

## GLOBAL TALENT FLOWS

# From Quantity to Quality: China's International Student Strategy

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China's international student strategy is shifting from enrollment-driven goals to a more diversified, quality-oriented model. Once focused on attracting degree students, recent efforts emphasize short-term international exchanges, and Chinese universities' overseas programs and campuses. Challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical tensions, and domestic criticism have spurred this reorientation. Despite policy ambiguity, emerging initiatives suggest a more flexible, outcome-driven approach aimed at strengthening global engagement and ensuring the long-term sustainability of international education in China.

In recent decades, China's international student policy has undergone a profound transformation, reflecting the country's evolving role in global affairs. From the 1950s to the 1980s, international education served primarily as a diplomatic and cultural instrument. Entering the 21st century, especially after joining the World Trade Organization, China began to reposition international education as a tool for strengthening global educational influence and advancing its market economy.

In 2010, the government launched the Study in China Plan, setting a target of enrolling 500,000 international students by 2020. The plan reflected a strategic ambition to position China as the leading destination for international students in Asia. It also sought to enhance the quality and accessibility of student support services, build world-class educational capacity, and cultivate globally competent graduates with a deep understanding of and affinity for China. Launched alongside other major national strategies, including the Double First-Class Initiative (a program to develop world-class universities and academic disciplines in China) and the Belt and Road Initiative (China's global infrastructure and economic cooperation strategy), it formed part of a broader effort to improve the overall quality of higher education, strengthen research capacity, and accelerate the integration of China's education system into the global academic community.

To support these ambitions, authorities introduced wide-ranging measures such as increasing scholarships, streamlining visa procedures, and building institutional partnerships around the world. These efforts yielded results. The number of international students rose from 52,150 in 2000 to 492,185 in 2018, nearly reaching the 2020 goal ahead of schedule.

## The Impact of the Pandemic and Geopolitical Tensions

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted this trajectory. Since 2019, no new official data on international student enrollment have been published, and no formal post-pandemic national strategy has been introduced. The absence of updated figures has made it difficult to assess the current state of international education in China. Meanwhile, peer countries such as Japan and South Korea have already outlined clear recovery goals: Japan aims to enroll 400,000 international students by 2033, and South Korea targets 300,000 by 2027.

In this uncertain environment, the authors conducted interviews with university-based practitioners, policymakers, and scholars involved in international student affairs. Their insights reveal a sharp decline in international student numbers and a slow pace of recovery. One leading Double First-Class university administrator reported that its international student population had dropped from 3,500–4,000 before the pandemic to around 1,500 in 2023, with degree-seeking students showing the weakest rebound.

Geopolitical tensions, particularly between China and the United States, have further constrained mobility. According to the Christian Science Monitor, the number of American students in China declined from about 20,000 in 2018 to just 700 in 2023. One scholar remarked that student mobility often mirrors diplomatic relations, noting that the recent reduction in exchange reflects a combination of strained political ties, diminished trade and academic cooperation, and travel warnings issued by the US government.

## Rising Domestic Criticism and Institutional Strain

Beyond external conditions, internal challenges are also dampening China's attractiveness as a study destination. Interviewees pointed to rising public skepticism toward international students, driven by concerns over preferential treatment and the allocation of educational resources. A 2021 report by Phoenix News noted that online media and public debate have increasingly questioned the special privileges given to international students, such as generous scholarships, better housing, and priority access to resources. These concerns, fueled by rising nationalist sentiment and calls for fairness, have pressured Chinese universities to be more cautious in recruitment and funding policies.

Universities also face persistent issues in international student services: language barriers, limited cross-cultural support, and institutional fragmentation have made it difficult to provide consistent and high-quality experiences. Financial constraints are compounding these challenges. Amid economic headwinds, both national and local governments have tightened education budgets, leading to reductions or eliminations of scholarship programs and weakening universities' ability to offer competitive financial packages. The impact of these changes falls disproportionately on less prestigious institutions.

## Signals of Change: Toward a More Flexible and Outward-Looking Model

In January 2025, the Master Plan on Building China into a Leading Country in Education (2024–2035) was released. While broad in scope, the strategy offers only general guidance regarding international education. It proposes strengthening the “Study in China” brand, improving admissions and evaluation systems, expanding youth exchange initiatives, and promoting global Chinese language education. However, it does not specify enrollment goals or provide detailed implementation mechanisms.

Despite this ambiguity, recent initiatives aligned with the plan suggest that China is beginning to reposition its international education strategy. For instance, the government is actively advancing the Five-Year, Fifty-Thousand initiative, which aims to bring 50,000 American youth to China between 2024 and 2029. Concurrently, China is expanding its educational presence abroad. As of 2024, 22 Chinese universities had established 27 overseas campuses or joint institutions. More than 200 vocational colleges across 27 provinces had launched over 400 international collaborations in 70 countries.

These developments indicate a gradual shift in China's international student policy from a primary focus on increasing higher education enrollment toward a more diversified model. This evolving approach includes outreach to younger student groups, short-term programs such as international summer schools, and the overseas expansion of Chinese universities through joint programs and branch campuses. In contrast to the elite-oriented frameworks common in Western systems, China's efforts emphasize vocational training and engagement with countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative. For instance, the Luban Workshop, designed to cultivate skilled professionals in collaboration with local institutions, saw its first overseas establishment in 2016 with the Thailand Luban Workshop, jointly launched by Tianjin Bohai Vocational Technical College and Rajamangala University of Technology. China is increasingly delivering education abroad, aiming to complement inbound mobility with the broader international presence of its educational resources.

Reflecting a broader shift in institutional priorities, a more quality-oriented and outcome-driven approach to international student recruitment is gradually emerging within Chinese higher education. This evolving model emphasizes the reassessment of program offerings, more targeted geographic outreach, and the use of performance indicators—such as graduate outcomes and educational return on investment—to evaluate enrollment effectiveness. In parallel, universities are developing specialized programs that align academic strengths with industry needs, aiming to attract self-funded international students and foster a more financially sustainable model of international education that reduces reliance on government subsidies. Furthermore, institutions are increasingly partnering with Chinese enterprises operating overseas to provide international students with internship opportunities and career pathways, thereby enhancing the practical value and employment relevance of their educational offerings.

Taken together, these policy signals and institutional innovations suggest that China's international education strategy is entering a period of strategic realignment. Although the absence of updated data and comprehensive policy guidance continues to create uncertainty, universities are actively experimenting with new models. The emerging approach places greater emphasis on educational quality, combines inbound and outbound engagement, and prioritizes vocational and regional partnerships. While still in formation, this model reflects a gradual move toward a more flexible, resilient, and globally embedded phase in China's international education engagement. If sustained, this transition could enhance China's soft power by positioning its universities as more credible partners in shaping the future of global education.

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