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U.S. EDUCATION

Chinese Student Visas to U.S. Tumble From Prepandemic Levels

Global competition, strained political ties lead to drop that hits revenue at big and small colleges and universities



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Aug. 11, 2022 5:30 am ET

The number of U.S. student visas issued to Chinese nationals plunged by more than 50% in the first half of 2022 compared with pre-Covid levels, with the U.S. losing ground as the most-coveted place for Chinese students to pursue higher education abroad.

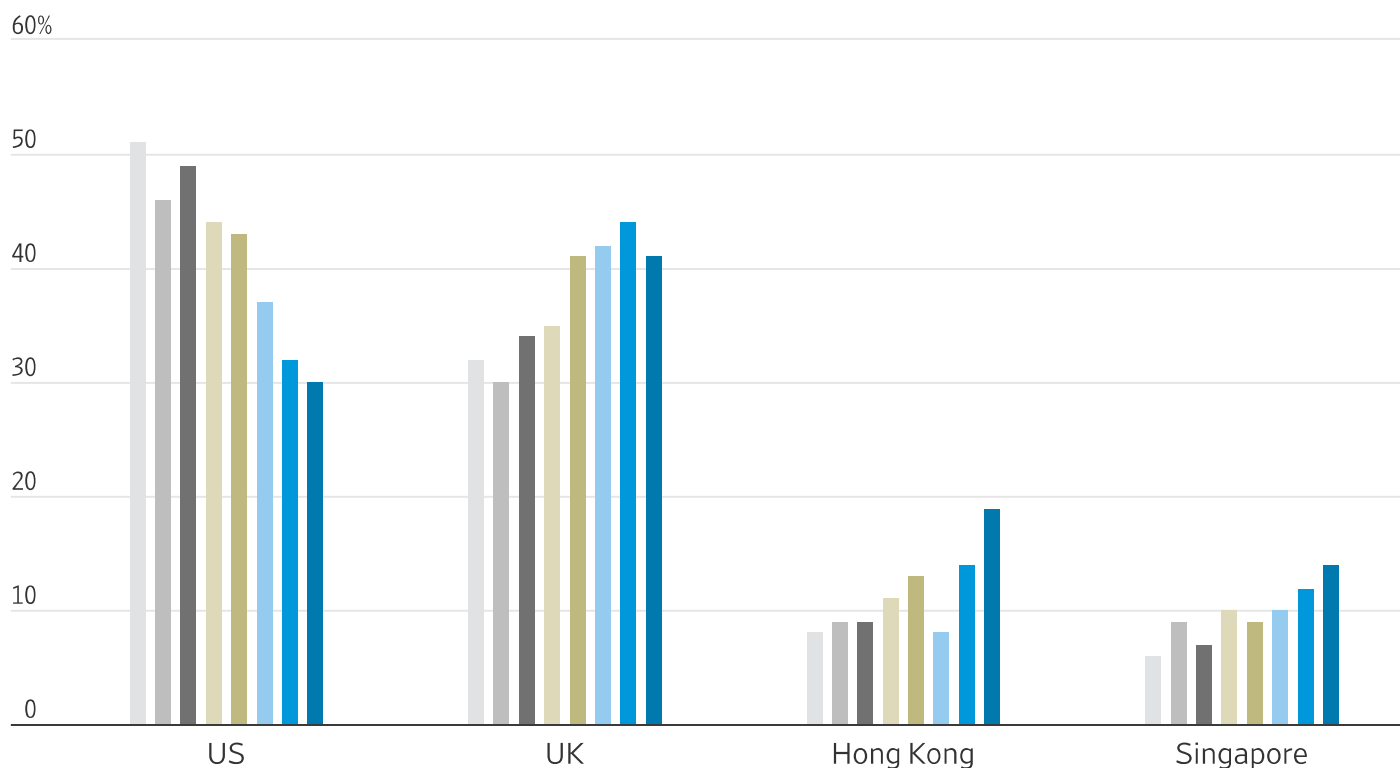
Even before the pandemic, Chinese students were shifting their study-abroad sights elsewhere, driven by doubts about whether they would feel welcome in the U.S. and the emergence of more domestic and international alternatives. Travel restrictions and heightened safety concerns during the pandemic accelerated that decline.

In the first six months of 2022, the U.S. issued 31,055 F-1 visas to Chinese nationals, down from 64,261 for the same period in 2019, according to data from the U.S. State Department. The drop has hit revenue at big and small colleges and universities around the country, including state flagships.

A Waning American Dream

Where Chinese students want to study abroad

2015 2016 2017 2018 2019 2020 2021 2022



Source: New Oriental Education & Technology Group Inc. survey

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln enrolled 415 Chinese students in fall 2021, a 66% drop from its peak of 1,234 in fall 2016, and expects numbers to be flat or down slightly this fall. International undergraduate students at Nebraska generally pay out-of-state tuition, which this year is \$24,900, compared with the in-state rate of \$7,770.

“We’re probably not going to rebound fully to where we were before,” said Josh Davis, associate vice chancellor for global affairs at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. “This is the new reality.”

For more than a decade, China has been the top source of international students to the U.S., providing universities with crucial tuition dollars to offset domestic declines and dwindling state funding at public universities. In the 2019-20 academic year, before the pandemic depressed study-abroad numbers, Chinese nationals accounted for 35% of foreigners studying in the U.S. and contributed \$15.9 billion in economic value, according to numbers tracked and aggregated by the Institute of International Education’s Open Doors report.

Many factors are now leading Chinese students to seek their higher education elsewhere, including within their own country. If U.S. schools can't find other international students, the financial hit could be devastating as federal pandemic relief funds run out.

Chinese students have had to navigate strict Covid-related travel restrictions, including a temporary suspension of visa services at U.S. consulates in China that complicated the logistics of moving abroad. In addition, students said in interviews with The Wall Street Journal that they felt deterred by reports of high Covid-19 deaths, gun violence and anti-Asian racism as well as deteriorating U.S.-China relations.

Many pointed to an order issued by then-President Donald Trump in 2020 that barred entry to the U.S. for Chinese graduate students and postgraduate researchers with ties to military-related entities, saying it was evident they weren't welcome at U.S. schools. University administrators said the visa clampdown has resulted in applications being rejected even for those without clear military connections.



The Biden administration resumed visa processing for Chinese students in May 2021 and publicly stated that the U.S. welcomed Chinese students, though it hasn't reversed the presidential order.

The perceived arbitrariness of the ban has soured some Chinese students' view of the U.S. "Many feel like they could be the next target," said Amanda Wu, a 21-year-old engineering student from the Chinese city of Taizhou. "They feel unsafe."

Ms. Wu said she started preparing to apply for U.S. graduate programs in her sophomore year of college in China. But after watching everyone at her university fail to get a U.S. visa,

she said, she let go of her dream to attend Columbia or Cornell university, and will instead go to the University of Toronto.

Officials at U.S. universities said that shutting the door on those with suspected ties to military programs cooled interest from students more broadly and that reversing the sentiment has been hard.

“The message is kind of inescapable for students,” said John Wilkerson, associate vice president for international services at Indiana University. “I think it had a deleterious effect at all levels.”

That school enrolled just shy of 1,600 students from China in spring 2022, less than half of what it had in 2015, school data show. India has overtaken China as the top country sending students to the school, with sharp growth there partly covering the China losses.

Chinese state-run media has leaned into depictions of the U.S. as a chaotic place, amplifying negative stories about violence and what it portrays as the country’s poor handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, China has extolled its own Covid-19 controls as effective in curbing deaths.

Safety concerns are now the second-leading factor behind educational quality influencing Chinese students’ decisions about where to enroll abroad, according to a June study from the Chinese education company New Oriental Education & Technology Group Inc.

Odile Dou, 27, had been an undergraduate student at the University of New Hampshire but returned to China in May 2020 as Covid-19 cases rose in the U.S. This summer she decided she wouldn’t go back to school in the U.S., citing worries about deteriorating U.S.-China relations and the immense hassle and cost of getting back to China once abroad.

In addition, education consultants said Chinese students have grown pickier about whether to study abroad at all, as Chinese universities have risen in global rankings and are viewed more favorably by some employers, both in China and abroad. China’s two top universities—Peking and Tsinghua—tied at No. 16 in the latest Times Higher Education global ranking.

Increased opportunities for Chinese students at home, as well as in places including Singapore and the U.K., have hit schools such as Pepperdine University’s Graziadio Business School in Malibu, Calif. In 2017, that school had nearly 360 Chinese students,

making up three-quarters of the business school's international enrollment. This fall it expects to have just under 200 students from China, a decrease the school partly attributes to increased competition from abroad.

“We certainly have the deck stacked in our favor, being in California, being in this beautiful place,” said Brooke O'Donnell Mitchell, director of Pepperdine's office of international student services. “But it just simply has become so much more challenging to recruit.”

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