

Abstract

China, the world's largest source of international students, has now become one of the top destination countries for student mobility worldwide and will be a strong competitor in the provision of international higher education in the foreseeable future.

International Students at Chinese Institutions: Trends and Implications

Nian Cai Liu

China has long been the world's largest source of international students, with outgoing Chinese students totaling 662,100 in 2018. Meanwhile, it is also quickly becoming one of the top destination countries globally: in 2018, the number of international students at Chinese institutions was as high as 492,185.

Increasing Numbers

Before China opened up to the world in the late 1980s, the number of international students was limited to a few hundreds. In the first 20 years following the reform, the number of international students increased rapidly: in 2018, it was 10 times higher than in 1999 (44,711). Meanwhile, the number of institutions receiving international students soared from less than 100 in the early 1980s to about 1,000 currently— which is about one-third of the total number of Chinese institutions.

This rapid increase in the number of international students is a result of national strategies and targeted policies. For example, in 2010, the National Outline for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020) clearly stated China's commitment to strengthening international exchanges and cooperation and improving the level of internationalization of higher education. That same year, the Plan of Studying in China (2010) put forward a national policy of “expanding scale, optimizing structure, improving management, and ensuring quality,” aiming to promote the sustainable development of international education and build an international brand of higher education in China. The plan also reflected China's intention to become the largest destination country for study in Asia by 2020.

Greater Diversity

In addition to the substantial increase in the overall number of international students, the number of source countries also expanded significantly, on all continents. In 2018, 196 countries and regions—about 90 percent of all the countries and regions of the world—sent students to China. Asian countries were the main sources of international students, with the proportion of Asian students in China remaining at about 60 percent in the past few years. African countries experienced the fastest growth as source countries, with the share of African students reaching 16.6 percent in 2018, second after Asian students.

The top 10 source countries in 2018 include South Korea, Thailand, Pakistan, India, the United States, Russia, Indonesia, Laos, Japan, and Kazakhstan. Eight among them are Asian, which appears relevant considering the sending countries' total population, economic level, education status, geographical location, ethnic composition, customs, and study abroad policies. The largest increases were from Thailand and Pakistan, which could be related to the Belt and Road Initiative. It is worth noting that until recently, Germany and France were among the top ten countries, which is not the case any longer.

For a long time, the study of Chinese was the most popular major for international students in China. Students studying Chinese language currently constitute about half of the total number of international students, most of them nondegree students. Although Chinese remains popular, the proportion of students studying Chinese literature, medicine, engineering, economics, and management keeps growing.

The proportion of degree students has been increasing steadily. In 2018, more than half of the international students were degree students. Among degree students, the proportion of graduate students has grown significantly. In 2018, about 10 percent of degree students were at the doctoral level, about 23 percent at the master's level, and 67 percent at the undergraduate level.

Government Scholarships

In 1996, the ministry of education established the China Scholarship Council, which, in particular, specialized in organizing, funding, and managing international students. In 2018, 63,041 international students (12.8 percent of all international students) received Chinese government scholarships.

A large proportion of international students receiving Chinese government scholarships were degree students, and their share has been increasing in the past years. With the number of international students steadily increasing while the budget for government scholarships remains relatively limited, Chinese government scholarships are likely to be reserved for degree students in the future.

In addition to the government program, many Chinese institutions have set up their own scholarship programs for international students, as well as international companies targeting specific international student groups, many of them related to the Belt and Road initiative.

Equal Treatment?

With the increasing presence of international students in China, questions arise about how the education system will adapt to multiculturalism, coupled with the difficulty, for the majority of international students, of learning Chinese. Chinese institutions and governments have been trying very hard to deal with these challenges. In the past, international students in China used to receive preferential treatment, which is still partly the case. But there has been strong advocacy—and even a public debate in 2019—in favor of enrolling international students on the same terms as Chinese students.

Final Remarks

Although nationalism may have significant negative influences, the long-term trend of internationalization of higher education will not be changed, and while Chinese universities are becoming increasingly competitive, China is turning into a strong global competitor in the provision of international higher education. ▲

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