

Reflection on the Impact of COVID-19 on International Student Mobility from and to China

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ABSTRACT

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has affected and continues to impact several areas of human lives and activities. With a particular focus on China, this reflection shares authors' observation on how COVID-19 may affect future trends of student mobility from and to the country. The reflection revealed that the impact of COVID-19 might not have a big negative impact on China. The declining interest of Chinese students to study abroad after COVID-19 will rather empower their home country. The reflection also revealed that the successful battle China has been leading and keeping the pandemic situation under control reassures international students to consider China as a protective destination for a future study plan. This study has relevant policy implications for understanding and informing international education actors of the change that may occur in student mobility trends and international higher education landscape due to COVID-19.

Keywords: China's destination, COVID-19 pandemic, international higher education, student mobility

Safety and security issues are increasingly becoming a critical factor when deciding upon a country and institution for study. Today, the decision relating to safety and security includes not only internal conflicts, racist violence, the rise of nebulous terror incidents, and gun violence in destination countries, but also insecurity related to the pandemics and epidemics. This latter have become a serious factor taken into consideration. Pandemics in destination and origin countries are emergent factors that affect students' movement and choice for study destination. Students fear to go where there is a pandemic. Likewise, they fear being "attacked" in their study destination if the pandemic is in the home country. In this second case, a clear example is the recent case of Chinese students in the United States (US) and Australia (Lee, 2020). In this perspective, this reflection mainly looks into China as origin but also as a destination country: How may COVID-19 pandemics affect the country's future student mobility trends? What will be the consequences on China's largest destination countries? Of course, it is difficult to predict its impact on study mobility, but the analysis of students' trends and attitudes, coupled with the global political environment, portends a change in international student mobility, not only with regard to the rate of mobility but also the destination's choice. Yet, the pre-COVID-19 period was characterized by a tremendous rise in student mobility across the world, with China keeping the status as most important sending country, but also an emerging study destination.

Pre-COVID-19 Trend of Student Mobility to and From China

In recent years, China has grown significantly as a destination country for international students in the global market (Ding, 2016; Wen & Hu, 2019). It has become a regional hub of international students in Asia. China has balanced the status of being solely the largest source country. Thousands of students from across the world are entering the country each year to study. Figures from the Ministry of Education website of the People's Republic of China reveal, for instance, that "in 2018 there were a total of 492,185 international students from 196 countries pursuing their studies in China, making an increase of 3,013

students or 0.62% compared to 2017” (Ministry of Education, 2019). The number of inflow students in China has been more than that of outflow (Pan, 2013). When it comes to the factors attracting international students to China, most existing literature is congruent with the fact that China’s rapid economic growth and the recent reputation of Chinese universities and higher education institutions (HEIs) are the major reasons (Ahmad & Shah, 2018; Guiaké, et al., 2021; Song & Liu, 2014). China’s engagement in globalization made her become an essential provider of international education. Beall (2012) stated in a study entitled “The shape of things to come: Higher education global trends and emerging opportunities to 2020” that, in line with their growing importance to the world trade, emerging economies are becoming increasingly popular study destinations and have seen significant growth in research. In this perspective, known as one of the world's fastest-growing economies, China is likely to win in ranking among the largest destination countries globally. The number of Asian and African international students in China has increasingly grown recently.

Apart from a growing Chinese higher education reputation and economic prosperity as major attractive factors, Asian students choose China for its geographical proximity and cultural resemblance. As for African or western international students, they are keen to discover new experiences from emerging countries such as China. It is probably for these reasons that new emerging economies have experienced a significant rise in international student inflows in recent years. The rate of international student flows in those countries has exceeded traditional Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) destination countries, 2018).

However, apart from its status as an emerging destination country, China, as said earlier, is keeping the traditional status of the most important sending country worldwide. With more than 710,000 Chinese students sent abroad in 2019, for instance, outbound students from China constitute a primary source of international students to several destination countries (Mok et al., 2021). Many receiving countries, especially western Anglo-Saxon countries, motivated by a commercial orientation, greatly benefit from international students from China. For instance, 1,095,299 international students studying at US colleges and universities during the academic year 2018–2019 have contributed around \$45 billion to the US economy (Wang & Freed, 2021). These authors add that “international students also contribute to America’s scientific

and technical research and bring international and cultural perspectives into US classrooms.” For Altbach (2019), universities in major countries have come to depend on Chinese students for their agenda of international student recruitment. That is the reason why the COVID-19 pandemic and the lack of interest to study abroad due to existing geopolitical tensions between China and some receiving countries are detrimental to these countries and institutions where benefit from international students is an important economic income. Rizvi (2021) revealed that the decline in the number of international students made universities go into panic mode. Thus, as the biggest sending country across the world, China plays a critical role in the survival of these universities’ economies. One-third of 1.1 million international students in the US are from China, with similar proportions found in other major receiving countries, such as Australia and the United Kingdom (UK) (Altbach, 2019). An overdependence on one country has instilled a reflection on the future of international education in case of any change from China.

The Analysis of the Tensions Before COVID-19

The pre-COVID-19 economic tensions between China and some western countries, notably the US, which led their leaders to impose acts of trade restrictions, are not without consequences on the education and mobility of students. The US President, Donald Trump, has called academics and Chinese students in the US “spies” (Altbach, 2019). On the other side, Chinese authorities have warned Chinese nationals about studying abroad in some countries like the US and Australia (Prema, 2020). The crisis has pushed countries to distrust each other in educational and scientific cooperation. It has caused losses to both sides—the loss of income from international students for some, and the inability to continue studies for others. These geopolitical tensions that preceded the outbreak of COVID-19 have favored conflicting relations between China and some countries during the pandemic regarding, for instance, the origin and the spread of the virus. Such conflict can affect student mobility across those countries.

Research Method

This critical literature review study employs a combined approach including related literature review analysis and the authors’ own reflection. As

international education scholars, we have put forward, based upon insights from our personal experience and observation as actors of studies abroad, the international student mobility trends from and to China after the COVID-19 crisis. The reflection is supported by recent literature on economic tension between the world's economic leaders and on the COVID-19 crisis that still nourishes uncertainties about the future trends of student mobility. From an analysis of trusted available literature, mostly from 2016 to 2021, a clear projection is made on student mobility trends from and to China, and its impact on China and Chinese students' preferred destination countries.

The literature review search strategy was based on key terms related to the topic, including "impact of covid-19," "student mobility and covid-19," "outbreak of covid-19," "China and covid-19 pandemic," and "impact of covid-19 on international education." The search was done from databases such as the scholarly journal archive ERIC, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and so on. In my literature review process, the criteria of exclusion and inclusion were adopted with regard to (un)trusted research findings and (ir)relevant research to ensure that my research was sufficiently scaled to fit the purpose of the study. Information from popular media news and non-academic references included in this study was double-checked in academic sources, thus confirmed. Conversely, unconfirmed data were automatically excluded. Then, a synthesis of relevant and trusted research guided our reflection on the fact that the impact of COVID-19 in a context of nationalism rise and economic tension between China and many foreign countries might not have a big impact on China.

Although this analysis presents some limitations because it is partly based on subjective observation, it draws its inspiration from the above mentioned trusted literature.

Results

Impact of COVID-19 on Student Mobility Globally

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been detrimentally noticed on international students' mobility across the countries. It is still creating a global crisis and slowing down the courses of many activities, including the internationalization of higher education (Yang, 2020). Several international students are still stranded in their home countries and have not pursued their studies abroad since the 2019–2020 academic year due to many countries' border

closures. Similarly, receiving countries have been losing revenues from international students.

Scholars, students, and economic actors have been facing restrictions, bans, or strict inspection of operations (Helms, 2020). Moreover, early studies showed that many students have resigned to pursue their studies due to the psychological affectation, epidemiological restrictions, difficulties in obtaining visas, commercial flights, and economic deficiency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic's effects have already been tremendous due to the sanitary impasse. The *Times Higher Education* estimated that the impact of COVID-19 would have likely resulted in some 80,000 fewer Chinese students entering the US, 35,000 in the UK, and nearly 30,000 in Australia (UNESCO, 2020). As the world's largest destination country for studies, the closure of many US universities and the suspension of visa application for foreign students amidst the critical period of the pandemic have shown its impact on the US. A similar observation was made in Europe, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. In Australia, for instance, where international education is the third-largest income of the country (UNESCO, 2020), a study based on a correlational and regression analysis revealed that there would be a loss of up to \$19 billion in revenue by 2023 due to their reliance on tuition fees from international students, of whom many are incapable of traveling to Australia (Hurley & Van Dyke, 2020). Additionally, there is a decrease of 36,292 full-time equivalent employment positions at Australian universities (Thatcher et al., 2020). These sources revealed that many Australian universities are at risk of losing their top 100 world ranking since international students have not been able to enter Australia. The challenge is so big, due to limited support from the government, that even international students who are in Australia were advised by the federal government to "go home" if they were unable to fund themselves, stating that it is "lovely to have visitors to Australia in good times" (Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). Hence, both from the international students' side and host countries, the effect of COVID-19 is widespread, with tremendous economic impacts on destination countries.

Impact of COVID-19 on Student Mobility in China

Like in many countries, the impact of COVID-19 in China is far-reaching. Both Chinese students studying abroad and international students in China have been facing traveling restrictions. Many international Chinese students could not go to their host countries to continue their studies. About 145,000 Chinese students have been unable to travel to the US, England, and Australia (UNESCO, 2020).

In the same way, since the outbreak of COVID-19, thousands of international students have not entered China because of the stringent measures put in place in the country. They include both regularly registered international students who went back to their home countries before and during the outbreak of the pandemic, and newly registered students for the academic years 2020–2021 and 2021–2022. In addition, those of 2023 intakes are still uncertain about entering China. Thus, since China is the world's largest sending country and an emergent destination country, the conflict and crisis uncontestedly affect the mobility of many Chinese students studying abroad and international students studying in China (Ding, 2016; Wen & Hu, 2019; Zhang & Zhu, 2020). On both sides, students have no longer been able to continue their studies abroad due to the traveling restrictions Implemented in China and several other countries.

Apart from those immediate and negative consequences, studies revealed that Mainland and Hong Kong students have become less interested in studying abroad, even after COVID-19; which might have a long-term effect on international higher education worldwide (Mok et al., 2021). In a report entitled “The coming ‘China crisis’ in global higher education,” Altbach (2019) predicted that “for both internal political reasons and as a reaction to foreign criticism, especially from the U.S., China is likely to become less open to international collaboration with top-tier universities.” As a confirmation, Chinese authorities have warned Chinese nationals for studying abroad in some countries like the US and Australia (Prema, 2020). This implies that many students will study in their home country, which is an empowering factor for the Chinese higher education system because their contributions in terms of tuition and research will remain in and for the country. Being in China before, during, and after the critical period of the pandemic, we have noticed two major events; namely, the geopolitical conflicts and the effects of the COVID-19 outbreak that have altered Chinese people's sentiment about the western world. It is a situation that, without doubt, will affect the mobility of Chinese students in some western countries. The

experience of Chinese international students abroad during and after the critical period of the pandemic has not been easy. The psychological impact of the pandemic, that of the discrimination due to the pandemic, and the disruption in the pursuit of studies abroad are among other negative experiences that contribute to the trend of declining interest in studying abroad, but in favor of China in a long-term.

Moreover, since old and new variants of COVID-19 resurface from time to time in many countries, studies on recovery from the pandemic noticed that the best and most effective recovery regarding student mobility would occur in East Asia (China, South Korea, Singapore, Japan) and some European countries (such as Finland, Denmark, and Germany) because they have managed the pandemic well, and this will affect higher education (Marginson, 2020). One more reason that demonstrates a facility for these countries in terms of recovery from the pandemic and re-stabilizing higher education institutions, according to Marginson (2020), is that higher education institutions are largely public. Therefore, they benefit from strong government support to rapidly recover from the crisis and attract back international students. While in the US, for instance, it is unknown how many colleges and universities are prepared with enough resources to re-host international students and scholars since many of them are functioning remotely and running online classes, especially when fears are still high (Bista et al., 2022). As an emerging destination country that attracts many international students worldwide, with a large number of Asians and growing Africans, China's attractiveness is more likely to continue once the recovery is effective.

Discussion

Although COVID-19 has brought worldwide negative consequences, its impact on international student mobility across countries may have different effects. It may severely or slightly hit some countries but turn out to be a long-term opportunity for others. As for China, the focus of this reflection, a deep analysis of the situation, with all the consequences, shows that China could come out less impacted compared to its largest study destination. The example of the disinterest of Chinese students in studying abroad (Mok et al., 2021; Mok et al., 2022) is more likely to be beneficial to China. On the contrary, it may create a fatal blow in the largest destination countries that heavily rely on Chinese

students (Prema, 2020; Ross, 2020; Welch, 2022). Their top world university ranking and economic benefits from international students might be greatly affected or even lost. On the other hand, China's higher education is dramatically expanding (Altbach, 2019); i.e., Chinese students will find greater opportunities to study at home. In this perspective, Mok et al. (2021)'s survey about Chinese students revealed that 2,312 (84%) out of 2,739 of their respondents expressed any more interest in studying abroad after COVID-19. This decline of interest in studying abroad is mostly due to the anti-Chinese sentiment expressed in many foreign countries for spreading the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the fact that Chinese authorities have warned Chinese students for studying in some countries in a trade war with China (Prema, 2020) is an additional factor to discourage studying abroad. As a result of both, the discrimination resulting from COVID-19 and the warning of Chinese authorities, Mok et al. (2021) found that the post-COVID study destination of a few Chinese students, who are still interested in studying abroad, is increasingly oriented toward their East Asian countries such as Hong Kong (for Chinese mainland students), Taiwan, and Japan.

However, it is worth noting that these new directions do not seem very attractive like western countries in the pre-COVID era because one of the major reasons attracting Chinese students to consider their study destination is English language. As proof, Chinese top largest destination countries are all English-speaking countries. Moreover, recent studies revealed that non-western international students experience more discriminatory challenges in countries with similar race and cultural values than international students of different races and cultural values. Studies carried out in South Korea and South Africa showed that Asian and African students are not welcome in their respective region by local students of the same race and cultural values (Lee, 2017; Lee et al., 2016). This implies that, despite the interest of Chinese students to study in the Asian region, the trend of neo-racism (defined as a form of racism based on one's norms, values, and language in addition to the physical differences within the same region and race; Lee, 2017) will push many of them to prefer studying in China. Hence, the short-and long-term trends of COVID-19 are more likely to discourage Chinese students from studying abroad, which will undoubtedly be a strength and an opportunity for China.

Furthermore, the engagement battle China has been leading to keep the COVID-19 pandemic under control reassures (international) students to consider

China as rather a safe destination for their post-COVID-19 study plan. Shijian and Agyemang (2022) found in a study on the impact of COVID-19 on international student enrollment for higher education in China that the percentage increase in the confirmed cases and death rate of COVID-19 resulted in a decrease in the number of foreign students enrolled. The recovery rate revealed a positive relationship with international students' enrollment. For this reason, they have recommended that the Chinese government reinforce preventive measures to minimize COVID-19's spread rate to encourage potential students who wish to pursue higher education abroad to choose China as their study destination. Similarly, Mok et al. (2022) revealed that countries with better pandemic control, such as some East Asian countries, will become potential major destinations for international students after COVID-19 because health and well-being concerns become major factors influencing international students' destinations. Effective control of the pandemic is not only attractive for international students, but it is also a "keep factor" for Chinese students to study at home. In her study entitled "Student mobility in the wake of COVID-19: The Mainland Chinese parent perspective", Profatilova (2021) discovered that the pandemic has increased many Chinese parents' sense of national pride. She noticed that China's well-organized pandemic response and corresponding hostility from the West let them treasure their Chinese heritage more than ever.

While the pandemic is, unfortunately, still impacting many countries around the globe, China has, so far, managed not to experience the same catastrophe of the first wave. For a long time, most new cases have been imported. This is thanks to good management and strict respect of measures implemented throughout the country. Such good management gives trust to international students, both those who are already studying in China and those intending to study abroad, to consider China. Being in some WeChat groups together with those students, many of them, who were in China at the time of strong reaction of the Chinese government to curb the pandemic, have evaluated these responses as more effective compared to those of their home countries. Hence, COVID-19 has not yet jeopardized China as a destination country. But then, to keep its attractiveness, the country should think about how to readmit international students to China since the situation is progressively returning to normalcy.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

The authors' analysis revealed that the impact of COVID-19 on student mobility amidst economic tension between China and some foreign partners is, so far, more likely to be advantageous to China as a host country as long as Chinese students show less interest in studying abroad in post-COVID. If the disinterest persists, they will empower the home country's higher education, and the contribution they were making abroad will be made at home. On the other hand, the effect of disinterest in studying abroad would have, unfortunately, a negative impact on the largest destination countries of Chinese students, as these latter have contributed a lot to the economic revenue through their tuition and other expenses. They have also contributed to their host country's universities to belong to the top world-class university ranking (Prema, 2020).

In this regard, the present reflection has strong policy implications, both for China and its largest destination countries. It suggests to China to be prepared with higher education infrastructures, human resources, and good quality education for hosting more Chinese nationals and international students. On the other hand, it recommends to the Chinese destination countries to also be prepared and look for alternatives to avoid sudden and big impact on their higher education system and economy. Apart from China and its largest destination countries, such as the US, the UK, Australia, and others, this reflection can also inspire any country engaged in the internationalization of education to take proactive measures against the effect of COVID-19 on student mobility and international education. For Crăciun and Gayardon (2021), the COVID-19 crisis is the perfect opportunity to rethink internationalization in the absence of mobility, to design activities and reconsider curricula to allow for internationalized education on the home campus, that is, internationalization at home.

The present reflection also contributes to the current scholars' debate on the future of international education and student mobility in the post-COVID era. It takes a clear position that even though the impact of COVID-19 impacts many countries differently, it is not without influence on student mobility and the future of international education. The study also alerts students, parents, and educators to be informed of what may happen as an upheaval. Hence, governments and other actors should be aware of and anticipate reducing the pandemic's negative impacts.

Since most studies carried out on the impact of COVID-19 on study destinations involving China mainly concern the Chinese students' intention toward their study destination, further empirical research might be needed to figure out what is the intention of international students toward China as a study destination in the post-COVID period. Such studies could shed light on the choice variation before and after the pandemic, as to whether or not China would lose its rank of the world's third destination for international students after the pandemic because, so far, studies are based only on the assumptions that China might be attractive due to its good management of the pandemic and a quick support from the government for recovery.

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