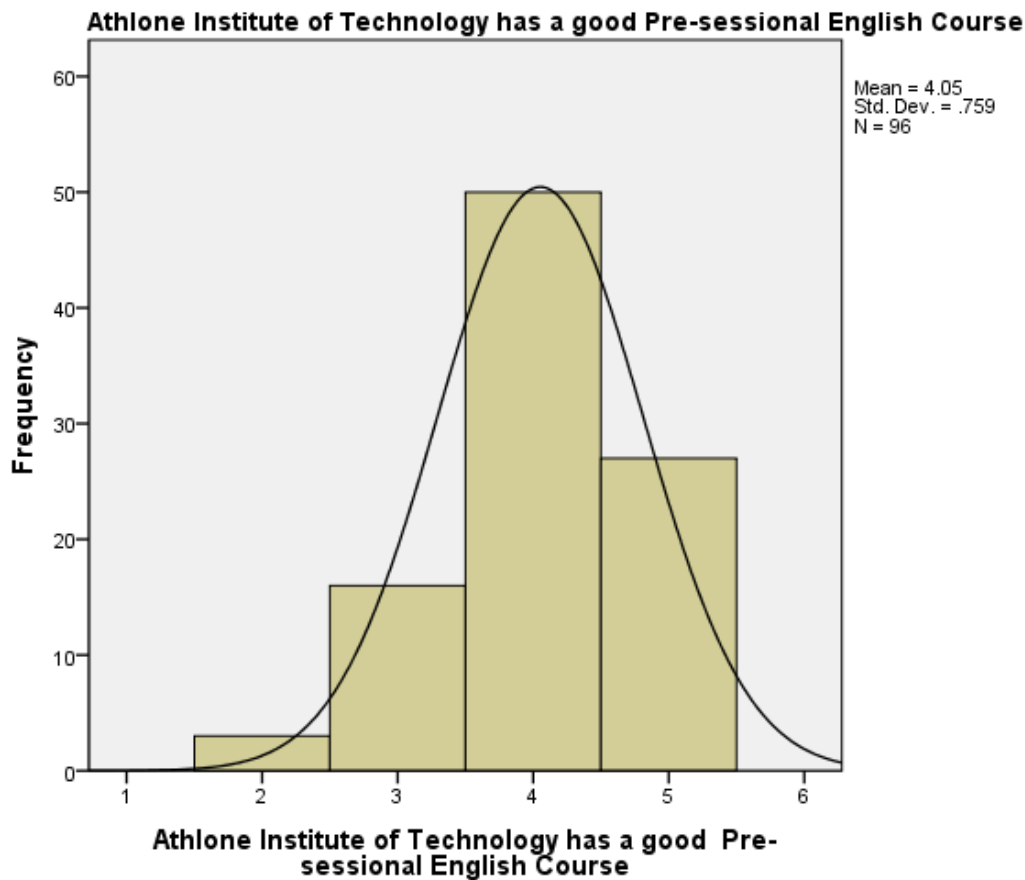
4.3.2 Why Chinese students choose to obtain an overseas qualification

The result also shows the importance of contributing to the career prospect among Chinese students to choose a certain college in Ireland. In examining reasons as to why Chinese students choose to obtain an overseas qualification, all respondents agreed that Irish education enhanced the value of the degrees they held. Examining reliability of the items and the reasons why students choose to obtain overseas education, the result graph reflected a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.683. This Alpha Value indicates that the elements measuring why students choose to obtain overseas qualification have an internal consistency. This is noted in the inter item correlation matrix in *Table 5* below for the five factors examined in the survey instrument. The majority of the factors are positively correlated.

Table 5: Inter-Item Correlation analysis for why Chinese students choose to obtain a qualification from overseas

Inter-Item Correlation Matrix

	Ireland has a high reputation in academic programmes	The experience of a Western culture appeals to me	There is a high social prestige in having an overseas degree	A degree from Ireland betters my chances of getting a better job and greater career success	A degree from Ireland betters my chances to work within a global workforce
Ireland has a High reputation in academic programmes	1.000	.304	.356	.507	.416
The experience of a Western culture appeals to me	.304	1.000	.773	-.074	-.093
There is a high social prestige in having a degree from overseas	.356	.773	1.000	.040	.040

A degree from Ireland betters my chances of getting a better job and career success	.507	-.074	.040	1.000	.813
A degree from Ireland betters my chances to work within a global workforce	.416	-.093	.040	.813	1.000

For the most part, respondents' answers in all of these five items indicated that the respondents agreed that getting a degree in Ireland was preferred as noted in *Table 6* below where the mean scores of each of the elements were around four. From the table, and based on mean values, it can be noted that the leading reasons why Chinese students obtain qualifications from overseas, such as qualifications from Ireland was to enhance their chance to work within a global workforce (4.48), so as to enhance their chance of getting a better job and career success (4.43), in order to attain social prestige by holding a degree from overseas (4.21), or due to the high reputation of degrees in Ireland (4.20), with the least reason being that they desire to get the experience overseas culture (3.92). A majority agreed that Ireland had a high reputation in its academic programmes (63%), although a few were unsure of the quality of the programmes in the school (7%). However, quite a substantial percentage of students strongly agreed that having a degree from Ireland did improve their chances of getting better jobs and having a career success (44%), as well as enhance their opportunity to work within the global workforce (48%). This is as indicated in *Figure 7* below where a large number of respondents are skewed toward agree and strongly agree. However, other factors

such as social prestige and experiencing western culture were elements that positively influenced the Chinese students to pursue overseas education.

Table 6: Why Chinese Students choose to obtain an overseas degree

 Statistics

		Ireland has a High reputation in academic programmes	The desire to experience Western culture appeals to me	There is a high social prestige in having a degree from overseas	A degree from Ireland betters my chances of getting a better job and career success	A degree from Ireland betters my chances to work within a global workforce
N	Valid	96	96	96	96	96
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		4.20	3.92	4.21	4.43	4.48
Median		4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.50
Std. Deviation		.555	.660	.695	.557	.542
Minimum		3	3	3	3	3
Maximum		5	5	5	5	5

Figure 7: A degree from Ireland enhancing chances of getting a better job and career success

4.3.3 Sources of Information that influence Chinese students in their decision making

Sources of information differentiate colleges from each other if they all meet with the same demands of Chinese students. Colleges that appear within the sources of information and meet the demand can attract the right amount of Chinese students while similar ones not appearing there cannot attract them. Analysing the sources of information that the students used in their decision making about studying in Athlone Institute of Technology, it can be noted that among the four elements used to investigate these issues, there was a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.831, which implies that the internal consistency in these four elements was strong and thus effective in measuring sources of information the Chinese students used. As can be noted in *Table 7* below, the inter-item correlation among the elements was positively correlated.

Table 7: Inter-Item Correlation Matrix for items measuring sources of information

Inter-Item Correlation Matrix

	My parents and family greatly influenced me in my choice to study in Athlone Institute of Technology	My friends strongly influenced me in my choice to study in Athlone Institute of Technology	My decision was largely influenced by online information searches and the college's website	My decision was influenced through information attained from Education and Career Fairs in China
My parents and family greatly influenced me in my choice to study in Athlone Institute of Technology	1.000	.899	.129	.911
My friends strongly influenced me in my choice to study in Athlone Institute of Technology	.899	1.000	.142	.844

My decision was largely influenced by online information searches and the college's website	.129	.142	1.000	.140
My decision was influenced through information attained from Education and Career Fairs in China	.911	.844	.140	1.000

Hence, by further analysing these factors, it can be noted that for all the items under study, the respondents agreed that they did use the different sources for their information search which later determined their decision making. However, as noted from *Table 8* below, the leading source of information were the Education and Career Fairs in China (4.17), followed by parents and family influence (4.06), then friends (3.93) and finally the least source of information was the online information searches and Athlone Institute of Technology's website (3.89). Among those sources, education fairs and online information searches can be influenced by colleges.

Table 8: Sources of information for decision making among the Chinese students in Athlone Institute of Technology

Statistics

	My parents and family influenced me in my choice to study in Athlone Institute of Technology	My friends strongly influenced me in my choice to study in Athlone Institute of Technology	My decision was largely influenced by online information searches and the college's website	My decision was influenced through information attained from Education and Career Fairs in China
N Valid	96	96	96	96
Missing	0	0	0	0
Mean	4.06	3.93	3.89	4.17
Median	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
Std. Deviation	.904	.874	.694	.959
Minimum	2	2	2	2
Maximum	5	5	5	5

Arguably, 80.3% of the respondents agreed that their relatives were a great influence in their decision making process regarding pursuing study in Athlone Institute of Technology. However, 9.4% disagreed that their parents were involved or were a source of information, while 9.4% chose to remain neutral. Furthermore, 79.2% of the respondents agreed that families and friends played a major role in being a source of information regarding schools to pursue education overseas, and that such information played an important role in their decision making process. This is as compared to 10.4% who disagreed with this point of view. Overall, a majority of respondents (84.4%), concurred that Education and Career Fairs in

China were good sources of information that influenced their decision making process regarding where to pursue their studies. This shows that the majority of students from China to Ireland have increasingly been relying on Education and Career Fair events to get a deeper understanding and compare between different options of institutions that they could choose. However, based on the analysis of the data, it can be noted that while respondents did agree that online information searches and the college's website were also an important source of information, it was the least important among the other sources examined with regard to how informed their decision was to enrol in Athlone Institute of Technology. This may reflect that either the information available online is not informative enough, or it is inadequate to provide a stronger perception of Athlone Institute of Technology that may influence decision-making.

4.3.4 The benefits viewed by Chinese students, resulting from studying in Athlone Institute of Technology

Reasons for Chinese students' choice may be out of their willingness to attain what they expect. What is the truth depends on what real benefits they gain. Only those aspects that really benefit students can be considered as effective reasons. Understanding the benefits the students view as resulting from enrolling in Athlone Institute of Technology assists in knowing what benefits the students may gain personally and in the process share it with other Athlone Institute of Technology prospective students. This is especially important because it has been noted that friends are an important source of information on whether or not to enrol in overseas education. Examining the six items' likeliness to become the benefit that students face, it can be noted on the graph that they have a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.744 which shows greater internal consistently in the scale and instrument used to measure such benefits as noted in the inter item correlation matrix in *Table 9* below.

Table 9: Inter-item correlation matrix measuring benefits of studying in Athlone Institute of Technology

Inter-Item Correlation Matrix

	Exposure to valuable and unique skills set is a benefit of studying in Athlone Institute of Technology	Flexible programmes is a benefit of studying in Athlone Institute of Technology	Wider job choices and opportunities when I return to China is a benefit of studying in Athlone Institute of Technology	Differentiating myself from the ultra competitive market in China and globally is a benefit of studying in Athlone Institute of Technology	Learning invaluable knowledge on culture and life in Ireland is a benefit of studying in Athlone Institute of Technology	Improved spoken and written English is a benefit of studying in Athlone Institute of Technology
Exposure to valuable and unique skills set is a benefit of studying in Athlone Institute of Technology	1.000	.066	.123	.086	.218	.270

Flexible programmes is a benefit of studying in Athlone Institute of Technology	.066	1.000	.819	.918	.193	.182
Wider job choices and opportunities when I return to China is a benefit of studying in Athlone Institute of Technology	.123	.819	1.000	.890	.044	.055

Differentiating myself from the ultra competitive market in China and globally is a benefit of studying in Athlone Institute of Technology	.086	.918	.890	1.000	.095	.096
Learning invaluable knowledge on culture and life in Ireland is a benefit of studying in Athlone Institute of Technology	.218	.193	.044	.095	1.000	.863

Improved spoken and written English is a benefit of studying in Athlone Institute of Technology	.270	.182	.055	.096	.863	1.000

Furthermore, analysing the data from the study, the respondents did agree that studying in Athlone Institute of Technology has benefits for their future careers. As can be noted from the *Table 10* below and based on the mean scores of the Likert scale codes, it can be noted that the leading benefit that students noted was that studying in Athlone Institute of Technology enhanced their job choices and opportunities when they return to China (4.19), followed by the fact that studying in Athlone Institute of Technology enabled them to gain unique and valuable skills (4.10). Furthermore, the respondents also noted that studying in Athlone Institute of Technology allowed them to differentiate themselves from the ultra competitive market, and further enable them to be able to enter the global workforce with ease (4.03). However, factors about the college also reflected benefits, asserting that Athlone Institute of Technology had more flexible learning programmes, and that studying in there allowed the students gain invaluable knowledge on culture and life in Ireland (3.91), which in turn enhances their intercultural competence. Although the respondents did agree that studying in Athlone Institute of Technology did improve their spoken and written English skills (3.72), which is critical for a person focusing on working within the global workforce,

it was the least important benefit that the Chinese students rated as resulting from their study there.

Table 10: The benefits viewed by Chinese students, resulting from studying in Athlone Institute of Technology

Statistics

	Exposure to valuable and unique skills set is a benefit of studying in Athlone Institute of Technology	Flexible programmes is a benefit of studying in Athlone Institute of Technology	Wider job choices and opportunities when I return to China is a benefit of studying in Athlone Institute of Technology	Differentiating myself from the ultracompetitive market in China and globally is a benefit of studying in Athlone Institute of Technology	Learning invaluable knowledge on culture and life in Ireland is a benefit of studying in Athlone Institute of Technology	Improved spoken and written English is a benefit of studying in Athlone Institute of Technology
N Valid	96	96	96	96	96	96
Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	4.10	3.97	4.19	4.03	3.91	3.72
Median	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
Std. Deviation	.718	.732	.730	.801	.872	.804
Minimum	3	2	2	2	2	2
Maximum	5	5	5	5	5	5

A larger percentage (79.2%) of the respondents agreed that studying in Athlone Institute of Technology exposed them to valuable and unique skills, with only 20.8% neutral on this. Furthermore, 76% of the respondents agreed that Athlone Institute of Technology had flexible programmes, although 2.1% disagreed with this viewpoint and 21.9% were neutral. A larger percentage (85.4%) as noted in *Figure 8* below, agreed that studying in Athlone Institute of Technology enhanced their job choices and opportunities in China, with only a small percentage disagreeing with this factor and a few being unsure. Given the analysis of different factors, it can be noted that the core benefit that Chinese students view as a result of studying in Athlone Institute of Technology is largely with regard to bettering their career choices both in China and within the global market, with other resulting benefits including intercultural competency, gaining valuable skills as a result of adequate learning facilities and equipment in Athlone Institute of Technology. The above data shows among the many consented factors on Chinese students' choice of colleges in Ireland, only the career prospects and the learning of valuable skills are strongly agreed by the enrolled Chinese students. Other factors' are not that apparent.
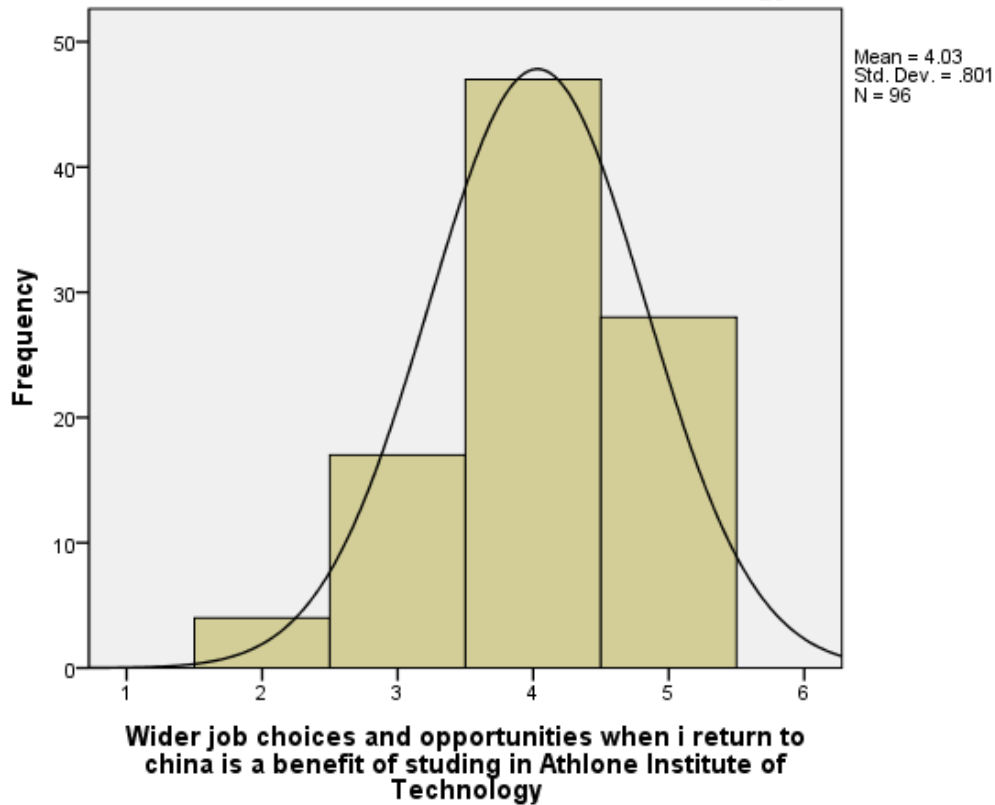
Figure 8: Benefit of Studying in Athlone Institute of Technology - wider job choices and opportunities

4.3.5 The challenges and drawbacks for the Chinese students studying in Athlone Institute of Technology

Existence of challenges and drawbacks can negatively influence Chinese students' choice of colleges in Ireland. They should be coped with in order to attract more such students. When examining challenges and drawbacks for the Chinese students studying in Athlone Institute of Technology, it can be noted that the items used in measuring the challenges and drawbacks were noted to have a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.529, implying that while there was internal consistency in scale and items measured, this level was lower than the previous factors examined. The level of correlation for each of the items is presented in *Table 11*,

where the correlation values are noted to be relatively weak**.** Overall this implies that each of these elements could possibly be factors on their own that need to be examined further.

Table 11: Inter-Correlation matrix on Challenges and drawbacks for Chinese students in Athlone Institute of Technology

Inter-Item Correlation Matrix

	One of the challenges is that the culture shock is crippling and limits integration into the environment	One of the challenges is that students tend to be in exclusive Chinese student groups which limits opportunities for interaction and benefits of living abroad	English is difficult. Writing, listening and comprehending at the same time is a tough skill to master
One of the challenges is that the culture shock is crippling and limits integration into the environment	1.000	.274	.258

One of the challenges is that students tend to be in exclusive Chinese student groups which limits opportunities for interaction and benefits of living abroad	.274	1.000	.301
English is difficult. Writing, listening and comprehending at the same time is a tough skill to master	.258	.301	1.000

Analysis of the data collected showed that by a large degree, most of the students were either neutral or disagreed with items examined as challenges they faced studying in Athlone Institute of Technology as noted in *Table 12* below. However, the leading challenge noted was the issue of culture shock which tended to limit their full integration into the school (3.28), followed by the issue of having exclusive Chinese student interaction groups which further limits opportunities for interaction (3.15). Most of the respondents disagreed that English was challenging where the skill of listening, writing and comprehending at the same time was concerned.

Table 12: Challenges and Drawbacks for Chinese students in Athlone Institute of Technology

Statistics

	One of the challenges is that the culture shock is crippling and limits integration into the environment	One of the challenges is that students tend to be in exclusive Chinese student groups which limits opportunities for interaction and benefits of living abroad	English is difficult. Writing, listening and comprehending at the same time is a tough skill to master
N Valid	96	96	96
Missing	0	0	0
Mean	3.28	3.15	2.97
Median	3.00	3.00	3.00
Std. Deviation	.777	.794	.989
Minimum	2	2	1
Maximum	4	4	4

Arguably, it can be viewed while 47.9% agreed that culture shock presented them a challenge in adjusting to living and studying in Ireland, a significant percentage (32.3%) were unsure about culture shock while 19.8% disagreed that culture shock presented a challenge to them. This shows that although a large percentage did agree with this factor, 52.1% of the respondents were either unsure or disagreed, meaning that while culture shock may be an issue, a large percentage of students were focusing on dealing with it or adopted a positive attitude. This was the same as exclusive Chinese students groups, where students pair into groups of Chinese only friends as a way to cope within a foreign environment. Arguably, although 39.5% did agree that exclusive Chinese groups did limit their opportunities for interacting with other non-Chinese students, a significant percentage (35.4%) were neutral on this matter, with 25% disagreeing that such Chinese groups did limit their opportunities for

interaction with other students from different countries. This shows that either the students felt the Chinese groups did not deter them from interacting with others, or they did not think there were exclusive Chinese groups. Finally, while 38.5% of the students agreed that skill writing, reading and comprehending English at the same time was challenging, especially given that English has different syntax and forms of expression to Chinese, a larger percentage (63.5%) of respondents either disagreed with this viewpoint or were neutral. This shows that while the students may be facing challenges in their English language and written skills, they also perceive themselves as having improved significantly, continually gaining essential skills in English. This result means that Chinese students may face negative impact because of culture shock. This has been confessed by many existing Chinese students in Ireland represented by the Athlone Institute of Technology. Colleges in Ireland may not be directly influenced by this factor in terms of attracting Chinese students. However, mitigating this negative influence surely increases the possibility of Chinese students to study in Ireland. To sum up, the questionnaire results show an exploratory factor analysis of the various items investigated resulted in a factor finding of seven main factors with a cumulative percentage of 88.55% as shown in *Appendix 2* and *3*. As shown in *Appendix 3*, the first factor regarding sources of information, parents, family and friends and career fairs were noted to have a significant impact as they loaded on this factor. The benefits of studying in Athlone Institute of Technology are loaded in two factors, 2 and 5. From these the main benefits included differentiating oneself in the competitive Chinese and global labour market, the flexible programmes in Athlone Institute of Technology and wider opportunities and choices that students would have in China. Furthermore, the students valued their improved English language skills and gaining invaluable cultural competence and knowledge. The relevant reasons for joining Athlone Institute of Technology included were that Athlone Institute of Technology had a good reputation, offered affordable programmes, offered high quality

programmes and the students were attracted to the area in which Athlone Institute of Technology was located. Furthermore, having a degree from Ireland enhanced their chance to work in a global environment, enhanced their chances for career success and getting a good job and further enhanced their social prestige. The last two have been engrained in Chinese students' minds regarding Irish colleges, while the other factors are not that impressive in their minds.

4.3.6 Changes Athlone Institute of Technology needs to make to attract more foreign students

Given the results through the questionnaire, the next question to be answered is whether colleges in Ireland should do something to change the current situations especially concerning the drawback of culture shock for the Chinese students. In examining results from Chinese students, their experience was good, although with some challenges. The content analysis of the responses given by the students showed that the respondents were more satisfied with their interactions and relations with other international students from different nationalities, than they did with the European students. They were also likely to mix with other Asian students, not just Chinese, than they were likely to mix with the European students, with the fundamental issue raised being that they had more commonalities with the Asians and felt less intimated speaking English with students from other nationalities. For most respondents, while they believed that their language skills were good, they also lacked in confidence especially when it came to face to face interaction with students who spoke faster and clearer English. For instance, one of the respondents noted that:

"Students from other countries speak English at the same level I do and express themselves well as I do. But this is different when talking to or discussing something with local students

who have good English and speak quickly. They become impatient and I feel a lot of pressure talking and interacting than when I do interacting with other students."

However, most of the respondents noted that while they may easily interact and make friends with Asian students, they were also making efforts in order to ensure interaction with a diversity of students. For instance, one student noted that:

"*Too much Chinese is not too good because it is like being in college in China and not living abroad. So I always try to get beyond my discomforts and actively interact with other students, like going to parties.*"

However, most of the students noted that learning in Ireland was better and although the students had had difficulty adapting to how things were taught in Ireland, they have had to adapt. For instance, one respondent noted that:

"*At first when I came, my English was not good and I did not understand lectures well. Learning English is different when you have to interact. Some tutors speak quickly or use jargon I don't understand. So I have to complement with more studies in the library, and I think I'm now catching up*"

Other respondents noted that they found group work to be quite good and enjoyable although initially, it had been intimidating. Overtime the students have learnt to work in groups and adapt. While the students needed time to form their utterances and expressions, they also noted that they were more comfortable and adapted than when they initially started their studies.   For instance, one student noted that:

"*In the beginning, when workings in groups I was sceptical and found it hard to express the knowledge I had smoothly. I have grown to like group work because the members are quite diverse and I realised I might not be the only one nervous, so I actively participate, although I still have to think in order to put my views in well.*"

Another respondent noted that:

"When I first got feedback on my assignment, I was so depressed and thought I was failing. But the tutor explained that the feedbacks were to improve and be more critical, and not a final mark. So I started adding my viewpoints and not just taking ideas in books or what teachers say as the truth, as I used to. It is really exciting questioning ideas. I think tutors here are more serious on research."

Furthermore, when Chinese students were asked about changes that Athlone Institute of Technology needed to make in order to attract more foreign students, it can be noted that quite a number of respondents left their questions unanswered. However, of the ones that responded, most noted that having competitive tuition rates was critical in attracting more Chinese students. Furthermore, other students noted that the college needed to leverage its capabilities in being research oriented and having effective facilities in order to appeal to Chinese students, especially those pursuing engineering courses and are more attracted towards innovative thinking. Others recommended development to improve institution support. A wide range of activities in The Student Union may be of interest to Chinese students and other international students. The Student Union largely promoted a pub culture and there weren't enough activities to foster mixing of the students with the home students, for instance, cross country tours and job fairs, among others including sporting competitions such as table tennis and badminton. This gives hints concerning what colleges in Ireland should do to mitigate the drawback of culture shock, that is, to offer interactive activities for Chinese students with those from other countries.

4.4 Summary

This chapter summarizes what are found in the research process. The main results are as follows: it can be noted that the leading reasons why Chinese students obtain qualifications from Ireland was to enhance their chances to work within a global workforce, so as to enhance their chances of getting a better job and career success, in order to attain social

prestige by holding a degree from overseas, or due to the high reputation of degrees in Ireland. Other reasons included being able to experience overseas culture. The leading source of information was the Education and Career Fairs in China. Other sources included friends, online information searches and Athlone Institute of Technology's website. Athlone Institute of Technology has a more flexible learning programme that allowed students gain invaluable knowledge on culture and life in Ireland. Although studying in Athlone Institute of Technology improved students' spoken and written English skills, it was the least important benefit. The leading challenge they faced however was to change exclusive Chinese students' interaction groups. The students were more satisfied with their interactions and relations with other nationalities than they did with the Irish and the European students. This was because they had more commonalities with the Asian students and felt less intimated speaking English with students from other nationalities. While the respondents believed that their language skills were good, they also lacked of confidence especially when they talked with some students whose English were better than them. However, most of the respondents noted that while they may easily interact and make friends with Asian students, they were also making efforts in order to interact with a diversity of students. Although the students had had difficulty adapting to life and the teaching methods in Ireland, they eventually have been able to adapt. They found group work to be quite good and enjoyable although initially, it had been intimidating. Finally, the respondents noted that greater institutional support such as Student Union services would be good in further enhancing the Chinese students' experience in Athlone Institute of Technology. Those results are gained through primary sources. Whether they are reliable is uncertain, which depends on the synthesis of them with theoretical supports.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

In view of these findings, this chapter discusses these findings by tying them with literature review and making commentary on implications of these findings so as to test the reliability of research results.

5.1 Why Chinese students choose to study in Ireland and specifically in Athlone Institute of Technology

A lot of factors such as costs, academic credit, fears, location, access to relevant information needed to make decisions, academic and social support in the learning programme, and availability of learning resources strongly influenced the attitudes that students held in studying abroad *(Peterson, 2003; Bodycott, 2009)*. Ireland is one of those countries for Chinese students to consider studying abroad in. It is thus reasonable that Athlone Institute of Technology attracted Chinese students because it offered high quality education programmes; it had a high reputation and image in Ireland, offered affordable degrees and had good Pre-sessional English Courses. However, those students choosing Athlone Institute of Technology in Ireland, place different priorities when considering the above reasons.

From the results of the study, it is noted that the leading reason is that Chinese students can obtain overseas qualifications, such as a qualification from Ireland, which can help them to enhance their chances to work within a global workforce, thus enhancing their chances of getting a better job and career success. This is reasonable since *Hung, Chung & Ho. (2000)* asserted that the main factors the students considered in their choice to study abroad included the high quality of education, the possibility of opportunities for migrating into the country in the future. They implied those factors such as quality of education, college image and other factors finally serve the purpose of learning which can be divided into job chances, immigration, and further education. Employment prospects and immigration prospects, as

well as education quality are factors considered by most international students *(Wang and Diu; 2005; Bass, 2005)*. Among the three purposes, this implies most of Chinese students target the final purpose of finding a good job. While the increasingly higher education among labour force and increasing number of international development based companies entails the necessity of international knowledge. Foreign colleges including the Athlone Institute of Technology provide highly advanced knowledge and different environments. It is justifiable that most of the prestigious universities globally are highly recognised in various organisations around the world *(Brown, 2003; Sin, 2006)*.Thus studying in Athlone Institute of Technology can facilitate Chinese students to find a good job in the competitive employment market.

Besides career prospects and value on employment prospects, the students can be influenced by social prestige of colleges too. Among the subjective norm elements there is social prestige and status in studying abroad *(Booker; 2001)*. This is in line with the finding of influencing factor of social prestige. The students preferred studying in a location and institution whose degrees are valued in China and are viewed as being of a higher quality. Part of the quality factors that Chinese students take into consideration include factors such as having an academic and social support in the learning programme, availability of learning resources, ease of employment after study, and having an English speaking environment *(Bodycott, 2009)*. *Hemsley and Brown (2012)* asserted that most students core reasons for choosing to apply to a given university was their perception of quality education in the universities. This reflects the link between the quality in Athlone Institute of Technology and the perceived quality in having a degree from Ireland. Therefore, Chinese students perceive western education as having a more experienced environment that is research and innovation oriented, and with prestigious and good quality education. Thus, at times the institution may not matter as much as the country the institution is located in *(Rudd, Djafarova &, 2012)*.

Bodycott (2009) and Wilkins, Balakrishnan and Huisman, (2012) noted that investment in studying abroad was largely driven by the belief a high quality education reflects a better future among the Chinese. It is thus justifiable that high education reputation is the second most important factor for the Chinese students to choose Athlone Institute of Technology. Furthermore, *Hung, Chung & Ho (2000)* asserted that high quality education, cost of living and competitively lower tuition fees were among the factors that students considered before making their choices to study abroad. However, unlike *Hung, Chung & Ho*'s findings regarding the possibility that there were opportunities for migrating into the country in the future, most Chinese students in Athlone Institute of Technology were more concerned with working within a global work environment, than simply immigrating to a particular area. This means that they are more likely to search for employment either in China, Ireland or other countries such as the US and UK since their qualifications may be viewed favourably. In the majority of cases, most of the reasons uncovered for Chinese students choosing to study in Athlone Institute of Technology are much similar to other findings of their choice to study in other countries, specifically western countries *(Mazzarol & Souter, 2002; Li, 2007; Hung, Shive, Wang & Diu, 2005; Bass, 2005).* Obviously the findings in this research are in line with the advocates in the above related researches: the factors affecting priority are their chance of career success, social prestige, high reputation and experience overseas culture.

5.2 Sources of Information that influence Chinese students in their decision making

Source of information is also a factor influencing students' choice of colleges. From the results of the study, it can ascertain that the students used different sources for their information search which later determined their decision making. The leading source of information were the Education and Career Fairs in China, followed by parental and family influence, then friends and thereafter the online information searches and Athlone Institute of Technology's website, which is consistent with the finding by *Bodycott (2009)* that parents

played a paramount role in decision making and as a source of information. A majority did agree that Education and Career Fairs in China were a good source of information that informed their decision making process regarding where to pursue their studies. This shows that a majority of students, other than relying on parents and family and friends as sources of information, they have strongly and increasingly been relying on Education and Career Fair events to get a deeper understanding and compare between the different options that they could choose. *Simpson and Tan (2009)* noted that career fairs are integral sources of information for students who have no contacts abroad, which a lot of universities and colleges around the world attend in order to provide information with regard to requirements and admission to the students. Furthermore, most respondents agreed that their friends greatly influenced in their decision-making process regarding pursuing studies at Athlone Institute of Technology. This observation is more convincing considering previous findings that suggested recommendations from parents, family and friends played an important role as the initial point of information regarding an institution of studies abroad *(Wilkins, Balakrishnan & Huisman, 2012).*Arguably, this can largely be in terms of a previous student who has had experience in a given institution and was able to get a good job afterwards. *Bodycott (2009)* had similar viewpoints arguing that parents played a paramount role in decision making and as a source of information. The finding of effectiveness of career fairs and online information is consistent with the above researches. They all imply that colleges in Ireland should increase its appearance in those places so as to attract more Chinese students.

5.3 The benefits and challenges for the Chinese students in studying in Athlone Institute of Technology

From the results analysed the students agreed that studying in Athlone Institute of Technology had benefits especially with regard to their future careers. The leading benefit the students studying in Athlone Institute of Technology had was the enhancement of job choices

and opportunities when they return to China, followed by the fact that studying in Athlone Institute of Technology enabled them gain unique and valuable skills because of good education. Furthermore, the respondents noted that studying in Athlone Institute of Technology allowed them to differentiate themselves in the ultra competitive employment market, and further enabled them to be able to enter the global workforce with ease. However, factors about the college also reflected benefits, asserting that Athlone Institute of Technology had more flexible learning programmes, and that studying in Athlone Institute of Technology allowed the students gain invaluable knowledge on culture and life in Ireland, which in turn enhances their intercultural competence. The multicultural environment has been considered as a strength for foreign colleges *(Li and Bray, 2007; Chen, 2008).*Although the respondents did agree that studying in Athlone Institute of Technology improved their spoken and written English skills, which is critical for a person focusing on working within the global workforce, it was the least important benefit that the Chinese students rated as resulting from their study in Athlone Institute of Technology. These benefits align with reviewed literature. Studying overseas, especially within a western context should be able to enhance the students' intercultural competence *(Wang, Harding & Mai, 2012).* Students believed that studying abroad enhanced their future career prospects and employability as they were able to acquire skills and knowledge that enables them to work within a global work environment or within a multicultural work environment *(Huang, Turner & Chen, 2014).* Campus environment in Athlone Institute of Technology provides opportunities for prolonged and intense forms of contact and interaction for Chinese students with the natives, thus enhancing an understanding of different cultures and interactions with a diversity of people *(Andersson, Sadgrove & Valentine, 2012).*

However, even with such benefits, the students are still faced with some challenges while studying in China. Some students noted that the English language and exclusive Chinese

groups were a challenge. Most of the students disagreed that such Chinese groups limited their opportunities for interaction with other students from different countries. This shows that either the students felt that the Chinese groups did not deter them from interacting with others, or they did not think there were exclusive Chinese groups. This is quite contrary to most popular findings which have noted that students from China tend to self-segregate or there may be little chance for interaction due to differences, as campuses orient certain students on expectations and lifestyles that may not be inclusive *(Andersson, Sadgrove & Valentine, 2012)*. Arguably, as people go into a new foreign environment they are more inclined to seek out individuals like them with similar tastes and understandings in order to make friends easily. They may find it difficult to make friends if they do not understand other students as a result of differences in cultures *(Iannelli & Huang, 2013; Andersson, Sadgrove & Valentine, 2012)*.The students noted that to some point, culture shock was a challenge and tended to limit their full integration into the school. However, while culture shock may be an issue, a large percentage of students were focusing on dealing with it or adopting a positive attitude. Furthermore, students did not agree that skills in writing, reading and comprehending English at the same time was not challenging. A substantial number found it to be so and this shows that while the students may be facing challenges in their English language and written skills, they also perceive themselves as having improved significantly, continually gaining essential skills in English. This was quite contrary to numerous findings which showed that students faced linguistic challenges, whist adjusting to an Anglophone learning environment. Noting that despite a high level of linguistic requirements in the admission to the institutions, students still faced a range of problems in their language skills, particularly oral interaction skills which are essential for participation in seminars and workshops, as well as in proofreading written work *(Hennebry, Lo & Macaro, 2012; Iannelli & Huang, 2013)*. However, to a larger degree the linguistics problems and performance

issues have also been linked to differences in teaching styles which may present a challenge to the students *(Song-Turner & Willis, 2011),* yet not effectively reflect their level of English language skills. The teaching skills in western countries such as Ireland do not align with the Chinese learning thinking and learning styles, where most of the learning is in class and is largely teacher oriented. In western education systems, much of the emphasis is on group and team work. A lot of learning is gained through discussion and completing assignment with other students, which may be challenging for students who are not well versed learning in groups *(Iannelli& Huang, 2013).*However, as students in this study indicate that they were becoming well versed with interacting with other students, as well as grasping good skills in English that allow listening, reading and comprehension at the same time without difficulty, *Mathias, Bruce and Newton (2013)* found that Chinese students tend to adjust well to teaching styles in the west overtime, and thus some of the issues they are faced with may be similar learning issues as those of other students.

From the results regarding the experiences of Chinese students, it can be noted that most of the Chinese students noted that their experience was good, and although they faced some challenges, they increasingly became more adaptable to the new environment. However, the respondents were more satisfied with their interactions and relations with other international students from different nationalities than they were with the Irish and European students. They were also likely to mix with other Asian students, not just Chinese, than they were likely to mix with the European students. The reasoning for this was that they had more commonalities with Asians and felt less intimidated speaking English with students from other nationalities. This fact concurred with some studies which found that the technique of instructions to foreign students tended to be challenging, as it differed to how the learning culture was done in their homelands *(Gao, 2008; Wang, 2012; Remedios, Clarke & Hawthorne, 2008).* Cooperative learning to some degree may conflict with some of the values

that Asian students have grown up with. For instance, it may conflict with the high Uncertainty Avoidance culture of Asians where students tend to be shy, especially having come from a teacher centred learning environment *(Zhang &Xu, 2007)*. Factors such as classroom formality, respect for teachers, maintaining group harmony, competition and face saving strategies, such as politeness and listening are some of the challenging factors that influence Chinese student participation in discussion, grading and feedback *(Wang, 2012)*. Their reluctance to interact is understandable. However, the real truth is that they are willing to do so but face some problems. For most respondents, while they believed that their language skills were good, they lacked confidence especially when it came to personal interaction with students who spoke fluent English. This premise aligns with findings that it was more difficult for Chinese students to interact with native students and the Chinese students lacked confidence in the English language *(McMahon, 2011)*. Most of the respondents noted that while they may easily interact and make friends with Asian students, they were also making the effort to ensure that they interacted with a diversity of students. These provided opportunities for forms of contact and interaction for Chinese students with the natives, thus enhancing an understanding of different cultures *(Andersson, Sadgrove& Valentine, 2012)*. So it is imperative for the institutions to take certain actions to mitigate the challenge. Though this challenge does not influence education quality, it does make a difference to the Chinese students learning in Ireland. This is in line with the findings of culture shock as a primary challenge for those students. Thus interactive activities after class and referring to Chinese teaching styles can be used to mitigate the challenges.

5.5 Summary

By relating the research results with the existing literatures, the following results are reliable and applicable in reality. It can be noted that the respondents agreed that Athlone Institute of Technology offered high quality education programmes; it had a high reputation and image in

Ireland and brought about future career prospects, which explained the incentives of current students to choose a right college. A majority of students, other than relying on parents and family and friends as sources of information, have strongly and increasingly been relying on Education and Career Fair events to get a deeper understanding and compare between the different options that they could choose. Studying in Athlone Institute of Technology had benefits especially with regard to their future careers. Among those factors, the high quality education and career prospects are the prior reasons which should be maintained in the future. Furthermore, most of the Chinese students noted that their experience was good, although with challenges. By mitigating the challenges, colleges in Ireland can attract more Chinese students, while neglecting them does not have any influences. Here it suggests that those colleges should refer to Chinese teaching environments and provide interactive activities to help Chinese students to overcome challenges.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1. Introduction

This chapter concludes the contributions in the above sections as well as its implications for the future efforts in the field. The focus of this study was to investigate the reasons why Chinese students choose to attend college in Ireland and the sources of information that influence their decision making, with the study focusing on the example of Athlone Institute of Technology. The scope of the study covered both their reasons for enrolling and their experiences in Athlone Institute of Technology. Contributions of the study and its limitations, as well as its recommendations are noted below.

6.2. Contributions

6.2.1 Factors Chinese students consider before attending Irish Colleges

Athlone Institute of Technology was used a case study to research the factors Chinese students would consider when choosing a foreign university to study in. By investigating the views of current Chinese students, all the reasons uncovered for Chinese students choosing to study in Athlone Institute of Technology were tested and discussed, in terms of reliability by synthesizing other findings of their choice to study in other countries. From the research, the reasons Chinese students obtain qualifications from Ireland were to enhance their chances to work within a global workforce, to enhance their chances of getting a better job and career success and to attain social prestige by holding a degree from overseas. The reality for the current Chinese students is that studying in Athlone Institute of Technology had benefits, especially with regard to future careers, namely enhancing job choices and opportunities when students returned to China, and further enabled them to gain unique and valuable skills. In reality, studying in Athlone Institute of Technology allows the students to differentiate themselves from the ultra competitive market, and further enables them to be able to enter the

global workforce with ease. Athlone Institute of Technology has more flexible learning programmes, and further studying in Athlone Institute of Technology allows the students to gain invaluable knowledge on culture and life in Ireland, which in turn enhances their intercultural competence. Chinese students have a better grasp and understanding of cultural intelligence and thus are better able to create a cultural synergy that enriches their learning experiences and intercultural competence.

Also, the high quality education which relates to a better future, matters too. This is because the students preferred studying in a location and institution whose degrees are valued in China and are viewed as being of higher quality. To detail, many aspects decide the prestige of an institution, which include having an academic and social support in the learning programme, availability of learning resources, ease of access to employment after study, and having an English speaking environment. The above indicates that universities should make efforts to improve students' future careers after graduation and improve their own reputation by providing higher quality education.

6.2.2 Ways to attract more Chinese students

While the factors that Chinese students care about when choosing a foreign university are a must for Irish colleges to increase their pool of future Chinese students, there are other aspects they should pay attention to in order do this more effectively. The Chinese students used different sources for their information search which later determined their decision making. The leading source of information was the Education and Career Fairs in China. This was followed by parental and family influence, then the influence of friends and finally the least source of information was the online information searches and Athlone Institute of Technology's website. A majority of students, other than relying on friends as sources of information, have strongly and increasingly been relying on Education and Career Fair events to get a deeper understanding and compare between the different options that they have.

Career fairs are a particularly important initial point of information for students who have no contacts abroad. In a similar view, recommendations from parents, family members and friends played an important role as the initial point of information regarding a given institution abroad, particularly previous students who have studied abroad. Therefore it is a must for all Irish colleges wanting to attract Chinese students, to attach importance to career fairs.

6.2.3 Challenges and actions to take in order to mitigate challenges

It is usually taken for granted that the students are better able to fit within the global work environment, and acquire skills and knowledge that enables them to work within a global work environment or within a multicultural work environment. However, the students were faced with some challenges to fully realize the benefit, although the discussion showed that these were relatively minimal, as the students were increasingly adapting to the new environment. While some students noted that the English language and Chinese interaction groups were a challenge, most of the students disagreed that such Chinese groups limited their opportunities for interaction with other students from different countries. This is quite contrary to most popular findings which have noted that students from China tend to self-segregate or there may be little chance for interaction due to differences in preferences as campuses orient certain students on expectations and lifestyles that may not be inclusive. Although by a large degree students did not agree that skills in writing, reading and comprehending English was not challenging, a substantial number found it to be so and this shows that while the students may be facing challenges in their English language and written skills, they also perceive themselves as having improved significantly, continually gaining essential skills in English. As students in this study indicate, they were becoming well versed with interacting with other students as well as grasping good skills in English. This means that Chinese students are increasingly adjustable to Western teaching styles.

However, one challenge for the students was culture shock. Culture shock tended to limit the students' full integration into the school, although students seemed like they were adopting a positive attitude with regard to differences in culture. Universities should address the challenge, which would help them gain interest from more Chinese students.

In the minds of the respondents they hoped for interactions and relations with other international students from different nationalities than they did with the Irish and European students. Furthermore, the students are better able to fit in within the global work environment. Students believed that studying abroad enhanced their future career prospects and employability as they are able to acquire skills and knowledge that enables them to work within a global work environment or within a multicultural work environment. This is because the campus environment in Athlone Institute of Technology provides opportunities for prolonged forms of contact and interaction for Chinese students with the natives thus enhancing their cultural intelligence. The truth is in contrast to the assumption. Chinese students tend to be silent participants in group discussions with Western students, initially when they join the groups, with this largely being due to cultural and social perspectives that the Chinese hold with regard to learning. For instance, the value that a person makes the most impression is one who is modest about their experience, knowledge and capabilities. This becomes problematic where verbal expression is used as a core measurement of learning and active engagement. The technique of instruction tended to be challenging as it differed to how learning was done in China. For most students, while they believed that their language skills were good, they lacked confidence especially when it came to face to face interaction with students who spoke faster and clearer English. However, most of the respondents noted that while they may easily interact and make friends with Asian students, they were also making efforts to ensure they interacted with a diversity of students. These provided opportunities for forms of contact and interaction for Chinese students with the natives thus

enhancing an understanding of different cultures and interactions with a diversity of people. However, most of the students noted that learning in Ireland was better and although the students had had difficulty adapting to how things were done in Ireland and how students were taught, they have been able to adapt quickly. Respondents noted that they found group work to be quite good and enjoyable although difficult initially. Interaction with the natives is desired as well as an introduction to the teaching techniques for the Chinese students to easily adapt to. For example, they could encourage the Chinese people to join in certain councils so that they could interact with the local people or they can consider involving the following features in their teaching: classroom formality, respect for teachers, maintaining group harmony, competition and face saving strategies such as politeness and listening, as these are some of the challenging factors that influence Chinese student perception in discussion, grading and feedback.

6.3 Implications and Recommendations of the study

Implied by the contributions of this research, the current universities in Ireland can refer to the affecting factors and ways to attract Chinese students as well as challenges to increase the number of new Chinese students studying in Ireland. From the influencing factors, the implications are that Chinese students largely joined Athlone Institute of Technology in order to get a good quality qualification that would make them competitive especially in China. Education quality should be improved in terms of the learning environment or support, to create a good reputation. Besides, they have to try to raise the possibility of getting employed by large companies in the local market. Also, they must guarantee their presence in educational affairs, and try to influence the Chinese' view to them if possible. From the perspective of the challenge of insufficient interaction with the natives, the solution is The Student Union. Most Chinese students were rarely aware of the services available in school which they could use, for instance The Student Union services. The Student Union largely

promoted a pub culture, and there weren't enough activities to foster mixing of the students with the home students. It is recommended that there be an active involvement and inclusion of international students in Student Union's so as to encourage a wide range of activities that may be of interest to Chinese students, and other international students. Such interactions can to be attained through recreational activities, group discussion and parties which play an important role in helping Chinese meet more native students and interact with them more, although by a large degree such activities need to be largely informal and organised by the students so as to foster a natural and authentic level of interaction and communication. This is an effective way for the Chinese students studying in Ireland to have a better grasp and understanding of cultural intelligence and adaptation and because they are more able to create a cultural synergy that enriches their learning experiences and intercultural competence. Considering students from different cultures or nationalities may tend to self-segregate or there may be little chance for interaction, colleges in Ireland should resort to interactive activities and improve the learning environment by corresponding to the Chinese learning environment.

6.4 Limitations and further study

This research is limited in its coverage of samples in each school. Among the research samples, most of them are from Business, Humanities, Engineering and so on. Thus it might not be true when it comes to Chinese students wanting to learn in other fields. Also, the number of samples included when divided into each school is limited which might challenge the reliability of the research results. Future research can try to further explore the reasons for Chinese students to choose different majors, which may further make changes to the reasons of choosing a certain school of a specific university. Meanwhile future researches can be devoted to employing a larger sample so as to enhance the reliability of the findings. Thus, the research will be able to give specific ways of increasing the number of Chinese students

attending Irish colleges. For example, when it is mentioned that Irish colleges should improve its reputation in China and refer to some Chinese teaching techniques, the exact ways to do so awaits further research.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Questionnaire

Questionnaire

Dissertation Title:

Investigation of the reasons why Chinese students choose colleges in Ireland as a place

to study

The case of Athlone Institute of Technology in Ireland

Dear Respondents,

This questionnaire is developed and designed to investigate reasons why Chinese students choose Irish Universities as places to study, focusing on why they chose to study in Athlone Institute of Technology.   The data collected from the questionnaires is solely for academic research and would not be used in any other way. All responses provided will be treated confidentially. No answer is right or wrong. Answer each question to the best of your knowledge, indicating how it applies to you. Your cooperation is greatly appreciated.

If you have any questions please email me at:

Student Name: _____

School: _____

Address: _____

Supervisor: _____

PART A: RESPONDENT'S PERSONAL INFORMATION

Kindly tick (√) on the appropriate answer

1. **Gender**

◯ Male   Female ◯

2. **Age** _____

3. **Which School within Athlone Institute of Technology are you in?**

◯ Business Studies

◯ Engineering

◯ Humanities

◯ Science

4. **Were you raised in the Ireland?**

◯ Yes

◯ No

5. **How long have you been in the Ireland?**

◯ 0-2 Yrs

◯ 2-5 Yrs

◯ 5-7 yrs

◯ More than 7 years

PART B: REASONS FOR STUDYING IN IRELAND: Athlone Institute of Technology

 a) To examine why Chinese students chose Athlone Institute of Technology

Please indicate the level by which you agree with the following statement by ticking (√) in the provided space. "5" shows that you strongly agree while "1" shows that you strongly disagree

No.	Question	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
6.	Athlone Institute of Technology offers high quality programmes					
7.	Athlone Institute of Technology has a high reputation and image among Irish universities					
8.	I'm attracted to the area the school is located in					
9.	Athlone Institute of Technology offers an affordable degree					
10.	Athlone Institute of Technology has a good Pre-sessional English Course					

 b) To investigate reasons why Chinese students in Athlone Institute of Technology want to attain an overseas degree

Please indicate the level by which you agree with the following statements by ticking (√) in the provided space. "5" shows that you strongly agree while "1" shows that you strongly disagree

No.	Question	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
11.	Ireland has a high reputation in its academic programmes					
12.	The desire to experience Western culture appeals to me					
13.	There is high social prestige in					

No.	Question	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
	having an overseas degree					
14.	A degree from Ireland betters my chances of getting a better job and career success					
15.	A degree from Ireland betters my chances to enhance my opportunity to work within the global workforce					

c) **To investigate sources of information that influence the decision making process in their choice of Athlone Institute of Technology**

Please indicate the level by which you agree with the following statement by ticking (√) in the provided spaces. "5" shows that you strongly agree while "1" shows that you strongly disagree

No.	Question	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
16.	My parents and family greatly influenced me in my choice to study in Athlone Institute of Technology					
17.	My friends strongly influenced me in my choice to study in Athlone Institute of Technology					
18.	My decision making was largely influenced by online information searches through the university's website					
19.	My decision was influence through information attained from Education and Career Fairs in China					

d) **Benefits of studying in Athlone Institute of Technology**

Please indicate the level by which you agree with the following statement by ticking (√) in the provided spaces. "5" shows that you strongly agree while "1" shows that you strongly disagree

No.	Question	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
20.	Exposure to valuable and unique skill sets					
21.	Flexible programmes					
22.	Wider choice of jobs on return to China					
23.	Differentiate myself from the ultra competitive graduate market in China and globally					
24.	Learn invaluable knowledge on culture and life in the Ireland					
25.	Improve the spoken and written English language					

e) The challenges/drawbacks of studying in Athlone Institute of Technology

Please indicate the level by which you agree with the following statement by ticking (√) in the provided space. "5" shows that you strongly agree while "1" shows that you strongly disagree

No.	Question	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
26.	The culture shock is crippling and limits integration into the environment					
27.	Exclusive Chinese student groups that limit the opportunities and benefits of living abroad					
28.	English is difficult. Writing, listening					

and comprehending at the same time in a lecture is a tough skill to master					

f) Experience in Athlone Institute of Technology

Answer the following questions based on your experience in Athlone Institute of Technology and potential areas of improvement

29. How has your experience in Athlone Institute of Technology been as a Chinese student? Explain. Are there areas that can be improved to enhance the experience?

30. What changes, if any, does Athlone Institute of Technology need to make to attract more foreign Chinese students?

Appendix 2: Exploratory Factor Analysis: Total Variance Explained

Total Variance Explained

Factor	Initial Eigen values			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings[a]
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total
1	3.382	21.139	21.139	2.385	14.903	14.903	2.869
2	3.072	19.199	40.339	1.967	12.293	27.196	2.835
3	2.273	14.207	54.545	1.373	8.579	35.775	2.061
4	1.856	11.601	66.146	2.929	18.303	54.078	2.042
5	1.745	10.905	77.051	2.470	15.441	69.519	2.181
6	1.439	8.992	86.043	1.662	10.389	79.908	1.851
7	1.179	7.366	93.409	1.384	8.648	88.555	1.758
8	.219	1.371	94.780				
9	.199	1.245	96.025				
10	.148	.923	96.947				
11	.137	.857	97.804				
12	.107	.666	98.470				
13	.104	.651	99.121				
14	.060	.378	99.499				
15	.046	.290	99.788				
16	.034	.212	100.000				

Extraction Method: Maximum Likelihood.

a. When factors are correlated, sums of squared loadings cannot be added to obtain a total variance.

Appendix 3: Exploratory Factor Analysis: Pattern Matrix

Pattern Matrix[a]

	Factor						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My parents and family greatly influenced me in my choice to study in Athlone Institute of Technology	1.003						
My friends strongly influenced me in my choice to study in Athlone Institute of Technology	.917						
My decision was influenced through information attained from Education and Career Fairs in China	.900						
Differentiating myself from the ultracompetitive market in China and globally is a benefit of studying in Athlone Institute of Technology		.991					

	1	2	3				
Flexible programmes are a benefit of studying in Athlone Institute of Technology	.932						
Wider job choices and opportunities when I return to China is a benefit of studying in Athlone Institute of Technology	.896						
Athlone Institute of Technology has a high reputation and image among Irish Universities		.991					
Athlone Institute of Technology offers affordable degrees from Ireland		.956					
Athlone Institute of Technology offers high quality programmes			.990				
I'm attracted to the area the school is located in			.906				

Learning invaluable knowledge on culture and life in Ireland is a benefit of studying in Athlone Institute of Technology					.938	
Improved spoken and written English is a benefit of studying in Athlone Institute of Technology					.933	
A degree from Ireland betters my chances to work within a global workforce					.994	
A degree from Ireland betters my chances of getting a better job and greater career success					.818	
There is a high social prestige in having an overseas degree						.978
The desire to experience Western culture appeals to me						.798

Extraction Method: Maximum Likelihood.

Rotation Method: Promax with Kaiser Normalization.

a. Rotation converged in 5 iterations.

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