Reimagining Higher Education in the Post-COVID-19 Era: Chinese Students’ Desires for Overseas Learning and Implications for University Governance

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Abstract

Neither world leaders nor leading medical professionals would have anticipated the adverse impacts of the global health crisis resulting from the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic on multifaceted aspects of contemporary society. Set against the broader political economy context, this Special Issue focuses on examining the impacts of the present global health crisis on higher education development. Addressing the major objective of the Special Issue, this article chooses the theme of reimagining higher education in the post-COVID-19 era, critically examining Chinese students’ desires and motivations for overseas learning. Based upon a few waves of surveys conducted since 2020, after the outbreak of the pandemic, this article assesses the impacts of the unprecedented global health crisis on Chinese students’ future overseas study plans. Having experienced various forms of disruption during the COVID-19 period, this article also critically reimagines higher education development in the post-COVID-19 era.

Keywords COVID-19 pandemic · International student mobility · Higher education · University governance · Overseas learning desires · Quality education for all

Introduction

Within the context of the broader political and economic context following the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020, this article sets out to critically examine how this unprecedented global health crisis has affected higher education development. More specifically, based upon several surveys conducted since 2020, this article analyses the findings on the impacts of the unprecedented global health crisis on Chinese
students’ future overseas study plans, after they had experienced significant disruption in higher education development due to the pandemic. Higher education systems around the globe experienced various forms of disruption during the COVID-19 period, and this article also critically reimagines higher education development in the post-COVID-19 era. The first part of the article shows the background and discusses the broader political and economic context for the present research. The second part critically examines the major findings generated by the various waves of surveys. The final part analyses findings from comparative perspectives, with critical reflections on the future development of higher education in the post-COVID-19 pandemic world.

**Background**

**Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on International Higher Education**

The pandemic, infodemic, and rising neoliberalism and nationalism have created a complex situation that intensifies geopolitical tensions in many regions, greatly influencing higher education. International higher education faces more significant challenges as border closures and travel restrictions disrupted international mobility for education, networking, and collaborations (Oleksiyenko et al., 2021). The rising xenophobia against Chinese and Asian students and parochial nationalism create obstacles for the international higher education system (Mok, 2021; Soria, 2021). Recent research suggests that international students face different forms of cultural, social, and psychological well-being issues during the pandemic (Mok, 2021; Li et al., 2020; Haft and Zhou, 2021). The well-being of international students was undermined by policies in some major host countries of international students. In July 2020, the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement issued a guideline urging international students who were participating in online education to leave the US. Likewise, the Prime Minister of Australia made a comment calling international students to “go home” unless they have critical skills needed by the government, neglecting the fact that border closures and visa regulations make going home impossible for many international students (Le, 2021). Such measures may discourage prospective students from studying in these countries in the future while opening the possibility of new international higher education destinations. According to the fifth Global Survey conducted by the International Association of Universities in 2022, “political and economic changes taking place in the world are reflected in the perception of internationalisation at HEIs [higher education institutions], with North America being the region reflecting them the most, both in terms of being affected by and responding to these changes” (Marinoni, 2019, 36)

In short, when analysing future trends of international student mobility, we must consider the broader political and economic perspective, particularly the new geopolitics. Indeed, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted international student mobility. The present research is set out against the broader political economy and new geopolitical environment to examine how Chinese university students determine their future overseas study plans. Based upon a few
rounds of student surveys, this article critically analyses whether there are major changes in terms of patterns and trends revealing Chinese students’ overseas learning plans. More specifically, the following section discusses whether Chinese university students would prefer studying abroad in the Asian region rather than going to the traditional destinations based in Britain, Europe, North America, and Australia.

**Changes to International Higher Education Landscape**

The spread of the pandemic has dramatically changed the landscape of global higher education by decreasing international mobility and fostering the emergence of new study abroad destinations. Although a sharp increase in international student mobility occurred over the past two decades, the overall percentage is rather low, with only 2.0% of the world’s total student population involved. Furthermore, mobility is mainly in a single direction, mostly from the Global South to the Global North. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed the landscape, and international student mobility has been facing unprecedented challenges caused by the pandemic. With travel restrictions and closed borders, many students cancelled or changed their overseas education plans, reshaping the landscape of international higher education. Universities in Anglophone countries are more likely to be influenced because they are more financially dependent on fee-paying international students (Marginson, 2020) and receive the lion’s share of the world’s internationally mobile students. The decrease in international student numbers means that higher education institutions will lose a large amount of income, and the financial crisis will further affect implementation of teaching, learning, scientific research, and other activities. Different stakeholders of global higher education have researched international student mobility, and universities worldwide are trying to adapt to the new situation (Salmi, 2020; Farnell et al., 2021). A summary of major challenges faced by different stakeholders is below:

- Universities that rely on international students to bring in revenue have been particularly affected by the pandemic.
- The negative impact of the pandemic on student mobility will be more profound in countries where the pandemic is out of control.
- Countries with better pandemic control, such as some East Asian countries, will become potential major destinations for international students.
- Health and well-being concerns become major factors influencing the destination choice of international students.

As shown in Fig. 1, the survey conducted by QS in 2020 shows that approximately half of the potential international students intended to defer their overseas learning plans until 2021, whereas just over 20% would either choose another country or cancel their overseas study plans. Factors preventing students from travel include border closure, visa restrictions, university campus lockdowns, and health and safety concerns. In addition, detrimental policies issued by some popular destination countries, like the US, also become an obstacle for international student
mobility. Although this policy was revoked by strong resistance from students and some leading universities, it has brought many negative impressions to international students who plan to study in the US. The impact of the pandemic on international mobility may vary significantly across regions and institutions, with elite universities being less likely to be influenced (Welch, 2022; Mok, 2021). After setting out the broader policy background for the present research, the following discussion will highlight the research design and present the major findings of the current project.

**Chinese University Students’ Studying Abroad Intention in the Pandemic**

**Research Design**

This study applies a survey approach to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on university students’ study abroad plans in mainland China. As the research team conducted the first-round survey on this topic of a similar population in May 2020 (Mok et al., 2021), therefore, in addition to presenting the findings derived from this first-round survey, this study also conducts a comparative analysis of two rounds of surveys to examine Chinese university students’ study abroad desires along with the up-and-down pandemic situations in the globe. The research team worked with the survey company, *Wenjuanxing*, to carry out both rounds of the survey. Before working with the company to distribute the survey, the research team first designed the questionnaire and selected the target groups. All target groups are from the sample database randomly invited to join the survey by the company. The company later disseminated the questionnaire through an e-survey platform to target samples who met the requirements. To ensure the validity of the data, the company systematically and manually screened the samples as they chose to join this study.

![Fig. 1](https://www.qs.com)  
*Fig. 1 How the pandemic has influenced the study plan of potential international students. Source: QS (2020)*
Data Collection

Based on the survey questionnaire of the first-round study, the research team added more questions and aimed to examine respondents’ desire for study abroad and destinations before, during, and after the pandemic. Using the Likert scale, this survey explored the reasons behind respondents’ desire to study abroad and their choices of specific destinations. In addition, the research team asked for respondents’ previous overseas study experiences to further understand their responses. The survey ended with the questions on respondents’ demographic information, including gender, age, affiliated institution, year of study, and household income level.

The company began distributing the second-round questionnaire in June 2021 and completed the data collection within a month. The sampling process aimed at covering higher education students at all levels (associate to master) from all four geographic regions in mainland China to ensure representativeness. Therefore, the questionnaires were purposely distributed to students at the universities and colleges in the pre-selected provinces and cities, covering the Eastern region (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Shandong, Fujian, and Tianjin), the Central region (Henan, Hubei, Anhui, and Hunan), the Western region (Sichuan, Chongqing, Shaanxi, Yunnan, and Inner Mongolia), and the Northeast region (Liaoning and Heilongjiang). Most cities selected are mainly near China’s eastern coast, considering that these areas are more economically developed and have a more developed higher education sector (Mok and Xu, 2008).

The research team received 2,036 valid responses from 29 provincial-level regions. Among all respondents, 1,940 provided valid institutional information, and they were from 799 universities and colleges. Respondents covered the study levels from the associate level to the master’s (Table 1). Most of them studied at the bachelor’s programs (82.2%).

Among all respondents, around two-thirds were female (62.0%), and only 249 (12.2%) respondents had overseas study or exchange experiences. Regarding household incomes, 61.1% and 31.6% of respondents indicated they were from mid-income and low-income families, and only 3.2% were from wealthy families.

| Table 1 Respondents’ Year of School (2021 Survey) |
|----------------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Year of School                  | Number    | Percentage (%) |
| Bachelor’s 1st year             | 479       | 23.5        |
| Bachelor’s 2nd year             | 533       | 26.2        |
| Bachelor’s 3rd year             | 424       | 20.8        |
| Bachelor’s 4th year             | 238       | 11.7        |
| Master’s 1st year               | 76        | 3.7         |
| Master’s 2nd year               | 34        | 1.7         |
| Master’s 3rd year               | 26        | 1.3         |
| Associate                       | 214       | 10.5        |
| Others                          | 12        | 0.6         |
| Total                           | 2036      | 100.0       |
Data Analysis

After cleaning and organising the data using Excel software, the research team conducted a descriptive analysis to examine respondents’ desires and reasons for studying abroad and destinations before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The comparison of their desires during these periods was conducted to demonstrate the impact of the pandemic on mainland college students’ overseas study plans. In addition, as mentioned previously, the research team also conducted a comparative analysis of the 2020 survey and the current one to see the differences.

Major Findings

Before the COVID-19 Pandemic

In this new round of the survey, 1,591 (78.1%) respondents indicated that they lacked interest in studying abroad before the pandemic outbreak, while 445 (21.9%) had considered studying overseas before the pandemic. The top five most popular destinations (respondents were allowed to select multiple choices) were the US (50.8%), the UK (45.2%), Japan (19.1%), Canada (16.9%), and Germany (14.4%). Hong Kong placed eighth (11%) in the selection, behind France and Australia. The five countries that students voted as the least favourite study destinations were Poland (0.5%), Taiwan (1.1%), Malaysia (2.7%), Macau (3.4%), and New Zealand (6.3%). Table 2 shows the comparison of their different choices.

Based on their choices of the preferred destinations for studying abroad, this study further investigated the reasons behind their selection (see Table 3): 88.5% of respondents would like to receive a high-quality university education. An eagerness to experience different cultures and lifestyles and broaden horizons was the reason for 387 respondents (87.2%) to study abroad. Also, 83.2% of respondents believed overseas learning experiences and diplomas would provide them with better employment prospects.

During the COVID-19 Pandemic

To understand whether the COVID-19 pandemic had an influence on Chinese university students’ educational pursuits, the research team further explored their opinions on their intention of studying abroad during the pandemic. The results

| Table 2 | Top-five Preferred Study Destinations and Five Least Favourite Destinations before the COVID-19 Pandemic (2021 Survey) |
|---|---|
| Top five most popular destinations | Five least favourite destinations |
| The US (50.8%) | New Zealand (6.3%) |
| The UK (45.2%) | Macau (3.4%) |
| Japan (19.1%) | Malaysia (2.7%) |
| Canada (16.9%) | Taiwan (1.1%) |
| Germany (14.4%) | Poland (0.5%) |
Table 3 Top-five Reasons for Studying abroad before the COVID-19 Pandemic (2021 Survey)

| Reason                                                                 | Agree     | No strong opinion | Disagree |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|-------------------|----------|
| 1. I wanted to receive high-quality higher education                    | 394 (88.5%) | 37 (8.3%)         | 14 (3.2%) |
| 2. I wanted to experience different cultures and lifestyles, and broaden my horizons | 388 (87.2%) | 43 (9.7%)         | 14 (3.2%) |
| 3. I wanted to have better career prospects because of overseas learning experiences and diplomas | 370 (83.1%) | 65 (14.6%)       | 10 (2.3%) |
| 4. The university I prefer has a strong international reputation        | 369 (82.9%) | 63 (14.2%)        | 13 (2.9%) |
| 5. I wanted to improve my foreign language (e.g., English) proficiency  | 343 (77.1%) | 78 (17.5%)        | 24 (5.4%) |
demonstrated that motivation for studying abroad weakened for most respondents. Over 90 percent (91.8%) expressed that they had no interest in studying overseas during the outbreak or after the pandemic, and only 8.3% insisted on planning to study abroad.

The top three reasons for respondents’ changing decisions or perceptions were mostly related to health concerns. Parents’ concerns about their children’s overseas safety and health while studying abroad accounted for the highest proportion, with 85.2% of respondents indicating this. On the other hand, 84.2% of respondents having no study abroad plans stated that they were worried about their safety and health during the pandemic. Also, 81.4% of respondents were worried that it would be difficult to get back to China during the pandemic. For the 8.3% of respondents who still wanted to study abroad during the pandemic, the five most attractive destinations were the UK (42.3%), the US (41.1%), Canada (23.2%), Japan (20.8%), and Germany / France (17.3%) (see Fig. 2).

The reasons for still choosing to study abroad during the pandemic included the preferred overseas institutions provide a high-quality learning experience (80.9%), overseas universities have a high reputation (80.4%), and an overseas diploma could be advantageous in obtaining job opportunities in a fiercely competitive labour market (72.1%) (see Table 4).

In addition, among the 168 respondents who intended to study abroad, more than 50 percent (59.5%) could not accept that the institution only offered online courses. In other words, this group of students emphasized the learning experiences, which was consistent with their choice of “the overseas institutions would provide high-quality learning experience” because they would like to study abroad during the pandemic.

![Fig. 2 Top five preferred study destinations during the COVID-19 pandemic (2021 Survey)](image-url)
Table 4  Top-Five Reasons for Studying abroad during the COVID-19 Pandemic (2021 Survey)

| Reason                                                                 | Agree          | No strong opinion | Disagree |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|-------------------|----------|
| 1. I wanted to receive high-quality higher education                   | 136 (81.0%)    | 21 (12.5%)        | 11 (6.5%)|
| 2. The university I prefer has a strong international reputation       | 135 (80.3%)    | 25 (14.9%)        | 8 (4.8%) |
| 3. I wanted to have better career prospects because of overseas learning experiences and diplomas | 121 (72.0%)    | 38 (22.6%)        | 9 (5.4%) |
| 4. Social security cover for students at this university is good, so my personal safety can be guaranteed | 84 (50%)       | 63 (37.5%)        | 21 (12.5%)|
| 5. The COVID-19 pandemic situation of the destination is well managed  | 72 (42.9%)     | 54 (32.1%)        | 42 (25.0%)|
After the COVID-19 Pandemic

It is worth noting that more than 20 percent (20.9%) of respondents would consider studying overseas when the pandemic is over, and nearly 80 percent (79.9%) were not interested. The top five most popular destinations were the US (45.5%), the UK (43.7%), Japan (23.9%), Canada (21.6%), and Germany (20.2%). Hong Kong ranked ninth place (13.9%) after France, Australia, and Singapore. At the same time, Poland (2.1%), Malaysia (3.3%), Taiwan (4.0%), Macau (5.9%), and New Zealand / Italy (9.4%) were the five least-favoured study destinations (Table 5).

Comparison of Before, During, and After the COVID-19 Pandemic

After comparing the results of students’ preference for studying overseas before, during, and after the pandemic, the study found no significant difference in their plans. However, more students were unwilling to study overseas, with an increase of 17.4% during the outbreak, meaning that the COVID-19 pandemic had a certain influence on students’ decisions (see Table 6). Students were also less interested in studying abroad when comparing their interests before and after the pandemic. This change implied that the COVID-19 pandemic could potentially have long-term repercussions on the international higher education system.

Japan was one of the top four study destinations for mainland students. The research team believed that, as a neighbouring country to China, Japan’s proximity was one of the attractive factors. However, the opportunities for the other countries in East Asia, including South Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore, are also listed in the top-ten. When students were concerned about the health conditions overseas, East Asian countries could enjoy a greater chance to admit more international students during this difficult time. For instance, Hong Kong was selected

### Table 5

| Top five preferred study destinations | Five least favourite destinations |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| The US (45.5%)                      | New Zealand (9.4%) / Italy (9.4%) |
| The UK (43.7%)                      | Macau (5.9%)                     |
| Japan (23.9%)                       | Taiwan (4%)                      |
| Canada (21.6%)                      | Malaysia (3.3%)                  |
| Germany (20.2%)                     | Poland (2.1%)                    |

### Table 6

| Yes | Before 445 (21.9%) | During 168 (8.3%) | After 426 (20.9%) |
|-----|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| No  | 1591 (78.1%)       | 1868 (91.8%)      | 1610 (79.0%)      |
as a destination during the pandemic (16.1%), even before Canada and Singapore. When asked about selection after the pandemic ends, nearly 14 percent (13.9%) of respondents planned to study in Hong Kong, which again became a comparable destination to Australia (15.0%) and Singapore (14.1%). These two countries are seen by the public as popular destinations.

### Comparison Between the 2020 and 2021 Survey

In the first-round survey in May 2020, the research team examined respondents’ study abroad plans and preferred destinations only after the pandemic (Mok et al., 2021). Therefore, the comparative analysis of two rounds of the survey focused on mainland college students’ overseas study desires and destinations after the pandemic.

Among 1267 mainland college student respondents in the first-round survey, only 9.5% indicated that they would choose to study abroad after the pandemic, while in 2021, the percentage increased to 20.9% (Table 7). We observed that the 2021 respondents were more interested in studying abroad when the pandemic ends than the 2020 respondents, which could be attributed to the global development of a vaccine in the first half of 2021.

Regarding study abroad destinations after the pandemic, Table 8 compares the five most and least popular ones in the 2020 and 2021 surveys. For the most popular destinations, the traditional western ones with robust higher education systems and reputable universities retook their top-five positions, such as Canada and Germany. Without the health and safety concerns of the pandemic, neighbouring Asian

| Table 7  | Number of Respondents Interested in Studying abroad after the Pandemic in 2020 and 2021 Surveys |
|----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Time of Survey | Yes (percentage) | No (percentage) |
| May 2020 | 120 (9.5%) | 1147 (90.5%) |
| June 2021 | 426 (20.9%) | 1610 (79.1%) |

| Table 8  | Most and Least Popular Studying Abroad Destinations in 2020 and 2021 Surveys |
|----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Most Popular Destinations | 2020 Survey | 2021 Survey |
| The US | The US | The US |
| Hong Kong | The UK | The UK |
| The UK | Japan | Japan |
| Taiwan | Canada | Canada |
| Japan | Germany | Germany |
| Least Popular Destinations | Macao | Poland |
| Malaysia | Malaysia | Malaysia |
| Italy | Taiwan | Taiwan |
| South Korea | Macao | Macao |
| France | New Zealand and Italy | New Zealand and Italy |
regions lost their attraction brought by their proximity to mainland China. Particularly, we saw Taiwan drop from among the top five destinations in 2020 to the one of five least popular destinations in 2021.

During the first-round survey in May 2020, when the pandemic was at its peak with considerable uncertainty for the future, safety and health were still the first concerns for mainland university students and their parents, even though they were asked about post-pandemic overseas study plans. Asian countries and regions became popular because it was easy for mainland students to retreat when the situation got worse (Mok et al., 2021). However, for 2021 survey respondents, given the development of a vaccine and living experiences with the pandemic, they returned to personal and career development as primary goals, including receiving high-quality education and obtaining advantages in the job market by overseas credentials. In this sense, the traditional western destinations regained their attraction for mainland China university students for their further studies.

**Reimagining International Learning in the COVID-19 Crisis Context**

**Asia Emerging as Preferred Destinations for International Learning**

The above analysis has indicated some pattern changes when Chinese university students plan for overseas study, but the changes will not fundamentally reshape trends and choices of destinations for overseas learning. Nonetheless, scrutiny of preferred destinations for international education reveals that Asia is becoming more popular for Chinese students. Table 9 below shows that more respondents chose the Asian region for overseas learning. More respondents identified Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong and South Korea as their study destinations after the COVID-19 pandemic (an increase by 13.6 % among the selected Asian economies), while the interest for the US and UK has declined in popularity. In particular, the US recorded a drop of 5.3% in terms of popularity as a destination for overseas learning, as revealed by the

| Table 9  | Top-ten Destinations for Studying abroad before and after the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Difference |
|----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Before   | After                                        | Difference              |
| 1        | The US (50.8%)                              | The US (45.5%)          | The US (− 5.3%) |
| 2        | The UK (45.2%)                              | The UK (43.7%)          | The UK (− 1.5%) |
| 3        | Japan (19.1%)                               | Japan (23.9%)           | Japan (+ 4.1%) |
| 4        | Canada (16.9%)                              | Canada (21.6%)          | Canada (+ 4.7%) |
| 5        | Germany (14.4%)                             | Germany (20.2%)         | Germany (+ 5.8%) |
| 6        | France (13.3%)                              | France (19.7%)          | France (+ 6.4%) |
| 7        | Australia (11.9%)                           | Australia (15.0%)       | Australia (+ 3.1%) |
| 8        | Hong Kong (11.0%)                           | Singapore (14.1%)       | Singapore (+ 4.7%) |
| 9        | South Korea (11.0%)                         | Hong Kong (13.9%)       | Hong Kong (+ 2.9%) |
| 10       | Singapore (9.4%)                            | South Korea (12.9%)     | South Korea (+1.9%) |
current survey. Such a drop may well be related to the new geopolitics shaping the diplomatic relations between China and the US. Considering public health issues and the worry of being discriminated against during the learning journey, Chinese students are more open to other destinations, especially opting for higher education in Asia such as in Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan, and South Korea due to their competitiveness in global university rankings, as well as their proximity to China. These factors represent another pulling factor for mainland China university students in planning their international learning journey.

When the 2021–2022 academic year commenced in September 2021, more students from mainland China came to Hong Kong to pursue higher education. According to the University Grants Committee (UGC) data in Fig. 3, the number of non-local students has increased from 15,069 in the 2014–2015 academic year to 19,430 in the 2019–2020 academic year (UGC, 2021a).

Based on a convenient sampling, the research team conducted an opinion poll in some postgraduate classes with most students from mainland China to provide a modest exploration of their overseas study desires and plans. The research team posted the survey questions to around 200 masters students at Lingnan University in Hong Kong, exploring whether they were keen on overseas learning after completing their masters programmes. Among the respondents, around 40% maintained their interest and decided to study overseas (see Fig. 4). The same opinion poll also revealed that most respondents took personal safety, proximity to their hometown, COVID-19 pandemic control measures, and the high quality of university education into consideration (see Table 10). The same poll also showed that most of the respondents considered Hong Kong a preferred destination for overseas learning because of its high level of internationalisation, the competitive edge of Hong Kong universities, its successful management of the COVID-19 pandemic, and its rich cross-cultural environment (see Table 11).
Fig. 4 Number of students who plan to study abroad when the COVID-19 pandemic is entirely under control

![Pie chart showing the distribution of students' plans to study abroad.]

Table 10 Factors to Consider Studying in an Oversea University during the Pandemic

| Factor                                      | Percentage of Respondents |
|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Personal safety                             | 83.0                      |
| Culture and lifestyle                       | 60.0                      |
| Reputation of the university                | 59.0                      |
| Teaching mode (e.g., face-to-face, online)  | 47.0                      |
| Tuition and living expenses                 | 44.0                      |
| Competitiveness of the degree in the labour market | 38.0                  |
| The relationship between the destination and my home country | 32.0                  |
| Effectiveness of anti-pandemic measures     | 30.0                      |

The data was collected from a classroom polling on 2 October 2021 at Lingnan University. The class size was 228 students, and 193 students responded to the survey.

Table 11 Motivations of Studying in Hong Kong during the Pandemic

| Motivation                                                                 | Percentage of Respondents (%) |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Close to mainland China                                                   | 75.0                          |
| World class education                                                     | 61.0                          |
| A fun and dynamic city                                                    | 46.0                          |
| A land of development opportunities                                       | 44.0                          |
| Effective anti-pandemic measures and a small number of COVID-19 cases     | 29.0                          |
| Good social order and no personal safety concern                          | 29.0                          |
| Affordable tuition fees and living expenses                               | 31.0                          |

The data was collected from a classroom polling on 2 October 2021 at Lingnan University. The class size was 228 students, and 193 students responded to the survey.
Given the competitive strengths of Hong Kong universities revealed by the most recent Research Assessment Exercise 2020 (RAE 2020) conducted by the UGC in Hong Kong with rigorous international benchmarking and peer evaluations, all eight publicly funded universities have significantly improved their research performance. When the RAE 2020 results were compared to the RAE 2016, the research works of the eight universities commanded international respect and recognition, with approximately 70% of works rated as “world-leading” (4*, the highest standing) or “international excellence” (3*), demonstrating remarkable achievements. The international review panels concluded the RAE 2020 in May 2021, with solid commendations of Hong Kong universities as globally competitive as their research performance was rated as one of the best higher educations in the world (UGC, 2021b). With strong support from the central government in mainland China for promoting Hong Kong universities to engage with universities in the Greater Bay Area (GBA) in South China, together with diversified funding sources from the mainland, Hong Kong, Macau, and overseas partners, the call for developing a strong cluster of research-intensive and innovation-driven universities in the GBA would attract international students to study in the bay area as it will offer exciting development opportunities and career advancement potential (Liang, 2022; Mok, 2022).

Equally important, we must also note how strategic it was for the Chinese government to attempt to reach out to universities through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) platform. For example, China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Education (MOE), and the provincial governments hosted the 2021 China-ASEAN Education Cooperation Week to discuss sustainable development cooperation in education. Around 2400 visitors from China, ASEAN countries, and partner countries such as Russia, Mongolia, and Germany are invited to participate online and onsite (MOE, 2021). A series of ASEAN Transformation Education meetings also emphasised the importance of regional collaboration on education, particularly for the post-COVID-19 recovery (ASEAN, 2021). During the COVID-19 crisis, student mobility and academic exchange were made available within the Asian region through innovative means and mixed modes of in-person and virtual channels. ASEAN representative bodies and member states provided more flexible ways of implementing “internationalism at home,” where less physical mobility and more virtual mobility are required to experience the curriculum’s internationalism (Atherton et al., 2021). Whether regionalization of higher education would shape the future of Chinese student mobility is open for further research. Our findings above and our analysis suggest that a potential pathway is in the making with more productive international student mobility within the Asian region. When imagining the future of student mobility, we should take the regionalization of higher education into consideration, especially when different forms of collaborative arrangements like the Alliance for Asian Liberal Arts Universities (AALAU), Alliance for Hong Kong and Shanghai Universities, Alliance for Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macau Universities, and others, providing platforms for engaging student exchange and research collaboration across different Asian countries, regions, and cities (Robertson et al., 2016; Dang, 2017; Mok, 2021). For example, East China Normal University organized an Annual Presidents’ Forum of AALAU in the hybrid format on 12 November 2020, and around 60 educational leaders and scholars
from 22 universities in India, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, mainland China, and Hong Kong exchanged information on future development (AALAU, 2020a). Also, AALAU launched the Scholar-in-Residence programme in the academic year 2020/2021 to facilitate internationalisation and promote research and learning. Renowned academics from member institutions were also invited by Lingnan University to spend a semester for exchange (AALAU, 2020b).

Emerging New Forms of International Higher Education

Our discussions above have highlighted the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international student mobility in terms of physical mobility and demonstrated that the current health crisis had driven other new forms of internationalisation of higher education. With the disruption of physical mobility, we have witnessed the boost given to internationalisation at home, with the growing interest in the green agenda in relation to internationalisation. Critical reflections of the conventional forms of internationalisation, which would have caused damage to the environment because of the carbon footprint, the COVID-19 crisis has driven institutions to search for creative and innovative ways in enhancing students’ international learning experiences through online platforms. Recent research has suggested an “identity crisis” for internationalisation has occurred in some institutions as a result of the pandemic, and on the other hand, the “moment in the sun” that the pandemic has afforded internationalisation at other institutions (Rumbley, 2021). Meanwhile, the disruption of physical mobility has also sparked a massive movement to lean on technology-enabled international learning and engagement. For example, universities engage in the form of collaborative online international learning (COIL). New or renewed attention to exploring the possibilities of internationalisation at home also resulted in many contexts from the widespread inability to undertake physical travel (Rumbley, 2021).

As a result of travel restrictions and social distancing measures, digital and online methods are used to replace previous face-to-face events. Virtual student mobility uses technology to support cross-border communication, intercultural understanding, and knowledge exchange during the pandemic. With the support of information and communication technology, virtual student mobility is increasingly being used to support international and intercultural learning during the pandemic. For example, a joint statement was signed by 33 universities worldwide to support student mobility during the pandemic, and over 60% of HEIs around the world increased their virtual mobility during the pandemic (UNESCO, 2021). Compared with in-person events and fairs, virtual student mobility can reduce the transportation cost of international travel thus can be more accessible for students with lower socioeconomic status. Virtual student mobility can also be accessed by students who are unable to undertake international travel for various reasons, such as physical disability. However, equity concerns relating to access to such events remain because they still require certain infrastructure support. Barriers to virtual student mobility include:

- Infrastructure limitations
• Concerns relating to the quality of the programme and the certificate, if any
• Different administrative measures between home and host institutions
• Language barriers
• Access to information

While celebrating the effectiveness of introducing technology-enabled platforms for enhancing students’ international learning, we must be aware of the digital divide between developed and developing countries. The widening gap between the “haves” and “have nots” in terms of access to the technology-enabled learning and research platforms should have affected students’ and faculty members’ access to such programs and thus further worsened the educational stratification between rich and poor. Meanwhile, we must also note that virtual student mobility is also viewed as inferior to physical mobility by some students and employers, calling into question the sustainability of such programs after the crisis. To address these issues, universities should work together to set clear learning outcomes and goals for virtual exchange programs and develop a transparent method for the evaluation and recognition of such programs. International comparative research shows the intensified educational disparities across different parts of the globe, particularly when many higher education systems in the less economically developed regions have faced challenges to assure high quality learning since the pandemic outbreak simply because of insufficient support of online learning platforms with school closures. Students have been offered different forms of remote learning, but diverse learning experiences are reported across different income groups (Vegas, 2020). Countries with sufficient resources could offer online learning for their citizens, while only 36% of residents of lower-mid-income countries could get access to online learning (UNESCO, 2020). Hence, when imagining the future development of student mobility and international learning, additional efforts are needed to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds in enrolling in various virtual mobility programmes. More specifically, other suggestions include:

• Clear goals and learning outcomes should be set for virtual student mobility programs.
• Associations and universities should set clear guidelines on the implementation and recognition of virtual student exchange programmes.
• Aid should be given to at-risk students to access virtual student mobility programmes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our discussions above have critically examined how mainland Chinese students evaluated overseas study during and after the COVID-19 crisis, showing growing interest of Chinese students making Asia their future destination for studying abroad, especially when they were becoming more concerned about the public health conditions in traditional destinations based in Europe, the UK, and the US. The motivations and desires of Chinese students choosing overseas learning
would have been affected by the new geopolitics and different kinds of “cultural shocks,” particularly when Asian students were reported being discriminated against and stigmatized after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic when studying abroad (Mbous et al., 2022; Mok and Zhang, 2022).

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