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“Filling in All the Options”: Chinese Students’ Choice of Transnational Higher Education

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ABSTRACT: *This study examines the decision-making processes of students when considering transnational higher education (TNHE) programs at regional colleges and universities. Drawing on rational choice theory, the study found that students tend to view TNHE as a means to access specific institutions or majors rather than being attracted by the unique characteristics of TNHE programs. Furthermore, many students are not fully aware of the potential benefits of TNHE and express concerns about employment prospects after graduation. The study also highlights the influence of social contexts and other factors on students’ decision-making processes. Based on these findings, the study offers recommendations and suggestions for regional colleges and universities to promote TNHE programs better and support students in their decision-making.*

Keywords: college choice, rational choice theory, regional college, transnational higher education

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BACKGROUND

Over the past two decades, the forces of neoliberal marketization and economic globalization have driven an increase in the exchange of knowledge-based educational products and services across national borders, particularly within the higher education sector (Huang, 2007; Knight, 2016; Mok & Han, 2016). Developed countries, such as the UK, Australia, and the United States, have been spurred to explore avenues to export surplus educational resources to cater to the needs of the global educational market. In contrast, developing countries, with a limited number of educational institutions, have to purchase services or seek cooperation from the global educational market to fulfill the increasing needs of domestic higher education expansion. As a result, new transnational higher education (TNHE) partnerships, programs, modes, and related regulations emerged. These include twinning programmes, joint degree programmes, international branch campuses, and Franchise universities (Knight, 2016).

In China, the TNHE has emerged as a new mode of higher education since the 1980s. The Chinese government initiated the TNHE as part of its educational reforms to keep up with globalization trends (Huang, 2007). TNHE has become a significant strategic plan for the internationalization of higher education in China (Mok & Han, 2016). The introduction of high-quality foreign educational products and services significantly mitigates the shortage of domestic educational resources during the ongoing popularization of higher education in China. This can further promote the necessary reforms in the existing higher education system, thus substantially enhancing the competitiveness and internationalization of Chinese higher education institutions (Lin & Liu, 2007). After 2000, the TNHE in China entered a period of rapid development. As of the end of 2021, there are 2,356 TNHE programs and institutions allocated in 30 provinces throughout China, and the enrollment numbers for TNHEs have surpassed sixty thousand. TNHE has become an important component of Chinese higher education.

The “Contemporary Regulation on Operation of Higher Education Institutions in Cooperation with Foreign Partners” issued by the State Education Commission (SEC) on January 26, 1995, defines TNHE, also known as Sino-foreign Cooperative in Running School (SFCRS, Zhongwai Hezuo Banxue), as “a form of cooperation between foreign countries and China to establish programs or institutions that provide education services within China’s territory mainly to Chinese citizens” (State Council of China, 2003). As the TNHE continues to develop in China, it presents students with a new option for pursuing higher education (Dowling-Hetherington, 2019; Fang & Wang, 2014). Students can choose to study abroad, enroll in a regular higher education program, or opt for TNHE programs. The unique mode of TNHE enables students to receive foreign education and degrees more conveniently and affordably without physically moving abroad (Wilkins et al., 2012). While TNHE offers a valuable alternative to traditional higher education options, research suggests that some students may always view it as their “second” choice (Fang & Wang, 2014). Students still prefer the option of attending domestic higher education institutions rather than enrolling in TNHE, especially at some provincial or regional colleges and universities. With

the limited number of applications they received and the resulting lower level of competition for admission, many TNHE programs have to admit students with lower college entrance exam scores, which will negatively impact the sustainable development of TNHE programs. In higher education, students are the key factor in ensuring the sustainable development of colleges and universities. Thus, how to make institutions or programs more attractive and competitive is an essential issue for college and university administrators to consider for long-term development. This study will take a close look at the process of students' choice of TNHE, and the knowledge generated will contribute to revealing how TNHE can improve competitiveness in the educational market and become more attractive from the perspective of students' choice of higher education.

Choice of TNHE in China

The process of student decision-making in higher education is rational, pragmatic, multifactorial, and highly complex (Wu & Ishii, 2025; Wu & Liu, 2025). It can be influenced by a series of individual and institutional factors, including friends, parents, school location, cost, distance, the program of study, employment opportunities, or career enhancement (He, 2025; Moogan & Baron, 2003; Zhou et al., 2024). In recent years, scholars have been interested in understanding the decision-making processes of students who opt for TNHE programs (Chen & He, 2015; Dowling-Hetherington, 2019; Fang & Wang, 2014; He, 2025; Wu, 2014; Zhou et al., 2024). These studies shed light on the various push and pull factors that drive students to choose TNHE as an alternative higher education option (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2016; Chen & He, 2015; Dowling-Hetherington, 2020; Fang & Wang, 2014; Liu et al., 2021; Wilkins & Huisman, 2011). For example, Fang and Wang (2014) generate an analysis framework based on the "push-pull" concept to interpret students' choice of TNHE and a particular TNHE program. The pull factors identified in their study include experiencing foreign culture and teaching methods, improving foreign language proficiency, enhancing academic competence, expanding international perspective, accessing opportunities for further overseas education, and obtaining degrees from Chinese and foreign partner universities (Fang & Wang, 2014; He, 2025; Lai & Jung, 2025; Luo & Zhang, 2026; Zhou et al., 2024). The push factors identified in domestic and overseas higher education include a lack of access to satisfactory domestic higher education institutions, insufficient major fields, inadequate language training capacity in domestic higher education institutions, low internationalization levels, and family influence (Fang & Wang, 2014).

Similar findings are demonstrated by Chen and He (2015), who surveyed 203 students from three Chinese universities. The results of their study found that six factors were identified as motivators for students' choice of TNHE program, including the high professional level of faculty, improvement of academic skills, acquisition of an international perspective, access to overseas study, employment opportunities, and exposure to international teaching philosophy.

While the literature has provided insights into the factors influencing students' choice of TNHE programs, it remains unclear how Chinese students

decide to choose TNHE despite their preference for other forms of higher education. Thus, this study aims to explore students' decision-making process in depth and to investigate how students balance the benefits and constraints that undergird college decision-making regarding TNHEs through the lens of rational choice theory.

RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY

Over the past few decades, rational choice theory has been widely applied in empirical studies across the sociological field (Kroneberg & Kalter, 2012). Rational choice theory evolves from both economics and sociology and operates on the premise of a "rational person", a central assumption in economics. This assumption posits that all actors in economic activities are rational persons who pursue the maximization of their interests. In sociology, rational choice theory corresponds to the instrumental rational action of Weber's four kinds of social action. Instrumental rational action refers to the fact that people choose the most effective action to achieve their goal through precise calculation.

Actors serve as the fundamental building blocks of social science research. Coleman (1990) expands the research category to a broader social context, recognizing how these external factors can shape individual preferences and goals. Rather than treating individual preferences and purposes as exogenous, he argues that they are endogenous variables influenced by institutions and cultures. Preferences and purposes are the behavioral basis of actors in social life, and most actors are rational individuals who strive to achieve their goals at the minimum cost, to the maximum extent possible. Coleman believes that the main task of social science is to study the operation of the entire social system. To fully understand the social system, actors under the system should be taken as the starting point of research, and social phenomena should be explained according to the behaviors of actors.

Rational choice theory consists of three parts: the transformation from macro to micro, the purposeful actions of actors at the micro level, and the transformation from the micro to the macro level. At the macro level lies the social structure, including institutional and cultural aspects, while at the micro level, we find individual actors and their behaviors. This theoretical framework offers a solution for bridging the gap between these two levels of analysis.

Rational choice theory is based on several fundamental assumptions. First, it posits that individuals are motivated by a desire to maximize their own self-interest. Second, individuals are presented with different behavioral strategies to choose from in any given situation. Third, it holds that actors can intellectually assess the consequences and likely outcomes of these different choices. Finally, the theory acknowledges that individuals have unique preference structures that inform their decision-making.

In China, the college choice process requires students and their parents to act as "rational people" who make effective decisions when filling out colleges and university applications. This process is primarily based on scores obtained from the college entrance examination, aiming to maximize opportunities for admission

to higher-level institutions and programs. Students and their parents are presented with various options with different results. These may include general majors, private colleges, school-enterprise cooperation, and study abroad, among others. As examinees evaluate the available options, they must consider a variety of personal and external factors that can ensure that students will not “waste” any points.

METHODS

To gain an understanding of the students’ decision-making process of choosing TNHEs and their specific needs during this process, this study is designed as a qualitative case study. A case study focuses on complex phenomena, especially “how” and “why” questions, in real-world contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Yin, 2014). In this study, the case is defined as students’ choice to enroll in the three TNHE programs in an Eastern city of China. It is particularly appropriate for this study, as it allows researchers to delve into students’ reasoning processes and decision-making procedures and to capture the interactions between students and social contexts. Through a qualitative case study, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive description of the factors that influence students’ decisions to select TNHE programs and how their decisions interact with social contexts and institutional systems.

Three TNHE Programs

Aligned with Knight’s (2015) universal framework of transnational education (TNE) and its corresponding definitions, the modes of TNE implemented in China fall within the collaborative TNHE provision category (Knight, 2015). Specifically, the TNHE in China is derived from joint, double, or multiple degree programs that involve collaboration between local host institutions of higher education and foreign providers to design and deliver curricula and educational programs.

Under the category of collaborative provision, there are three different modes in practice, including the TNHE program, TNHE institution, and TNHE independent provision. The TNHE program refers to a cooperative education program that is jointly implemented by Chinese and foreign institutions within a Chinese college or university. This mode of transnational higher education (TNHE) involves the establishment of a cooperation agreement or contract between the participating institutions that outlines the terms and conditions for their joint educational activities. The TNHE institution is a collaborative entity that refers to a school with several educational and teaching programs implemented through joint efforts of the host college or university and foreign institutions under the leadership of the host university. The third mode of TNHE is the independent provision, which refers to an educational institution that operates independently of its parent institution, with an independent campus and basic school-running facilities. It is organized by both Chinese and foreign colleges and universities and has an independent civil liability in management and

financial accounting. It should be noted that the definition of an independent TNHE provision in the Chinese context differs from Knight's (2015) definition.

This study was conducted at three higher education institutions governed by provincial authority in the eastern region of China. The research was part of a broader project that evaluated the development of TNHE in the region. Specifically, this study aimed to explore students' reflections on their application and admission experiences in TNHE programs. The three colleges were all less-selective regional colleges, with most of their majors located in the second tier of college admissions. Despite their relatively lower admission standards, these colleges offer various TNHE programs to students seeking international educational opportunities. These colleges are deidentified as A, B, and C.

College A is a provincial public undergraduate college of science and technology located in the capital city of the province in eastern China. It consists of 19 schools offering 57 undergraduate programs and two master's programs. As an institution that prioritizes international exchanges and cooperation, the college has established partnerships with more than 50 universities in more than 20 countries, including Russia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany. It has also enrolled nearly 1,000 students from 50 countries. College A has established a TNHE institution and a program. In 2019, it made history by establishing the first TNHE institution in the province, partnering with Russia to offer two undergraduate majors in Transportation and Civil Engineering. Currently, the TNHE institution has successfully enrolled 525 students from both China and Russia, with no graduates to date.

College B is also a provincial public undergraduate college of science and technology located in the capital city of the province mentioned above. The institution boasts an impressive academic profile that comprises one first-level doctoral degree program, 15 first-level disciplines that award master's degrees, and 83 undergraduate programs. Currently, College B has a substantial student population consisting of 32,448 full-time undergraduates, postgraduates, and international students. College B offers three TNHE undergraduate programs and one TNHE institutional partnership in cooperation with Ukraine. The three TNHE programs are Mechanical Design, Manufacturing and Automation, Brewing Engineering, and Applied Chemistry. The TNHE partnership offers three undergraduate programs in Biotechnology, Light Chemical Engineering, and Visual Communication Design, as well as two master's programs in Pharmaceutical Engineering and Design. The institution boasts a total enrollment of 713 students, both undergraduate and postgraduate.

College C is situated in a prominent tourist city in the eastern region of China. The city is well known for its national key scenic spots and has been listed by the State Council as one of the first batch of tourist cities open to international visitors. College C, as a comprehensive general undergraduate university, comprises 15 secondary colleges, which offer 66 undergraduate majors in total. In 2022, College C initiated an undergraduate TNHE program by introducing Mechanical Design, Manufacturing, and Automation majors with an enrollment of 120 students per phase. Since this TNHE program in College C is relatively new to the institution, the program has enrolled only one class since its establishment.

Data Collection

First, we carefully selected the TNHE programs at three colleges. Despite the fact that colleges A and B have a strong emphasis on engineering, we made a concerted effort to include diverse representatives from majors such as social science and art to minimize bias. Additionally, as part of a larger research project, this study received support from the administration at each of the participating colleges. The program administrators helped us recruit students who were interested in participating. We intentionally selected mostly freshmen and sophomores as participants, although a few seniors also participated.

To better understand students' decision-making processes and experiences when choosing TNHE programs, we conducted one-on-one semistructured interviews with students at each participating college. The interviews were conducted in Chinese and audio recorded for accuracy and thoroughness. In addition to the audio recordings, interviewers also took field notes to record information beyond what was captured in the recordings.

Participant Description

We recruited 31 participants – 13 from College A, 11 from College B, and 7 from College C. Students' majors, gender, and year of college diversified. The participants' majors and demographics are described in Table 1.

Table 1
Participants' Majors and Demographics

		College A	College B	College C
Gender	Male	12	7	6
	Female	1	4	1
Grade	Freshman	5	4	5
	Sophomore	5	5	2
	Senior	3	2	
Major	Civil engineering	13		
	Light chemical engineering		4	
	Visual communication design		5	
	Biotechnology		2	
	Mechanism design, manufacturing, and automatization			5
	Tourism management			2
Total		13	11	7

Note. N=31.

Data Analysis

All the audio recordings of interviews were transcribed. The transcripts and field notes were uploaded to ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software program. The students' names are deidentified and replaced with English letters beginning with letter A according to the order of the interviews. We employed a combination of deductive and inductive coding techniques (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Saldaña, 2016). Specifically, we began with structural coding using an initial codebook created from the study's theoretical framework and interview guide. This allowed us to align the data with our core research objectives, such as students' choice of TNHE programs, information sources, and challenges. Throughout the coding process, we added inductive codes based on the data, subdividing parent codes into child codes to capture the nuanced meanings and information within the data. Then, we synthesized these codes into themes to demonstrate the relationships between students' decision-making and the broader social contexts.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis, we adopted the following measures. First, we employed investigator triangulation. The two authors independently coded a subset of the transcripts (six out of the 31 transcripts) and met to resolve any discrepancies until a high level of intercoder agreement was reached. Second, we kept documenting the evolution of codes from the initial structural list to the refined codebook. This process allowed for the emergence of inductive codes that captured nuanced meanings beyond our initial expectations.

FINDINGS

The objective of this study is to analyze the processes of students in choosing TNHE through the lens of rational choice theory, particularly focusing on the factors and constraints that affect students' purposeful selection of TNHE as either their primary or secondary choice. Through the interviews, this study found that participants show a strong preference for enrolling in a public college and a major that is well recognized and could secure them a good career. According to rational choice theory, individuals are motivated by the desires and objectives that represent their "preferences" (Scott, 2000). In line with rational choice theory, this preference serves as the objective for students when considering selecting TNHE. In the college application process, students are faced with a multitude of factors and constraints that they must take into consideration when making their final decision. These factors may include their CEE (College Entrance Examination) scores, provincial ranking, and the cutoff points of their desired colleges from previous years as a point of reference. This process can be essentially described as one where students weigh the costs and benefits associated with each option while considering available resources and constraints.

The Purposeful Action of Students: A Better College and A Good Major

“I can go to a better college with my score!”

In the decision-making process related to TNHE, students consider domestic host colleges to be a significant factor. Some students chose TNHE programs for the purpose of being able to enroll in their preferred or competitive college. When asked about reasons for choosing the TNHE program at College C, many students stressed that they were attracted by the reputation and institutional prestige of the domestic host institution, learning environment, teaching quality, and beautiful scenes, rather than the unique features of the foreign institutions. For example, student A mentioned that he had completed several programs at College C in his college application, and TNHE was just one of many ways that he could be admitted to the prestigious institution (College C). He stated:

I heard about College C from my family relatives, who informed me that it has a beautiful campus environment and a good learning atmosphere. They recommended this college to me. I was planning to take the graduate school entrance examination. And also, I heard that College C has a good track record in terms of this examination. All programs I put in my college application form prior to applying to TNHE were from College C. Unfortunately, I wasn't admitted to any of those programs, which is why I'm enrolled in this TNHE program here now.

Similarly, student B from College B organized his college application process by ranking prospective colleges. As student B (College B) said, “I sorted the choices just by the college name. I did not notice which one was the TNHE program.”

Meanwhile, some students prioritized TNHE programs, but this does not necessarily indicate that they were attracted by institutional factors pertaining to these programs. Instead, selecting TNHE programs may increase the likelihood of being admitted to a more socially recognized college or university. Student B from College B explained:

I put TNHE in the front because I wanted to go to somewhere whose name ends with “daxue”¹ [With my CEE score], I could only go to TNHE programs because its' cutoff point is usually lower than the regular programs.

In contrast to the emphasis on domestic host colleges, students tend to give lower levels of consideration to foreign cooperative colleges and universities. Because not all foreign undergraduate degrees can be recognized by Chinese society, even if the foreign college or university has a good reputation and ranking in its own country, Chinese students therefore put more weight on the degrees earned from Chinese host colleges or universities when making decisions about their educational paths.

¹ In China, colleges and universities that award graduate degrees and have a better reputation usually end with “daxue”.

Student F from College A declared, “I only care about the Chinese college [of the TNHE program]. I don’t care about the foreign partner.” Although students from College B would be awarded double degrees from both Chinese and foreign institutions, they showed the least interest in the foreign diploma. Some students stated, “The [foreign] diploma is not valued much in China. ... [The diploma from] college B is enough for me. It doesn’t matter whether I got the foreign one.”

“This major leads to a good job!”

Many students regard TNHE as a shortcut to gain admission to better higher education institutions, and students treat the TNHE as a strategic option for applying to their preferred majors, which they believe could lead them to better career opportunities upon graduation. In cases where students’ CEE scores could not ensure their admission to a regular program in the majors of their choice, TNHE programs may be less competitive, as they usually set lower admission requirements. Consequently, students believe that the TNHE program is an effective method for improving their chances of being admitted to their desired majors with lower CEE scores and achieving a successful career after graduation.

For example, student C from College C shared his willingness to enter an engineering major, and the TNHE program in College C falls in his scope because of its major field of Mechanics:

I focused more on my major and career prospects. Because they [families] believe that majors such as Mechanics and Computer Science mean better career prospects for boys. Therefore, I filled in majors related to Mechanics [in my college application form], which includes the TNHE program in College C.

“I can experience foreign teaching without studying abroad!”

In addition to considering the institution and major, students still choose TNHE for its valuable experiences. TNHE programs, especially the “4+0” programs, offer students opportunities to experience high-quality foreign higher education without traveling abroad. Students are acutely aware of the value of such programs and recognize that they can gain valuable insights and knowledge from foreign universities that may not be easily available in their home country.

Additionally, students raised their concerns about studying abroad, including the COVID-19 pandemic, wars, gun violence, and racial discrimination. For example, for student D from College C, TNHE is an alternative for him to experience foreign teaching:

I think 4+0 is a better choice. It is unsafe abroad due to COVID-19. Therefore, for me, 4+0 is the best choice. For the TNHE program, one-third of the classes are taught by foreign instructors. I hope to experience foreign teaching, so I choose this TNHE program.

Cost is another factor that motivates students to consider TNHE programs, especially those who wish to gain foreign teaching experience. Although TNHE typically costs more than regular programs, it is still significantly less expensive

than studying abroad. In their decision-making process, students often compare the costs associated with TNHE to those of studying abroad. Many students valued the opportunities to learn from foreign instructors, the reputations of foreign institutions, and the potential to pursue postgraduate degrees at partner institutions. For these students, TNHE programs offer a cost-effective alternative to studying abroad.

Constraints of Choosing TNHE

While TNHE programs offer many advantages, many participants typically do not consider them as their first choice for pursuing higher education, and most of them put TNHE in posterior positions. Obviously, students accept TNHE as one of the multiple options for higher education destinations, but they hesitate to consider it their preferred choice. Students have shown that a lack of knowledge about TNHE and concerns about future employment opportunities are the major constraints in students' choice of TNHE.

Lack of Knowledge of TNHE

Students described their first impression of TNHE as “lower admission scores”, “high tuition fees”, and “foreign teachers’ classes”. For most students, TNHE is still a new mode of higher education. As student C from College B said, “I searched the TNHE on Baidu (a Chinese search engine). It shows that this is very new. At that time, I wasn’t sure whether it was a formal [higher education program]. Therefore, I put it after regular programs. I mean, I would not choose this if I had other choices”. In students’ opinion, choosing TNHE may be risky when knowing so little about its legitimacy.

The students mentioned several sources of information, such as an official guide, program flyers, and online searching. However, they reported that the information available through these channels was limited in terms of its reliability and comprehensiveness. For example, the official guide published for colleges and majors only provides application codes, rather than detailed introductions and descriptions.

Student B from College C said, “... before filling in the application, the school sent us a book, which only showed whether the major was TNHE or not.” In addition, students reported difficulties in finding more information online after learning about TNHE programs. Student B from College B shared, “I learned the TNHE from the booklet of the program, but when I tried to search for more information, I was unable to find any relevant results on Baidu. This could be because the program may not be very well known.”

Concerns about Future Employment

Students discussed their concerns about the uncertain employment prospects of going to TNHE programs. Specifically, they believed that TNHE programs may not be fully recognized in the domestic job market, thereby decreasing their

chances of finding suitable employment upon graduation. Student B from College B explained:

In the field of this major, we may not have any advantages because it is possible that we do not have a deeper level of knowledge [compared to the corresponding regular programs in traditional universities]. If we compete with the students in the regular programs, our advantages may not be distinct.

Moreover, students are concerned that they learned in TNHE programs from foreign instructors might not be suitable or competitive in Chinese contexts. Student B from College B explained,

What they [students in regular programs] learn maybe materials more relevant to domestic situations, employment, and graduate school entrance examinations. However, what we learn may not be quite consistent with domestic situations but rather more aligned with the Ukrainian context.

Another student who majored in tourism management indicated that “the market in China differs from foreign countries, and I don’t know whether the knowledge we have acquired can be applied to the Chinese market.”

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In China, students’ decision-making about universities and majors is largely based on their college entrance examination (CEE) scores and expectations. The current student-college match system adopts the Gail-Shapley mechanism (GS). With this system, candidates can apply for up to 96 colleges with majors of their choice based on the CEE scores and rank within the province. Students first determine the order of their first preferred institutions and majors, after which institutions evaluate applicants based on their college entrance examination scores. Once students are accepted into any institution on their application list, the system will cease matching students with the remaining institutions. Therefore, when filling out a college application list, students tend to prioritize institutions and majors based on their desire or academic performance and then rank the remaining institutions and majors they have chosen.

Based on the findings presented in the previous section, it is obvious that students chose TNHE programs as a variable option to enroll in their preferred institutions and majors. Instead of being attracted by the characteristics of TNHE, most students were pulled into TNHE programs by their lower admission requirements compared to their counterparts in regular programs. Most students do not have high opinions about enrolling in TNHE programs when choosing colleges and universities. This result is consistent with Fang and Wang’s study (2014) conducted at W University in the southern region of China approximately ten years ago. Surprisingly, this finding also reveals that students showed little interest in obtaining foreign degrees and lacked awareness of the transnational nature and potential benefits of TNHE programs. Some students believed that the foreign components of TNHE programs, such as international curriculum and instruction, may not enhance their learning experiences or contribute to their future employability. In China, major international commercial ranking systems, such as QS and the US News and World Report (USNWR), of foreign colleges

and universities have been one of the most essential indices and sources for Chinese students and parents to know about a particular foreign higher education institution and then evaluate its quality. Graduates from institutions with higher rankings will be more competitive and possess more opportunities in the global labor market (Clark, 2007). However, in China, provincial public colleges and universities hardly cooperate with high-ranking world-class foreign universities. These colleges and universities usually establish TNHEs with foreign institutions ranking 500 and lower, which are not recognized, as well as top-ranking universities in the labor market and larger society. Acquiring degrees from these colleges and universities may not ensure that students are more competitive in graduate education or in the labor market. In this case, students aiming to attend public colleges and universities do not mind whether they will be awarded foreign degrees.

The concept of employment is multifaceted and includes the labor market job, further study in graduate schools, and entrepreneurship (Wu et al., 2022). A previous study indicated that an important reason for students to choose transnational higher education is increasing potential employment opportunities (Chen, 2025; Chiocca & Zhang, 2024; Dowling-Hetherington, 2020; Zhou et al., 2024). Surprisingly, in this study, employment opportunities did not show a significant driving force for students to choose TNHE programs. Instead, students are concerned about losing employment competitiveness after graduation from the TNHE program. This finding is consistent with Liu's (2021) study, which found that the content students learned may not align with the needs of the domestic labor market. The difference in course content puts students at a disadvantage in future employment and graduate entrance. TNHE in China has to include at least one-third of the foreign curriculum designed and taught by professors from cooperative institutions of the professional core curriculum. The course content taught by foreign professors is mostly based on different national conditions, cultures, employment environments, and labor market contexts. In addition, the students who plan to enter graduate schools in China express serious concerns about the differences between the core curriculum taught by foreign teachers and the requirements of graduate school exams. As a result, students approach their selection of TNHE programs with caution.

Based on rational choice theory, individuals strive to maximize their interests by carefully weighing the costs and potential benefits when making decisions. Several previous studies have suggested that learning in TNHE programs could increase students' innovation competence, international perspectives, employment competitiveness, and cross-cultural learning abilities, which in turn increase the possibility of attending world-class universities after graduation (Sun, 2016; Wu et al., 2022; Xu & Hua, 2018; Xu & Sun, 2016). However, this study found that few students actually realize the benefits of attending TNHE programs when making decisions about choosing colleges and universities, although previous studies have listed a series of information channels used by students to get in touch with TNHE or students learning at TNHE, such as relatives and friends, official websites of programs, and online communication platforms (Fang & Wang, 2014). Consistent with previous studies, the majority of students

demonstrate difficulty and concerns about finding informative and trustworthy information about TNHE. The lack of reliable information led to a series of stereotypes surrounding TNHE programs, which then weakened students' willingness to pursue TNHE as their first choice. Students often rely on online searches and information from relatives when considering educational pathways. However, when negative information about TNHE programs is prevalent, it is challenging for students to evaluate the accuracy of the information they find. This can lead to a skeptical attitude toward TNHE as a new higher education model. Students may easily hold stereotypes about TNHE, such as lower admission requirements and expensive tuition, based on limited and unreliable sources of information. Such perceptions can hinder students from recognizing the unique value of TNHE in comparison to regular domestic programs.

As a result, TNHE programs were not able to admit students with higher CEE scores, as expected. Instead, many students with lower CEE scores and insufficient understanding of TNHE are enrolled in the programs. This can be a problem for both students and TNHE programs. For students without a clear understanding of the curriculum and language requirements, this may negatively impact their learning outcomes and employment prospects. Unfortunately, the admitted and graduated students from TNHE programs are ambassadors for shaping the reputation. Understanding prospective students' perceptions is essential for TNHE programs to ensure that they prepare their students for a successful future. This, in turn, promotes sustainability for these programs.

Although TNHE is becoming increasingly popular in China as students seek to gain an international education and improve their career prospects, TNHE providers still face several challenges in attracting and retaining students. One of the main challenges is the information gap, as many students and parents are not aware of the benefits of TNHE and the opportunities it provides. TNHE providers need to better promote their programs and educate potential students on the advantages of studying abroad. Another challenge is social acceptance and brand building. TNHE providers need to establish a strong brand image and gain wider social acceptance in China. This can be achieved through partnerships with local universities and collaborations with Chinese companies. Employability concerns are also a challenge for TNHE providers. Students and parents are concerned about their job prospects after graduation. TNHE providers need to tailor their courses to the local job market and provide students with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in their chosen field.

Admission standards are another challenge for TNHE providers. They need to attract high-quality students who are capable of succeeding in an international environment. This can be achieved through rigorous admission standards and scholarships for outstanding students. To address these challenges, TNHE providers need to work closely with the government and higher education institutions to provide policy support and collaboration. This will help enhance the core competitiveness of TNHE programs and provide students with more opportunities to gain an international education. Overall, TNHE has the potential to become a key player in the global education market in China. By addressing the challenges of information gaps, social acceptance and brand building,

employability concerns, and admission standards, TNHE providers can attract and retain high-quality students and equip them with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in a globalized world.

Importantly, these findings offer insights to support students in their decision-making processes. To bridge the information gap, we recommend that institutions build “peer-to-peer” advisory networks, where prospective students can access the lived experiences of current students regarding academic transitions and social integration. To enhance practical relevance, TNHE programs should provide transparent “career-pathway maps” that detail how specific international curricula align with local and global job market demands. By offering preadmission workshops focused on career mapping and academic readiness, program coordinators can help students move toward more informed, goal-oriented educational decisions that better suit their individual aspirations.

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- None*
- Some sections, with minimal or no editing*
- Some sections, with extensive editing*
- Entire work, with minimal or no editing*
- Entire work, with extensive editing*

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