

**Choosing Canadian Graduate Schools from Afar:  
East-Asian Students' Perspectives**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

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**ABSTRACT**

International graduate students are a very special group of people, belonging to the so-called “creative class” (Florida, 2002), who travel from afar to pursue advanced education for the love of knowledge and for personal/professional advancement. They play an important role in Canadian graduate education by bringing academic, cultural, and economic benefits to our learning environment and society. They are ambassadors of Canadian education to the world. However, little research has been conducted to understand why and how they come here, and what attracts them. The purpose of this research is therefore to explore the factors and process by which graduate study in Canada is undertaken, and to develop a framework to explain their choice of a Canadian graduate school.

“College Choice” models appearing in previous research are designed mainly to explain the college choices of domestic undergraduate students. There is a general lack of “College Choice” working hypotheses for graduate students (Kallio, 1993). The research into international students generally does not differentiate level of study. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, a synthesis model was developed to understand the *process* of undertaking overseas graduate study. A push-pull model was used to understand the strengths of and relationships among various *factors* that influence the choice of a country, institution, program, and city.

The dual purpose of the research suggested a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods be used to explain the factors and process. Data was obtained by means of a survey questionnaire and in-person interviews. The research sample comprised students from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, who enrolled in graduate programs at the University of Toronto and York University in the 2003 – 2004 academic year. Out of a total

population of approximately 450 students, one hundred and forty surveys (31%) were returned. Twenty-three of the one hundred and forty respondents submitted to in-depth interviews.

The research findings revealed that international graduate students come to these two graduate schools primarily because of the school's strong *Institutional Academic Pulling Factors*, followed in importance by *Institutional Administrative Pulling Factors*, the *Canadian Environment*, the *Economics of Canadian Education*, and finally ease of *Visa/Immigration*. The research showed a three-stage process – “predisposition,” “search/selection/application,” and “choice.” Due to the nature of graduate study, the focus of the programs (i.e. research-oriented programs vs. professional programs) dominates the process as to which country and universities to make applications. The other three sets of factors – country, institution and city – interplay simultaneously at the two later stages.

Three recommendations are made to forward the national goal of being “*A Magnet for Talent*” (Government of Canada, 2002). The first recommendation calls for strengthening the core competencies of Canadian education by investing in the quality of graduate education and research. Next, for the benefit of both the institutions and the international students, enhanced internationalization efforts at the institutional level are crucial in promoting the profile of Canadian graduate education and research capabilities. Finally, a national marketing strategy should be crafted to enhance awareness and the overall image of Canadian higher education.

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