



# Dutch higher education and Chinese students in the Netherlands

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## **Executive summary**

The number of Chinese students in the Dutch higher education sector has grown rapidly. In 2014 the number of Chinese BA and MA students reached 4638, or about 7 percent of the population of international students in the Netherlands. The number of formally employed PhD students in that year was 427. After the Germans, the Chinese have become the second largest group of international students. Dutch HBO schools ('universities of applied sciences') used to attract about half of all Chinese students in the Netherlands, but their share has been dropping perceptibly in recent years. The presence of Chinese students has become a structural aspect of the Dutch higher education sector.

In the competition for student talent from China, the Netherlands lose out to top-ranked universities in the English-speaking world. Nevertheless, the Netherlands has proven to be quite successful as one of the most English of all non-English-speaking countries with a very wide range of study programmes in English. When looking at the relative costs of studying abroad the Netherlands occupies a middle position. As a result, Chinese students often come to the Netherlands as an excellent second-best choice.

Self-development and exposure to foreign cultures are the most important reasons to study abroad. Another consideration is the hope of gaining a competitive advantage in the Chinese job market upon return. Students view the Netherlands as safe, egalitarian, and open to different cultures. This appreciation of certain aspects of Dutch society is also a reflection on satisfaction with some social changes inherent to China's rapid modernization. Students appreciate the fact that Dutch education puts more emphasis on skills and the use of knowledge. Contacts with international students is an important aspect of positive experiences of Chinese students. Relations with Dutch students seems to be less common. Students encounter problems with a language, different customs, integration, and even prejudice in Dutch society. Many students also report being uncomfortable being exposed by questions and criticisms of Chinese politics. These tensions could potentially harm the image of the Netherlands in China and affect student inflow.

Chinese bachelor's students perform relatively well in comparison with Dutch and many other international students. A relatively high percentage successfully completes their education and mostly within the nominal study time. In comparison with students from other non-EEA countries the stay rate for employment reasons after graduation is relatively low and continues to drop. Most Chinese students are enrolled in programmes in the field of business, science, and engineering. As a result, most of the graduates who stay find work in financial services, trade, business, communication and hospitality. Only students in technology and science stay relatively less often for employment after graduation.

## Recommendations

1. The Netherlands should capitalize on its international, open and tolerant society and educational system in China, including the integration into Europe and the wide availability of English-language programmes, rather than the specific characteristics of Dutch culture and society. The penetration of English in the Netherlands is one of the highest in the non-English-speaking world.
2. Calling HBO institution ‘universities of applied science’ in English has led to much confusion and dissatisfaction among Chinese students. Emphasis on the unique strength of Dutch high-level vocational education and the fact that the Dutch HBO sector serves as an example for the development of university-level vocational education in China itself might be the best way forward to buck the trend of falling HBO enrolments from China.
3. Student recruitment in China has been disjointed and standards have often been opaque. What is needed is an emphasis on the selection of candidates that meet the requirements of the courses that they have applied for, including sufficient English. Commercial recruitment agencies need to be certified and their work monitored as part of Dutch “nation-branding” by the Dutch government. This in turn requires the sharing of expertise en experience across the higher education sector in the Netherlands and a joined-up approach to develop transparent, consistent and sufficiently rigorous standards, aptitude tests and procedures. Despite the fact that individual institutions often have different interests and strategies, a joined-up approach to recruitment and branding more generally is much needed, also in cooperation with EP-Nuffic and the VSNU.
4. Better preparation of students for study and participation in the Netherlands is needed. This should include but not be limited to raising admission requirements or standards, such as English-language test scores. One option might be for PhD students creating a trial period of study in the Netherlands as existed in the past. Another option for all students (i.e. BA, MA and PhD) would to a joined up effort of Dutch universities and HBO institutions to offer a pre-university programme or summer school on study skills (including English) relevant to the Netherlands. Such a programme could be offered in China itself to reduce the costs for the students.
5. Chinese and other international students should be supported when they have negative experiences, including encounters with stereotypes and prejudice. When left unaddressed, such experiences could harm the image of the Netherlands as an open and tolerant society and a desirable place to live and study.
6. Measures are needed to increase the number of Chinese students that stay after graduation, particularly those in engineering or the natural sciences. Such measures could include improving access to internship opportunities and working together with Chinese-invested companies in the Netherlands to improve their reputation among students the employment conditions that they offer. Chinese students would also be helped with targeted training for job applications in the Netherlands and other employment-related skills. To help students settle in and to enhance their long-term employment chances, the opportunity to learn Dutch should become more widely available and be more actively promoted.
8. Chinese graduates are often very attractive employees for Dutch subsidiaries in China. Although these return to China they still contribute more indirectly to the Dutch economy and this should be encouraged and facilitated further.

## 1. Introduction

The number of Chinese students that follow a degree programme, or a part of a programme, in the Netherlands has drastically increased over the last decade. Whereas in the year 2000 there were 185 students enrolled in a Dutch higher education institution, in 2012 this number rose to more than 4000 students. The growth has been so rapid that Chinese students have become the second largest group of international students, and presently account for about 10 percent of the international student population in the Netherlands.

This increased inflow of Chinese students should be understood in a context of an internationalizing higher-education sector and the growing importance of China as a global power. Developments in transportation and communication technologies together with a neoliberalist mode of production have led to social changes that are often referred to with the concept of 'globalization.' As a result, higher education institutions now compete for students, researchers, and prestige on a global scale. With declining students numbers in the Netherlands due to demographic changes, international students to secure a sufficient number of students in the future. Economic development of China, and the potential of more international students in the coming years, makes Chinese students a highly interesting group for Dutch education institutions.

Also on a national level, the Dutch government recognizes a need to attract more international students. International students are considered to have a positive effect on the quality of education, international collaboration, and scientific achievements. Besides, they have a positive effect on the domestic economy. A recent study by the Central Agency for Statistics (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, CBS) showed that the net-inflow of international students to the Netherlands has a positive effect on the Gross Domestic Product (CBS 2012). Although foreign students cause extra government expenses during their period of study, these costs are compensated by the tax revenues of those who stay to work in the Dutch labour market. International students are potentially an important source of high skilled labour. According to a recent OECD report, in 2025 the Netherlands will have a shortage of high-skilled workers. Whereas the demand for high-skilled workers is expected to increase with 2.4 million, the labour supply is estimated to grow by only 1 million. International students who stay after graduation can help to overcome this labour shortage.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the large number of Chinese students and the connected economic interests, little is known about the motivations, expectations, and experiences of this group. We do not know how Chinese students decide to come to the Netherlands, how they experience their time here, or what motivates them to stay after graduation. This empirical study aims to find answers to these questions and provide more insight in experienced realities of the Chinese students. The aims of this report are threefold:

- What is the impact of Chinese students on the higher education sector?
- How can the higher education sector better facilitate the migratory experiences of Chinese students?
- What are the staying intentions and prospects of Chinese students?

To answer these questions this report draws on data from a unique survey held among more than 647 students, of whom 466 completed the whole questionnaire, complemented by semi-structured interviews with Chinese students and different stakeholders. Together these two types of data will offer a unique insight in the motivations and experiences of Chinese students in the Netherlands.

The rest of the report is structured as follows: The next chapter will provide context to the study by describing social changes related to internationalization of higher education and Chinese globalization. Thereafter, in chapter three the motivations of Chinese students to go abroad and come to the Netherlands are elaborated on. Chapter four describes the positive evaluation of the stay in the Netherlands and sheds light on the problems faced by the Chinese students. Finally, chapter five discusses the aspiration to stay in the Netherlands after graduation. In chapter six the main conclusions will be summarized and policy recommendations are provided. For a discussion of the methodological design of this research please refer to the appendix to this report.

## 2. Internationalization of higher education and development of China

The current migration flow of Chinese students to the Netherlands is not a solitary phenomenon but should be understood as embedded within wider societal processes. On the one hand the migration is an aspect of the internationalization of higher education where universities increasingly have to compete on a global level. On the other hand, the increased number of Chinese students should be seen as an outcome of China's modernization process and China increased importance as a global power.

### 2.1. Higher education and internationalization

Higher education institutions increasingly have to operate in a transnational environment. Modern communication and transportation technologies facilitate among others, international student mobility, staff mobility, and online education. Due to these changes, universities have to compete on a higher spatial scale. Whereas in the past universities rivalled on a national scale, now many of them have to compete for students and funding with institutions all over the world.

International student mobility is one of the main aspects of this internationalization. Due to a demographic decline of student numbers, international students have become important to secure student inflow and funding. Because new students are potentially from all over the world, universities promote themselves internationally. Over the last decades, the percentage of the total global number of international students that go to the Netherlands has doubled. The share of the Netherlands increased from 0.7 percent of all the international students in 2001 to 1.4 percent in 2012. In the academic year 2014-2015 this was a total inflow of almost 63,000 foreign students in Dutch higher education. This is almost 9 percent of the whole Dutch student population.<sup>1</sup>

To secure research grants and publications in prestigious academic journals, universities also compete internationally. International university rankings, such as the Times Higher education world ranking and QS world top 900, function as score boards of this global contest. These lists rank universities among others based on number of publications in scientific journals and the number of citations and are published annually. According to several of these rankings, Dutch universities belong to the best two percent in the world.<sup>2</sup>

The development of English as a dominant academic language can also be understood as part of this internationalization process. Recently the Dutch media has initiated a discussion on the desirability of this shift from English to Dutch as first language in academia. According to the opponents of this anglicisation, a demise of Dutch as an academic language will lower the quality of education. Despite these concerns, in 2016 more than 60 percent of the master programmes in Dutch universities are taught in English. One reason for this is that a English programme is available for a much larger pool of international students. Furthermore, the international outlook of a study programme is also considered to be beneficial for the Dutch students.<sup>3</sup>

International students are not only important for the higher education institutions, but are

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<sup>1</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics, "Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students", online at <http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Pages/international-student-flow-viz.aspx>, Accessed on 14 Augustus 2016; EP-Nuffic, *Internationalisering in beeld 2015*, chapter 6.

<sup>2</sup> VSNU, "Internationale rankings universiteiten" (International rankings of Dutch universities), online at [http://www.vsnu.nl/nl\\_NL/f\\_c\\_rankings.html](http://www.vsnu.nl/nl_NL/f_c_rankings.html), accessed on 20 October 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Bouma, K. (2016). "Meer dan de helft van de studies volledig in het Engels" (More than half of degree programmes in the Netherlands in English). *Volkskrant* 26 August 2016, <http://www.volkskrant.nl/binnenland/meer-dan-de-helft-van-de-studies-volledig-in-het-engels~a4364526/>

considered to be beneficial to society as a whole. In the contemporary globalized economy, knowledge has become the primary means of production and a vital source of economic growth. An inflow of international students is expected to have a positive effect on the position of the Netherlands as a centre of technology and knowledge.

This positive effect is primarily caused by the students who decided to stay in the Netherlands after graduation and work here. In 2012 the CPB Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis (Centraal Planbureau) commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (OC&W) estimated the financial effects of internationalization of higher education for the Dutch government. Their report concluded that, although the international students net cost the government while they are studying, these costs are more than compensated by the tax revenues of those who decide to stay. In 2012, the inflow of international students yielded an overall positive tax revenue for the Dutch treasury of 740 million euro. According to the Dutch Organization for the Internationalization of Education EP-Nuffic, this figure can increase to an income of one billion euro in 2016.<sup>4</sup>

Within this context of globalization and the economic interests in higher education, China is increasingly recognized as a potential important collaboration partner. Stakeholders in the academic sector realize that in the near future China will be at the centre of the global capitalist system and important for innovation and education. Therefore, many educational institutions are trying to already establish relationships with universities in China. Examples of these efforts include: expansion of inflow of Chinese students, development of exchange programmes, or the recruitment of promising PhD candidates. Although different institutions have different aims, it is unanimously recognised that collaboration with China is, or will be, important.

With the plan to develop a university campus in China, the University of Groningen (RUG) takes the boldest step to invest in the Chinese market. The concrete plan is to invest in an offshore part of the university which will be located in Yantai, a harbour city in eastern China with 1.7 million inhabitants. Although this plan of RUG still awaits final approval from the Dutch Ministry of Education, it shows the recognition of the importance of China in the higher education sector.

The rapid growth of Chinese students in the Dutch higher education sector over the last decade is another indicator of the rise of China. In 2014 the number of Chinese BA and MA students reached 4,000, which is about 7 percent of the population of international students in the Netherlands. With this number the Chinese students have become the second largest group of international students, only surpassed by the Germans. The presence of Chinese students is thus no longer a marginal phenomenon, but has become a structural aspect of the Dutch higher education sector.<sup>5</sup>

## *2.2. A Chinese perspective: studying abroad as part of modernization discourse*

From a Chinese perspective student migration can be seen as an integral part of the country's state led modernization process. Since economic reforms initiated in 1978, Chinese higher education has also increasingly been confronted with a global dimension. As part of its modernization process the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has set the goal to drastically increase the percentage of the population with a higher education degree. Together with the aim of developing a number of globally competitive universities this has to help China with its transition to become an internationally competitive knowledge economy.

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<sup>4</sup> CPB Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis, *De economische effecten van internationalisering in het hoger onderwijs*, p. 3; EP-Nuffic, *Internationalisering in beeld 2015*, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> EP-Nuffic, *Internationalisering in beeld 2015*, chapter 6.



The modernization discourse underlying this reforms dates back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After the fall of the last empire in 1911, a higher education sector was basically non-existent in China. At this time, thousands of Chinese students went abroad, mainly to Japan, to study. The nationalist elites who came to power were convinced that Chinese culture was 'backward' and needed to be modernized in order to catch up with the West. They believed that the defeat of China in the Chinese Japanese war of 1895 was mainly due to the fact that Japan had rapidly modernized and adopted western technologies in the previous years. In this period, studying abroad was not only a way to quickly move up the social ladder, but also meant being able to make contribution to the modernization process of the Chinese state. This patriotism is still present in the meanings of studying abroad today.

Besides promoting international student mobility, the CCP invested heavily in the domestic higher education sector. The underlying idea was that, as a modern country China would need a number of globally competitive and top-ranked universities. Huge investments of state resources has helped a selective number of Chinese universities to develop and work themselves up in international university rankings over the last decennia. Institutions such as Peking University and Tsinghua University are now among the top-ranked global universities.

Yet, the allocation of all state resources to just a selective number of elite universities has had an indirect effect on China's education sectors. As a result of these policies, huge differences in quality and prestige between different domestic universities has been created and a hierarchal structure emerged. A selective number of about 100 universities occupy the top position in this educational hierarchy. These are the institutions that have to become globally competitive and are heavily subsidized by the national government. Below this selective top layer, there are much more universities which fall outside the national level funding projects. These educational institutions have to rely on local governments, private donors and student tuition. As a result of this lack of financial resources, the quality and prestige associated with a degree of these universities is much lower in comparison with the state financed prestigious universities.

In combination with increased numbers of students, this limited number of good universities has led to a highly competitive climate. Between 1991 and 2006, the student number as percentage of the whole population rose from 3,5 percent to 22 percent. To get access to a domestic university all high school graduates have to partake in the college entrance examination (*gaokao*). The score for this test largely determines to which university someone will go. The top-ranked universities have the most selective criteria and only the students with excellent scores will be able to go here. The rest of the academically less successful youngsters have to settle for less prestigious education.

The decision to study abroad should be understood within this context of China's state led modernization process and its effect on Chinese higher education sector. Studying abroad can be an alternative strategy for someone with a relatively low *gaokao* score. Moreover, the worldview underlying the modernization discourse has since 1978 come back and increased in strength. Studying abroad is intrinsically connected with the development of China and its opening up to the West in which 'foreign' is seen as everything beyond China's borders. Yet, at the same time the world is seen in a hierarchal way where countries are ranked based on their level of development and political power. In this hierarchy, the United States take the top position and is seen as the best place to become successful for ambitious Chinese. The decision to study abroad follows the same world view. Chinese students do not choose to study in a specific country but rather decide to 'go abroad.' The country of destination is mainly determined by the prestige of a certain country in what Hansen and Thøgersen, have called

‘global education hierarchy.’<sup>6</sup> In this hierarchy, the position in global university rankings, the height of tuition fees and the domination of the English language are important factors.

The Netherlands occupies a middle position in this educational hierarchy. In the competition for talent, the Netherlands cannot rival with countries that have English as a native language and possess top-ranked universities. Countries in this category are among other the US, the UK, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. Nevertheless, the Netherlands is quite successful in promoting its position as one of the most English of the non-English countries. As a result Chinese students who come here often consider it as an excellent second-best choice.

Still if we examine the flow of Chinese students to the Netherlands from a Chinese perspective, the Netherlands occupies a minor role. On a global scale, China is the largest sending country of international students. In 2012, 16 percent of the total of 4.5 million international students had the Chinese nationality. Of the total of 712,175 Chinese students that studied abroad in 2014, more than 80 percent went to the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. In comparison, only 0.65 percent studied in the Netherlands. Thus, although for the Netherlands the Chinese students are the second largest group, in the total outward flow of international students from China the Netherlands is only a minor destination country.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Anders Sybrand Hansen and Stig Thøgersen (2015). “The Anthropology of Chinese Transnational Educational Migration”. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 44: 3-14.

<sup>7</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics, “Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students”; EP-Nuffic, *Internationalisering in beeld 2015*, chapter 6.

### 3. Recruiting students: How Chinese students decide to go abroad

From the previous chapter it has become clear that China is emerging as a significant stakeholder for universities that are confronted with an internationalizing education sector. The large ‘talent pool’ in China can help to sustain a stable inflow of students and secure funding for research and education. Furthermore, on a national scale, Chinese students can potentially become high-skilled workers, who are needed to secure the position of the Netherlands as knowledge economy. This poses the question of how this flow of students between China and the Netherlands can be stimulated or regulated. In order to effectively attract talented Chinese students to the Netherlands, more information on their motivations, expectations, and imaginations is required. How do these young adults make their decision to study abroad? and what influences them to choose for the Netherlands? This section answers these questions and provides an overview of the most important factors that play a role in the decision making process. But first, the rationale underlying this need for more Chinese students discourse is further examined.

#### 3.1. *Quantity or quality?*

On a national scale, the Dutch government has set the aims to attract more Chinese students to come to the Netherlands. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the Netherlands has a drastic need for high-skilled workers. International students can be considered a potentially important source of skilled labour migration’ and help to fill this shortage on the labour market. As another policy objective, the Dutch government aims to strengthen the connections and intensify cooperation with China. As one of the interviewed stakeholders employed at a Dutch ministry said:

From Dutch government’s side, the investment in China will go on. We will try to build the relationship and make traditions.

It is believed that the build-up of networks and strengthening of existing relations enables possibilities to profit from the economic and technological development of China. Within Europe, the Netherlands is the second biggest trade partner of China. This offers opportunities for further collaboration in the future. The presence of Chinese students in the Netherlands is considered to have a positive effect on the development of these China-Dutch networks and trade relationships.

On a more practical level, EP-Nuffic with funding from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science has set up a NESO (Netherlands Education Support Office) office in Beijing, one of just eleven of such offices in countries that are of special interest for the Netherlands. The purpose of the offices is to promote Dutch higher-education in China and to increase student and staff mobility. Activities in China include for example organizing information events on scholarships and studying in the Netherlands.

Despite the national level interest in intensifying the relationships with China and willingness to attract more international students, most institutions interviewed for this project do not aspire to attract more Chinese students. For most of the interviewed higher education institutions the inflow of Chinese students is already sufficient. Universities and HBOs do not want Chinese students to become an excessively large percentage of the total student population. It is believed that a overrepresentation of this group could harm the international character of a programme, which was one of the reasons to attract Chinese students in the first place. This general consensus that arose from the interview is well expressed by a spokesman of a Dutch

university of applied sciences (HBO) who stated that:

We don't want Chinese students to outweigh other students. Most Chinese students go to business schools. We tried to spread them among different classes. For a class of 25 students we try to enrol 5 to 6 Chinese students. That's a good mixture.

The quote above illustrates the concern that Chinese students become a too dominant group. This concern to not have too much Chinese students reveals that many higher education institutions are already quite successful in attracting Chinese students. This relatively successful attraction of students from mainland China is facilitated by different recruitment strategies which are deployed by many of the large education institutions. These strategies include among others: cooperation with recruitment agents in China, attending education fairs, and stimulating an active alumni network. Especially a method of hiring current students as 'student ambassadors' has proved to be an effective strategy. These student ambassadors provide potential new students in China with practical information. Conversely, the more conventional method' of attending education fairs seems to become less effective. As an employee with a managerial function in a HBO said:

We used to do that on education fairs, but it's too expensive and we stopped doing that. Because China is so big, even if you do it in five places, you still can only reach a small percentage of students, so we are now doing it online.

The number of students that are reached by attending such an education fair is often disappointing. Because of China's large size, an education fair in a particular city only attract a relatively small quantity of potential students. Besides, the organization and travel costs associated with attending an education fair are high and do often not outweigh the benefits.

Data from our student online survey suggest that working closely together with private facilitating agencies could be a good strategy. Approximately 54 percent of the Chinese bachelor and master students (N=415) indicated to have used a facilitating agency in the process of migrating to the Netherlands. This widespread use of these private agencies by Chinese students make them an interesting partner for cooperation. Collaboration with these agencies could both contribute to attracting more students or facilitate in the process of selecting qualified students. However, we immediately have to emphasises that the selection of cooperation partners should be a careful process. Students are often dissatisfied with the services provided by the migration facilitating agency. Some students had the impression that the private agency were mainly interested in the money of the students rather than giving them accurate information. Some of the interviewed students even said to have received incorrect information by the agency.

Although the recruitment of sufficient numbers of Chinese students is not problematic for most institutions, selecting capable students is. Most interviewed organizations have difficulties with the recognitions and selection of the better qualified students. This unfamiliarity with the Chinese context is best visible in troubles with interpretation of the national college entrance examination test scores (*gaokao*). As an employee at the international office of a research university said

We are now accepting students based on their gaokao as well. Which is difficult for us, to understand ... now it [the score] differs by province. And the entry tier levels change every year.

All Chinese high school students at the age of 18 have to take this test in order to get in a domestic university. The test is highly important and will determine to which universities a student will be able to go. Because of the large number of students and limited number of prestigious universities, only an excellent gaokao score will give access to one of the top research universities. What makes it complicated for Dutch universities is that this score is dependent on the geographical location where the exam took place. Different provinces can have different tests and students from different regions need different score for the same test in order to get in a particular university. The reason for this is that universities have quotas to allow a certain number of students from particular regions. This means for example that a student from Jiangsu province, who is admitted to Peking University, is regarded a better qualified student than a student from Beijing who is also admitted. The underlying reason for this variety in valuation of test scores is a quota for a number of students from each province the universities have to admit. Thus, in order to interpret the test score, it is necessary to know the procedures in all the 22 Chinese provinces of the People's Republic of China. The fact that the interpretation of the score changes every year complicates this even more.

Besides, the interviewed stakeholders believe that test scores are not always a reliable indicator for the skill level of the student. According to one of the interviewees, often 'Chinese students are too well prepared for exams.' With this statement is meant that they often are too much focused on the method of examination rather than content. Because the results of the test is so important for their future, their learning strategies are adjusted to the requirements of the test rather than a more practical form of knowledge. A high score does therefor not necessarily indicate a student's suitability for Dutch higher education.

As an alternative strategy for selecting suitable students for programmes in the Netherlands, alternative tests could be developed. In the US a policy like this already exists. Potential students who want to go to a university in the US are required to get a high-score for either the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) or American College Test (ACT). Designing a similar test for studying in the Netherlands gives more control over which skills are tested and can therefore facilitate a better regulation of the student selection. In this way it will be easier for Dutch institutions to select the 'best and brightest' students who can be successful in and actively contribute to Dutch education. As a national level facilitator, the EP-Nuffic NESO office in Beijing could play a leading role in the conduction and controlling of this test.

### *3.3. The Chinese context of going abroad*

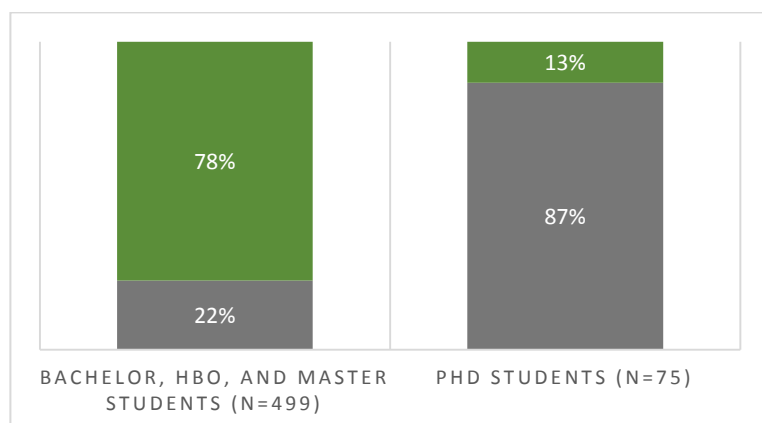
The increased number of Chinese students in the Netherlands has to be understood in relation to the rapid modernization process of China. Whereas during Maoist rule emigration was seen as betrayal to the country, this perspective gradually changed and migrants were seen as role models who actively contributed to China's modernization. Furthermore, China's rapid modernization has provided a significant part of the population with the financial capabilities to finance their children to study abroad. This economic growth has, however, been highly unequal, causing large income difference between the higher and lower segments of society. A relatively small percentage of the population has profited most from China's shift from a socialist to capitalist mode of production. International students are often from this privileged upper- middleclass<sup>19</sup>. For the rest of society, studying abroad is still highly expensive. In comparison, in 2007 the costs for one year studying in the United Kingdom equalled seventy times the average annual household income in China's urban regions. This expenditure associated with studying abroad can be seen as investment in the future. It is thought that an

international degree will significantly improve someone's position in the Chinese labour market.<sup>8</sup>

The need for parental investment in order for a child to study abroad is supported by our data. Of all the students in our online survey only 22 received some form of scholarship (figure 1). The remaining 78 percent thus have to rely on savings or loans from the family (N= 499). This finding is accordance with previous research which revealed that that over ninety percent of all the international Chinese students finance the study abroad year themselves.<sup>9</sup> The group of PhD's are an exception here. Based on the survey data, about 87 percent receives funding for his or her PhD programme. In many cases this is a scholarship provided by the Chinese government's China Scholarship Council (CSC). In 2016, the CSC planned to support a total 8500 people for study abroad, of which 5500 people will be following PhD programs.<sup>10</sup>

Because of the average low age of the students ins our sample, it is likely that most rely on their parent or extended family to finance their stay abroad. The overseas education can therefore be understood as a strategy by the family. A large amount of financial capital is invested so that the child can attain a degree required for a successful career. The fact that most children born under the one child policy do not have siblings means that all family resources can be allocated for the educational development of this one child. Based on this reliance on familial resources and migration as strategy by the family, it could be expected that studying abroad is the outcome of a decision by the parents rather than a deliberate process of the children themselves.

Figure 1: Percentage of students who receive a scholarship



Source: online student survey, 2016

In line with the expectation, our data reveals that more than 75 percent of the respondents (N=653) are only child. However, the hypothesized influence of the parents cannot be confirmed. When asked directly, only 30 percent of the students indicated that their parents played a major role in the decision to study abroad. Rather than listening to the wishes of their

<sup>8</sup> Biao Xiang & Wei Shen (2009). "International Student Migration and Social Stratification in China". *International Journal of Educational Development*, 29(5), 561.

<sup>9</sup> Liu Guofu (刘国福), "Review of and Legal Reflections on China 's Policy on Studying Abroad in the Past 30 Years". (近三十年中国出国留学政策的理性回顾和法律思考). *Journal of Zhejiang University* (浙江大学学报) 39(6): 19.

<sup>10</sup> "National establishment of the selection methods for publicly funded graduate students at high-level universities in 2016" (2016 年国家建设高水平大学公派研究生项目选派办法), 5 January 2016, online at <http://www.csc.edu.cn/article/337>, accessed on 4 January 2017.

parents, the students express a strong personal aspiration to acquire their education in a foreign country. From the survey it becomes clear that when asked about motivation to study abroad the statements ‘I want to expand my horizon’, ‘I want to experience new things’, and ‘I want to learn and try independent life’, were considered the most important. All these factors relate to expected personal development as a result of migration. In their view, studying abroad is more part of a broader development of the self rather than being a purely economic strategy.

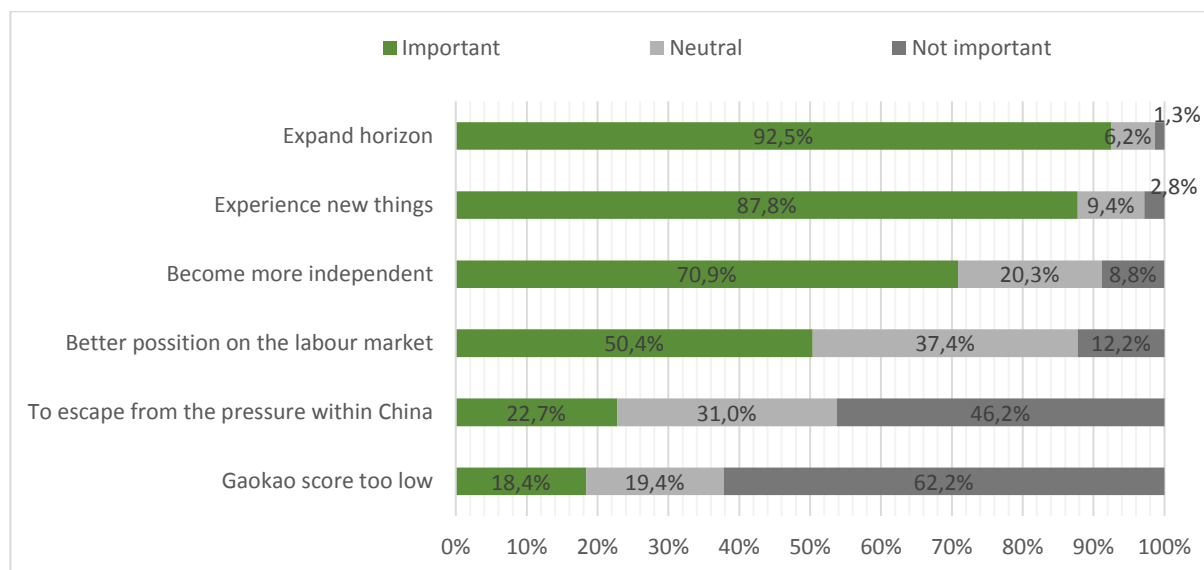
However, this importance of personal motivation does not have to mean that the family as unit of analysis can be rejected all together. When asked about motivation for return, taking care of parents was frequently named as a reason (43 percent of the 486 students agreed with this statement). Personal success can be motivated by a more familial strategy of securing social position. On the short run, migration means leaving their parents behind. On the long run, this same act of migration can be a strategy that enables them to take care of their parents in the future.

As can be seen from figure 2, career-related expectation play a role as well in the decision to go abroad. About fifty percent of the respondents named the advanced position in the job market with a foreign degree as an important reason for studying abroad. This is related to the variability in quality of Chinese universities and the competitive climate in China. As was explained in the previous section, applying for a study programme abroad can be an alternative strategy for students with a low score for the gaokao. A low score means that students can only go to less prestigious universities, which provide worse prospects on a future successful career. Applying for an overseas programme can be an alternative strategy. An international degree, especially of a university with a high ranking, is more valuable and gives better career prospects than a degree of an average Chinese university. Since foreign universities often do not pay much attention to the gaokao scores, even those students with low scores can get in. Yet, only a relative small percentage of about 18 percent of the students named a low gaokao score as reason to study abroad.<sup>11</sup> The importance of an international degree for development of future career is thus not only recognized by students with a low gaokao score. The experience of living abroad and studying in a different environment are in itself viewed as characteristics that distinguish education abroad from domestic education.

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<sup>11</sup> The gaokao score is of course only relevant to BA students and not for graduate (MA or PhD) students. But even after we excluded the graduate students from the sample the importance attached to the gaokao score remained relatively low.

Figure 2: Motivations for studying abroad (N= 532)



Source: Online student survey 2016

### 3.4. Choosing the Netherlands

So far it has become clear that economic development provided an significant part of the population with the capabilities to finance studies abroad. The financial support of the family, the aspiration of personal development, and the competitive Chinese education system are all important in this decision. Yet, until now another important aspect of this decision is overlooked: how do they decide for the Netherlands as destination?

About fifty percent of the students in the survey indicated *not* to have had the Netherlands as their preferred destination prior to emigration. From the perspective of the student, the Netherlands is one possible destination next to a range of other ‘developed’ countries. As was discussed in chapter 1, for China the Netherlands is only a minor destination country for outward student mobility. Of all the Chinese students who went abroad, more than 80 percent went to the United States, Australia, Japan and the United Kingdom. Just 0.65 percent moved to the Netherlands. From a Chinese perspective, the Netherlands should thus be considered a relatively rare study abroad destination.<sup>12</sup>

Overall ‘going abroad’ was seen as more important than ‘going to the Netherlands.’ Rather than choosing specifically for the Netherlands, it seems that for at least half of the students broader spatial categories, such as ‘The West’ and ‘Europe’, were more significant in the student’s decision making process. When asked to indicate the relative importance of different motives for coming to the Netherlands, the statement ‘I like Europe’ was considered most important. Often these students also applied for universities in other countries and mainly went to the Netherlands because they were accepted or could get a visa.

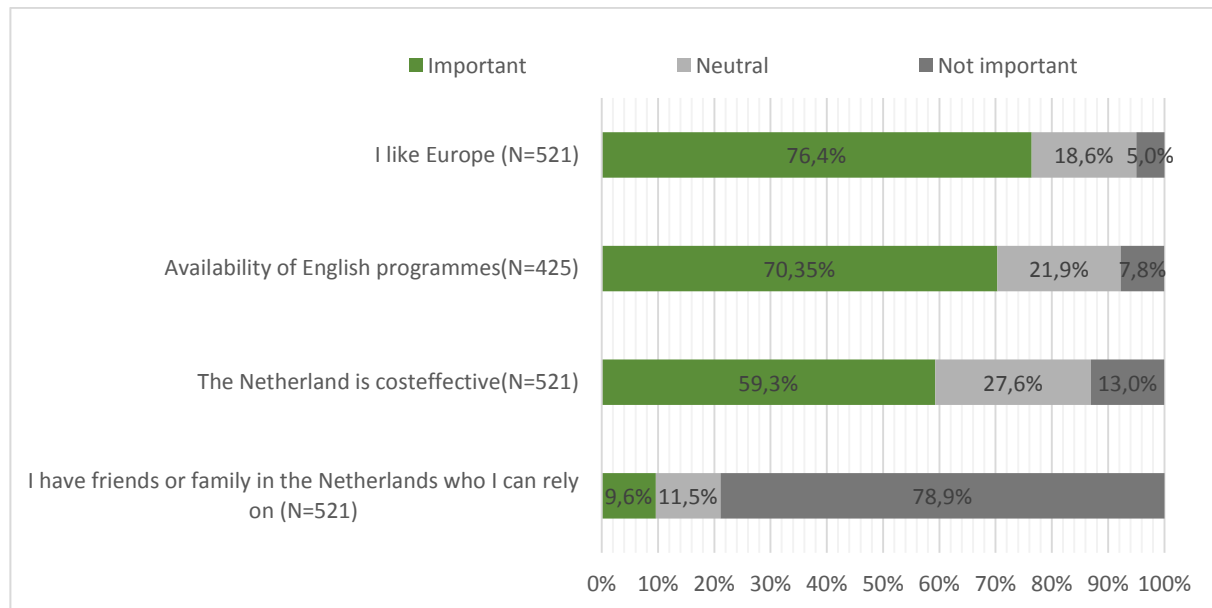
This poses the question how much the potential students actually know about the Netherlands before they migrate. Although perceptions of Chinese students prior to migration is not a goal of this research project, the interviews suggest that information prior to migration is limited. Most of their information is based on a stereotypical image of the Netherlands as present

<sup>12</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics, “Global Flow of Tertiary Level Students.”



in Chinese media.

Figure 3: Motivations for going to the Netherlands



Source: Online student survey 2016

However, to represent the actors as agents without information making their decision randomly, would also be incorrect. The students are in fact really aware about certain characteristics of the Netherlands that are important to them. Moreover, although for half of the students the Netherlands was not their first choice, for the other half it was the preferred destination. If we consider that only 0.65 of the Chinese overseas students goes to the Netherlands, this particular interest is surprising. Apparently these students have some reasons to prefer the Netherlands over other more common destination countries such as the US or France.

A first factor that became evident is the number of English programmes in the Netherlands. As we saw in the previous chapter, more than fifty percent of the Dutch higher education programmes, and even seventy percent of the master programmes, are taught in English. This percentage is much higher in comparison with countries such as France or Germany. Related to this, the on average good level of English proficiency in the Netherlands is something the students are aware of and value. English has become the hegemonic language in international relations and academia. For this reasons Chinese students prefer to live in an English speaking environment so that they can further improve their language skills. In order to go to France or Germany students would have to learn another foreign language besides English. The Netherlands thus takes a middle position between native English countries and other non-English-speaking European countries.

When looking at the relative costs of studying abroad the Netherlands also occupies a middle position. In comparison with for example Sweden and Germany, the Netherlands is a more expensive for students from outside the European Union. As an illustration, whereas in Germany higher education is free, in The Netherlands non-EU students pay a yearly tuition fee that can go up to approximately twenty-five thousand Euro's.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the cost of living in the

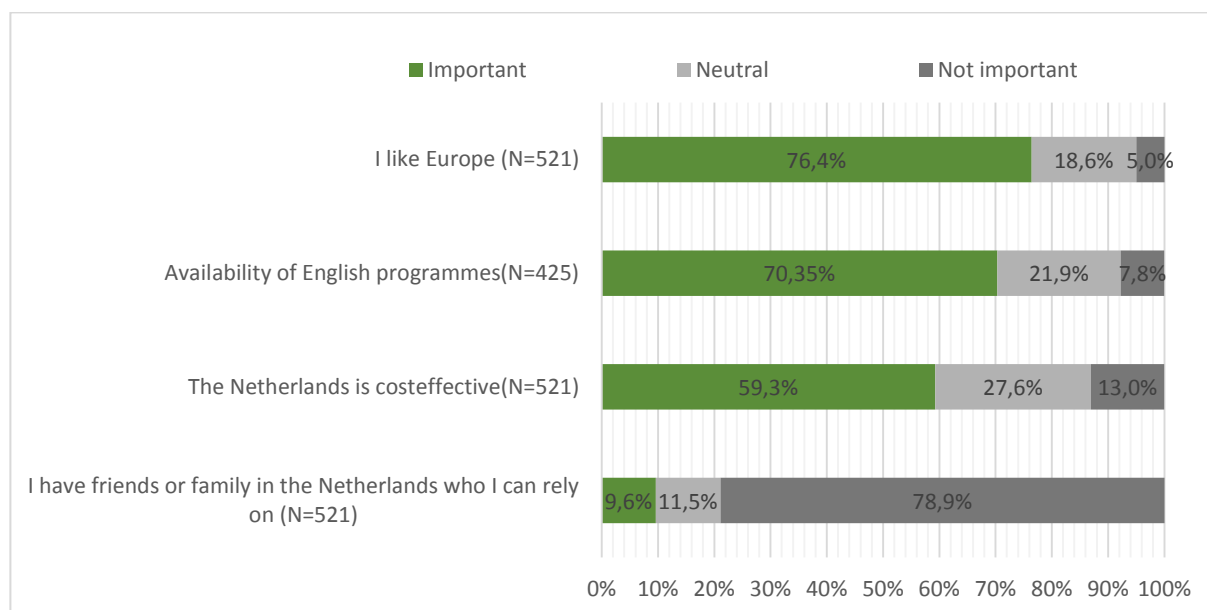
<sup>13</sup> Migration Policy Group (2012). *Mobile Talent? The Staying Intentions of International Students in Five EU Countries*. Berlin:

Netherlands are higher than in Southern European countries. On the other hand, studying in the United Kingdom and the United States are associated with even higher costs. Especially the top ranked universities such as Harvard and Princeton charge even higher tuition fees. About sixty percent of the respondents named cost-effectiveness a factor that played a role in the decision to go to the Netherlands. A master student said about this:

The Netherlands is the cheapest choice, excluding countries like Germany which does not charge tuition fee at all; and its education quality and research level is quite good comparatively speaking.

Overall, the Netherlands thus occupies a middle position in a hierarchical ordering of study abroad destinations. Moreover, the quote reveals the importance of yet another factor: the place of Dutch universities in international university rankings. According to different international university rankings, the Dutch universities are among the best of the world, and several are among the top 100.<sup>14</sup> The Chinese students seem to be aware of and value these positions of universities in international university rankings. It is thought that a higher ranking university will provide better education and gives more prestige when returning to China. These personal assets will help to find a good job in the highly competitive Chinese labour market. The quote reveals the importance of yet another factor: the place of Dutch universities in international university rankings. According to different international university rankings, the Dutch universities are among the best of the world.

Figure 1: Motivations for going to the Netherlands



Source: Online student survey

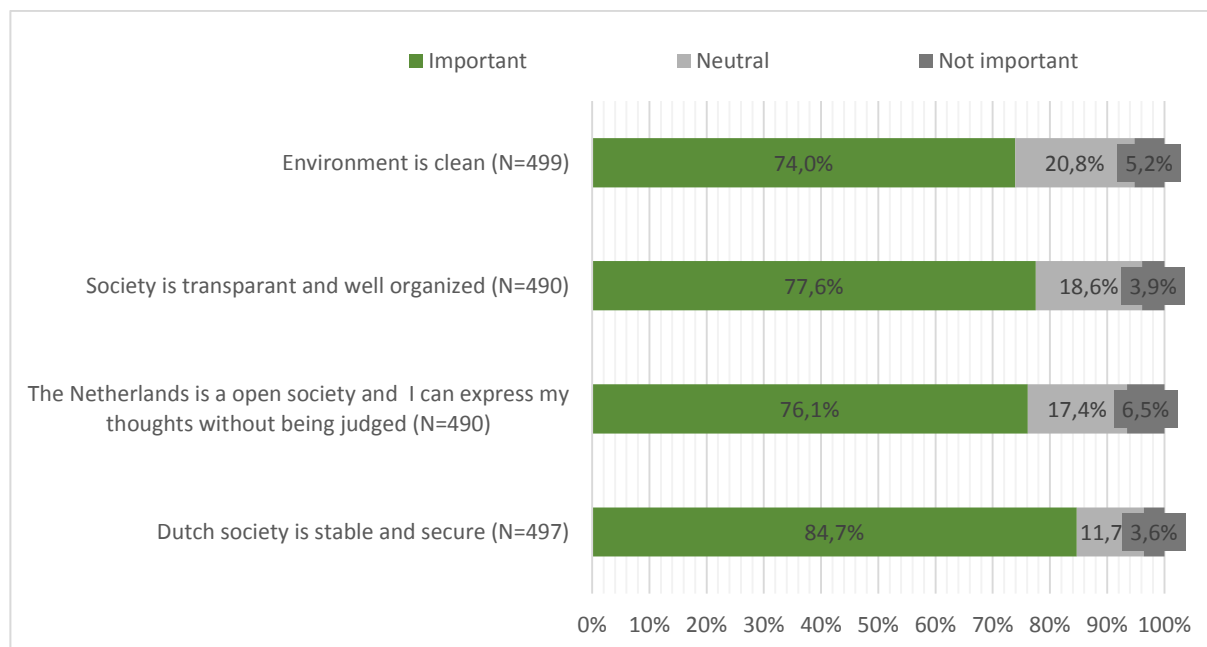
As a final aspect, the general impression the students have of the Netherlands as an open, free and save society play a role. Figure 4 shows that a relatively large percentage of the students

Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration (SVR).

<sup>14</sup> Vereniging Samenwerkende Nederlandse Universiteiten (VSNU) (2016). "Internationale rankings universiteiten", online on [http://www.vsnu.nl/nl\\_NL/f\\_c\\_rankings.html](http://www.vsnu.nl/nl_NL/f_c_rankings.html), accessed on 1 October 2016.

considers these societal factors as important reason for coming to the Netherlands. These factor relate to the perception of the Netherlands as egalitarian and transparent society. In contrast, regulation in China is less accessible and more top-down regulated. Also, the clean environment statement seems to reflect increasing concerns with for example waste and air pollution.

Figure 2: Perceptions Chinese students have on Dutch society



Online student survey 2016

Although there is a considerable Chinese and Dutch-Chinese community in the Netherlands, social network was infrequently named as an influential factor. Less than 10 percent of the students stated that family and friends in the Netherlands played a role in their decision making process. This finding goes against some Dutch education providers’ impressions that Chinese students choose the Netherlands mainly because of existing social networks. One explanation for this is the different ethnic background of Chinese students from mainland China and the established Chinese community in the Netherlands. The Chinese students who come to the Netherlands can be considered to belong to the group of ‘new Chinese migrants.’ In ethnic, social, and demographic composition this group differs significantly from the Chinese migrant who arrived in the Netherlands before 2000. Whereas many pre-2000 migrants were originally from Hong Kong, Macao, and Chinese communities in former Dutch colonies, the new migrants are predominantly from mainland China.<sup>15</sup> The linguistic and historical cultural difference between these two groups of migrants can account for the limited role of existing social networks by new Chinese migrants. In line with this, a very few students have received direct help or information from family and friends in the Netherlands.

As we already discussed in chapter 2, to overcome the limitations posed by the availability of knowledge and the lack of an established social network, most students employ a private facilitation agency. Approximately 54 percent of all bachelor and master students in our sample

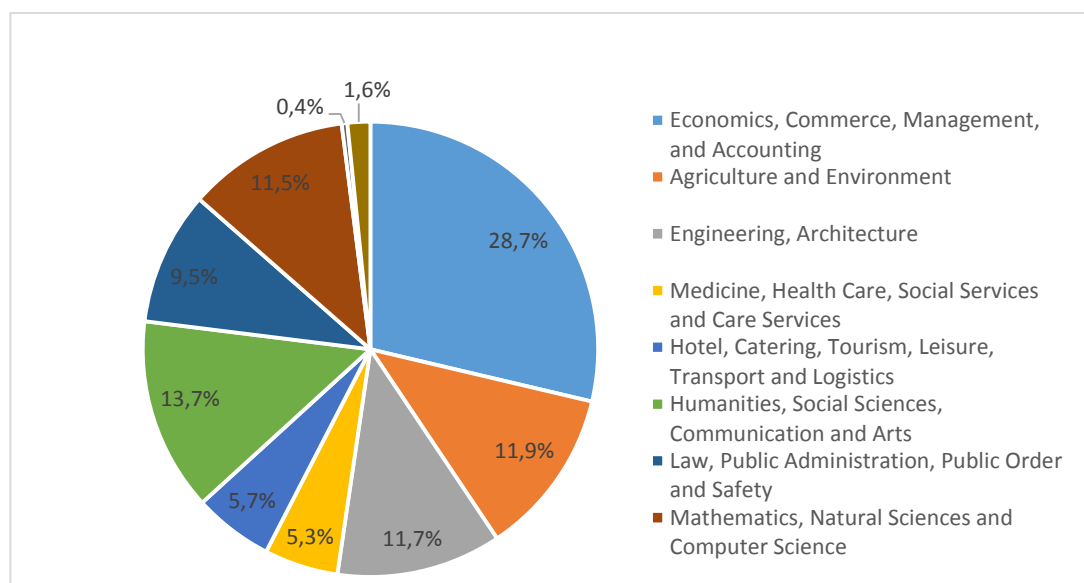
<sup>15</sup> Linder, Frank, Van Oostrom, Lotte, Van der Linden, Frank, & Harmsen, Carel (2011). “Chinezen in Nederland in het eerste decennium van de 21ste eeuw” (Chinese in the Netherlands in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century). *Bevolkingstrends* (Population Trends) 2011 (4): 28-44.

(N=415) used the services of one of these migration facilitators. As offered services these companies helped the students with the decision for a study abroad country and a university. Also, on a more practical level, they assisted with the university application forms, language tests, and visa application. Because the families of the students often did not have contact in the Netherlands and lacked the specific information, these facilitator agencies could charge high fees for assistance. The use of the EP-Nuffic NESO office to acquire information about studying in the Netherlands was limited. Only 16 percent of the students indicated to have acquired information from one of the organized activities or official website. Additionally, social media was named most often as source of information. Thirty-three percent indicated to get most information over social media.

### 3.6. The effect on education sector

The education sector is internationalizing and increased student mobility is one of the main aspects of this transformation. However, not all fields of study are undergoing this process to the same extent. Our survey data reveals that Chinese students are not evenly distributed over the different academic disciplines. According to data from EP-Nuffic, most Chinese students are enrolled in programmes in the field of business, science, and engineering.<sup>16</sup> In figure 5 can be seen that these three largest fields of study also account for more than fifty percent of students in our own only student survey. In comparison with Dutch students, the Chinese students choose less often for studies in the fields of Humanities or Social Sciences.

Figure 5: Field of study of Chinese students in the sample (N=495)



Source: Online student survey 2016

From our survey it also became clear that Chinese students often find it difficult to decide on the subject they like to study. About 38 percent of our sample stated to have doubts about the study programme he or she is currently following (n=501). This indecisiveness about subject of study was visible for students in the bachelor as well as the master's programmes. The limited

<sup>16</sup> EP-Nuffic (2016) "Mobility statistics", online at <https://www.epnuffic.nl/en/internationalisation/mobility-statistics/incoming-degree-mobility/fields-of-study>, accessed on 15 October 2016.

time available to think about this decision is an important explanation. In comparison with their Dutch counterparts, Chinese students have had little guidance in their choice for a field of study. In the Netherlands, two years before high-school is completed children are confronted with and prepared for this important decision. Due to the pressure to study for the gaokao exams, Chinese students do not have this time to reflect on their personal aspirations and talents. Furthermore, the pressure to become successful influences them to choose a subject which offers good job opportunities after graduation. Yet, only 4 percent of the Chinese bachelor students and 2 percent of the Chinese master students start another education in Dutch higher education after one year of education. In comparison, 15 percent of the Dutch bachelor's students switched to another education after the first year.

### *3.6. Conclusion*

The international character of the Netherlands is one of the most important reason for Chinese students to come here. The connection with Europe and good level of English were the most important characteristics of the Netherlands. It becomes clear that the Netherlands occupies a middle position in the imagined hierarchal ordering of study abroad destinations of Chinese students.

As an active strategy the Dutch government and higher education institutions could more actively brand the Netherlands on these issues that are important to the students. The image of Dutch society as open, international and safe has to be made more prominent. Since this branding mainly concern the national level, closer cooperation between different the different stakeholders is advisable. The EP-Nuffic NESO office can play a leading role here. However, until now only a relatively small percentage of the students have participated in the activities of the office. Organizing activities in other regions of China and intensive use of social media could help to further promote the NESO office and the image of the Netherlands. Furthermore, as an ambassador of the Dutch higher education sector the Neso office should be aware of the different agendas. On a national level, the Dutch government aims to attract more Chinese students to come to the Netherlands. Yet, on an institutional level, education providers indicate that increasing the total number of Chinese students is no specific aim. They rather want to improve the quality of the student inflow.

#### **4. Managing expectations: How Chinese students experience studying in the Netherlands**

It has become clear from the previous chapter that the information the students possess about the Netherlands prior to migration is sometimes limited. For about half of the respondents the Netherlands was not their preferred destination of choice. In this respect it is remarkable that, if they could choose again, 86 percent of the students would again choose for the Netherlands as study abroad destination (N=508). Moreover, about 88 percent would recommend the Netherlands as a good destination to study to friends (N=508). These figures suggest that the experiences of Chinese students in the Netherlands is generally positive. We found that this positive evaluation of their time in the Netherlands is closely related to a discourse of personal development. This personal development is constituted in interaction with three social spheres: (1) Dutch society, (2) Dutch education sector, and (3) international student community. Overall, the experiences in these settings contribute to personal development and an overall positive evaluation of their study experience in the Netherlands. However, the second part of this chapter will make clear that everything is not as good as it seems. This positive image is distorted by the many problems faced by the Chinese students. The research reveals that problems with language, cultural differences, difficulties with integration, and stereotype and prejudice all negatively influence the experience of their time in the Netherlands.

##### *4.1. Societal context*

A first factor that contributes to the positive evaluation of their stay in the Netherlands stems from values in society and the Dutch lifestyle. The students have positive image of Dutch society. The Netherlands is considered as safe, egalitarian, and open to different cultures. This appreciation of certain aspects of Dutch society can also be understood as a dissatisfaction with some social changes inherent to China's rapid modernization. As one of the interviewed students pointed out when asked to state a difference between the China and the Netherlands:

Good cooperation between companies and the government is needed, just like in the Netherlands, where companies, universities, government are working together.

According to the respondent, China can benefit from adapting certain organizational practices which are common in the Netherlands. In China, organizational structures are generally strictly hierarchical. In this hierarchy, the government is the most powerful actor and has the capabilities to enforce its will if needed. This differs from the traditionally more cooperative way of organization in the Netherlands where the idea is that voices of different stakeholders are heard and it is aimed to come to a consensus position where all parties can agree with. Interviewed students appreciate the collaboration and transparency inherent to this organizational structure.

The different relation to one's superior is another characteristic of organization culture that is appreciated by the Chinese students. One of our respondents reveals these differences by stating:

When you are doing your internship [in the Netherlands] you can tell your supervisor I want to do this kind of thing and I don't want to do that. But in China it will be like, well, my professor told me to do this and I have to do this.

The fact that the respondent is so amazed by the possibility to disagree with your supervisor as an intern, reveals something about the dissimilarity in social norms and hierarchal power structures. As a norm imbedded in Chinese culture, one has a moral obligation to obey one's

superior. In this philosophy, formal power relations are extremely important in structuring people's behavioural patterns. Students, who are likely to be in a relatively low position in this hierarchal ordering, appreciate the more egalitarian power relations in the Netherlands. Although the importance of a hierarchal power structure varies for different sectors, under certain conditions stepping up to your superior is generally regarded as acceptable social behaviour.

Another societal aspect that the students particularly appreciate in contrast to the situation in China is the importance of leisure time in Dutch culture. While being in the Netherlands, the students feel less pressured to constantly work than when they are in China. Due to the highly competitive climate in China, they find it very difficult to separate private time from working time. A female student describes this clearly when saying:

Here I can stop if I want, but in China I cannot stop... (because) all the people around you, they are not stopping.

Moreover, in China work time and private time are more interlinked. The reason for this is the importance of personal networks for finding a job and getting things done. Connections have to be cultivated and require investment of time. This means that in order to cultivate connections, private time is on a regular basis spent with colleagues, partners and possible business associates.

As a final element, the students appreciated the 'Dutch way of communication', which they see as very direct. One of the interviewed students characterizes the communication by the Dutch as: 'They are straight to the point and they don't hide their emotions.' Another interviewee also appreciates this directness and said:

I am quite happy with this way [of communication], because I don't need to guess about what that guy was talking about. And I really like to point it out directly.

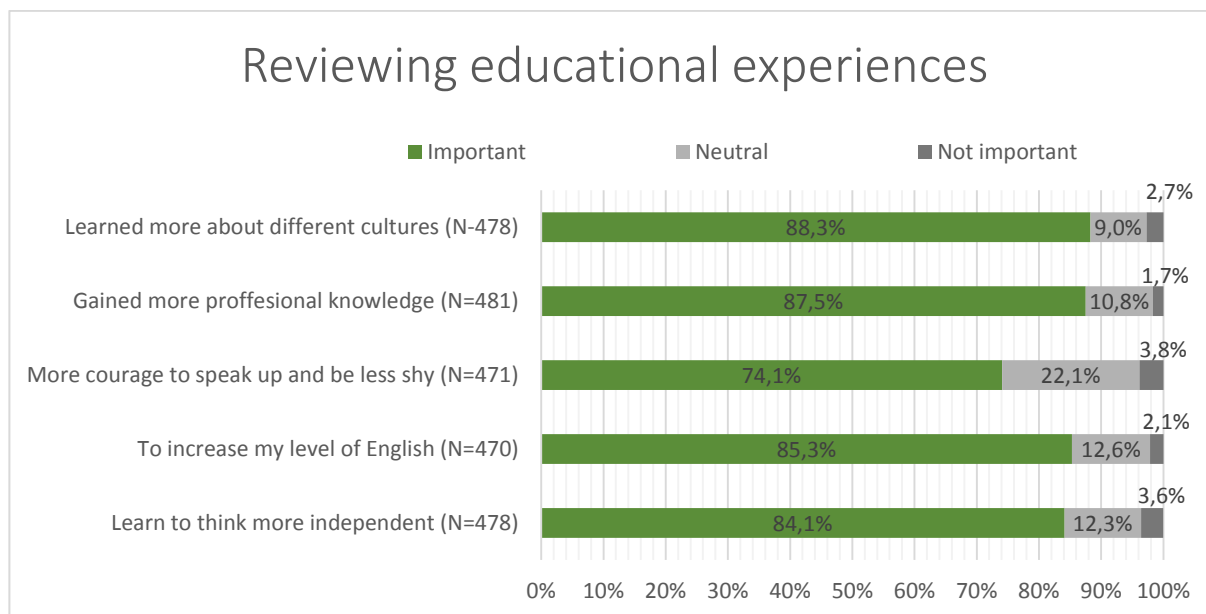
In general, Chinese people tend to communicate in a more indirect and polite way.

The positive valuation of the egalitarian organizational structure, transparency of policy, direct way of communication, and important role of leisure time, thus all reflect dissatisfactions with a certain element in China's modernized society. Consequently, these cultural differences contribute to a positive experience of their stay in the Netherlands.

#### *4.2. Educational context*

From the interviews and the survey data it becomes clear that, in general, the Chinese students appreciate the experience in the Dutch higher education sector. Figure 6 shows the level of agreement of students with different statements concerning this topic.

*Figure 6: How Chinese students evaluate their educational experiences*



Source: Online student survey 2016

English proficiency as one of the most important gains from studying abroad, illustrates the international outlook of the students. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, the perceived connection of the Netherlands to the European Union and other Western countries is an important factor for the students to decide to come here. In comparison with Germany and France, this positive evaluation of the focus on English is a distinctive asset of Dutch education sector. Due to a generally lower level of English in these countries, the students are required to learn the native language and have less chance to improve their English language skills.

Students also mentioned characteristics that can be considered more unique to the Dutch higher education sector. About 75 percent of the respondent indicated for instance that they appreciated the equal status between students and professors (N=493). Furthermore, they feel that in Dutch education more emphasis is put on the practical skills and the value of learned knowledge. One of our respondents contrasts this with the situation in China:

In our previous study in China we did not know why we have to learn that knowledge. We only have classes and during the class knowledge was taught, but we seldom had any opportunity to participate in research ... But for the majority of the courses, we were only having theoretical classes. I think this is the biggest difference between us and Dutch students. At first I did not know what the knowledge is for. How could I use it?

In comparison with education in China, education in the Netherlands puts more emphasis on the practical value of knowledge. Connected to this, respondents also appreciate the requirement to work together in groups in Dutch professional education. Overall, from the perspective of the Chinese students, the Dutch way of education provides them with more practical knowledge and skills that better prepare them for their future careers.

Based on the evident differences between institutional contexts of university, HBO, and PhD education, it was expected that students in these different groups would mention different aspects. Yet, to our surprise, the survey data did not reveal significant difference in experiences of education for these three groups. For this reason, it was decided not to split up figure 6, but show the level of agreement for the whole sample. As one exception, the HBO student



mentioned the practical value of education more often than the university students and PhD students. Since HBO programmes are generally more ‘applied’ than university education, this is not a surprising result. In addition, the PhD students did not name increased courage and self-worth as frequently as the other students did. A possible explanation is that the average age of PhD students in our sample is higher than the other students. It is likely that they have more life experience, are already more mature, and have more self-confidence.

#### *4.3. Contact with international students*

Contact with international students is a third important dimension that contributes to the positive experiences of Chinese students. Several interviewed students indicated that they particularly appreciated the contact and friendship relations with people of other nationalities. This appreciation of international friends relates to the perception of the Netherlands as being a ‘international and open’ society, which was often mentioned as an important motivation to come here. Belonging to an international student community is in line with their imagination of going to the ‘West’ as one coherent international community. The shared housing facilities for international students and having to work in groups in the university play an important facilitating role in the formation of these relationships. Interviewed students mentioned that, together with the introduction week, these were the places where they met their international friends.

Close friendship relations with Dutch students seem to be less common. Although several students indicated that they would like to have more Dutch friends, establishing these relations appears to be more difficult. According to the interviewed students, the Dutch students already have a certain lifestyle and have their friends. One of the interviewees pointed out that he thinks it is this lack of time rather than a lack of interest, that prevents the Dutch students from mingling with their international peers.

It is interesting that this high appreciation of international contacts by Chinese students seems to contradict the general image of the Chinese students as a segregated group. This paradox is further discussed in the subsection on integration.

#### *4.4. Personal development*

Overall, experiences in Dutch society, Dutch education, and international community, are considered to positively influence self-development of the young migrants. The students perceive their time abroad as an important stage in the process of reaching adulthood. Besides being a migrant, the students are also at a life-stage where certain decisions have to be made that will impact the rest of your life. Being away from their parents and stable social setting at home speeds up this maturing process.

Part of this maturing process is that respondents indicated to have become more outspoken and being better able to stand-up for themselves (74 percent of the total 470 respondents). Interaction with the more direct Dutch society and an education sector which demands independence and creative input, has helped them to develop these personal skills linked to maturity. Better time management and independent thinking are other qualities which were often named as positive gains from their time abroad.

Furthermore, this personal development discourse has an international dimension. Becoming more open and tolerant to different cultures was regarded to most important achievement from their international experience. Eighty-eight percent of the respondents indicated this was important for them (N=470). Together with the increased level of English and appreciation of international friends, this shows that having an international outlook is highly important in these self-development discourses of young adults. One of the interviewed students plainly summarizes these personal changes when she says ‘now I am really an adult.’

#### *4.5. Language problems*

It has become clear that the majority of the Chinese students positively reviews the experience of studying and living in the Netherlands. Yet, this positive image is only one side of the story. Our research reveals that the students encounter problems with a language, different customs, integration, and prejudice. These tensions could potentially harm the image of the Netherlands in China and affect student inflow.

Inability to find relevant information in English is a first problem the students immediately encounter when arriving in the Netherlands. Although in the university the common language is English, for other public institutions this often not the case. The respondents complained that especially government websites and official letters do not contain sufficient information in English. As a consequence, Chinese students find it difficult to find certain information on visa requirement and study programmes. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, these difficulties have led many students to hire a private facilitator company that helps them with the application programmes abroad.

Likewise, their inability to speak Dutch hinders them in a more informal setting. These small linguistic unfamiliarities make it more difficult to follow discussions in class and mingle with the Dutch students. One of the interviewees explained that even when Dutch students are speaking English problems can arise:

Like for organizations, for some streets, restaurants or places ... even if they said everything else in English but for that word that is still in Dutch, I am like huh? what are they saying?

Despite the existence of this language barrier, only a small percentage of the Chinese students learns to speak Dutch during their time in the Netherlands. Yet, to our surprise, the survey revealed that approximately 54 percent of the respondents would appreciate a wider availability of Dutch courses (N=489). A possible explanation for this interest in learning Dutch is related to the intention to stay after graduation of a part of the students. To find a job in a Dutch company, a sufficient level of Dutch is often one of the requirements. Due to financial burdens, limited time, or unavailability of language courses, this desire to learn Dutch is however often not realized. Better accessibility of low- cost Dutch language courses could realize this potential of highly skilled Dutch speaking Chinese graduates. This could have a positive effect on the integration of Chinese students and increase the number of graduates that stay in the Netherlands to work.

An insufficient level of English of some of the students is another problem. When asked about their preparation before going to the Netherlands, approximately one third of the respondents stated that they felt that they lacked sufficient English skills (N=505). This is a striking number because English language proficiency is an important criterion in order to get accepted for a Dutch university and get a visa. For their application to a university or HBO, Chinese students are required to hand in a document which proves that they passed for an official language test, such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). However, it seems that this test score does not guarantee an adequate level of English. A possible explanation is that the students primarily adjusted their learning strategies to the structure of the test rather than learning the language. As a result, they pass the test, but still lack the required English skills.

#### *4.6. Integration in the Dutch and international student community*

Related to these problems with language are concerns of integration. Although it is not exactly clear to what extent the Chinese students are 'integrated', interviews with stakeholder in the

higher education sector suggest that Chinese students often stick together. As one of the interviewed employees of a university explains: socially they have difficulties fitting and blending in, so they stick with other Chinese students.’

Partially this tendency to stick together can be explained by the insufficient English language skills of a part of the Chinese student population. Among the students who found it difficult to integrate, this language barrier was the most frequently named cause. Other reasons were the difficulty to find a common topic of interest due to differences in knowledge background and finding it hard to interpret body language. As a result, some students interacted solely with co-ethnic Chinese. Furthermore, the students have to get used to the social norms implicit to the Dutch way of communication. Different customs and norms of social interaction make it difficult to join a conversation. In the section below on cultural differences this is further discussed.

Yet, it is too simplistic to just see the Chinese students as a closed and segregated group. In the previous section it became clear that there is a substantial part of the Chinese students who have more contacts with international rather than Chinese students. Furthermore, increased English proficiency and openness to cultures were among the most positively reviewed aspects of their time in the Netherlands. This tendency to sticking together with co-ethnic Chinese therefore seems to result from a lack of opportunities and linguistic problems, rather than a lack of motivation to integrate.

For this reason, we advise institutions that not already do this, to actively involve these not so well integrated Chinese students. Better integration of a larger part of the Chinese student population will intensify Dutch-Chinese networks and positively influence the overall study abroad experience in the Netherlands. Providing housing facilities with other Dutch and international students, and organize communal introduction activities would be good ways to start. Moreover, facilitating practical English speaking courses could benefit the thirty percent of the Chinese students who still feel insecure about their English language skills. Also, the implementation of a student buddy system could benefit the Chinese students. At the start of the year a Chinese student could be ‘matched’ with a local student, where he or she could go to with practical questions. As a positive side effect this increases personal Chinese-Dutch relations and contribute to more Dutch students going to China

#### *4.7. Many Small difficulties*

When arrived in the Netherlands the students have to get used to cultural differences. One of the respondents referred to these aspects as ‘many small difficulties.’ These daily encountered small difficulties include for instance: communication norms, daily time rhythm, and food.

As a first cultural unfamiliarity, the Chinese students said they had to get used to the different communication norms in the Netherlands. According to Dutch custom, it is for example generally the newcomer who has to break in. He or she is expected to shake hands and introduce himself or herself to a circle of insiders to which he or she is a stranger. On the contrary, in the Chinese case, most of the time the ‘stranger’ is expected to be formally introduced by an insider and is actually brought into the insiders’ circle. As another example, whereas on a Dutch party people would normally frequently switch conversation partner, attention in a Chinese gathering is more centralized. According to Chinese custom, everything is pretty much organized, leaving little room for spontaneous interaction. People often do things together, be it playing a collective game like *san guo sha*, singing karaoke or watching a football match on TV. As a result, Chinese people often find it difficult to behave spontaneously in an unfamiliar environment. It takes time for the students to understand and get used to these different communication norms.

The organization of time is another cultural difference that frequently came up in the interviews. Traditional Chinese teaching prescribes that the schedule of a person should resonate that of the nature. Ideally people should follow nature's rhythm: get up early when the sun rises in summer and sleep early in winter when the sun sets early. Noon time (11.00-13.00) and midnight (23.00-01.00) are alternating periods between Yin and Yang and are an important moment for the body to rest. Chinese students, who are often raised with this conception of time, consider a noon-nap very important for health reasons. Chinese universities therefore always give free from classes during this lunch time. In contrast, in the Netherlands people often take a very short break for lunch and quickly eat a sandwich. Taking a noon-nap for two hours is generally perceived as lazy and something suitable only for old people. About 35 percent of the students indicated to miss the time and space for taking a noon-nap (N=496).

During lunch time the students have problems to get used to another important aspect as well: the food. Whereas most Dutch people quickly eat a sandwich, in Chinese culture lunch is considered the most important meal of the day. In the interviews the students almost unanimously complained about the Dutch food customs. As one of the interviewed master students points out 'It is too much to eat bread every day for some Chinese.'

#### *4.8. Feelings of prejudice*

To the question in our survey asking whether a person has felt discriminated while being in the Netherlands, about 19 percent indicated that this was the case (N=492). Experiences of Chinese students show that micro aggression is not absent Dutch society. These feelings of prejudice appear to exist in three different domains: individual, institutional, national.

A first aspect of prejudice is the feeling of being treated differently for their Chinese appearance in individual interactions. Some students have reported incidents where they were yelled at with 'Chinees!' (Chinese!) by complete strangers on the street. Also, in interaction with teachers and fellow students, some students had the feeling of being ignored because their Chinese nationality. Although it cannot be verified whether the persons in these situations intended to discriminate, the fact is that some students experience it prejudice or stereotype. One of the interviewees felt mistreated based on her physical appearance as 'Asian looking.' Most students see these experiences as incidents rather than as structural aspects of Dutch society. As one of the interviewed students said: 'It rarely happens, but it can happen.' Nevertheless, these feelings could accumulate and potentially damage the image of the Netherlands as international and open to other cultures.

A second source of these feelings of inequality are considered to be institutionally imbedded in the system. More than 70 percent of the undergraduate and graduate students think it is unfair that they have to pay much higher contribution fees than their European co-students (N=427). Most Chinese students are not aware of the fact that universities have no other choice, because the Dutch government does not pay them for the education of non-European citizens. Having to retake a course and the resulting delay is much more expensive than for the Dutch students. Furthermore, some students find it unfair that they are only allowed to work a maximum of ten hours a week next to their studies. In comparison, they Dutch co-students are allowed to work more hours and can earn more money with a side-job.

The third source of prejudice is related to conflicting Western and Chinese perspectives on Chinese history and current geopolitics of the CCP. About 52 percent of the respondents said to have felt uncomfortable at moments when China was discussed in a critical manner (N=492). As one of the interviewed students exemplifies these, in her view, stereotypical images:

In Dutch people's eyes, Dalai Lama is a peaceful envoy, Rebiya a goddess of freedom, and Li Hongzhi a religious

leader in exile. In the meantime, Chinese are all dog-eaters. All these things which are obviously opposite to the truth have grown roots in Dutch people's hearts ... Chinese students should not bear the burden of those rumours, in which Dutch people are immersed in and thus often wearing coloured glasses to look at Chinese students.

This quote makes clear that a Western democratic and a Chinese nationalist discourse sometimes have incommensurable understandings of Chinese government's actions. Whereas in the Netherlands freedom of speech and freedom religion are fundamental values, in China these are understood in a different light. The Chinese students have grown up with a strong sense of patriotism and belief in the modernization project of the CCP. This becomes evidently clear in a description of a situation in class by a HBO teacher:

Once in my class I cracked a joke about the dispute between China and Japan about the South China Sea. All the boys among my Chinese students in the class suddenly stood up and started singing their national anthem together.

This incommensurability of a Chinese nationalist and a Western neoliberalist perspective is experienced as prejudice by the students. If a university teacher is critical on geopolitical policy of the CCP, they feel personally offended. The two situations described above show that Chinese students are often very patriotic and have a strong national identity.

The feelings of unfairness and prejudice, although impossible to verify, are bad for the image of the Netherlands as open and international country. Though most students see prejudice and stereotype as individual incidents and not a characteristic of the Netherlands, on the long run these experiences could accumulate to negative stigmatization of the Netherlands in China. Because these incidents occur on an individual scale and are highly subjective, it is impossible to completely prevent this from happening. Yet, better integration of the Chinese students and more interaction with Dutch nationals is considered to lead to mutual understanding and acceptance. Moreover, to show good will, higher education institutions could make sure there is a place where students can go to when they feel discriminated.

#### *4.9. Mismatch for students who come to study in a university of applied science*

The earlier described problem of imperfect information prior to migration and unfamiliarity with the Dutch education sectors have led to a particular discrepancy in expectations for a part of the HBO students. For Chinese students it is difficult to understand the difference between 'Universiteit' and 'Hogeschool', particularly because in English HBO institutions are allowed to call themselves 'universities of applied sciences.' By recruitment agencies in China, the latter are often explained as being a more practical version of a university. Therefore, students sometimes feel deceived when they figure out that they are actually not enrolled in a university but in a vocational institution. This misunderstanding of Dutch education sector is highly problematic and unjust toward the misinformed students. Policies that facilitate the information provision in China should immediately take up this issue. The Nuffic Neso office in Beijing already does this. Yet, since only 15 percent of the students indicated to have used information from the Neso office this information is not transferred to all future students.

#### *4.10. Study success of Chinese students*

Based on the interviews with stakeholder in Dutch higher education we got contradictory accounts of the study success of Chinese students. In general, the Chinese students are perceived as very hard workers. This mainly relates to their perceived preparedness to work or study very hard for very long period of time. As an employee at the international office at a university told

us:

What I get back from faculties is that in general academically students are excellent, they work very hard and are very serious.

Yet, several experts in the field said that Chinese students sometimes also find it difficult to adjust to the Dutch way of education. As one of the interviewed university professors makes clear:

Chinese students are more used to absorbing knowledge, and are not familiar with the transition to create new knowledge. [Therefore] I give them problems that they don't know. ... and any efforts they made to solve the problem will receive my encouragement. I want to cultivate the confidence to explore. I want them to know, it is not wrong if you make mistakes or you do not know things, whereas it is wrong if you don't take any action.

Education in China is mainly focused on memorization and conformity with the general opinion of the teacher and textbook. In contrast, the Dutch higher education sector demands critical thinking, participation in discussion, and motivates creative solutions. For students used to the Chinese way of learning it is therefore difficult to suddenly cope with these different requirements. Furthermore, in Western cultures the individual that stands out is often praised. To excel and to be different are generally seen as belonging together. In the Chinese context the excellent individual is not supposed to be visible to all, but should wait to be discovered by people who are willing to take closer look. This difference translates in a perception of Chinese students as introvert and shy, as was expressed by our the professor who we quoted above.

As a result of this different way of education, the Chinese students have the feeling that they have to start all from the beginning when beginning their Dutch education. As one interviewed student who said to have had excellent previous study results at Peking university told us:

It seems that the things I have learned before couldn't be used at all. They [Dutch nationals] are just thinking very differently.

Aware of these differences in previous education between students, some lecturers try to adjust to the needs of Chinese students and motivate them to think and participate:

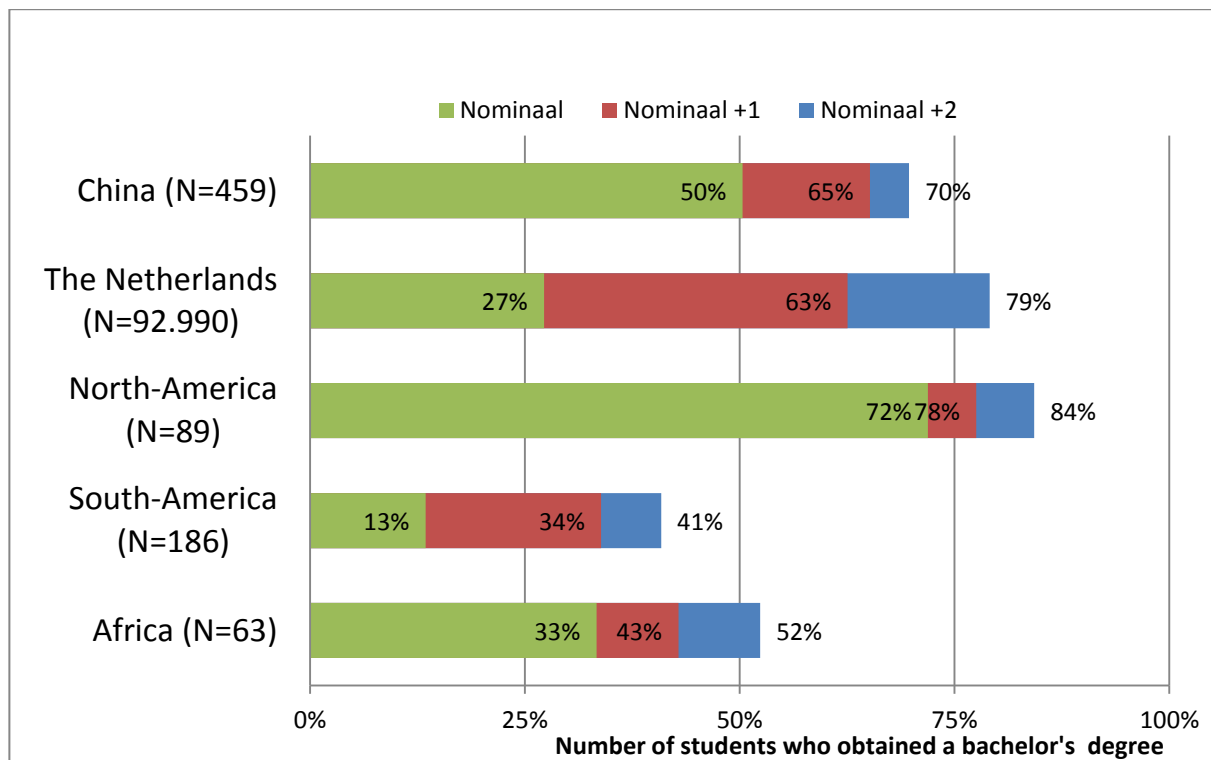
During lectures, I force them to think in public for an unexpected question. They are afraid to give wrong answers. I can wait them for 2 minutes, but I cannot wait longer, the course has to go on.

There is however no consensus on this requirement to treat the Chinese differently. The lecturer in the example above gives some extra time to the Chinese students and motivates them to think critically and being creative. These micro-adjustments are generally seen as acceptable. Yet, making more structural adjustments in the education programs to meet the needs of the Chinese students is met with opposition. Special treatment of one group is considered a violation of the egalitarian ideal where every individual should have the same chances and be treated equally. Special policies for students with a background in the Chinese education sector are therefore seldom implemented.

This poses the question to what extent special adjustments for Chinese students are really needed. Data provided by VSNU on percentages of students cohorts that attain a degree, and

what percentage does this within the nominal time of a study, give insight in how Chinese students are doing in comparison with other international students and Dutch students. The VSNU data are only from full universities and do not include HBO institutions.

Figure 3: Bachelor's graduates per region of origin (cohort 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2010)



Source: VSNU, 'IcijferHO-bestand(2015)' database

Figure 7 on enrolment in Dutch higher education reveals that 70 percent of the 459 Chinese students who started a bachelor's programme in 2007, 2008, 2009, or 2010 eventually attained a bachelor's degree from a Dutch higher education institution, and 50 percent did so within the nominal time that stands for a programme. In comparison, 79 percent of the total of 92,990 Dutch students that began a bachelor's programme in these years eventually attained a degree, but only 27 percent did this within the nominal study time.<sup>17</sup> Of the bachelor's students from South America and Africa, merely 41 percent and 52 percent eventually received a Dutch bachelor's degree. Thus, these figures show that Chinese bachelor's students do relatively well in comparison with Dutch and many other international students. A relatively high percentage successfully completes his or her education and most of the students who do, do this within the nominal study time. Only the international students from North America, of whom 72 percent attains a degree within the nominal study time, are doing better.

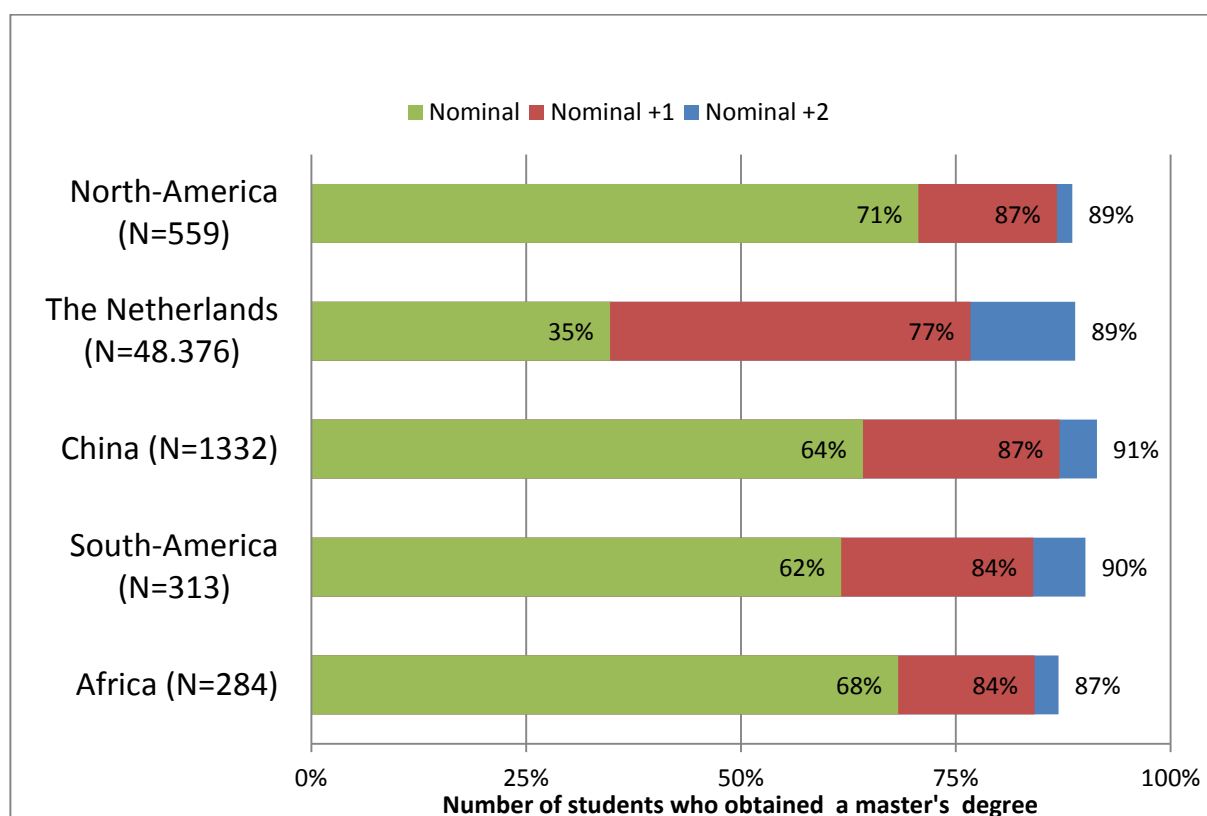
Additionally, a striking 18 percent of the Chinese bachelor's students continues with a master education after 1 year of studying. In comparison, only 2 percent of the total group of all international students does this. Apparently a 'bridging year' is much more common among Chinese students than for other groups of international students. Some of the Chinese students

<sup>17</sup> These figures are about student cohorts that started before the introduction of the 'mandatory study advice' (bindend studieadvies) that requires students to obtain a certain minimum number of European credit points (EC) during their first year of study. Students that fail to meet that requirement have to end their study.

who did not attain a Dutch bachelor's degree are thus likely to have finished a graduate programme in the Netherlands.

Figure 8 shows that Chinese master's students are doing even better. Of the 1332 Chinese students who started a master's programme in the Netherlands between 2009 and 2012, 91 percent attained a degree. Furthermore, whereas 64 percent of the Chinese students completed the programme within the nominal time, only 35 percent of the Dutch students did so. For the rest, the figures for Chinese master's students are roughly similar to the figures for the rest of the international master's students. In comparison with the study success of bachelor's students, the study success for master's students has less interregional variability.

Figure 4: Masters' graduates per region of origin (cohort 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2010)



Source: VSNU, 'IcijferHO-bestand(2015)' database

Based on these figures on graduate and undergraduate students, we can conclude that Chinese students are relatively successful in Dutch higher education<sup>45</sup>. Despite differences in study culture, feelings of unpreparedness, and insufficient level of English, they do better than Dutch students in terms of degree attainment and time needed for completing the study programme. It seems that they are able to compensate for their shortcomings by working hard and spending a lot of time on study. A high pressure to be successful, high additional costs of study delay, and previous experience with learning for the gaokao, are possible factors that motivates them to take studying serious. Besides, it is likely that there is a selection bias, meaning that only the relatively good Chinese students come to the Netherlands. Because they are already quite successful, it is not really needed to make adjustments to specifically meet the need of the Chinese students. The majority of the students is able to adjust themselves to the Dutch higher education context and successfully attain a degree while being here.





## Chapter 5: After graduation

In Chapter two it was mentioned that according to estimations by the OECD, by the year 2025 the growth of high skilled jobs is expected to exceed the growth of the high skilled labour force. As a result, in the near future the Netherlands will have a shortage of high-skilled workers. Based on cross-national data from 2000 to 2012, the Netherlands has seen only a marginal increase in share of highly educated personal as percentage of the total population in comparison with other OECD countries. This expected shortage of high-skilled labour will exist primarily in sectors that require technical or mathematical qualifications. An OECD report published in 2016 therefore concludes that the Dutch government should adopt strategies to cope with this shortage of high-skilled workers.<sup>18</sup>

One of the possible solutions is to attract high-skilled workers from other countries, for instance by retaining international students that are already in-country. Because international students have already lived in the Netherlands for a period of time, they possess some advantages compared to other foreign high-skilled workers. First of all, this group have a degree from a Dutch higher education institution, which will therefore certainly be recognized by Dutch employers. Moreover, during the period they studied here they are likely to have become familiarized with the local culture and language.

In practice, the recognition of the potential role of international students has led to two objectives. On the one hand, the Dutch government aims to increase the number of international students in the Netherlands. The establishment of Being Neso office in 2010 and the branding of the Netherlands are aspects of this strategy. In chapter three these strategies were discussed in detail. As a second objective, it is tried to motivate the international students to stay in the Netherlands after graduation. In line with this ambition, EP-Nuffic developed the 'make it in the Netherlands' strategy.<sup>19</sup> The main goal of this strategy is to 'developing stable, long-term relationships with international students' (p. 1). In this way it is tried to bind the international students to the Netherlands. The improvement of Dutch language skills and better integration in the Dutch student community are strategies that contribute to this objective of increasing the stay rate of international students. Although a large percentage of the international students wants to stay in the Netherlands, unfamiliarity with the Dutch labour market and inability to speak Dutch often act as barriers.

To overcome these difficulties with finding a job, the Dutch government has introduced the possibility to apply for a 'search year for higher educated people' (*zoekjaar hoogopgeleiden*). Students who graduated from a Dutch higher education institution or a foreign top-ranked university can apply for a one-year residence permit within three years after time of graduation. During this twelve-month period, they are allowed to work without needing a separate work permit. The idea is that this year gives them the time to search for a job in the Netherlands. If they succeed in finding a job within this period, they can apply as a high-skilled migrant and receive a residence permit for duration of their employment contract. In order to be recognized as a high-skilled migrant, a recent graduate has to earn a minimum gross income of 2,228 Euros a month or be employed as an academic researcher. Another possibility is to register as a self-employed worker. To be accepted on this ground, the worker has to demonstrate a sufficient and stable income for at least twelve months and to show to be making a contribution to a specific Dutch interest, to be assessed by the Netherlands Enterprise Agency

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<sup>18</sup> OECD (2016), *Recruiting Immigrant Workers: The Netherlands*.

<sup>19</sup> EP- Nuffic. "Make it in the Netherlands", online at <https://www.epnuffic.nl/en/study-and-work-in-holland/make-it-in-the-netherlands>, accessed on 4 January 2017.

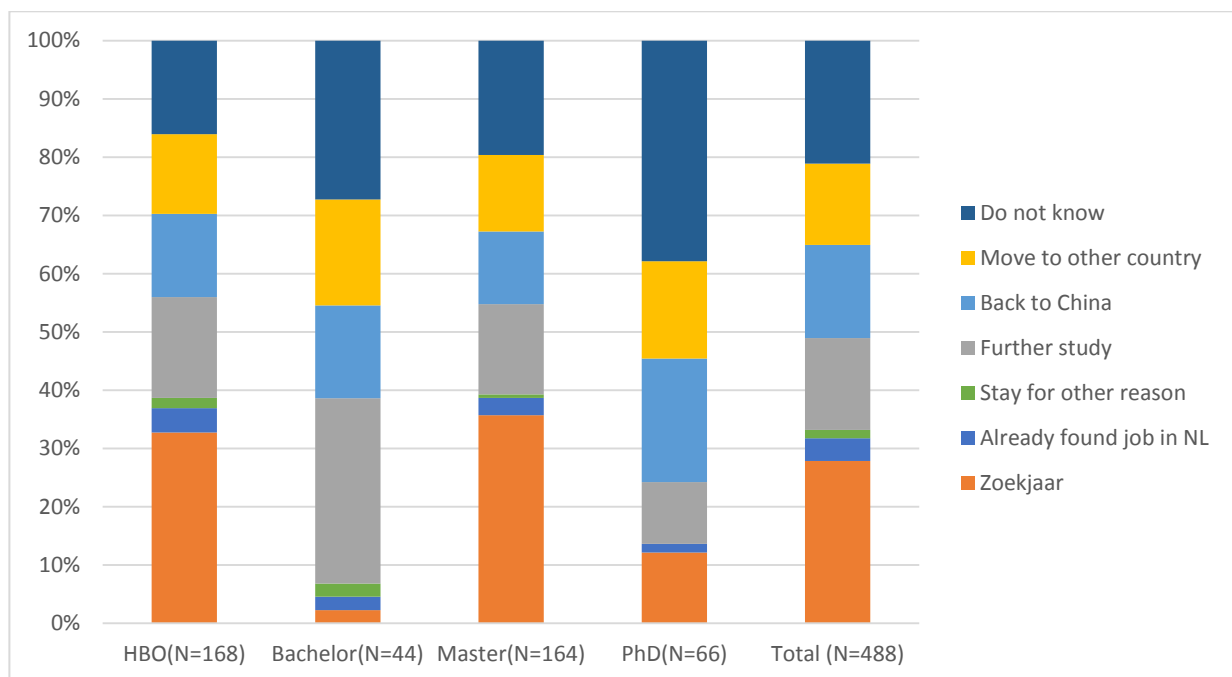
(Rijksdienst voor Ondernemend Nederland, RVO).

In this section the plans for the time after graduation of the Chinese students are further examined. We will look into what percentage of the students wants to stay, what percentage actually stays, and what factors are important in their decision making process. Overall we see that there exists a gap between the students who express a willingness to stay, and the students who actually stay in the Netherlands. Also, the intentions after graduation differ significantly for students in different stages of their educational career.

### 5.1. Staying intentions of Chinese students

Our survey reveals that about 49 percent of the Chinese students plan to stay in the Netherlands to work, continue studying, or look for a job. Figure 9 shows the intentions of students for the period after their graduation.

Figure 5: Intentions for period after graduation



Source: Online student survey 2016

It can be seen that for students who are currently following a HBO bachelor or university master programme more than fifty percent want to stay in the Netherlands by applying for a ‘zoekjaar’, work, continue studying, or for another reason. The HBO students and master students are the groups that most frequently plan to apply for a search year. Respectively 33 percent and 36 percent of the respondents in these groups said that they intended to do this.

In comparison, just 2 percent of the university Bachelor students want to stay in the Netherlands and look for a job after graduation. About 32 percent of this group plans to continue studying in the Netherlands. In large part, this may be because many who are registered as bachelor students are in fact students on a pre-master’s programme of a package of BA courses that they must complete before formally commencing their MA study. Besides, for this group relatively many students have the intention to move to another country or return to China in comparison with the HBO and master students. It is likely that these students will do a master programme in

another country or back in China. Only a bachelor degree does not give good prospects for finding a job.

Figure 9 reveals that PhD students are the most uncertain about their plans after graduation. Approximately 38 percent did not yet know what to do after finishing the PhD programme (N=66). In comparison with the other groups, a relatively large number of 21 percent of the students plans to go back to China after graduation. Although with 21 percent the PhD students are the group that most often express a intention to return to China, this number is still surprisingly low. As was discussed earlier in chapter four, most PhD students in the Netherlands are financially supported with a scholarship provided by the China Scholarship Council (CSC). A condition for this scholarship is that recipients have to return to China after obtaining their doctorate. This relatively low percentage of intended returnees suggest that at least some of the PhD students expect to be able to avoid the CSC requirement.

Of the students who want to move abroad to another country than the Netherlands or China, a majority wants to go to the United States. Almost forty-five percent of the students who want to move to another country indicated that the United States was their preferred destination (N=66). For these students, the Netherlands can be considered a 'lay-over' country to facilitated further migration. A degree from a Dutch higher education institution will make it easier for them to apply for prestigious study programmes and/or acquire employment and residence in the United States.

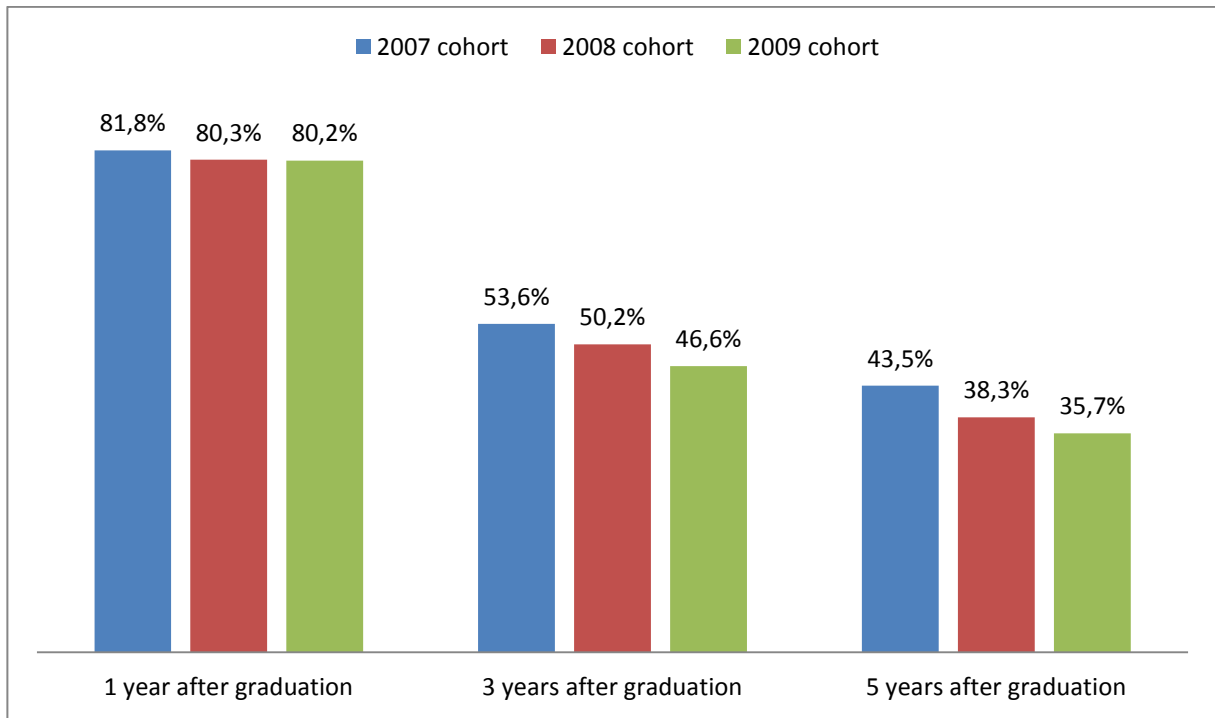
Data from our survey provides a good overview of the intentions after graduation for students in different study trajectories. An expressed intention to stay does however not always mean that a student will actually stay in the Netherlands. There exist different personal and institutional barriers that might force a graduate who has the aspiration to stay to eventually return to China. A comparison of our figures with additional data drawn from the municipality registration and commercial register can reveal something on this topic.

### *5.2. Stay rates and working stay rates of Chinese graduates*

The most important factor explaining the difference between the percentage of the students who desire to stay and the students who actually stay is the ability to find a job. If the students do not find a job that meets the requirements to qualify as a high-skilled worker within this period, they can no longer stay legally in the Netherlands, unless they marry a Dutch resident or start their own company here.

Unpublished data that we have been given access to by EP-Nuffic drawn from the municipal population registers and business register give more insight in the stay rate of Chinese students. Figure 10 shows that of those who graduated between 2007 and 2009, approximately 80 percent was still registered as living in the Netherlands one year after graduation. Yet, after a period of three years, only 50 percent of the students who graduated in 2008 were still registered. This drastic decrease of approximately 30 percent between the stay rate 1 year after graduation and the stay rate 3 years after graduation can partially be explained by inability to find a job after the one-year search year or because of graduation from a programme of further study.

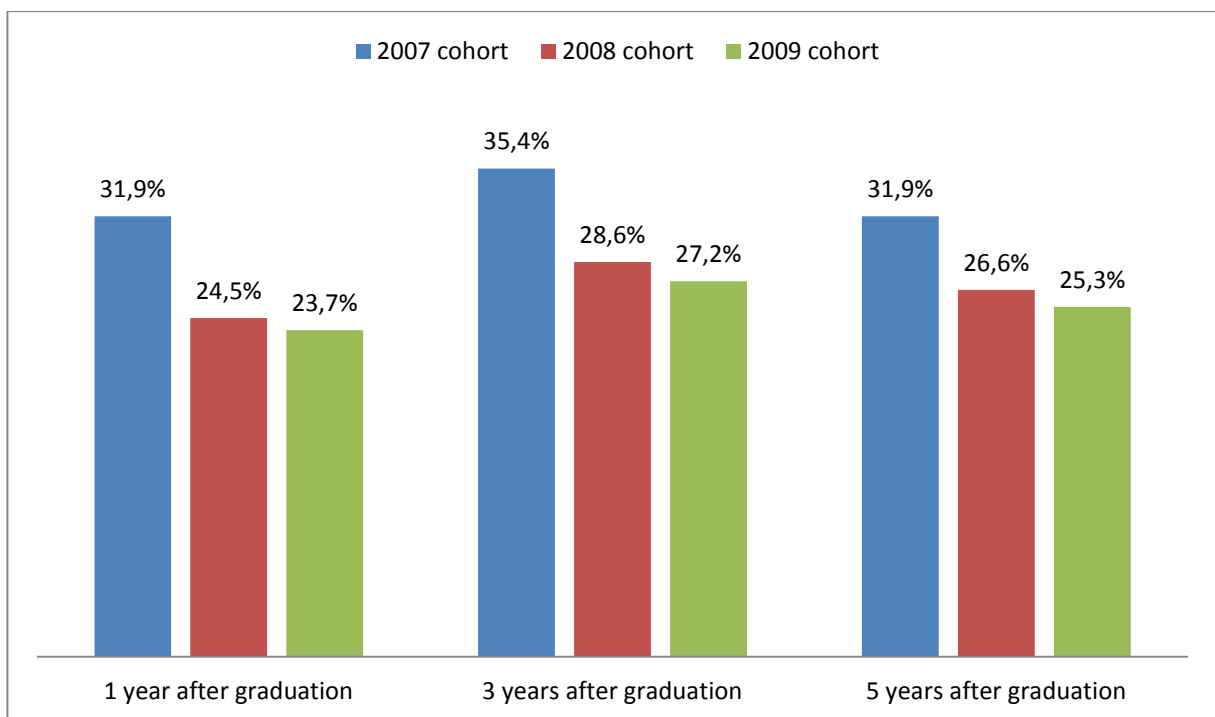
*Figure 6: Stay rates of Chinese graduates in the Netherlands*



Source: EP-Nuffic

The figures on percentages of cohorts of graduates that are employed in the Netherlands offer further clarification. Figure 11 reveals that between 25 and 32 percent of the graduated students are still working in the Netherlands five years after graduation. Because people who enrolled in another study programme are excluded from these numbers, it offers a better view on the percentage of the Chinese students that become member of the high skilled labour force.

Figure 7: Working stay rates of graduated Chinese students In the Netherlands



Source: EP-Nuffic

In comparison with students from other non-EEA countries the working stay rate of Chinese students is relatively low. From all non-EEA students in the 2009 cohort, 30 percent was employed in the Netherlands five years after graduation. In comparison, only 26.6 percent of the Chinese students who graduated in 2008 were still working in the Netherlands in 2013. Nonetheless, this number is still higher than students from EEA countries in the 2008 cohort. For this group the working stay rate after five years was 23.9 percent.<sup>20</sup> Why Chinese students less frequently stay in the Netherlands after graduation compared to other non-EEA countries is not entirely clear. The relatively high economic growth and job opportunities in China could be an explaining factor. A cross-national comparison required to validate this claim is however beyond the scope of this research project.

In figure 11 it can also be seen that the working stay rate of Chinese nationals three years after graduation is higher than the working stay rate one year after graduation. Whereas one year after graduation 24.5 percent of the 2008 cohort had a job, two years later this was 28.6, a growth of 4.1 percent. This increase suggests that some of the students successfully used the search year to find a job, or else returned to the Netherlands after a period of work or further study in China or elsewhere.

Between the cohorts of graduates in 2007, 2008 and 2009 we see a gradual decrease of the stay rates of the Chinese students. Whereas for the students graduated in 2007, 32 percent was working in the Netherlands five years after graduation, only 25 percent of the 2009 graduates was still employed in the Netherlands after five years. Overall, this declining stay rates for Chinese students follows a trend for international students in general.<sup>21</sup> The 2008 economic recession and resulting high youth unemployment among high educated workers are a probably influencing factor here. Future research has to show if this decreasing stay rate is a trend for Chinese students or is a temporary effect of the economic recession.

Based on the unpublished data from EP-Nuffic, most of the graduates find work in sectors related to financial service, trade, business, communication and hospitality. Of all the Chinese students who graduated in 2007 and stayed on in the Netherlands, about 70 percent was working in one of these sectors three years after graduation. This distribution over economic sectors is in line with what could be expected based on the fields of study most commonly chosen by Chinese students (see section 3.6 in chapter 3). Only students in technology and science relatively less often stay in the Netherlands to work after graduation.

### 5.3. Motivations to stay or return

Although we cannot fully explain why some students want to return to China while others want to stay in the Netherlands, our interviews suggest some factors that play an important role in this consideration. A first aspect is related to strong relationships with parents. Overall the interviewed students expressed strong feelings of kinship and sense of duty towards their parents. This need to take care embedded in Chinese culture. Furthermore, as single children they have no siblings with whom they can share the burden of care for their parents. As an only child they have received intensive parental attention when they were young. Their parents have often invested extensive resources in order to make their education and studying abroad possible.

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<sup>20</sup> EP-Nuffic. "Analysis of stay rate of international graduates: 2008-09", online at <https://www.epnuffic.nl/en/publications/find-a-publication/analysis-of-stay-rate-of-international-graduates-2008-09.pdf>, p. 7, accessed on 5 January 2017.

<sup>21</sup> EP-Nuffic. "Analysis of stay rate of international graduates: 2008-09."

This sometimes involves sacrifices of taking up loans or working very long hours in order to pay for these expenses. Consequently, many interviewed students felt that they owe their parents and in some way have to pay them back for all the efforts they made. Leaving them alone when they grow old is generally considered immoral. These strong familial ties can be a reason to move back to China after graduation.

However, a foreign degree does not guarantee the same high position in the Chinese labour market as it did in the past. Because the number of Chinese who have studied abroad has drastically increased over the last decennia, a good job after return is no longer assured. The average starting salary of a returned overseas students is conspicuously lower than expected.<sup>22</sup> For this reason some graduates try to acquire working experience in the Netherlands before moving back to China. They expect that this additional working experience will improve their position on the labour market and help them to find a well-paid job. Although these factor certainly play a role in the decision making process of the students, they cannot explain why some students decide to stay whereas other decide to return. The consideration whether to stay or return is often a complicated decision. As was shown in figure 7, a considerable part of the students is not sure what he or she will do after graduation. Which students will eventually stay in the Netherlands is largely dependent on the ability to find a job.

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<sup>22</sup> This information has been take from a Chinese report on study abroad, see 中国出国留学展趋势报告(Report on the general development trends of study abroad), Beijing: EOL (Education online, 中国教育在线) 2014, online at <http://www.eol.cn/html/lx/2014baogao/content.html>, checked on 5 January 2017.

## 6. Conclusions

The decision of Chinese students to study abroad is primarily motivated by personal development. Although in almost all cases parents cover the costs associated with overseas education, students indicated to have made the decision to study abroad themselves and for their own reasons. The PhD students are an exception. They are generally financed by the Chinese government or Dutch employers and name university-specific characteristics more often as reason for overseas education.

The Netherlands as a destination takes a middle position in a hierarchical view the students have of different study abroad destinations. About half of the students did not have the Netherlands as their first choice. In this worldview, the image of the Netherlands as having a good level of English, being an open society, and having international connections, are considered the most important positive aspects. Most of the students do not choose for the Netherlands because of unique characteristics, but rather go because it is abroad. A considerable part of the students planned to move to the US after graduation. For them the Netherlands can be seen as a temporary transition to facilitate further mobility.

Based on the reasons of Chinese students to come to the Netherlands and their evaluation of their time here, we advise to emphasise an international dimension when promoting the Netherlands in China. The connection of the Netherlands to Europe and the wide availability of English programmes were most often named as reason for moving to the Netherlands. Moreover, increased openness to other cultures and better level of English proficiency were among most positively valued gains of their stay here. Overall, Chinese students care more about the international character of the Netherlands rather than characteristics unique to Dutch society. With the high level of English for a country where English is not the native language, the Netherlands is a second best option after countries where English is the native language. When looking at the tuition fees, the Netherlands also takes a middling position between the more expensive UK and US and less expensive countries like France and Germany. Exactly this middle position can make the Netherlands an attractive destination for Chinese students.

Yet, the results also indicate that that not everything is as positive as it initially seems. There is a certain mismatch between these expectations prior to migration and the reality when they are here. Despite the high valuation of intercultural exchange and international contacts, Chinese students sometimes have difficulties to integration in the Dutch and international student community. Different cultural backgrounds and insufficient language proficiency in informal conversation form the main barriers to integration. Especially the number of Chinese-Dutch friendship relationships appears to be scarce. To the extent that higher education institutions are not doing this already, methods to facilitate the integration of Chinese students should therefore be adopted. As a side benefit, an increase in Chinese-Dutch networks could contribute to stimulate the number of Dutch students who go to China.

Another problem is that 19 percent of the Chinese students indicated to have felt discriminated while being in the Netherlands. Although discrimination is generally not considered a structural characteristic of the Dutch society, in the future these negative experience of students could harm the image of the Netherlands as an open and tolerant society.

Our research revealed that there is a group of HBO students who felt they were inadequately informed about the difference between a HBO and a university. Although the Nuffic NESO office in Beijing explains this difference, our research reveals that these efforts are not completely successful. The HBOs themselves should also clearly stress the differences and perhaps adopt a terminology that is easier understandable for the Chinese students. Stakeholders should be



aware that the difference between ‘university’ and ‘university of applied science’ is very difficult to understand for someone unfamiliar with the Dutch higher education sector.

There is a gap between the number of students that want to stay and the students that eventually stay in the Netherlands. We argued that this difference can mainly be explained by the inability of finding a suitable job, which is required to qualify as a high-skilled worker and get a visa and residence permit. Of the students who graduated between 2007 and 2009 approximately 30 percent was still working in the Netherlands five years after graduation. This number is notably lower than the working stay rate for students from other non-EEA countries. This gap between number that intend to stay and number that actually stays offer a possibility to increase the number of Chinese students that stay in the Netherlands and become part of the high-skilled labour force.

Measures are needed to increase the number of Chinese students that stay after graduation. One of these is the possibility to learn Dutch should become more widely available and be more actively promoted. Relatively many Chinese students expressed a willingness to learn Dutch. Due to the limited availability of affordable Dutch language courses, many students do however not realize their plans to learn the native language. The ability to speak Dutch is expected to improve the position on the labour market of Chinese graduates from a Dutch higher education institution. Moreover, the increase of China-Dutch networks due to an alumni network or student buddy system are also expected to have a positive effect on the stay rate of Chinese students.

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## **Appendix: Methodology**

This research project follows a mixed-methods research design and is based on both qualitative as well as quantitative data. Using this strategy has the advantage that the findings provide insight in the individual experience of Chinese students and give a general view on the representability of these insights for the larger population as well. Therefore, the combination of methods helped to get an overall understanding of student migration to the Netherlands. By answering the same questions with interview data and survey data, we could triangulate our findings. This consistency over different methodological perspectives strengthens the reliability of our results.

### *Qualitative research*

The first stage of this research was the collection of the qualitative data. This strand mainly consisted of the conduction of semi-structured interviews with Chinese students and stakeholders. Interviewed stakeholders were for example employees of the international office of universities and professors who frequently work with Chinese students. All interviews were directly transcribed and later analysed by using CAQDAS (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software). Interviews were conducted in Dutch, English and Chinese.

Furthermore, the qualitative data included many informal conversations and observations with Chinese students and alumni. During the time of the research project, the researchers had frequent personal contact with respondents within their own social networks. Although this type of information is less formalized and structural, it was highly valuable for contextualizing the interviews. In informal conversations the more sensitive and tacit knowledge, one would not likely speak of in an interview setting, could be extracted.

From the analysis of the qualitative data different important themes emerged. Based on these subjective experiences and motivations in the interviews, a survey was designed. The research project thus follows an inductive approach: the hypotheses were informed by observations rather than theory. In this sequential design, where the qualitative strand informs the quantitative strand, the external validity of the interviews can be tested. Although interviews give a good understanding of a person's motivations and experiences, it is unclear if these feelings are representative for the whole population of Chinese students. A survey design, as a follow up quantitative strand, helped to validate or falsify issues that came up in the surveys.

### *Quantitative research*

The purpose of the qualitative strand was twofold. First, the goal was to test the external validity of the relationships that were found in the semi-structured interviews. We wanted to know to what extent motivations for migration, experiences in the higher education sector, and aspiration to stay were shared by the rest of the Chinese students in the Netherlands. Secondly, the quantitative data could answer certain questions about the Chinese students that the qualitative data could not provide. For example, the survey data could inform us of the existing differences between postdoctoral, undergraduate and graduate students.

The survey questions were based on the issues that came up during the interviews with the students and the stakeholders. In this way, the survey could answer certain questions posed by the stakeholders and help to reflect on their existing assumptions. Furthermore, we could test to what extent the highly subjective stories by students we interviewed were representative for the group of Chinese students in the Netherlands. To stay as close to the initial qualitative data as possible, we decided to use the same language as used by the interviewees. In this way we tried to limit the influence of the interpretative account of the researchers. With this purpose, we

included an extensive number of Likert-scale question that presented the respondents with literal statement from the interviews. The respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement or applicability to their own situation on a 1 to five scale where 1 was do not agree and 5 was completely agree. The survey was completely in mandarin.

Because of limited time and resources available and an aspiration to include as much students as possible, we decided to use a mail survey. The programme we used is called Quantrix. With this online survey tool, we were able to send an email containing a link to the survey. This posed the problem of acquiring the email addresses of all the students in the Netherlands. We found out that, unfortunately, no centralized database containing such data existed. Because of the non-existence of this data and therefor impossibility to construct a sampling frame, we decided to sample the complete population of Chinese students in the Netherlands. According to EP-Nuffic, in 2016 this was a group of about 4300 students enrolled in a full degree programme.

The advantage of this decision for a self-administered questionnaire was that we were able to survey more than 500 people within a very restricted period of time. The alternative of manual surveying would definitely have resulted in much less respondents. To motivate the students to cooperate, we raffled two twenty euro coupons among the participants who completed the survey. The anonymity inherent to this mail questionnaire had the advantage of limiting a possible interviewer effect or social desirability bias. Since the survey was anonymous and could be made within the safe setting of the home, respondents are likely to state their honest, possibly socially undesirable, opinions. In the setting of an interview, respondents can sometimes feel ashamed and refrain from giving certain information.

One of the disadvantages was however that we have no information on the context in which the survey was filled in. We do, for example, not know if people filled in the survey alone or did this together. The social pressure when people filled in the survey together is likely to have influence the results. Another limitation resulted from the inability to reach all the students. For emailing the students were dependent on the willingness of different higher education institutions to cooperate. Privacy concerns prohibited the responsible employees to send us the email address. Instead, we sent them the survey which they directed to the Chinese students. Unfortunately, not all institutions were willing to cooperate with our research. Due to this inability to reach all the students, as an alternative strategy we also spread the survey within our own social networks and contacted Chinese student organizations. As a result, our data is not completely representative for the whole population of Chinese students in the Netherlands.

Nevertheless, a comparison of our data with official statistics of EP NUFFIC suggests that our sample is an relatively good reflexion of the entire population. In terms of study interest, the three fields with most Chinese students, engineering, business, and science are also the largest groups in our survey. The only striking figure is an overrepresentation of students in the humanities and social sciences. This is probably caused by the fact that the researchers and people in their social networks consist mainly of people in this field of interest. Although these figures cannot assure representativeness, they offer assurance that our survey is not radically different than the population.

This non-representativeness of the sample is one of the limitations of this research. We are not completely certain that our findings can be generalized beyond the students in our sample. Furthermore, due to the inexistence of a sampling frame, we do not know the response rate of our survey. It is unclear what percentage of the people that received the survey actually completed this survey. It could be that a group with certain characteristics was more likely to fill in the survey.

A tendency to look for confirmation can be considered another limitation inherent to the

design of our research. The initial purpose of the survey was to see to what extent the finding from the interviews are valid for a larger population. In order to limit researchers' interpretation, we often used literal quotes from the interviews as Likert-scale questions. As a result, the survey data is more likely to come to the same conclusions as found in the interview data. This tendency to ask for positive answer in the second strand of the research is referred to a confirmation bias.

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