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Has everything changed?

What Chinese students now think about studying abroad





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Introduction

To the dismay of everyone in the international education sector, 2021 has inherited many of 2020's challenges. In Western nations across the globe, the Delta Variant has scuttled hopes for a quick return to open borders. Courses have needed to remain online, academics have extended their Zoom accounts, and international admissions teams have faced yet another period of uncertainty.

Nowhere has this been more apparent than in the realm of Chinese student recruitment. Once the linchpin of many Western educators' international strategies, Chinese student recruitment has hit an array of hurdles. Logistically, border controls arising from COVID-19 have impaired the ability of Chinese students to physically study abroad. Moreover, political tensions between the Chinese Government and some Western nations have cast a shadow over Chinese student recruitment plans.

For many higher education providers, the state of Chinese student recruitment has pushed an unstoppable force against an immovable object. On one hand, this collision of problems has left many admissions teams at a loss over how to proceed. On the other, many institutions existentially depend on the patronage of Chinese students. However, by understanding the realities faced by Chinese students in 2021, education providers can create a COVID-proof China marketing strategy. In doing so, they can maximise their future chances of bringing Chinese student numbers back to pre-pandemic levels.

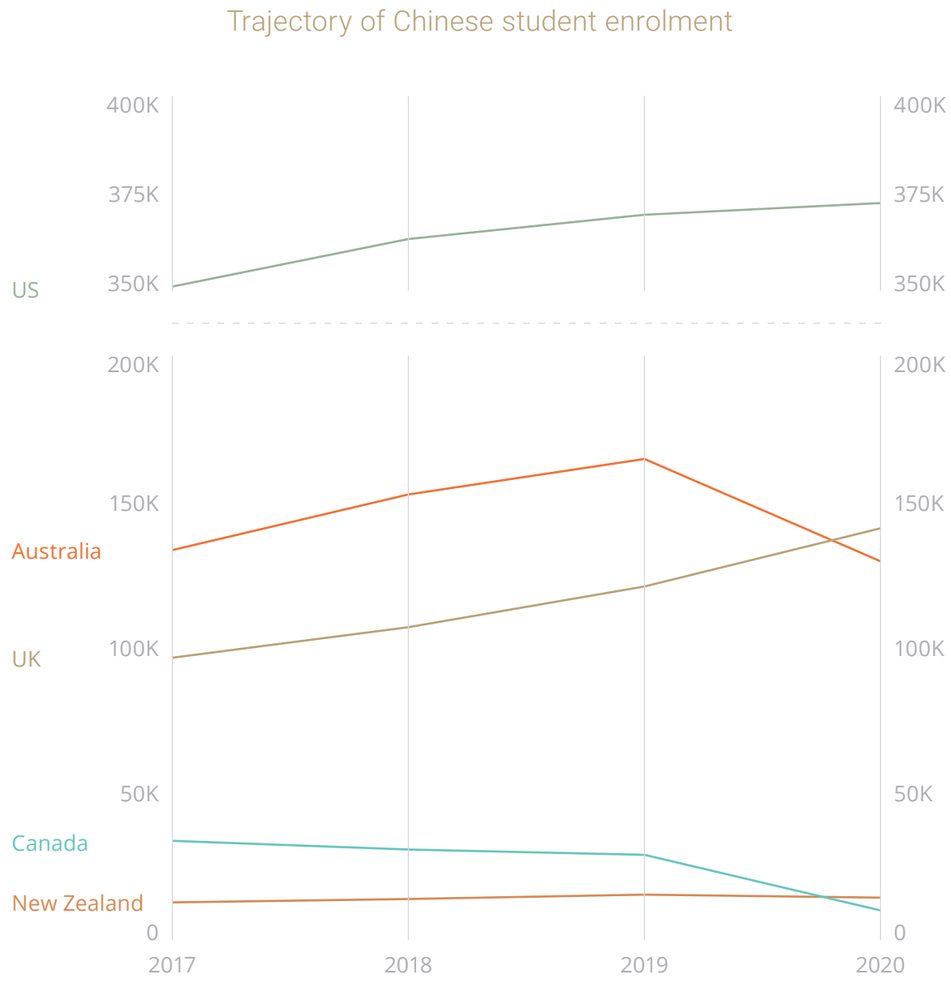
How can they make this happen? In this guide, we explore:

- How Chinese student enrolment trends have changed in each key region since 2017
- The ways in which domestic Chinese education shapes overseas study plans
- Why Chinese students study abroad, and how recent events have influenced these motivations
- Whether remote teaching from Western universities has been a success from the Chinese student perspective
- The extent to which the pandemic and border closures have affected Chinese students aiming to study abroad



Chinese student enrolment trends by country

Across the Western world, the higher education sector suffered notably in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak. Between border closures and mounting infections, international student numbers plummeted for most tertiary education providers in English-speaking nations. This was the case with recent Chinese student enrolment trends, which — unsurprisingly — took a tumble in most regions during 2020.



Beyond the immediate financial impacts, these downturns pose more long-term implications. According to QS Top Universities, both the US and the UK have seen an overall decline in their score for international student appeal. If left unchecked, these ranking dips could impact recruitment efforts once international travel fully resumes. Similarly, in Australia, indefinite border closures and international political tensions have created challenges for the recovery of higher education.

Despite the impact of these events, there still exist fertile opportunities for Chinese student recruitment. As reported by the Chinese Government-owned China Daily, 91% of China's would-be international students still intend to study abroad. Of those who do, up to 31% plan their overseas study two years in advance. In other words, higher education providers can capitalise on future post-COVID demand by connecting with Chinese students now.

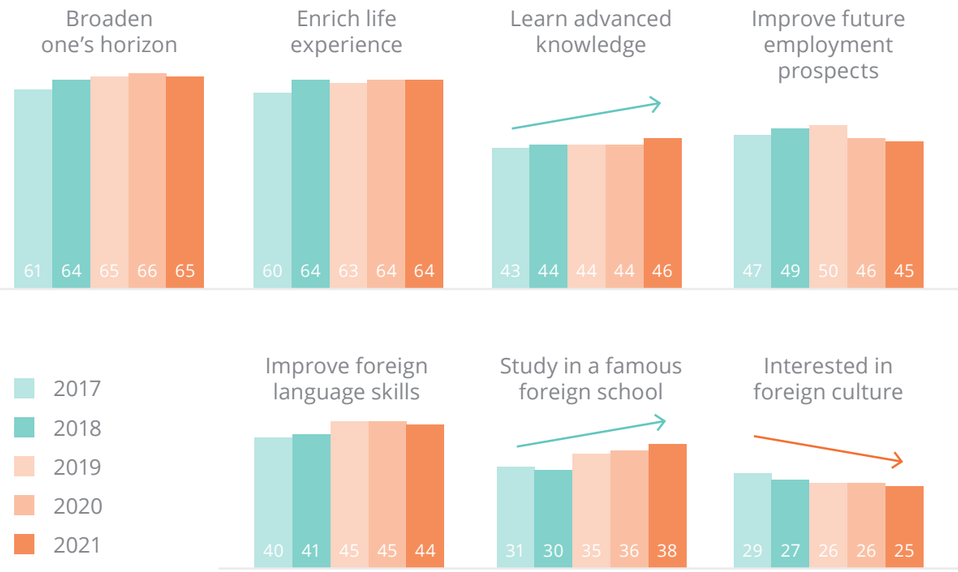


Why do Chinese students choose to study abroad?

Before assessing Chinese attitudes to foreign study, it is essential to first recognise why Chinese students study overseas. Historically, there have been a range of reasons why Chinese students seek an education in foreign countries. However, the hyper-competitive schooling system has remained a key factor. Within China, the National College Entrance Examination — or "gaokao" — is the sole gatekeeper for top-tier domestic universities. Should a student underperform in the gaokao, they lose access to China's most prestigious universities. For these students, international study can provide a second chance at a well-regarded qualification.

Increasingly, secondary school students and their parents are planning years in advance for a foreign undergraduate education. By doing so, they ease the looming pressure of the gaokao, which would otherwise provide the only route to a premium higher education.

Aims of Chinese students who intend to study abroad (%)



In their 2021 report on studying trends in China, Beijing-based education provider New Oriental detailed why Chinese students study internationally. Their report tracked five years of data, and measured growths and declines in overseas study motivations. Since 2018, the desire to Study in a Famous Foreign School has steadily grown as a motivation among Chinese students. Similarly, the proportion of Chinese students who enrol at foreign universities to Learn Advanced Knowledge has moderately increased.

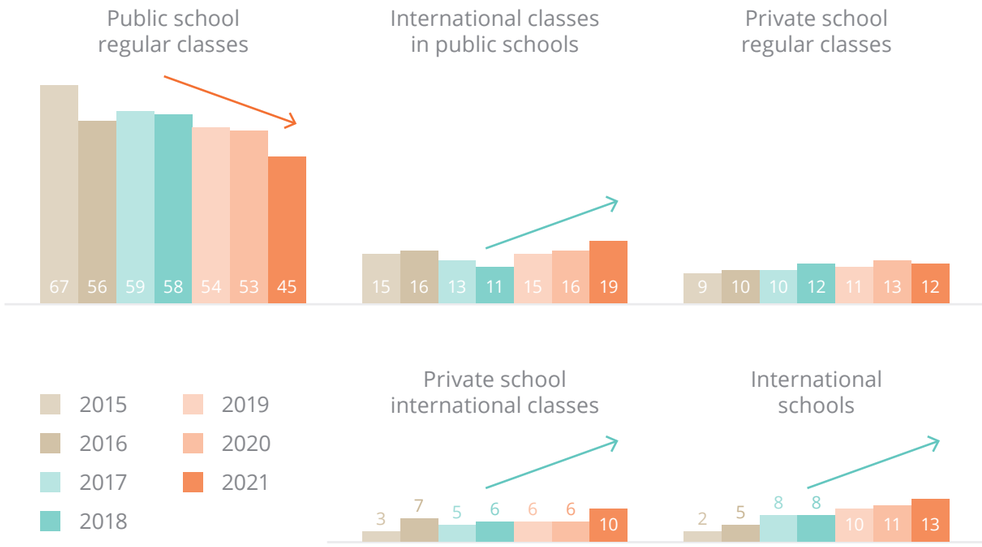
During the same timeframe, the number of would-be international students who are Interested in Foreign Culture has decreased by 4%. This focus on knowledge and prestige over cultural motivations suggests that the pandemic has compounded the stress Chinese students face. Against a mounting tide of academic pressure, Western higher educators are still perceived as an accessible and reputable alternative.



How has prior education influenced international study plans?

Within their report, New Oriental explored the link between schooling and a desire to study overseas. As of 2021, China's state-owned Public Schools still account for the single largest share of students planning to study abroad. However, the last four years have seen a decline in Public School students enrolled in regular classes who plan to study overseas.

Types of schools attended by primary and secondary school students intending to study abroad (%)



By contrast, the interested number of International School students has grown from 2% to 13% over the past six years. Students enrolled in International Classes in Private Schools have also shown a similar spike in interest. With the recent state-imposed curbs on private education in China, the future of Private and International Schools is uncertain.

Fortunately, the growth in demand for international study appears to stem from international classes, rather than private schooling. While international study demand decreased for those in Regular Classes, it increased for Public School students enrolled in International Classes. This suggests that a desire to study abroad can survive any potential future crackdowns on private schooling in China.

For would-be students who have already studied at Chinese universities, figures have largely remained the same since pre-pandemic 2018. As of 2021, 50% of all tertiary Chinese students planning to study abroad hail from Standard Domestic Universities. In comparison, only 35% of the total belong to the prestigious universities included in China's Project 211 and Project 985. These numbers suggest that overseas study remains an attractive option for students who want an edge over their 211/986 counterparts.

How many former international students plan to study abroad again?

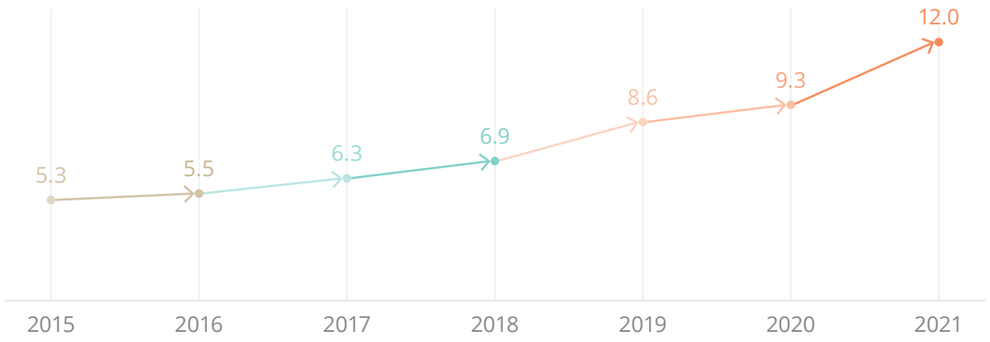
Increasingly, Chinese students with overseas study experience are returning to study abroad. In fact, according to the New Oriental study, students who had already studied internationally comprised 45% of China's outbound international students in 2021. Had the pandemic not thwarted overseas study plans in 2020, it is believed this percentage would have climbed even higher.

Within this demographic, the fastest-growing group is those who have completed Summer Courses at Universities Abroad. This supports the idea that Western higher educators can treat short courses and summer programs as feeders for their more substantial degrees. It also underscores the need for institutions to include alumni engagement in their Chinese student lifecycle marketing plans; beyond promoting their alma maters to prospective Chinese students, they also represent a growing target market themselves.

Does the education level of students' parents play a role?

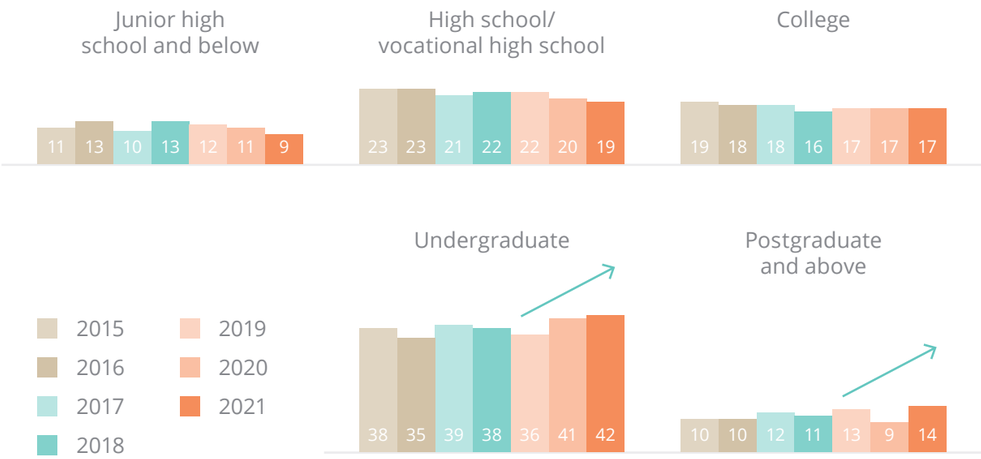
On the topic of alumni engagement, a growing number of parents with would-be international student children have studied abroad themselves. Since 2015, the percentage of parents with some type of international education has steadily risen, reaching 12% in 2021. This increase coincides with the growth of interest in overseas study amongst prospective international students. In addition to stressing the role Chinese parents play in shaping their children's tertiary study, this figure also highlights the long-term benefits of alumni communication.

Percentage of parents with an overseas education



The proportion of educated parents also reached an all-time high in 2021. Of all the parents of prospective international students, 56% had completed a Bachelor's degree or higher. For higher educators, this indicates that tertiary-educated parents see the value in optimising their children's higher learning prospects.

Highest level of education obtained by
Chinese parents with prospective international students

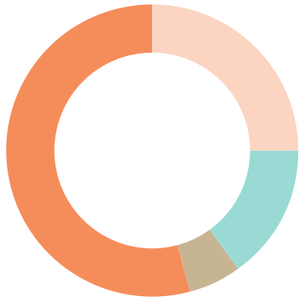




How has the pandemic impacted the plans of Chinese students?

Since early 2020, the greatest factor of concern for Chinese international students has been COVID-19. Thanks to closed borders and pandemic dangers, 79% of all Chinese students enrolled in foreign institutions currently reside in China. 25% of this 79% have opted to defer their studies until they can safely travel to their chosen country. However, more than two-thirds of this cohort have remained enrolled in their institutions and are completing their studies online.

Current status of Chinese international students



79% living in China

54% Enrolled in overseas institutions but currently in China

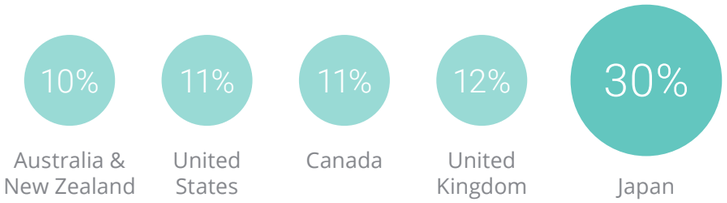
25% on a GAP year living in China

15% living overseas

Studying in overseas insitutions and living there

6% other

Back to campus status of Chinese international students from mainstream countries (%)



In contrast, only 15% of Chinese international students presently attend classes overseas. Of these, the majority are based in Japan, due to its proximity to China and its track record with COVID-19. However, in response to a recent surge in COVID-19 cases, the Japanese government has introduced a raft of restrictions which could impede student movement. With a new semester having begun in September 2021, the number of in-person Chinese students may diminish ahead of 2022.

Has remote learning succeeded or failed?

As per research published by the South China Morning Post, online learning has yielded mixed responses from Chinese international students. Some Chinese students have praised the flexibility, claiming they have been able to study remotely whilst pursuing local Chinese internships. Others, however, have lamented the absence of a cultural experience; some have gone further to question the value offered by current Western online models compared to local Chinese universities.

For this reason, it is crucial that educators ensure their online material offers more than digitised versions of regular classes. By creating a Chinese student-friendly online learning format, higher education providers can retain Chinese students until borders safely reopen.

What do current Chinese international students plan to do after the pandemic?

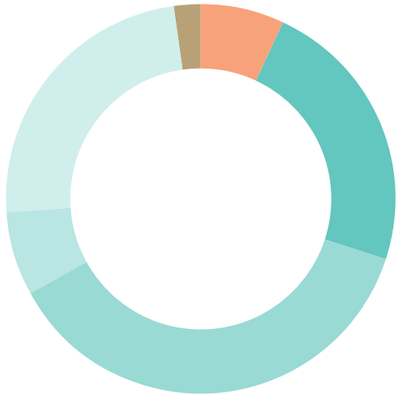
Despite the present challenges, New Oriental's report indicates that the outlook amongst current Chinese international students is largely positive. Of the international students who have returned to China during the pandemic, only 7% intend to complete their courses remotely. Meanwhile, 92% plan to return to their country of choice to finish their studies in-person.

Such a one-sided preference highlights the premium Chinese students place on the in-country experience.

Future study plans of Chinese international students currently in China (%)

92%

Plan to return to foreign country to finish studies



- **7%** Attend classes in China until graduation
- **23%** Return to foreign country by the end of spring semester in 2021
- **37%** Return to foreign country in the fall/autumn semester of 2021
- **7%** Return to foreign country in the spring or fall/autumn semester of 2022
- **24%** Plan to return to foreign country but the time is not yet determined
- **2%** Others







Which concerns are impacting the international study plans of Chinese students?

While optimism for post-pandemic study remains high, the last 18 months have unearthed a slew of issues for Chinese students. The two problems which have grown the most since 2019 have been Language Skills and Safety. The former has increased in response to online learning, which many Chinese students report is a challenge for their English. Conversely, concerns over Safety have skyrocketed since 2019. This surge has chiefly stemmed from two sources: the dangers of the Coronavirus pandemic, and reported assaults of Chinese students in Western nations.

Problems encountered while studying abroad — from Chinese students who have studied abroad (%)



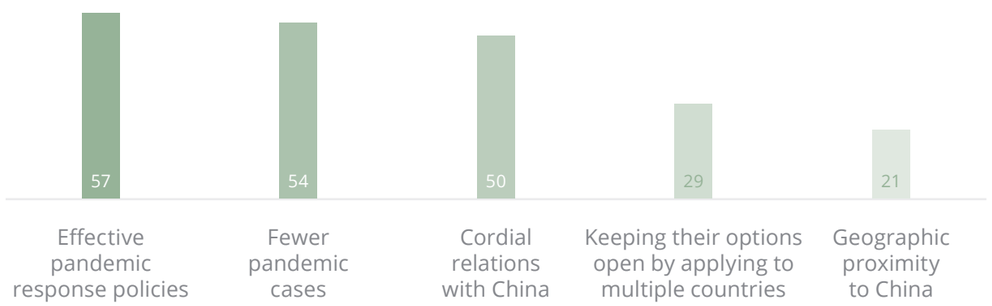
Mental Health has also emerged as a growing concern — in large part due to the pressures of Coronavirus and remote learning. In more positive news, issues with Cultural Differences have slightly declined in 2021 after growing in 2020. Other pre-pandemic problems, such as Social Skills and Homesickness, have either tapered out or grown only marginally.



What other factors inform the decision-making process?

Throughout New Oriental's report, COVID-19 kept finding ways to rear its head. Beyond the multiple pandemic-inspired factors already detailed in this guide, Coronavirus also weighed heavily on the plans of future students. Specifically, more than half of all prospective students consider a foreign university for their host country's Pandemic Response Policies. In addition, 54% of would-be students favour countries which have seen Fewer Pandemic Cases. It comes as no surprise, but a foreign university's capacity to withstand a COVID-19 outbreak has become a major drawcard.

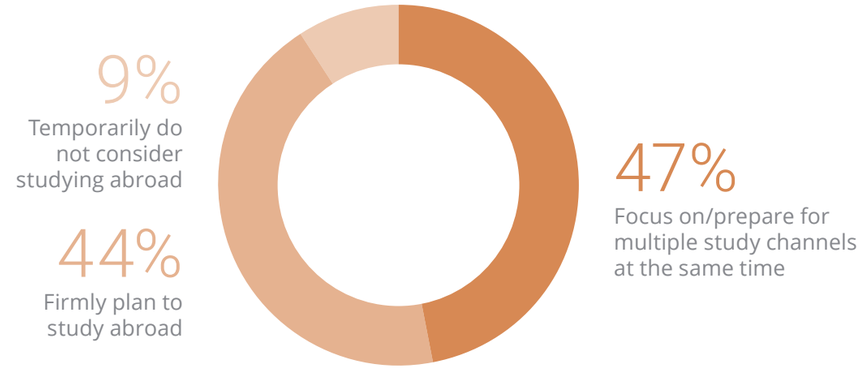
Traits that prompt Chinese students to apply to prospective host countries (%)



How have study plans changed for prospective international students?

As this guide has already detailed, most prospective international students in China still intend to study abroad. However, the way in which some of them plan to study has changed with the pandemic. While 44% still intend to fulfil their original international study plans, 47% are now willing to consider multiple avenues. These channels include online coursework, Sino-foreign cooperative education, and foreign university branch campuses in China.

Shifting perspectives of prospective Chinese international students in the wake of the pandemic



Beyond online learning, higher educators can capitalise on this trend by creating domestic learning experiences for Chinese students. One such example can be found in Rutgers University, which recently launched the Rutgers Overseas Semester Experience (ROSE) Initiative. Via this program, first-year undergraduate students can study the Rutgers syllabi both remotely and at Chinese partner universities. By providing these types of hybrid options, higher educators can engage their Chinese students in face-to-face classes until borders reopen.



Conclusion

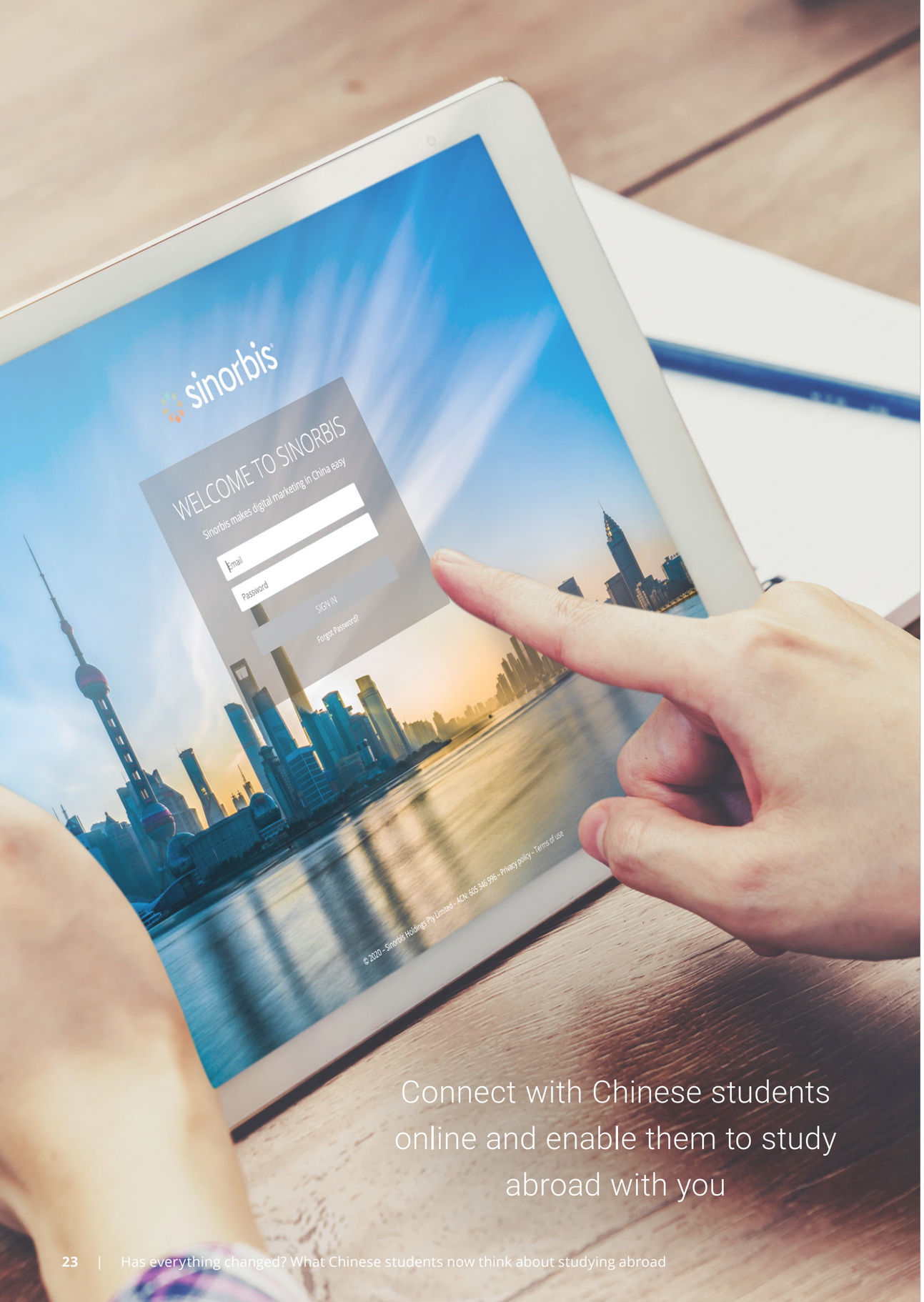
If you're reading this, you already know that COVID-19 has created challenges for higher education. However, despite the impacts on student enrolments, there exists a ray of hope: Chinese students still want to study abroad. For many, a foreign higher education still offers an enticing alternative to the cutthroat competition for top-ranking domestic university spots.

However, far from assuring a post-COVID-19 recovery for Western higher educators, this new reality offers a fork in the road. Down one path are the institutions that fail to respond to the wants of Chinese students. Down the other are those education providers who adapt with the times.

To put themselves on the latter path, higher educators can take three steps:

- **Utilise China-friendly digital assets** to convey key messaging around university pandemic policies and Chinese student safety on campus
- **Implement best practice remote teaching** to keep students engaged until they can return to in-person classes
- **Actively engage with Chinese alumni**; they can act as brand ambassadors, trans-generational decision-makers, and, in a growing number of cases, repeat students

In this way, Western education providers can contain the problems of the present whilst reaping the opportunities of the future.



Connect with Chinese students online and enable them to study abroad with you

Who is Sinorbis?

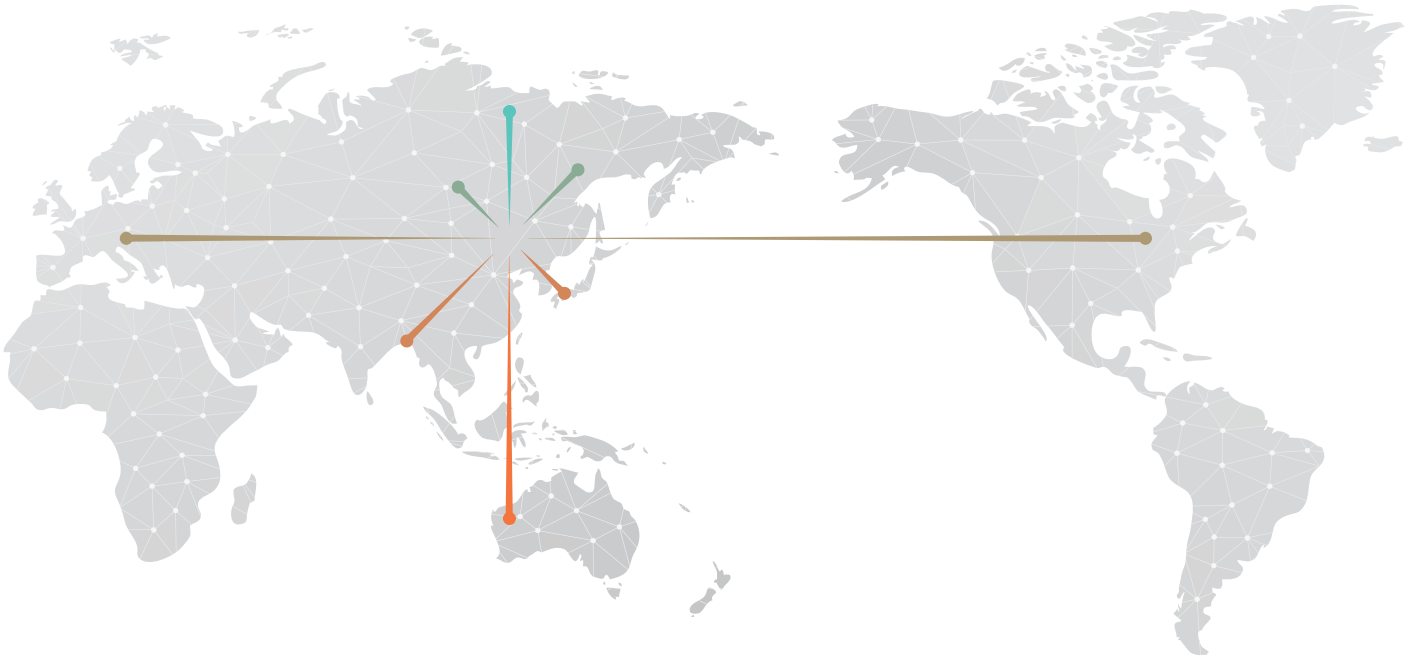
Sinorbis is a multi-award-winning software company on a mission to make digital marketing in Asia easy for education providers. By bridging the gap to Asian digital ecosystems, we remove common market entry barriers for universities and schools.

Sinorbis provides the world's first integrated marketing platform that enables Western learning institutions and businesses to create, measure and optimise their Asian digital presence. With Sinorbis, schools and universities can enjoy:

- **Accelerated speed to market** — launch your digital presence within weeks without having to jump the usual administrative hurdles.
- **Reduced cost** — set up and manage digital marketing initiatives at a fraction of the investment previously required.
- **Increased control** — get an integrated view of all digital initiatives in China.

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