

# Chinese students in Australia: motivations and mobility in the face of COVID-19

Studying abroad can be a life-changing experience for many: it allows students to immerse themselves in different cultures, learn new languages, and gain fresh perspectives on the world.

For decades, education researchers have been investigating the driving forces behind international students' decisions to study abroad. The motivations tend to be multifaceted and often involve a set of 'push and pull' forces between the host and home countries. Push factors in the country of origin can include insufficient educational resources, limited career opportunities, and social insecurity. Pull factors may include academic advancement, professional development, cultural immersion, as well as entertainment.

Australia, as one of the most popular destination countries, has many things to offer. Its leading universities are world-renowned for their teaching and research excellence, with the Group of Eight consistently ranking in the top 100 on the QS World University list and Times Higher Education Rankings. Australia also offers a wide range of career opportunities. International students can work 40 hours a fortnight during their studies and are currently enjoying unrestricted work rights due to the post COVID-19 labour shortage (restrictions are expected to be re-applied in June 2023). Following completion of their studies, international students can apply for a post-study work visa that allows them to continue to work and live in Australia. With its large immigrant population, Australia's cultural diversity is unparalleled worldwide. At the same time, its established international student communities make it an excellent place for new students to socialise with others from similar backgrounds. Its clean air, moderate climate, natural scenery, as well as infrastructure and medical facilities are additional reasons people are drawn to Australia.

In 2022, international education contributed AU\$25.5 billion to the Australian economy, with students studying online adding another AU\$3.5 billion. Education is now Australia's third export industry, following closely behind coal and iron ore. Students with a Chinese background have accounted for more than a quarter of the

total international student numbers over the years.

## **COVID-19, border closures, lockdowns and online learning**

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic introduced significant challenges to higher education. In Australia, in-person teaching was discontinued, and classes were switched to an entirely distance-learning mode following the lockdown restrictions in early 2020. This lasted, on and off, for nearly two years. For international students in particular, the pandemic controls have made it overwhelmingly difficult to study and complete their degrees. After the national border was closed to non-residents in March 2020, those who were about to travel to Australia or had returned home for family reunions were left stranded overseas. At that time, almost 120,000 international student visa holders were outside Australia. Overseas work experience, cultural immersion, and language acquisition outside of the classroom all became inaccessible. The situation was no better for those who remained in Australia but were stuck in their student accommodation. Many of them fled back home to avoid health risks, exorbitant living costs, and the world's longest COVID-19 lockdown in Melbourne, Victoria.

COVID-19 related national border closures and lockdowns almost halved the number of international students in Australia. Many prospective and current students who found online classes and COVID-related disruptions unbearable enrolled in courses in other popular English-speaking destination countries. Since late 2020, Canada, the US, and the UK rebounded strongly upon opening their arms to student visa holders, while Australia's student numbers continued to fall. As soon as Australia reopened its doors, active measures were taken to retain and recruit international students. At the university level, travel compensation packages were offered to those who returned to campus (Melbourne Welcome Grant worth AU\$4000, the University of Melbourne). Further, the Australian government implemented strategic initiatives to facilitate the arrival and integration of prospective students, e.g., unrestricted working hours during the study period and a one-year extension of post-study work rights. In spite of this, Australia has still been struggling to attract students back. Over a quarter of Australia's international students (over 100,000) were taking online courses rather than returning to campus in mid-2022. Australia's higher education system has struggled to recover across the board, as most students went to prestigious universities in the Group of Eight, leaving low enrolments in the other

universities.

‘A sound education will guarantee a good future’ is a widespread belief among many Chinese middle-class families. This phenomenon can be interpreted from a sociological perspective, according to Bourdieu’s concept of ‘cultural capital’, which can include knowledge, competence, attributes (embodied cultural capital), and academic qualifications (institutionalised cultural capital). International education offers a rich package of capital to students and their families: they become experts in their area of specialisation, competitive candidates on the job market, and at the same time members of prestigious alumni communities. This makes studying abroad an effective means of social mobility, allowing people to maintain or elevate their social standing.

## The present study

In what follows, we set out to examine the ways Chinese international students responded to the COVID-19 global health crisis when planning to study overseas. This is important because Chinese students made up almost a third of Australia’s overseas student intake in 2022. A Masters program offered at Asia Institute, University of Melbourne, was selected as a case study because 90 percent of its current students are international and have a Chinese background.

Using a snowball approach (a recruitment method where existing participants are invited to help identify other potential participants), a bilingual questionnaire survey (available in English and Chinese) was disseminated in June 2022 to the then current students and recent graduates of the program. The responses of 62 Chinese international students were received. They were instructed to answer the open-ended questions in any languages they feel comfortable with (their responses in Chinese were analysed then translated into English by one of the researchers who is a NAATI-credited translator). The majority of them were enrolled at the University of Melbourne when Australian universities switched entirely to online learning, with the last cohort starting when hybrid teaching modes were adopted, blending online and in-person teaching (from March 2022). Of this sample, some 90 percent were female, and most were in their mid-20s (ranging from 21 to 36 years, mean=24.58, SD=2.24). Almost all participants were native speakers of Mandarin Chinese (92 percent, n=57), two were first language Cantonese speakers, and three named both as their primary languages. All participants were self-financed and were studying on a full-time basis. At the time of the survey, 23 students (37 percent) had returned to

campus after the border restriction had been lifted, while 39 (63 percent) remained overseas and continued with distance learning. Quite a few from the latter group completed their degree without ever setting foot on campus.

The open-ended survey asked about the participants’:

- strongest motivations to study at the University of Melbourne;
- cross-border mobility after Australia’s international travel ban was abandoned, and
- benefits or drawbacks they and their family considered when making the decision to enrol.

The narrative data collected from the open-ended questions allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of how the students interpreted the uncertainties associated with overseas education during and after the pandemic. Using a bottom-up thematic analysis, the qualitative data was examined inductively for patterns of shared motivational and constraining factors that influenced the students’ desire to study overseas.

## Motivations for studying abroad

With respect to the motivations to study at an overseas university, the students’ responses to revealed five recurring themes. The distribution of these five themes across our data set can be found in Figure 1.

The first theme is **educational prestige**, i.e., obtaining a Masters degree from a prestigious university abroad. It was perceived that the higher a university’s ranking, the more prestige could be obtained by its degree holders:

*‘I think my biggest motivation was to get a MA degree after two years of study, so at least it would be easier to land a job after graduation. Also, the University of Melbourne’s recent world university ranking was a major draw.’*

*‘I chose Melbourne because of its ranking among universities worldwide. Even though many Australian universities offer similar programs, a degree obtained from a top-ranked university is better recognised in my home country.’*

The second theme is **cosmopolitan vision**. Studying abroad was seen not only as an academic pursuit but also as an opportunity to develop cultural sensitivity and interact with others who are different from oneself. We also found that more than 90

percent of those who prioritised this motivational factor tended to be those who returned to Australia when in-person learning became available:

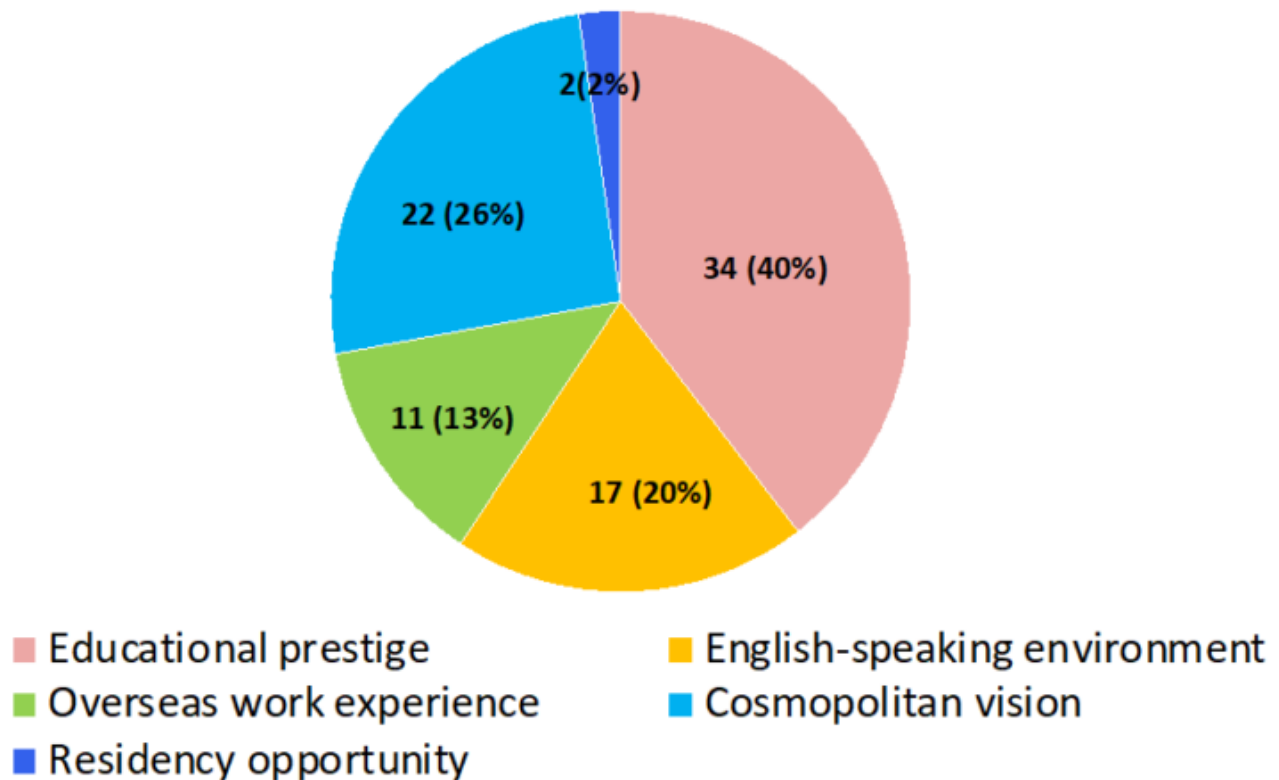
*'I booked a flight ticket as soon as the border opened, because I wanted to take this opportunity to see the world. Experiencing a different social atmosphere would help me develop a more open and tolerant mindset, as well as a broader perspective.'*

The next theme concerns **a desire to study and live in an English-speaking country**. Studying in Australia forces students into an English-speaking environment, which is ideal for language acquisition. However, students' ability to develop this competence was reported to be limited by the online learning mode. For many students, their expectations in this regard were not fulfilled, with fewer than 10 learning hours delivered in English per week and virtually no English exposure outside of the classroom. For instance, one student who did not return to campus noted:

*'It would be better if we were allowed to choose some English-learning subjects as electives. In this way, those who are less confident and less advanced in English can use and speak the language more and receive some additional assistance.'*

At the same time, fewer students cited motivations **to gain overseas work experience**, and most did *not* see international education as **a pathway to immigration**. This finding is not in line with previous studies which found that students' intentions to migrate to Australia after graduation were one of the key factors that influenced their decision to study abroad. This was probably due to a lack of direct immigration pathways available to our participants, as what they studied (translation and interpreting) was no longer on the list of eligible skilled occupations for a permanent residency visa. However, since interpreting will be brought back onto the list in 2023, further studies should investigate the impact of this policy change on students' motivational disposition.

### Motivations for studying abroad



**Figure 1. ‘What are your strongest motivations to study at the University of Melbourne?’ - 62 respondents**

## Study abroad without crossing borders

Additionally, we examined why 39 international students in our sample (nearly two thirds) continued distance learning after they were allowed to travel to Australia. Figure 2 shows their main concerns when making cross-border mobility decisions during and after the pandemic. Their hesitation to return stemmed from concerns about health risks and a lack of confidence in **the host country’s pandemic control measures**. As one student explained:

*‘My parents and I think what the Australian government does is different from China’s COVID Zero policy. And I heard quite a few students who had travelled overseas tested positive, so I’d rather stay online.’*

Their concerns seemed to extend beyond risks of contracting COVID-19. Specifically, travel restrictions on international arrivals had been imposed by China to stop COVID-19 coming in from abroad. For those who wished to seek employment back home in China, the difficulty of returning to China heavily influenced their decision

on whether leave. Those difficulties included travel expenses, flight availability, and quarantine requirements by the Chinese government:

*'It can be easy to leave but difficult to return – unaffordable flights, plus 14+7 days hotel quarantine and self-isolation.... I and those who shared the situation around me were not so much concerned about getting COVID as we were about being unable to return home whenever we wanted. Currently, I have only one semester left, so it may not be worth it.'*

Apart from these concerns, some students expressed their preference for distance learning over in-person mode due to its flexibility. Those who remained in China said virtual education gave them a more flexible schedule, allowing them to pursue internships and other career opportunities while furthering their degree. Similarly, those who arrived in Australia worried they might miss out on career opportunities in China:

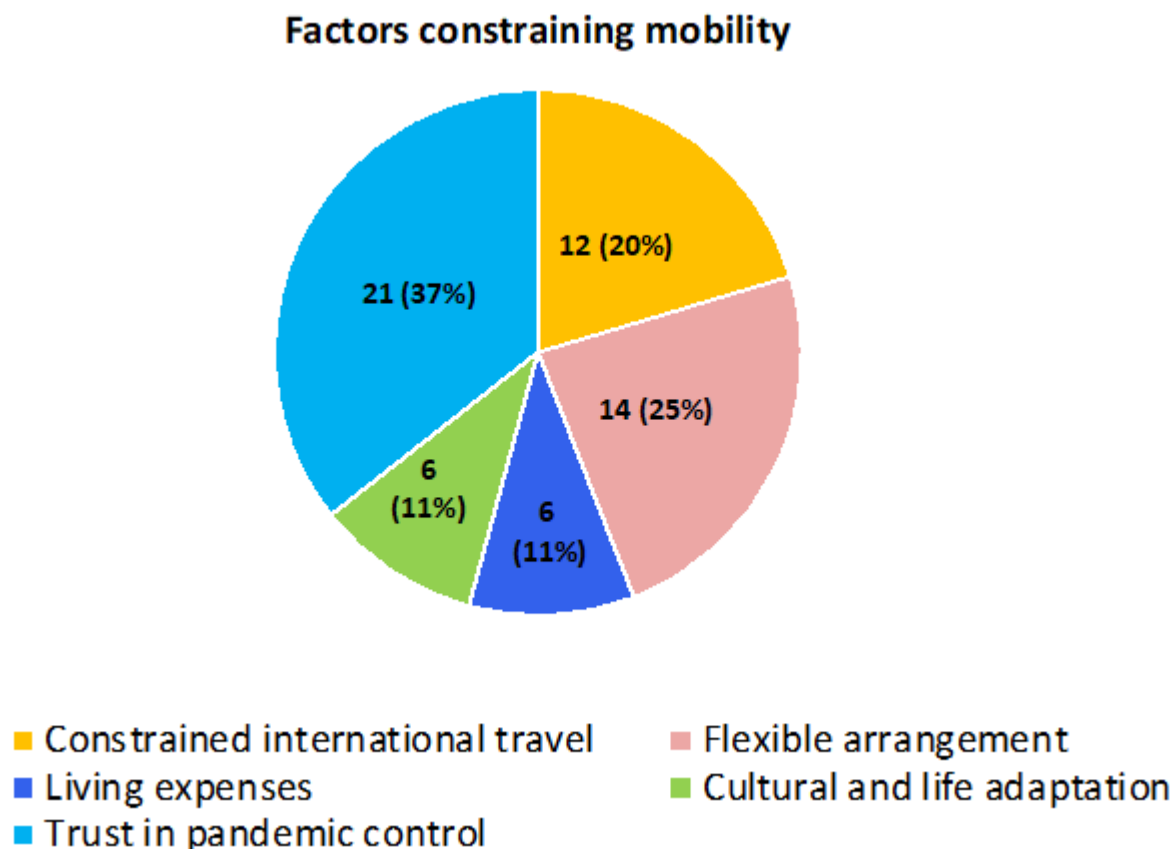
*'When the country was reopened, my family urged me to purchase a ticket to Australia immediately because they believed it was the only way for me to get a real study-abroad experience. I think I made the right decision. But now I am nearing the end of my studies and am feeling a lot of pressure to find a job in China. I am very concerned about not being able to attend many internships and career fairs in person.'*

There were some concerns about **living expenses** too. Melbourne can be a very expensive city to live in—student accommodation near the University of Melbourne can cost approximately AU\$500 per week, which is equal to the average monthly rent in Chinese first-tier cities. Food can be expensive too—a decent meal at a noodle bar close to campus costs around AU\$20, which is four to five times as much as it would cost in China. The majority of students were financially supported by their parents back home, who did not earn Australian dollars (the current AUD/CNY exchange rate is 4.68; in recent years the best exchange rate was 5.15 in Mar 2021). Even though they paid the same tuition fee for the online courses as for face-to-face classes (AU\$60,000 for two years), distance learning in their eyes was an ideal way to reduce the total cost of this overseas degree. Many of those who did not come to Australia also lived with their parents to keep the household expenses down.

Those in their last semester tended to be especially reluctant to return to campus. They had become accustomed to the way things were. Traveling to Australia required them to step out of their comfort zone and **adapt to in-person**

**instruction and life in a foreign country** for just a few months. Changes like that were perceived to potentially disrupt their academic progress:

*‘I was concerned that I would not be able to adjust to a new environment in three months. And currently my Minor Thesis is a heavy task to manage with only one semester left. It is very hard to leave, also because my parents want to spend more time with me and I am the person our dog relies on most. Being in a familiar environment around my family can also makes it less stressful for me.’*



**Figure 2. ‘After the border restrictions were lifted, why did you choose not to come to/ return to Australia? What drawbacks did you (and your family) consider when making this decision?’ - 39 respondents who did not return to campus**

## Conclusions

Our results suggest that the active accumulation of cultural capital is a key component of international students’ motivation, i.e., the pursuit of an overseas academic qualification, English-language proficiency, and an inclusive worldview. Upon acquiring cultural capital, students expect to convert it into socio-economic capital such as a decent, well-paying job and residency rights (*hukou*) in big Chinese



cities. The international students in this study did not prioritise immigration-related motivations: many listed their home country as their preferred employment destination. This is more or less in line with what we found out in a graduate employment survey conducted in 2021: fewer than 40 percent of graduates (of the same Masters of Translation) stayed in Melbourne where the program is based, while the rest returned to big cities (e.g., Shanghai, Beijing, and Shenzhen) in their home country after graduation. In terms of geographical mobility, some students came to Australia as soon as it was permitted, driven by the desire to experience an authentic study-abroad experience after the pandemic. Some, however, were reluctant to return due to health risks and travel restrictions, as well as the potential disruption to their career plans that could have resulted from being outside of China. Chinese international students who had never set foot in Australia were severely restricted in their ability to learn English outside of the classroom and to experience foreign cultures.

The study is on a specific student population who studied an MA in Arts at an Australia university and chose a non-immigrant pathway, but our findings are relevant also to other institutions with large international enrolments that have faced similar circumstances.

More recently in January 2023, following its rapid removal of COVID-19 restrictions, the Chinese government has implemented a set of policies that ban citizen studying at foreign institutions *online*, i.e., they must opt for on-campus learning to have their certificate and credentials accredited by the Ministry of Education of the PRC. This means that over 40,000 international students with a Chinese background would be returning to Australia. It would be interesting for further study to explore the immediate and longer-term impacts of these policy changes on Chinese students' mobility and motivations to study abroad.

At the time of writing this article, thousands of international students are on their way to Australia, and we can expect international enrolment numbers to bounce back as the world steps out of the shadow of COVID-19. In the past two years, universities worldwide went into crisis-response mode. But the pandemic also opened up new avenues for higher education and shed light on curricular and pedagogical improvements in providing flexible and inclusive learning opportunities. In the past, most courses in mainstream higher education institutions relied on physical attendance. With screen-based online learning, which became the new normal way of instruction during the pandemic, students can have greater control

over where and how they learn. By eliminating the need to travel and live near the campus, this approach can lower the cost of gaining a degree, which helps make international education more accessible to international students and their families. But unfortunately, online learning is no longer an option for the vast majority of Chinese international students (exceptions are made for students in their final semester).

The Chinese students in this case study did not see migration to Australia as their primary motivation for studying overseas. Instead of seeking a three-year post-study work visa in Australia, they preferred to return home in order to plan their career development in a more long-term manner. A prestigious Western university degree and English language skills acquired in a predominantly English-speaking country tend to be appreciated and valued by potential employers in China. In terms of cross-border mobility, some students opted for distance learning over returning to Australia for face-to-face instruction, not because they *couldn't return* but because they *didn't want to*. Distance learning is a viable option for that student group due to its flexibility in study-work balance and commuting and housing arrangements.

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*Image: Students at the University of Melbourne. Copyright: University of Melbourne.*