

Chinese interest in studying abroad plummets amid pandemic

Many of those crossing borders now likely to stay within East Asia, survey shows

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[Joyce Lau \(/author/joyce-lau\)](#)

Twitter: [@JoyceLauNews \(https://twitter.com/JoyceLauNews\)](#)



Fewer than one in five Chinese students are interested in studying abroad in the post-Covid era, according to a survey (<https://www.researchcghe.org/publications/working-paper/impact-of-covid-19-pandemic-on-international-higher-education-and-student-mobility-student-perspectives-from-mainland-china-and-hong-kong/>) conducted for the Centre for Global Higher Education.

The paper's authors, a team at Lingnan University in Hong Kong, described their finding that only 16 per cent of respondents were interested in studying abroad as "alarming".

If this materialised in mobility data, it would mark a major reversal in Chinese student movement to the West, which has shot up consistently over the past decade. "If there was no pandemic, the number of [Chinese students overseas] in 2020 would have reached a new high," the authors write.

They predict that the downward trend could last beyond 2021-22, warning that the decreased interest in overseas study "may potentially cast long-lasting effects on the international higher education sector".

The authors conclude that the pandemic not only decreased global student mobility overall, but also shifted some of the flow to East Asia. While the US and UK still made the top five most popular destinations among the survey's respondents, Australia, Canada and New Zealand no longer make the cut.

The other top five destinations for Chinese students were Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan, meaning that "regionalisation" could replace "internationalisation" as a dominant trend.

The authors note that higher education institutions in East Asia have already tried to "capture this as an opportunity to attract mainland Chinese students", for example with lucrative PhD funding.

The Lingnan team conducted an online survey of 2,739 students in May, with respondents split roughly between those from mainland China and Hong Kong. While the authors noted that the survey only reflected interest, not actual enrolments, their findings were roughly consistent with data from the Beijing Overseas Study Service Association, which represents education agents in China.

Weiyang Xiong, director of Lingnan's MA in international higher education and management and a co-author of the paper, told *Times Higher Education* that "East Asian countries and regions, especially those with reputable universities, have been rising destinations for Asian students". He said that this was a change from past decades.

The CGHE paper cites a variety of factors, but the most dominant was "better pandemic control" in East Asia. Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan, with combined populations of 158 million, have had fewer than 2,000 Covid deaths collectively.



Source: iStock

“The growing interest to study in Hong Kong, Japan, and Taiwan is due to their proximity to mainland China. In times of instability, students may want to stay in neighbouring regions in which they can still entertain international exposure and easily retreat to the homeland when necessary,” the authors write.

Many Chinese students found themselves stuck in overseas destination earlier in the pandemic, when China closed its borders and shut flights.

Other considerations included the rising rankings and reputations of Asian institutions; Chinese government warnings of tensions with countries such as Australia; “detrimental policies” related to US immigration; and news reports of discrimination against Asians wearing masks in Western countries.

Dr Xiong predicted that “Hong Kong will become a popular destination because of the high quality of higher education and reputable universities”.

This is despite some other studies showing negative perceptions of Hong Kong among mainland Chinese citizens because of political protests last year. While a new national security law has caused global alarm about academic freedoms in the city, Hong Kong still has relatively higher internet and other freedoms compared with mainland China.

The Hong Kong government has capped “non-local” students – meaning both foreign and mainland Chinese students – at 20 per cent of publicly funded undergraduate programmes, to preserve places for local students. However, Dr Xiong felt that there was room to grow in the rapid development of self-financed courses, especially taught postgraduate programmes.

joyce.lau@timeshighereducation.com (mailto:joyce.lau@timeshighereducation.com)