

## Article

# Sustainable Marketing Strategies for Incoming Students to Chinese Universities

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates the motivations and satisfaction levels of international students studying in China, using a marketing approach. Through a literature review, it examines education service quality, marketing tools, and the importance of international students. The main goal is to identify the main incentives for students coming to China and to assess the gaps between their expectations and satisfaction with various aspects of the marketing mix during their studies. To achieve this goal, a quantitative survey was conducted, which reveals that the most valued incentives are related to the campus environment, professional teachers, student life, and cultural diversity. In terms of student satisfaction, the results highlight that the least satisfactory factors include aspects related to the promotion of international studies and the partnerships between universities. These areas require more attention from Chinese university management for future improvement. The paper concludes with theoretical implications and managerial recommendations for universities, national policymakers, and Chinese authorities in the context of China's national education development strategy, entitled "Opinions on Accelerating and Expanding the Opening Up of Education to the World in the New Era".

**Keywords:** internationalization of higher education; student mobilities; international partnerships; sustainable development; marketing strategies; Importance–Performance Analysis (IPA)



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## 1. Introduction

Education is one of the most important challenges for every nation, as education can ensure the sustainable development of the society on several levels. In this sense, education was considered among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 2015. The fourth goal aims to provide quality education, accessible to all people [1]. Beyond this general aim, education is considered a key issue in attaining the other SDGs. It can contribute to the poverty and inequality reduction and to finding a decent job. An educated person can campaign for gender equality, for the sustainable development of society and communities, for environment protection, etc. [2]. The pursuit of achieving the Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals presents many opportunities to strengthen rather than hinder sustainable progress [3]. Despite its importance, progress towards this objective has been slower than expected even before COVID-19, but the pandemic crisis has deepened the gap between results and targets according to an UN research [4]. The pandemic has been a global issue, affecting education on a large scale, especially international student mobility, reshaping higher education worldwide [5,6]. In this context, higher education plays an important role as it can increase the involvement of all stakeholders in debates and the dissemination of best practices. Thus, the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI) was established with the aim of promoting research and innovation and educating leaders as prerequisites for achieving the SDG objectives [7]. In higher education development, internationalization plays an important role as part of modern education, which greatly enriches the educational content

and learning experience, promotes knowledge exchange and cultural understanding on a global scale, and provides support and impetus for global social and economic progress.

Considering the above-mentioned aspects, the poor progress in achieving the goal of quality education represents a gap in both the theoretical framework and the practical approach, which requires innovative tools for further improvement.

To fill the aforementioned gap, the educational marketing approach could be considered an appropriate way to improve the quality of education and achieve the SDG goals, especially for higher education institutions (HEIs). According to Kotler and Levy, as a common social activity, marketing encompasses more than just the sale of toothpaste, soap, and steel, but also the education field, especially higher education. In this regard, American universities have long used public relations, advertising, lobbying, fundraising, and enrollment as marketing tools [8]. In the approach of Philip Kotler, considering the characteristics of the educational industry, analyzing, planning, implementing, and controlling the university are core aspects of educational marketing [9]. This includes creating value for the target market in order to achieve educational and teaching goals. Thus, it is crucial for HEIs to comprehend the factors influencing student satisfaction and to manage students' experiences for the benefit of the institution [10]. In research regarding the UK educational system, it is pointed out that to compete for students, marketing should include display, advertising, sale, communication, persuasion, public relations, as well as listening to, and responding positively to, consumers' complaints and suggestions [11]. In other works, marketing is considered to improve the school image, awareness, efficient use of educational resources, quality of educational services, market segmentation, competition, and competitiveness of school performance [12]. Through education marketing, the public image is improved, educational resources are gained, and learning is enhanced [13–16].

The basic 4P components of marketing mix (product, price, placement, and promotion) are controllable factors for organizations that can be used to achieve objectives and continuous improvement [17]. Using these marketing tools in higher education can contribute to the improvement of managerial practice integrating and intersecting the theory of higher education management and marketing [18]. Relationship marketing and customer brand bonding are greatly valued, as they develop strong relationships with customers [19–23] and create great value to an organization [24,25]. Such an approach to students as customers has been a feature of academic literature for over 20 years [26].

The internationalization of higher education is considered one of the most important strategies in the development of HEIs. It usually experiences three typical stages: introduction, deepening, and development. In this process, international students, who are considered customers of higher education institutions, are considered one of the most important stakeholders [27,28]. Students are also active participants, but not passive recipients, in service delivery and service co-production [29,30]. In this regard, scholars have demonstrated a significant relationship among student commitment, service quality, and student loyalty [31]. Other papers point out that students pay for and receive university services, similar to a seller–customer relationship, but there are also subtle differences. It would be beneficial for the higher education sector to adopt a relational approach to the marketing of higher education services and also consider the students they serve as customers of their brand [19]. The quality of programs and student satisfaction have been shown to have a direct and significant impact on the image and quality of education [32].

Despite the above-mentioned, there is still a gap in the literature, mainly regarding the use of marketing tools in universities' internationalization strategies. This gap should be filled by further research aimed at capturing students' opinions and satisfaction with such strategies. In this framework, our research aimed to find out the attitudes of incoming international students towards their studies in Chinese universities. It will also help decision makers establish the best marketing strategies for the internationalization of higher education. Therefore, the research objectives are as follows:

(O1). To assess the main incentives of incoming students to study in China. The results could be of help for Chinese universities to optimize the very features to attract international students.

(O2). To find the discrepancies between the importance and satisfaction of students with the main characteristics of marketing mix during their abroad studies. By achieving this objective, the Chinese universities can learn about their performance in providing educational services and about the needs of improvement, so that Chinese international education could achieve further progress.

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature, Section 3 describes the research methodology, Section 4 presents the results, Section 5 contains the discussions, and Section 6 contains conclusions and proposals. Based on the obtained results, the article highlights some proposals regarding marketing strategies meant to ensure sustainable development of the higher education services from a marketing perspective.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Education Service Quality and Marketing Tools

The student as a consumer has driven significant changes within universities, both in academic areas, like quality, maintenance, and enhancement, and in areas, such as student support and institutional marketing [33]. It is observed that in order to attract international higher education students, the quality of programs, industry connections, and student satisfaction are crucial factors in enhancing overall education service quality [32]. Some universities promote greater student input, increase faculty accessibility, and integrate student-needed curriculum [34], in order to help them navigate successfully through school and society [35,36]. Knowledge, skills, and attitudes learned in a workplace setting benefit students greatly [37]. Motwani and Kumar [38] point out that the university and its mission directly serve students as primary customers of the university. In the student survey of Ronald Ferguson, a Harvard researcher, it finds that even elementary students notice the differences of good and bad instructions [39]. It regards that having a clear and deep understanding of students' expectations before enrollment benefits higher education service providers [19]. In the view of Turban et al., most higher education institutions dedicate whole departments to student services, improving service quality [40], because higher education aims to provide students with a rewarding career and interest studying subjects. A worthwhile career and good job after finishing study are greatly wanted by students. In order to thrive in today's global environment, students must cultivate essential global cultural competencies [41]. Among these, attracting international students is seen as a critical objective for universities, as they bring economic, cultural, and academic benefits [42]. For this reason, there has been a significant interest in understanding the mobility of international students, with a focus primarily on the perspective of the students involved [43].

Education and education marketing are part of the service industry, which presents unique challenges for practitioners. In this industry, the main focus is on students, who are considered customers. Students not only consume the educational service but also contribute with economic resources through financial transactions with the institution. Additionally, they have the potential to become advocates and donors for the institution's alumni networks. The relationship between students and universities plays a crucial role in shaping the institution's reputation in the educational marketplace. Students perceive themselves as being in a relationship with the institution, seeing it as a long-standing and shared relationship [44]. They usually recognize the importance of putting in the effort for long-term benefits and tend to avoid easy curricula [45], being fully informed about the university offer [46]. Thus higher education institutions should focus on providing both competences and skills valued in society and educational experience for students [47]. Various factors related to learning experiences affect satisfaction and recommendations [48].

The education service market has become larger and larger [49], making education the second largest global market just after healthcare [50]. There is a sound reason to

approach it from a marketing perspective. Thus, students can be seen as individuals in the educational process, graduates as the end result, and prospective employers as key stakeholders [51]. From the perspective of service marketing theory customers play an important role in the process of co-production [52]. In the case of education, the service does not have tangible features but a complex bundle of benefits to meet customer needs [53]. The student evaluates the educational service [29], and so the issues regarding service quality are receiving increased attention as the number of higher education institutions and competition for highly qualified students has increased [54]. The quality of service is a crucial factor in determining an organization's ability to build a large and loyal customer base [42]. From this point of view, positive perceptions of service quality attract new students by spreading positive word of mouth. But spreading the message by word of mouth can make or break a university image [55]. The physical environment, layout, lighting, classrooms, building and grounds, and the overall cleanliness contribute greatly to students' perceptions of the quality of services [56]. The learning environment also plays a crucial role in international student satisfaction [48]. Students value an inclusive and accepting classroom atmosphere where they can freely engage in discussions and have their ideas understood by others [10]. Clear curriculum guidelines and quality assurance mechanisms are also essential for education services [57]. The high quality of the study programs is very appealing and should lead to an increase in the number of students [58]. Quality is also considered the key to private higher education, so for-profit institutions should maintain adequate standards and social services just as that of public institutions [59]. In conclusion, a thorough understanding of the relationship among program quality, industrial partnerships, student satisfaction, institutional image, and service quality is essential for making informed policy and strategic decisions, as well as identifying areas for improvement by institutional management [32].

## 2.2. The Importance of International Students

UNESCO identifies "internationally mobile students" as individuals who have physically crossed an international border between two countries with the objective of participating in educational activities in the country of destination, where the country of destination of a given student is different from their country of origin [60]. They consider that for some national governments, international students are individuals studying abroad [61]. The main reasons for studying abroad are generally well known: different cultures, new thinking and behaviors, making new friends, and improving intercultural knowledge and skills [21,62]. The goal of every international student is to have positive experiences, to acquire the needed competences, and return home as a satisfied customer [63,64].

In order to meet these students' expectations, appropriate support and programs are needed for foreign students meant to adapt their life to a new country and educational system [21]. Thus, various campus activities are arranged for international students [65] and HEIs strive to provide greater value to international students in order to maintain a competitive advantage [66]. Thus, a "membership" relationship between students and educational services could be created [67].

In turn, universities benefit from academic and cultural inputs from international students, which provide a strong talent pool [68–70]. They actively recruit talented international students to enrich their academic community and gain access to additional resources [71]. Other scholars consider that educational institutions should improve the quality, personalization, teaching practices, and career relevance in order to be able to recruit international fee-paying students [72]. However, global competition to attract and retain talented international students has intensified in recent years [48]. For this reason, the academic and social factors should ensure the uniqueness of higher education institutions [73]. It is considered that culture and diversity understandings, knowledge practice, dialogue, and culturally responsive curriculum should be well explored in education programs with an international component [74]. Such programs can provide students with international and cross-cultural perspectives and an improved curriculum [75]. Good aca-

demic programs and well-trained staff, providing courteous, accurate, and timely services and informative programs are benefits expected by the international students [76,77].

In addition to attracting international students for full degree programs, short-term exchanges are becoming increasingly interesting for both universities and international students. In this regard, Harvard University has stated that more of its students should study abroad to understand the world [78]. Researches show that the short-term study abroad programs have been increasing and that more and more students are in favor of them. Confidence and global awareness have helped students to prefer short-term study abroad programs [79–82], which can be shorter than a semester or a year [82–84]. Such studies offer international experience and contribute to intercultural awareness development and skills acquisition that help students for future career opportunities [85]. Such kinds of international students can also help universities with the adjustment of their processes in culturally sensitive programs by sharing their experiences [86].

In assuring a proper education for international students, the proficiency in using foreign language becomes very important. Given the most prominent trends in higher education, a good knowledge of the English language is a crucial element in effective communication [48,57]. Thus, the intensive English language programs can improve language skills and build self-confidence among international students [64].

Looking at the importance of international students, it can be concluded that international education programs provide benefits both to students and universities, and the internationalization should become one of the most important goals of HEIs. However, there is a strong need of relevant research among international students [87], focusing on capturing their needs, their attitudes towards the education service quality [32,58], and their satisfaction with these services [42,48].

### 3. Materials and Methods

Starting from the importance given to the internationalization of higher education, quantitative survey-based research was conducted to capture the opinions and attitudes of international students who come to study in China (incoming students), regarding multiple aspects of the educational services that they receive from the host universities. The research has focused on a marketing approach in order to identify better strategies for the internationalization of HEIs.

#### 3.1. Setting the Scene

China is a very huge educational market with international students. The education of international students in Chinese universities has made significant progress in recent years, attracting a growing number of international students. According to the Ministry of Education, China has become the world's third-largest destination country for overseas students. The source countries of international students are increasingly diverse, no longer limited to Asian and African countries, with more students from European and American countries choosing to study in China. This diversity helps enhance the international atmosphere on campus. In addition to traditional Chinese language and traditional Chinese medicine, more students are now opting for engineering, economics, management, medicine, and other disciplines. China's science, technology, and engineering fields have attracted a large number of international students due to their rapid development and world-leading research levels. To attract more international students, the Chinese government and universities offer various scholarship programs, such as the Chinese Government Scholarship, Confucius Institute Scholarship, and local government scholarships in various provinces and cities. These scholarships have significantly reduced the financial burden on international students and increased the appeal of Chinese universities. Chinese universities are continuously improving the quality of international education, with many institutions offering English-taught programs for international students and enhancing the internationalization of their teaching staff. The rising global rankings of top universities, like Tsinghua University, Peking University, and Fudan University, have also bolstered the

international reputation of Chinese universities. Universities are increasingly focusing on culture integration and support services for international students, establishing international student offices to assist with everything from admission to daily life. Additionally, a variety of campus activities and exchange programs help international students better adapt to and integrate into Chinese society.

In 2020, the Ministry of Education and seven other departments issued the “Opinions on Accelerating and Expanding the Opening Up of Education to the World in the New Era” (hereinafter referred to as “The Opinions”). This document outlines China’s plans for further opening up education in the new era. “The Opinions” emphasize internal and external coordination, quality and efficiency improvement, proactive leadership, and orderly opening up. It provides key guidelines for the internationalization of Chinese colleges and universities.

To implement “The Opinions”, Chinese universities have undertaken several initiatives. They have formulated and executed internationalization strategic plans, set development goals and measures, and increased the recruitment of foreign teachers and experts. They have promoted cooperation with renowned overseas universities to establish joint research centers, colleges, and laboratories. Additionally, they have improved international student enrollment and services by expanding enrollment, optimizing policies, and providing scholarships to attract outstanding international students.

Moreover, universities have enhanced international student management and services, increased English-taught courses, and set up bilingual courses and international curriculum projects. They have promoted curricula that meet international standards and adopted advanced teaching methods and materials. There has been a focus on cross-cultural communication and training in international teaching abilities. Student exchange programs have expanded, and there is greater credit recognition with foreign universities. Participation in international academic activities has been encouraged to boost international competitiveness.

Collaborative research with international counterparts has been promoted, with the establishment of international research cooperation funds. International academic exchanges and cooperation have increased. Policies and systems supporting international development have been improved, along with visa, residence, and work permit policies. Universities have enhanced their international management capabilities and optimized the evaluation and quality-assurance systems of international education to ensure high-quality development.

Based on the above facts, research on incoming students is of great importance and necessary to find appropriate ways for the further development of international education in China.

### *3.2. Research Methodology*

Research on incoming students requires significant efforts to yield meaningful and effective results, which can be obtained through quantitative research methods. In this sense, to achieve the research objectives mentioned in the Introduction, a survey was conducted among incoming students to China.

#### *3.2.1. Questionnaire Design*

The questionnaire used in this survey has two major questions established in accordance with the research objectives. One of these questions used a 10-item scale aimed at rating the main incentives for students to study abroad. A five-level Likert scale with equal distances, from 5 to 1 points, was used (where 5 indicates very attractive and 1 indicates unattractive). The second question included 32 items that measured the characteristics of the marketing mix, divided based on eight components (8Ps): product, price, placement, promotion, physical evidence, personnel, process, and partnership. The same items were used to measure both the importance given by the students to the analyzed characteristics and the satisfaction with them in the host HEIs. These items are presented in detail in the

Results section. The students also rated these items on a five-level Likert scale with equal distances, from 5 to 1 points (where 5 indicates very important for importance and very satisfied for satisfaction)

The questionnaire was pretested and revised several times to align with the research objectives and to avoid mistakes in respondents' answers due to the misunderstanding of some questions.

### 3.2.2. Data Collection and Sample Structure

The researched population includes incoming international students of the most important universities in China. The questionnaire was sent to 124 universities, and the top ten universities with the largest number of respondents were Shenyang Jianzhu University, Jilin University, Guangxi University for Nationalities, Shenyang University of Chemical Technology, Beijing Language and Culture Universities, China Pharmaceutical University, Central China Normal University, China University of Petroleum (Beijing), Guangxi Normal University, and Guizhou University. These universities were selected in order to make the research more representative. The list includes well-known universities, common universities, comprehensive universities, and professional universities.

Challenges were encountered during the survey process, including identifying the incoming students and survey refusals from some students. Various methods of contacting students were used, such as contacting universities, using international student databases, using groups of international students on social media, etc. For incoming international students to China, over 6000 links to the online questionnaire were distributed. Finally, a sample of 329 students was obtained after data verification and validation. The questionnaires with incomplete responses or respondents who are not international incoming students to China were excluded.

The sample structure according to some characteristics of the respondents is presented below:

By country of origin, the sample members originated from 44 countries, including Vietnam (174), Nigeria (26), Pakistan (16), Russia (15), India (14), Tanzania (11), Ghana (10), Indonesia (10), Congo (5), Romania (3), Uganda (3), Yemen (3), Afghanistan (2), Bangladesh (2), Chad (2), DPRK (2), Ethiopia (2), Germany (2), Iraq (2), Kenya (2), Morocco (2), and Somalia (2), as well as Angola, Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroon, Canada, Congo, Brazzaville, Japan, Lao, Malaysia, Mexico, Myanmar, Namibia, Oman, Sri Lanka, Swaziland, Turkey, Ukraine, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, having just one respondent each. The top 5 countries of origin of the incoming students are Vietnam, Nigeria, Pakistan, Russia, and India. The diverse range of countries can assure higher representativeness of the sample for the research population.

The types of study programs in which the incoming students were enrolled are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** The study programs in which the respondents are enrolled.

Study Programs	Frequency	Percent
Bachelor	142	43.2%
Master	99	30.1%
Doctoral studies	9	2.7%
Short studies	79	24.0%
Total	329	100%

The large majority of the sample members studied in China in classical study programs (bachelor and master), but there were also 24% of the respondents who studied in various short studies.

Regarding the length of study, the largest group consisted of those studying for less than one year, followed by those studying for over four years. (See Table 2).

**Table 2.** Abroad study length for incoming students.

Length of Abroad Study	Frequency	Percent
Over four years	81	24.6%
Three years to four years	53	16.1%
Two years to three years	46	14.0%
One year to two years	42	12.8%
Less than one year	107	32.5%
Total	329	100%

The collected data were analyzed using the SPSS v. 23 system. Some statistical methods were applied to obtain scientific research findings and discussions. In this process, the mean of each variable was computed and the Importance–Performance Analysis (IPA) was applied. Thus, the respondents’ attitudes toward the importance of various performance criteria and how the analyzed entity has performed were compared in order to find areas of improvement [88]. By applying IPA, the discrepancies between the performance of the analyzed items and the satisfaction of students with them were computed. The statistical significance of these discrepancies was tested by using the t-Student test for dependent samples to find areas where the universities should intervene for improvements.

#### 4. Results

The results are presented for each research objective mentioned at the beginning of this paper: to assess the main incentives of incoming students to study in China (O1); to find the discrepancies between the importance and satisfaction of students with the main characteristics of the marketing mix during their abroad studies (O2).

##### 4.1. The Main Incentives of Incoming Students to Study in China

There are many incentives that can encourage students to study abroad. Some students wish to study abroad for more in-depth academic study or to study courses or majors that are not available in their home country. Others are interested in cultural exchange or the university reputation. For this reason, we have ranked some of the incentives to study abroad according to respondents’ opinions. The results are presented in Table 3, where the highest mean represents the highest attractiveness of the analyzed items.

**Table 3.** The ranking of study abroad incentives according to student opinions.

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Campus environment	2	5	4.41	0.679
Professional teachers	1	5	4.30	0.817
Student life	1	5	4.28	0.759
Cultural diversity	1	5	4.25	0.854
Program quality	1	5	4.22	0.732
Study resources	1	5	4.18	0.805
Student oriented management	1	5	4.14	0.813
Research facilities	1	5	4.13	0.805
University ranking	1	5	4.02	0.878
Easiness of graduation	1	5	3.86	0.921

The results show that almost all of the analyzed items recorded mean values above 4 points, which signifies the great attractiveness of these incentives for international students. Only the “easiness of graduation” had a mean value below 4 points but higher than the neutral level of the scale (3 points). The most appreciated incentives are related to the campus environment, professional teachers, student life, and cultural diversity. The university ranking and easiness of graduation are ranked last. Understanding the students’ opinions regarding the driving factors in choosing abroad studies will help universities

better manage their programs. It is important for universities to recognize that there are also other factors to consider when managing international education.

#### 4.2. The Discrepancies between Importance and Satisfaction with the Main Characteristics of the Marketing Mix

In order to find the discrepancies between importance and satisfaction with the main characteristics of the marketing mix, an Importance–Performance Analysis (IPA) was performed. We started from the hypothesis that “there are discrepancies between importance and satisfaction with the characteristics of marketing mix in the students’ evaluations”.

The means of each item for importance and satisfaction were computed, and the differences between these means were calculated as the expression of discrepancy between expectations and services performance. The statistical significance of these differences was tested by using the t-Student test for paired samples (See Table 4). This model was applied from a marketing approach, with the main characteristics of the marketing mix components being analyzed. The results are presented separately for the traditional marketing mix (product, price, placement, and promotion) and the extended marketing mix (physical evidence, personnel, process, and partnership).

**Table 4.** Importance and satisfaction with the characteristics of the traditional marketing mix.

Marketing Mix Characteristics	Importance	Satisfaction	Mean Difference	t	Sig.
	Mean	Mean			
Product					
Program with good international accreditation	4.43	4.24	0.19	3.88	0.00
Language courses in the program	4.35	4.21	0.14	3.18	0.00
Good university service	4.60	4.12	0.47	9.25	0.00
Culturally responsive curriculum	4.27	4.09	0.18	3.27	0.00
Reasonable graduation standards	4.51	4.06	0.44	8.95	0.00
Price					
Affordable tuition	4.52	3.88	0.64	11.17	0.00
International education with enough funding from the university	4.43	4.03	0.40	6.79	0.00
Scholarships for study abroad	4.43	4.09	0.34	5.15	0.00
Placement					
Simplified online admission process	4.35	4.11	0.25	4.56	0.00
Existence of an admission agent in the origin country	3.84	3.73	0.11	1.62	0.11
Existence of face to face teaching	4.47	4.29	0.18	3.84	0.00
Existence of rich study materials for the courses	4.54	4.18	0.36	7.18	0.00
Promotion					
Diversified sources of information about university	4.43	4.09	0.33	6.43	0.00
Timely information on the university website	4.48	3.97	0.50	8.05	0.00
Participation in educational fairs in the origin country	4.20	3.92	0.28	4.82	0.00
Information about university in social media	4.29	3.81	0.47	6.99	0.00

From the above figures, it can be concluded that in the case of the traditional marketing mix, all of the differences between mean values are positive, which reveals that a discrepancy exists between the expectations (importance) and performance (satisfaction). In such cases improvements are needed.

The comparisons between the two categories reveal that almost all differences are significant for  $p < 0.01$ . Only the “Existence of an admission agent in the origin country” returned a  $p$ -value  $> 0.05$ , which means that the difference is not statistically significant. In conclusion, the research hypothesis is confirmed partially, but in almost all cases.

In the case of the extended marketing mix (See Table 5), almost all of the differences between the mean values are positive. In all of these cases, some improvements are required. Only the difference between mean values for “Beautiful campus landscape” is negative, so expectations were exceeded. The comparisons between the two categories reveal that differences are significant for  $p < 0.01$  in all cases.

**Table 5.** Importance and satisfaction with the characteristics of the extended marketing mix.

Marketing Mix Characteristics	Importance	Satisfaction	Mean Difference	t	Sig.
	Mean	Mean			
Physical evidence					
Smart classroom	4.26	4.01	0.26	4.71	0.00
Comfortable accommodation in the campus	4.47	3.93	0.53	8.74	0.00
Beautiful campus landscape	4.12	4.29	−0.17	−2.92	0.00
Existence of digital libraries	4.36	4.03	0.32	5.66	0.00
Personnel					
Good program coordinator	4.43	4.03	0.40	6.83	0.00
Professors with high professionalism	4.57	4.20	0.37	8.15	0.00
Professors with high research capability	4.51	4.24	0.27	5.74	0.00
Process					
Good communication with professors	4.59	4.14	0.45	8.48	0.00
Good communication with administrative staff (secretary, dormitory administrators, etc.)	4.50	4.10	0.39	7.29	0.00
Good relationship with international office in charge of foreign students	4.58	4.02	0.55	9.48	0.00
Clear procedures of graduation	4.58	4.05	0.54	10.11	0.00
Good instructional practices	4.50	4.00	0.50	9.41	0.00
Partnership					
Receiving university to have high ranking university partners	4.29	3.91	0.39	6.68	0.00
Partnership with institutions in your origin country	4.12	3.86	0.26	4.36	0.00
Good partnership with local government	4.26	3.97	0.29	5.21	0.00
Good partnership with local company	4.22	3.81	0.41	6.80	0.00

Among the factors that need improvements, it was found that the incoming students to China are less satisfied (mean value lower than 4 points) with the following characteristics of the traditional marketing mix: existence of an admission agent in the origin country (3.73 points); information about the university in social media (3.81 points); affordable tuition (3.88 points); participation in educational fairs in the origin country (3.92 points); and timely information on the university website (3.97 points). For the extended marketing mix, the lowest scores were recorded by the following: good partnership with local companies (3.81 points); partnership with institutions in the origin country (3.86 points); receiving

university ranking level (3.91 points); accommodation in the campus (3.93 points); and good partnership with the local government (3.97 points). All of these factors require more attention from the management of Chinese universities for future improvements.

## 5. Discussion

Taking into account the results presented above, we can conclude that the goal of this research, “to find out the attitudes of incoming international students towards their studies in Chinese universities to help decision makers in establishing the best marketing strategies for the internationalization of higher education”, has been achieved. This goal addressed a gap in the literature, which is quite poor in proposals involving the use of marketing tools in university internationalization strategies.

Such marketing approaches could also play an important role in ensuring the achievement of the fourth goal, related to education, of the UN’s 17 Sustainable Development Goals [1,7]. In today’s era of globalization, international education has become an important choice for more and more students to pursue high-quality education. Student satisfaction is crucial for the development of international education, which not only affects the learning experience and growth of students but also has a profound impact on the reputation and future development of the school. The higher the degree of student satisfaction, the higher the recognition and affirmation of the educational services provided by the universities. When students are satisfied, they will participate more actively in educational activities and have their own initiatives to achieve better learning outcomes. For these reasons considering the students as the customers of the HEIs represents a crucial challenge to improve the internationalization of higher education. Thus, the marketing approach of the international mobilities of students becomes a key factor in the development of future improvement strategies, which is also mentioned in the specialized literature [32,42,48,58].

Comparing our results with the reviewed literature, it can be seen that the findings are roughly the same regarding prospective students. International students bring diverse academic and cultural perspectives and enrich educational environments, as noted in some papers [68–70,74]. As in our findings, international education is also recognized in the literature as a key goal for higher education institutions [87], highlighting the need for ongoing research into the needs and experiences of international students [32,42,48,58]. The literature also emphasizes the need for universities to promote greater student accessibility, integrate student-centered curriculum [34–36], and develop strategies to meet the specific needs and expectations of international students, which are essential for maintaining competitiveness [21,66].

Considering our target group, the attractiveness of the campus environment and cultural diversity as incentives for Chinese students align with global trends observed in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia [11,21,39,44]. While university ranking is a lower priority for students in China, it remains a significant factor for those in the UK and US, where institutions often use their global rankings to attract students [6,21,44].

For the first research objective (O1), the main incentives of studying abroad were ordered according to the opinions of incoming students regarding their attractiveness. The results reveal that students especially value aspects related to interactions with the professors, student life, and intercultural exchanges, which are consistent with other studies in the literature that highlight the importance of experiencing new cultures [21,62,74] or the importance of campus activities for foreign students [21,65–67]. The interaction with well-trained staff is also present in the literature among the most attractive factors for student mobilities [76,77]. The ranking of the university is considered among the least attractive incentives by the sample members, but its mean score of more than 4 points places it among the other important incentives to study abroad, as also mentioned in the literature [44]. The easiness of graduation is ranked in last place, which reveals that incoming international students are not degree-oriented, with their main goal being to achieve a high level of education [45–48].

The second research objective (O2) was achieved by conducting an Importance–Performance Analysis to find the features of educational services that should be improved in the relationship with the international students. The results reveal that almost all analyzed characteristics of the marketing mix should be improved due to statistically significant discrepancies between expectations and service performance. Thus, all eight Ps of the marketing mix have to be considered by Chinese universities in developing their future strategies of higher education internationalization. Nevertheless, only a few items recorded mean scores lower than 4 points in terms of student satisfaction. These are mainly related to the promotional activities from the traditional marketing mix and partnerships between universities from the extended mix. Such results are also found in the specialized literature, which mentions that communication with prospective students and promotional activities are key factors in attracting international students [8,11,46–48,54,55]. The need for strong partnerships is also strongly highlighted in the literature [21,32,44,52,79–84].

### 5.1. Implications for Theory

The present study is important for the development of theory in the field of education, with a focus on the internationalization of higher education, mainly due to its approach from a marketing perspective. Thus, a framework of analysis was proposed, which focuses on eight components of the marketing mix: product, price, placement, promotion, physical evidence, personnel, process, and partnership. Such framework has great applicability and could be used as a working instrument in disciplines from various fields, such as educational sciences, educational management, educational marketing, etc.

The research results contribute to filling a gap in the existent literature concerning the use of marketing tools in the internationalization strategies of universities. Thus, by applying the IPA model, discrepancies between student expectations and service performance were highlighted. Furthermore, the need to study in-depth the student satisfaction to obtain crucial information for supporting the decision-making process is another strong contribution to the theory. When students are satisfied with educational services, they will have more confidence in the teachers and the quality of the services in the university. Student satisfaction not only helps to improve the quality of teaching but also helps to promote international exchange and cooperation. For these reasons, the study of customer satisfaction has become very important to all fields of studies.

The use of the IPA model in a context other than business activities represents another contribution to the theory development, which recommends this instrument as very useful in finding areas that need improvements, regardless of the specifics of the organization. A similar contribution was also mentioned in the specialized literature [89].

### 5.2. Managerial Implications

The study also has very strong managerial implications for decision makers in universities but also for policy makers in education at regional and national levels. Considering the obtained results, which are focused on the information provided by the incoming international students in China, some concrete strategies and actions could be developed without much effort.

First, the most attractive incentives to study abroad in the opinions of incoming students were discovered. According to the research results, the most attractive are the interaction with professors and new cultural factors. In this sense, it is recommended, to the management of the universities, to develop high-quality educational services, provided by experienced staff, but also to ensure appropriate conditions for students to experience a new culture and to establish intercultural relations during their abroad studies.

For the policy makers at the national level, in line with the national strategy of China, it is recommended to streamline the international accreditation process, grant universities the autonomy to develop flexible international education and management systems, provide diverse scholarships for incoming students, and allocate funds to universities hosting international students. Additionally, it is recommended to simplify visa procedures for

incoming students, create national online promotion channels for universities hosting international students, conduct comprehensive evaluations of the international education process to ensure high quality, and support universities in building partnerships to enhance international education.

Achieving the second research objective provided useful information about areas for improvement. It reveals that among the components of the marketing mix, promotion and partnership require special attention based on the responses of the sample members. Therefore, it is very important for university management to create awareness by providing reliable information to the target market through the use of promotional techniques. They must also develop international partnerships with other universities to facilitate the mobility of students and staff. Within these partnerships, all of the details of the internationalization of higher education could be established, and the flow of mobilities could be more intense than in the case of strong competition between HEIs.

By cooperating with internationally renowned universities, advanced curriculum systems, teaching methods, and textbooks could be developed. Such collaborations could promote education and teaching reform and improve the quality of staff training. International educational products can also attract excellent teachers and international students, providing a wider development space for universities. By cooperating with universities and international research institutions, universities can jointly carry out scientific research projects, organize academic conferences, establish academic exchange platforms, and promote international exchanges and cooperation in academic research. This cannot only improve universities' academic level and international influence but also promote interdisciplinary integration, scientific and technological innovation, and staff training.

For the Chinese authorities, in alignment with China's national strategy, strong partnerships with international accreditation associations should be established to achieve reputable global accreditation for their programs. They should set reasonable graduation standards that consider students' abilities and needs and clearly communicate these standards to incoming students. Tuition fees should be reasonable, with financial support available for new students. The online admission process should be simplified to assist incoming students. They should employ various methods to provide diverse sources of information to new students. Moreover, developing a beautiful campus landscape can enhance students' study and living experiences. It is also important to hire program coordinators with international backgrounds to effectively engage with incoming students, ensure that teaching professors maintain good communication with new students, and establish partnerships with universities or institutions of similar or lower rankings to attract more students.

### *5.3. Limitations and Future Research Directions*

This research has some limitations. While it addresses critical aspects of incoming students to China, other important aspects are not discussed in detail. The topic of sustainable marketing strategies for incoming students to Chinese universities is constantly evolving. Any changes in this field could impact the findings. Thus, this research represents general situations and not all possible scenarios.

The theme of student mobility offers vast research opportunities. Future studies could delve into detailed aspects of student mobility or investigate different country contexts, from comprehensive master plans to specific marketing niches. More comparisons based on demographics (gender, field of study, etc.), the relationships between demographics and incentives, and the main characteristics of the marketing mix will be helpful as they provide valuable information for targeting international students and for designing the future marketing strategies of universities. This is another limitation of our investigation, which will be approached in future research meant to deepen the influence of demographics and to compare the findings with the relevant literature.

Further research will cover the generalizability of the results to other countries or regions with different educational systems and cultural contexts. Continued exploration of

this theme is necessary, as evolving conditions and regulations will present new research avenues. The implementation of student mobility will face new challenges and issues. This ensures that research into student mobility will consistently yield new topics and warrant ongoing investigation.

Extending the research to outgoing students and also increasing the number of respondents could be suitable future directions of research that can provide useful information to policy makers, both at the level of universities and national regulatory agencies.

## 6. Conclusions

This study is of high importance for academia and for decision and policy makers. It proposes marketing tools to capture the student opinions and attitudes in order to obtain useful information aimed at establishing proper strategies for higher education internationalization and for improving the educational services attractiveness for international students. The benefits of such results are more important in the context of Chinese universities because there are some differences between China's higher education system and foreign countries, such as the academic system, curriculum, teaching methods, etc. As a result, foreign students studying in China may face some challenges in adapting to the Chinese education system. Since the foreign students studying in China come from different countries and regions, their cultural background, values, and lifestyle are quite different from those of Chinese students. This makes it likely that foreign students will take longer to adapt to Chinese culture and the campus environment. The tuition and living costs of studying in China are relatively low, which makes studying in China more attractive to some foreign students whose families have limited financial means.

In the context of the above-mentioned, the results of our research provide useful insights into the beliefs and expectations of students regarding the educational services they have received during international mobilities in China. Such information, together with the results of students' satisfaction with the educational services they received, can help policy makers in their efforts to establish future development strategies for the internationalization of higher education in China.

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