ABSTRACT

In higher education institutes (HEIs), Operations Management programmes (OMPs) are among those programmes attracting a substantial amount of international student enrollment. With the current situation that the government is reducing its funding input, the UK HEIs’ financial balance relies more than before on the international students who pay higher tuition fees; meanwhile, with the increased number of the international students, the whole nation’s economy will be indirectly benefited from the increased consumption capacity associated with them. Thus to have more overseas students is not only educationally meaningful but also economically significant. In order to increase the international student number in HEIs, it becomes more critical to have a thorough understanding of the stakeholders’ demand of operations management professionals and preference on such an education programme’s content and its graduates’ competence. This paper focuses on postgraduate level OMP, through comparing viewpoints obtained from stakeholders (potential employers, academics and students) in UK and China, presents an empirical comparative investigation on the demand trend of the graduates from OMPs, as well as the preferred programme content, necessary student capability/skills and admission criteria for joining the study of such a programme.

Keywords: China, Demand Trend, Entrance Criteria, Higher Education Institute, International Students, Operations Management Programme, Teaching Content, UK

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INTRODUCTION

Similar to the situation in many other countries, currently the UK government is reducing the funding (James, 2012; Richardson, 2010; Anonymous, 2010b) allocated to higher education institutes (HEIs). This will endanger the survival of some institutes in their present conditions (Anonymous, 2010a). Under the context of reduced national financial input, to avoid the phenomena of: 1) many of the current universities’ employees may lose their jobs; and 2) the increased class size, which is cost effective but not learning/teaching effective, HEIs are endeavouring to secure funding from other sources. These sources include research grants from various funding bodies, consultancy projects from businesses and tuition fees, especially from international students who pay higher fees (UKCISA, 2012) that contribute significantly to HEIs’ revenue.

The competition among HEIs for recruiting more international students is fierce. To win the competition, making programmes more appealing to international students, namely to enhance the programmes’ internationalization feature, is one of the key strategies employed by the HEIs for increasing the overseas student number.

As argued by Zha (2003), among the main approaches for internationalization of HEIs there are activity approach and competency approach, which include the critical activities of the development of curriculums and programmes as well as student skills and knowledge. Thus the programmes’ curriculum content and the preferred student competence development were set as a part of the research foci.

The drive for students joining in an OMP or any other education programme is not only to obtain more knowledge, but also to ensure a promising career future. This naturally requires that a successful education programme with the aim to have more students enrollment, besides having attractive and useful content courses (Basnet, 2000; Sauber et al., 2008) and equipping students with substantial practical skills, it should also secure its graduates with a good career opportunity (Engwall, 2007; Camuffo et al., 2009). Namely, the programme’s graduates should be welcome by the businesses.

Nowadays hardly is any UK HEI not recruiting or has not recruited overseas students; and international student recruitment in HEIs keeps increasing in scale and scope, demonstrated by the student enrollment number and the countries they come from as well as the programmes they enroll in. According to HESA (2012), the Asian overseas students (who pay higher tuition fees than the EU students) count for around 62.5% of the non-EU students in the UK HEIs. And the Chinese student group is the largest one within the Asian cohort. Thus China is regarded by the authors as one of the key sources of overseas recruitment.

In view of aforementioned issues, this research investigates: 1. the career prospect of the graduates of OMPs, illustrated by the demand trend; 2. the content (modules in the programme) and necessary graduate skills/capability currently needed/preferred by the employers, academia and international students; 3. the criteria deemed reasonable to assure recruiting qualified students for a successful learning/teaching journey, meanwhile not constructing an exorbitant threshold to keep some otherwise enrolled students out. This research focuses on postgraduate level OMPs, due to that there are more overseas students joining in postgraduate level programmes than that joining in undergraduate programmes (HESA, 2005, 2006).

For exploring the above research issues, the authors conducted a survey investigation; sample participants of the survey include Chinese and UK industrial and academic professionals, Chinese and UK students. The reason for selecting China and UK as the counterparts is because that as aforementioned that China supplies the largest portion within the UK HEIs’ Asian international student population, while the UK is one of those countries where Chinese students are keen to seek their overseas education. Also with its fast and continuously developing economy, China has huge potential to keep its current trend of that many of its high