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# **Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on International Higher Education and Student Mobility: Student Perspectives from Mainland China and Hong Kong**

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## Abstract

The world is facing an unprecedented health crisis with the spread of COVID-19 across different corners of the globe. The pandemic again raises the issues of the future of international higher education. Would the COVID-19 adversely impact international education and student mobility? This quantitative study examined the Mainland China and Hong Kong students' studying abroad expectations after the pandemic. Among the 2,739 respondents, 84 percent showed no interest in studying abroad after the pandemic. For those respondents who will still pursue further degrees abroad, Asian regions and countries, especially Hong Kong, Japan, and

Taiwan, are listed in the top five, in addition to the US and the UK. While the pandemic has significantly decreased international student mobility, it is also shifting the mobility flow of international students, and East Asian countries and regions are facing more opportunities in the increasingly competitive higher education sector for international students. This article also indicates the current global health crisis would intensify social and economic inequalities across different higher education systems when some countries fail to maintain the scale of international learning because of different economic recovery paces in the COVID-19 era.

**Keywords:** Studying Abroad; Transnational Higher Education; COVID-19 Pandemic; Student Mobility

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## Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic since early 2020 has dramatically impacted higher education development in various aspects, including the shift of face-to-face teaching to online teaching and learning, the cancellation of physical events and activities, and the formation of a “new normality” in higher education (Tesar, 2020). While the COVID-19 has brought many challenges to higher education in teaching, learning, research collaborations, and institutional governance, it also brings about an excellent opportunity for various stakeholders to re-think and even re-design higher education with an effective risk-management plan to make this sector more sustainable and resilient in the future. Meanwhile, this crisis forces higher education stakeholders to re-consider the role of information and communication technologies (ICT), especially online learning in higher education. Even though online learning has been treated as a remedy for higher education problems (like rising tuition costs), both students and instructors have expressed many negative concerns regarding learning effectiveness and interactions during the pandemic (Herman, 2020; Xiong, Mok, & Jiang, 2020).

The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic is significant in international higher education, especially student mobility (Altbach & de Wits, 2020; Mok, 2020). Due to the travel restrictions and campus closure, many students changed or cancelled their plan of studying abroad. In this sense, higher education institutions (HEIs) in the major destination countries, like the US, the UK, and Australia, have anticipated a considerable decrease of incoming international students in the coming semester. For instance, based on the survey conducted by the Institute of International Education, about 90 percent of US colleges and universities have anticipated a decrease of international student enrollment, and 30 percent HEIs indicated a substantial decrease in the academic year 2020/21 (Martel, 2020). A recent study published by the British Council in April 2020 shows 39 percent of Chinese students, as the largest source of international students in the UK, are unsure about cancelling their study plans (Durnin, 2020). Similarly, the Australian HEIs will face a loss of around 150,000 Chinese in the coming school year (Mercado, 2020).

As a primary source of international students to the several destination countries, the Mainland China sent out more than 710,000 students in 2019, among which 73 percent (518,300) were in the higher education level (New Oriental, 2020). However, with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese students cancelled or changed their plans of studying abroad with the consideration of safety and travel restrictions. At the same time, the Chinese government also announced some notifications to alert new students not to specific destination countries like Australia for safety consideration (China's Ministry of Education, 2020). It is against this particular circumstance that some HEIs in the East Asia region have tried to capture this as an opportunity to attract Mainland China students, adopting different policies to attract those students who have plans to study abroad. For instance, the University of Hong Kong announced its Presidential PhD Scholarship with generous funding to attract students who have received the offers from the top universities but cannot make the trip due to the pandemic (University of Hong Kong, 2020).

The present research is set out against the context outlined above to examine how students in Hong Kong and Mainland China respond to the global health crisis resulted from COVID-19 when planning for overseas learning. The research team adopted the survey instrument and successfully collected 2,739 responses of university students in Mainland China and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (Hong Kong) on their studying abroad expectations after the pandemic. Regarding the data collection, three specific questions were designed and inserted to research team's two projects using survey methods to examine respondents' studying abroad expectations, which asked them to indicate if they were still interested in studying abroad after the pandemic. And if so, what were the five countries/regions they wanted to go the most and the least? Therefore, the research questions of this study were articulated as below based on the survey questions.

1. Are Mainland China and Hong Kong university students still interested in studying abroad after the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What are the top countries for Mainland China and Hong Kong university students to study abroad after the COVID-19 pandemic?



This micro-level study on students' perspectives of studying abroad can contribute to the investigation of the impact of the pandemic on international higher education and student mobility at this particular time. The empirical evidence in this study can also contribute to the studies on the macro-level issues in terms of the COVID-19 pandemic and international higher education, such as international student recruitment policies, institutional management, and international collaborations.

## **Literature Review**

### **International higher education and student mobility under the COVID-19 pandemic**

Well before the present global health crisis, growing debates have emerged to critically examine the future of the internationalisation of education, especially when people begin to question the value and benefits that international education brings. The COVID-19 pandemic again raises the issues of the future of international higher education. Would the COVID-19 adversely impact international education and student mobility? Different groups of stakeholders of global higher education realise the profound influences brought by the pandemic on international higher education and, particularly, international student mobility. In addition to higher education institutions (e.g., Lingnan University, 2020a) and international organisations, like UNESCO (e.g., Goris, 2020), research organisations and teams have been working on this particular topic, such as the Institute of International Education (Martel, 2020), British Council (Durnin, 2020), and World Education Services (Schulmann, 2020). All these studies forecast a decrease of the international students to the major destination countries and a downturn of international student mobility globally.

For the specific impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on international higher education and student mobility, Marginson (2020a) argues the negative impact from the pandemic on student mobility will bring substantial financial challenges to universities and countries that depend on international students' tuitions. Also, the international education sector will turn into a buyers' market, in which the incoming international students become scarce sources. Because the pandemic is unevenly distributed in different countries and regions, the student mobility flows will be different in various

regions. For example, East Asian countries with a better situation and pandemic control will become the potential major destinations after this particular period. The COVID-19 pandemic also changed the weight of each factor affecting students and their families in the decisions and country choices of studying abroad. The pandemic has put health security and safety as priorities in their decision-making (Marginson, 2020a). For instance, in the survey study of the British Council on over 10,000 Chinese students, when asked about the major concerns when conceiving their plans for overseas learning, the majority of the respondents overwhelmingly rated “personal safety” (87 percent) and “health and well-being” (79 percent) as their major worries (Durnin, 2020). Worse still, the international media report several cases showing Asian students and residents experienced discrimination or even assaults when wearing face masks in the UK, Europe, and Australia (e.g., Tan, 2020). Such images would have affected Chinese students’ plans and choices for international education (China’s Ministry of Education, 2020; Mok, 2020).

In addition to the health and safety concerns of international students who cancelled their plan of studying abroad during the pandemic, the detrimental policies that have been implemented by some popular destination countries become the obstacles for international student mobility. For instance, the US federal government implemented the policy of not issuing student visas to international students if they will take all online courses in the coming fall semester. After the strong resistance from international students and some leading universities in the US (like Harvard, MIT, and Carnegie Mellon University), this policy was revoked (Jordan & Hartocollis, 2020). However, this policy has brought many negative impressions to international students who want to study in the US. It also amplified the overall negative impacts of the pandemic on international higher education.

Even though the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on international higher education and student mobility have been well recognised, some scholars still hold an optimistic view that the international student mobility will remain strong after the pandemic, just like the situations of the SARS in 2003 and the economic crisis in 2008. In addition, the previous efforts of globalisation and internationalisation of higher education in each country have laid a solid basis for student mobility, including

the compatible education systems, integrated credit transfer systems, and stimulating policies for students exchange (Mercado, 2020).

### **Factors influencing students to study abroad**

With the development of globalisation and internationalisation of higher education, the demand of students for higher education has dramatically expanded, and a large proportion of students intend to study abroad, which lead to the cross-border higher education is booming on an unprecedented scale. Thus, many scholars have studied the factors of influencing students to study overseas (e.g., Austin & Shen, 2016; Kim et al., 2017; Oliveira & Soares, 2016).

According to Hossler and Gallagher (1987), the three-stage model is appropriate for the process of deciding to study abroad. The three stages refer to choosing to study abroad or stay at home country, choosing a destination country for studying abroad, and choosing an institution for higher education. Although this is a normal process for making the decision, some students choose the higher education institution purposefully bypassing the destination consideration directly (Chen, 2007). Most of the literature to analyse the process is affected by the “push-pull” theory (Lee, 1966). Generally, push factors are related to some negative aspects of the home countries that force the students to leave and study abroad. The pull factors are associated with the positive aspects of destinations that attract the students to study in other countries (Liu & Zhu, 2019). Both push and pull factors attract the students and motivate them to study abroad, which explain the determinants that caused outflow (Lee, 2017) and also relevant to the first stage of the three-stage model, whether to study abroad.

Six crucial pull factors influence determinants (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). The awareness of the host country is the first factor, which is related to the recognition degree of the destination. The second factor is the level of other referrals during the decision-making process. In particular, the view of parents played a vital role in the final decision (Bodycott, 2009). The third is the cost issues, not only including the living expenses but also the social cost such as safety. In a study conducted by Lee

(2013), the cost issue is perceived as the essential factor that affects the final decision, and the safety issue is one of the major concerns (Deviney et al., 2014). Environmental factor such as climate is the fourth influencing factor, and the geographic proximity is the fifth factor. The sixth pull factor is the social link that is related to any familiar person or family living in the destination.

Conversely, the push factors included the lack of high-quality education in domestic countries, difficulty in increasing the competitiveness, and the political or economic condition pushing students to leave the home country (Liu & Zhu, 2019). Both pull and push factors are regarded as the individual variables that affect students determining to study abroad or not (Altbach, 1991). However, this model is difficult to distinguish the factors in the diverse group of students during the decision-making process (Kim et al., 2017). For example, the motivations of the undergraduates and postgraduates to study abroad are different (Briggs, 2006).

The motivations of an individual for studying abroad have become complex and diverse as students have more opportunities to choose their favoured destinations and study fields (Wu, 2014). To better understand the factors of influencing study abroad and the process of decision-making, the human-capital theory has been applied as an alternative approach to illustrate the demands for studying abroad (Findlay, 2011). The three dimensions within the human-capital theory are scholastic, social, and cultural. Scholastic capital refers to the knowledge attainment generated by the degree course; social capital refers to resources gained from the social network during the oversea study; and cultural capital is defined as academic credentials (Bourdieu, 2001). Furthermore, studying abroad presents the instrumentalism from the human capital theory perspective (Fong, 2011), and students consider international higher education as an opportunity to increase the wage premium and gain the high return from the higher education investment (Cebolla-Boado, Hu, & Soysal, 2018; Cozart & Rojewski, 2015). The above review regarding factors affecting students' motivations for overseas learning provides relevant perspectives for the research team to examine and analyse how students in Mainland China and Hong Kong assess the impact of COVID-19 on their plans for

overseas learning. Would the current global health crisis fundamentally change the patterns of international student mobility?

### **Mainland China and Hong Kong students' considerations of studying abroad**

After the higher education expansion in 1999, Mainland China enters the massification stage of higher education, and the competition of admission become intensive (Mok & Wu, 2016). Meanwhile, the qualification of higher education degrees was devalued in the employment market, which also caused the unemployment rate to increase. Graduates face the difficulties of finding jobs (Mok, 2016; Mok & Wu, 2016). Therefore, more students seek to study abroad for personal development and career development. In Hong Kong, the supply of places for higher education falls short of demand. It is easier to be admitted to Western universities by studying abroad than to obtain admission to the local institutions (Altbach, 1991). Thus, more Hong Kong students choose to study abroad for higher education (Mok, 2017).

Mainland China and Hong Kong students have diversified destinations for studying abroad, mainly in English speaking countries (Lewis, 2016). The university reputation and university ranking are the most significant factors that are influencing Chinese students' choice of the final destination (Lee, 2017). The US and the UK are the two major destinations because of the strong reputation of the universities in these two countries (Austin & Shen, 2016; Wu, 2014). Based on the study done by Austin and Shen (2016), students choose the US as a destination because employers would tend to recruit the employees returning from the US as they are perceived to have more opportunities to increase creativity and develop critical thinking (Tang, 2014) since the educational system in China is criticised of lacking innovation (Chao et al., 2019).

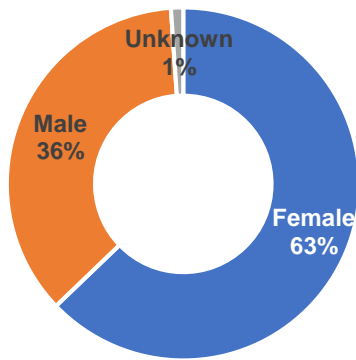
Some of the nearing Asian countries and regions are popular as a destination in recent years, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan (Li & Bray, 2007; Lee, 2017). According to Li and Bray (2007), Hong Kong and Macau have the common advantage as places capturing the mix of Eastern and Western cultures, serving as

the linkage between Mainland China and other countries. In addition to attaching Mainland students, the unique characteristics of Hong Kong and Macau have also attracted a different group of students globally. As an educational hub, the academic reputation and quality of Hong Kong is another motivation for students to choose it as the destination, but in Macau, economic income is the pull factor that attracts students to select it as the destination. Moreover, Taiwan considers as one choice that the cost is low with a high quality of higher education (Lee, 2017). With the comparative advantage of Hong Kong and Macau, would students from Mainland China prefer going to these places for learning than the popular destinations in Europe, Australia, and North America? The following part examines this issue.

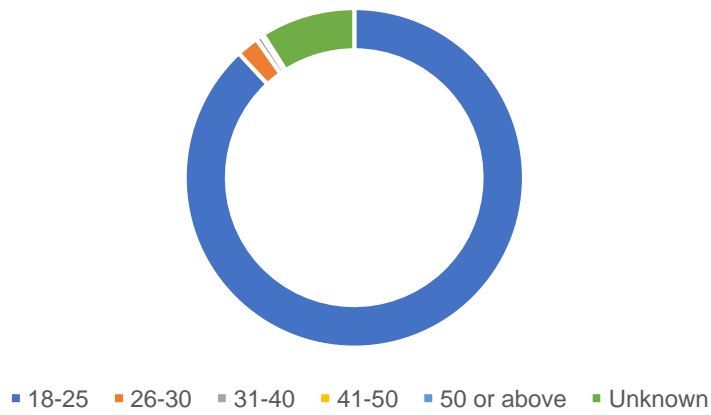
## **Research Design**

This study applied the quantitative method to examine Mainland China and Hong Kong students' attitudes to studying abroad in the COVID-19 pandemic. As mentioned above, the three survey questions which informed the two research questions of this study were purposely inserted to two research projects using the survey method. These two projects respectively investigated the online learning experiences in the pandemic of Hong Kong university students and job search experiences of Mainland China students who are studying in a Sino-foreign cooperative program or university. Therefore, the sampling group of this study includes Hong Kong higher education students and Mainland university students in the Sino-foreign cooperative programs and universities. In May 2020, the research team distributed the questionnaires through the online survey systems (Qualtrics and Wenjuanxing) to the above two groups. After a few weeks, the research team successfully collected 2,739 valid responses from the online survey systems.

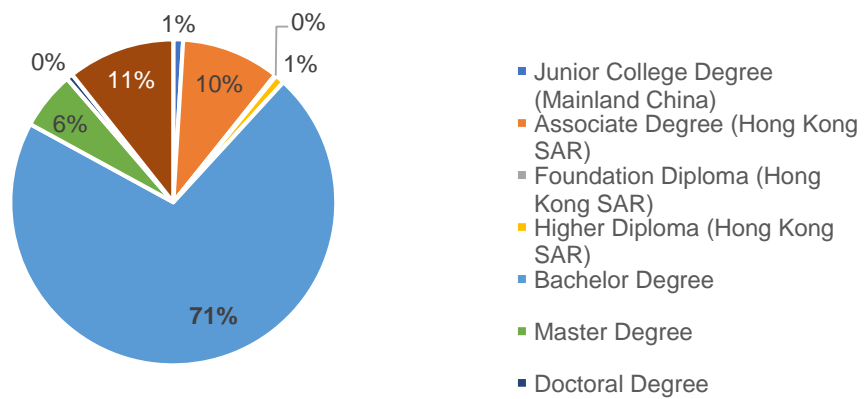
As revealed by the demographic details of our respondents, among the 2,739 respondents, 63 percent are females, and 36 percent are males (see Figure 1). Moreover, 2,413 (88.1 percent) are between 18 and 25 years old, which is the youngest cohort. Regarding the studying levels at universities, 1,948 (71.12 percent) students are studying in the Bachelor's programs as of the time of the survey (see Figure 3).



**Figure 1.** Gender distribution of the respondents.



**Figure 2.** Age distribution of the respondents.

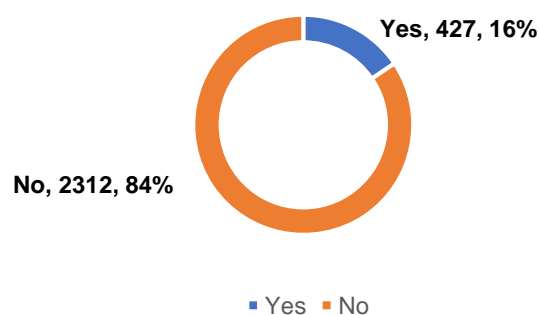


**Figure 3.** The degree of study undertaken by respondents.

After cleaning and organising the collected data, the research team applied a descriptive analysis to examine and demonstrate survey participants' attitudes to studying abroad after the COVID-19 pandemic and the top and least choices of studying abroad destination countries and regions for those who are still planning to pursue higher degrees out of their countries. The findings and results are presented in the following section.

## Major Findings

We found that 2,312 (84 percent) university student respondents expressed no interest in studying abroad after the COVID-19 pandemic, while only 427 (16 percent) would consider pursuing further education overseas (Figure 4). The alarming figure is consistent with that of the Chinese Agency Survey Results conducted by Beijing Overseas Study Service Association (BOSSA) in a sense that 73.44 percent agencies received a lower number of overseas study consultation, and 65.52 percent believed the total number of Chinese students studying abroad would drop this year (BOSSA, 2020).

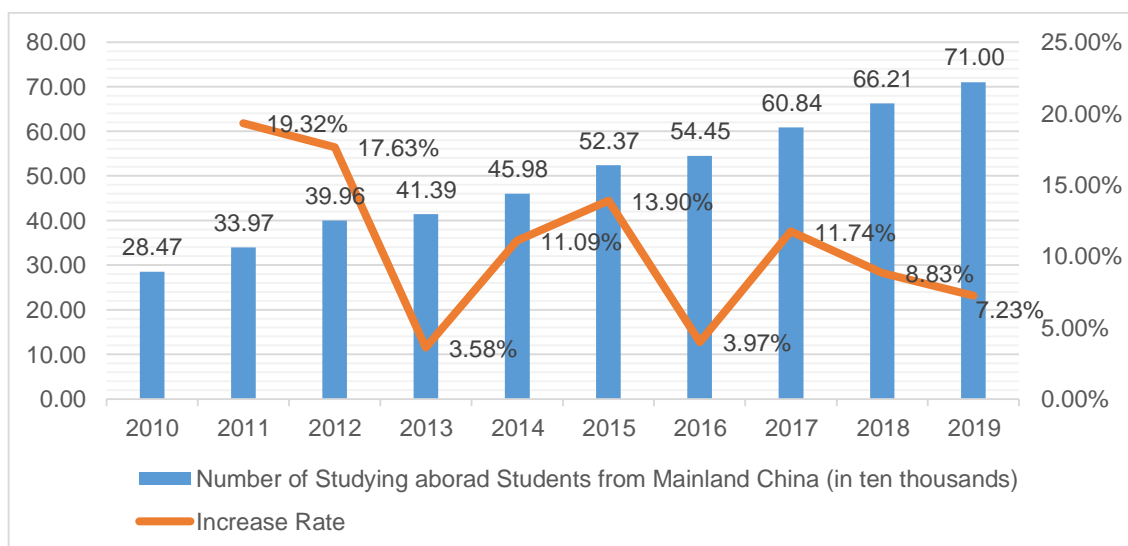


**Figure 4.** The number of respondents interested in studying abroad after the COVID-19 pandemic

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the overall number of Mainland students studying abroad consistently increased in the past decade (see Figure 5). Despite the rising anti-globalisation and nationalism trend in international higher education (Xiong & Mok, 2020), in 2019, the number reached 710,000, increasing by 8.3 percent to the 2018 figure (New Oriental, 2020). Also, if there was no pandemic, the number of



2020 would reach a new high according to the trend. Even though the number includes all levels of education, as higher-education-degree pursuers take the majority of this group (e.g., 73 percent of the 2019 number), this trend can be referred to examine the studying abroad motivations of undergraduate students, who are the primary group of participants in this study.



**Figure 5.** The number of studying abroad students from Mainland China and the increase rate, 2010-2019. Sources: New Oriental (2020) and Zhiyan Consulting Group (2020).

Therefore, comparing the pre-COVID-19 studying abroad trends with our study findings, we believe that COVID-19 did impact the further study preferences of students who are undertaking their degrees in Mainland China and Hong Kong. Mainland China and Hong Kong students are less interested in studying abroad when the pandemic is over, which may potentially cast long-lasting effects on the international higher education sector.

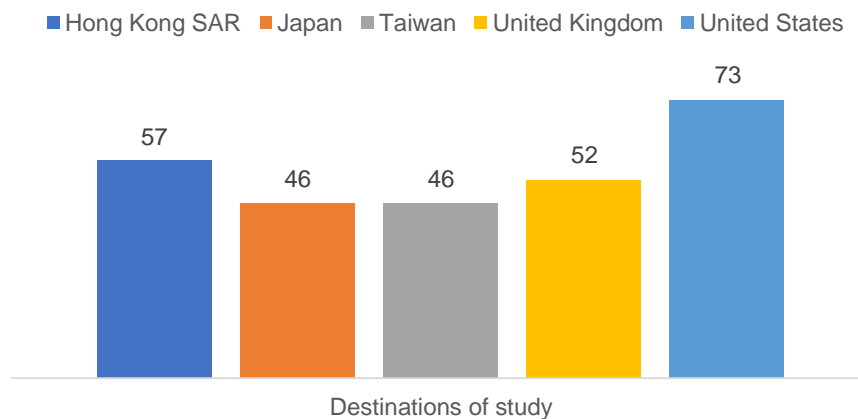
### Young first-degree students

A majority of our respondents are 18 to 25-year-old first degree seekers who may have little work experience but plenty of choices (e.g., pursuing a higher degree, gaining some work experience, and traveling overseas). That said, based on the expression mentioned above of (un)willingness to further study overseas, this large cohort of young and first-degree students may either opt for working or pursuing a higher degree back in Mainland China and Hong Kong. Regardless of work or further

study, bachelor degree graduates in Mainland China and Hong Kong will likely stay to compete for jobs and advanced level degrees in the country. More vigorous competition over jobs and studies can be foreseen, and hence we argue that more job vacancies and research study places should be offered to overcome such hardship this year.

### Most popular post-COVID study destinations

Our survey found that, apart from the all-time popularity of studying in the US, other English-speaking nations are witnessing a drop in study inclination while their East Asian counterparts are expecting more Chinese higher education students. Among the responses which indicated an interest in studying overseas after the COVID-19 pandemic, as Figure 5 depicts, the top five most popular study destinations are the US (17.1 percent), Hong Kong (13.35 percent), the UK (12.18 percent), Japan (10.77 percent), and Taiwan (10.77 percent).



**Figure 5.** The top 5 most popular study destinations.

Although the UK is still the third most popular option of study destination, the UK used to be the fourth country with the most Chinese higher education students between 1998 and 2018; compared to the UK, Hong Kong has only been the eight most popular place (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2019) (see Table 1). The tide has been turned, with Hong Kong starting to attract more Mainland China students than the UK does. Apart from Hong Kong, we observed a recent interest in pursuing

further studies in Taiwan, which has never been any top ten study destinations for Mainland China students before.

**Table 1.** Top ten destinations of Mainland China students studying higher education abroad (1998-2018)

Study destinations	Number of outbound Chinese HEI students
US	2,837,369
Japan	1,349,463
Australia	1,118,108
UK	1,005,794
Canada	515,700
Republic of Korea	461,392
France	330,698
Hong Kong SAR, China	243,258
New Zealand	215,740
Macau SAR, China	197,346

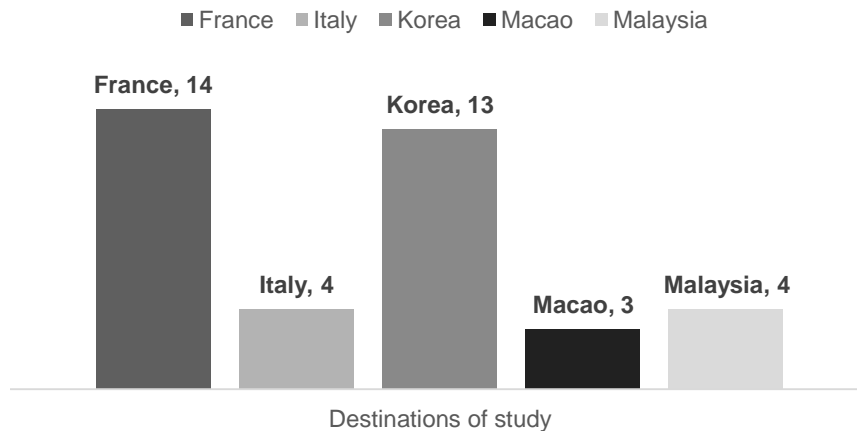
*Source:* UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2019).

With Japan remaining as one of the most popular options, three out of five top destinations are located in East Asia, and one-third of the respondents who will still go abroad after the pandemic would stay and study in the region. Hence, we argue that the growing interest to study in Hong Kong, Japan, and Taiwan is due to their proximity to Mainland China. In times of instability, students may want to stay in neighbouring regions in which they can still entertain international exposure and easily retreat to the homeland when necessary.

### **Least popular post-COVID study destinations**

While the US and the UK remain the most popular study destinations in this study, their Anglophone brothers Australia, Canada, and New Zealand no longer top the list as they used to (see Figure 6). Neither Australia nor Canada was voted as the top five popular countries in this study, but New Zealand was ranked the fifth least favourite study option in our survey. However, according to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2019) (Table 1), Australia, Canada, and New Zealand used to be the third, fifth, and ninth countries with most Mainland China higher education students during 1998 to 2018, respectively. Further investigations can be undertaken to investigate the reasons why these three English-speaking nations are not appealing to Mainland China students in this study.

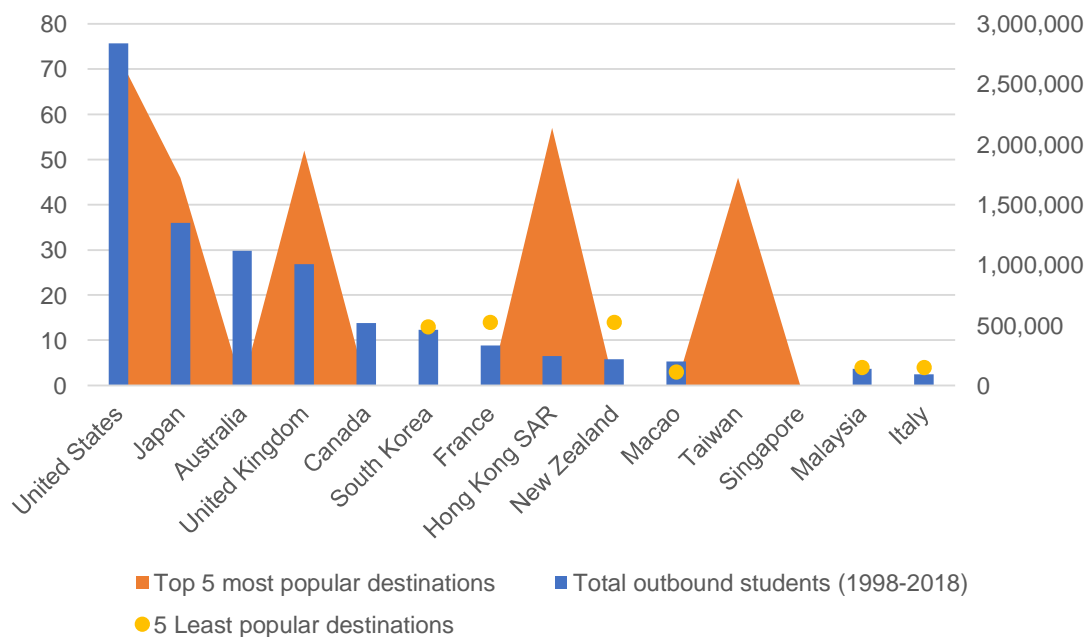
Also, as Table 1 presents, France used to be the seventh country with most Mainland China higher education students over the last two decades, but France lost its popularity among our respondents just like New Zealand. Only 3.28 percent of respondents would choose to study over there. Finally, even though some East Asian countries and regions like Hong Kong, Japan, and Taiwan would recruit more Chinese students than expected, only three percent of our willing-to-study-abroad respondents chose South Korea and even less than one percent chose Macao or Malaysia as their upcoming study destinations. Interestingly, South Korea used to be the sixth country with most Mainland China higher education students in the past 20 years, and Macao used to be the tenth (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2019).



**Figure 6.** The least five popular study destinations.

A question is thus raised: Why do some East Asian places become popular while some do not? Figure 7 contrasts the ratio-differences between the total number of Chinese higher education students last two decades (blue bars) (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2019), the five most popular options as well as the five least popular options (yellow dots) in the current survey. We conclude that while the US is as popular as usual, the UK sees a decline in its share for Chinese higher education students. We also conclude that Hong Kong and Taiwan are the ‘winners’ expecting more Mainland China higher education students. Some significant reasons accounting for such a “shift” is closely related to the better crisis management of governments in Asia when combatting the COVID-19 in terms of preventive measures adopted in enhancing public health. Comparing their real experiences

back home, together with the images broadcast internationally when Asian students were bullied by their Western peers because of different public health behaviours like wearing face masks in public, growing concerns for personal safety and well-being among Asian students and parents are becoming common (Mok, 2020a). Recent research examining how international students assess the support offered by their institutions during the COVID-19 crisis, the majority of respondents across 26 countries/regions reported insufficient support and care rendered by their institutions. Many of them felt lonely and helpless during the crisis (Amoah and Mok, 2020). These findings could offer some useful insights for analysing the results presented above.



**Figure 7.** Comparison between the total number of Chinese students studying higher education degrees overseas (1998-2018) and the preferences of further study destinations (current survey).

## Discussion

### **Impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on international higher education and student mobility**

Research findings of this study on Mainland China and Hong Kong university students' attitudes toward studying abroad have approved the negative impact brought by the COVID-19 pandemic on international higher education and student mobility. The barriers for students to pursue their further degrees overseas include travel bans, visa restrictions, and campus lockdowns in destination countries, as well as students' and their families' worries on health and safety. Some practical reasons like the delays of English tests also prevent students from completing the application in time (Mercado, 2020).

The impacts of the pandemic on international higher education are manifested in various aspects. As to student mobility, the decrease of international students due to the pandemic will bring a significant impact to overseas higher education institutions, especially for those that financially depend on the tuitions of international students (Marginson, 2020a; Tesar, 2020). For example, the UK universities would face an approximately £2.5 billion loss in tuition income in the new academic year (University and College Union, 2020).

Meanwhile, with the international students becoming scarce resources, the competitions for them will increase in international higher education. Moreover, the rate of recovery from the pandemic and post-pandemic governance will become a significant factor for destination countries to attract international students (Goris, 2020; Marginson, 2020a). This study argues that the domestic job market will become competitive because college graduates will stay for jobs instead of studying abroad. The predicted global economic recession will exacerbate this effect after the pandemic (Mercado, 2020).

Some scholars are discussing whether the COVID-19 pandemic will bring the end of the internationalisation of higher education (Heisel, 2020; Helms, 2020; Leask &

Green, 2020). In terms of student mobility, based on the present study, even though the willingness of Mainland China and Hong Kong students to study in the traditional major destination countries (like the UK, US, Australia) is decreasing, the nearby countries and regions in East Asia would become popular because of the health and safety concerns highlighted above. In our study, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan are on the list of the top five popular destinations. Also, some scholars believe the international student mobility will remain strong after the pandemic based on the previous experiences of SARS in 2003 and the global recession in 2008 (Mercado, 2020).

Also, collaboration in international higher education has been emphasised during the pandemic. In the Webinar hosted by Tohoku University Graduate School of Education (2020) regarding the “new normalcy” of international higher education in the Asia-Pacific region, the keyword about the future is “collaboration.” As the anti-globalisation trend and the COVID-19 pandemic have brought many negative impacts to international higher education, policymakers, institutional administrators, and educators know that individual institutions and countries cannot deal with this situation singlehandedly. On the contrary, collaborations are in great need. However, while it will not be easy to regain the collaborations on a global scale, the pandemic provides a precious opportunity to enhance the regional collaborations.

In short, while the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted the internationalisation of higher education, the trend of regionalisation might become a new trend in international higher education in and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This survey’s findings and the practices of Hong Kong universities in attracting doctoral students can forecast this trend. We argue that this trend will be feasible in Asia and other regions like Europe, where the further regionalisation of higher education might be enhanced due to the pandemic.

## **Rising trend of East Asian countries and regions**

As the research findings present, while the US and the UK remain as attractive destinations for the respondents in this study, one-third of them prefer to study in Asian countries and regions. Hong Kong, Japan, and Taiwan list in the top five popular destinations. Notably, after comparing the most popular destination list of this study with one of the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2019), we can see the rising trend of East Asia countries and regions in attracting Mainland China students. This trend has also been identified in recent research on studying abroad of Mainland China students (New Oriental, 2020).

Regarding the reasons for the popularity of East Asia countries and regions for Mainland China and Hong Kong students of studying abroad, the proximity serves as an essential reason during the COVID-19 and even in the post-COVID era. As most Mainland China and Hong Kong students are funded by families for their study abroad, their parents hope they can be near to them for the safety consideration. For the push-out factors of Western countries, the travel restriction and border control of the major destination countries like the US and the UK make it impossible for Mainland China students to enter their programs physically this year. The worsening pandemic situation and new social movement in the US make it more difficult for Mainland China and Hong Kong students to make the decision.

For the post-pandemic situation, because of the different governance regimes and cultures (Marginson, 2020b), East Asian countries (like China and Japan) with the Confucian and collective cultural traditions are expected to recover faster than the Western countries (like the US, the UK, and Australia) of individualist traditions from the pandemic. One point which deserves attention here is the enhanced performance of universities in Asia, as revealed by different university league tables. The rise of China in scientific research, in particular, may change some of the students in the Mainland to go for learning and research at institutions with a strategic partnership with their home institutions in Singapore and Hong Kong, especially when higher education institutions are good at internalisation (New Oriental, 2020). Although going to the English learning environment commonly



offered by universities in the West, the success of universities in Asia in research and internationalisation could become an attraction for students in Mainland China and Hong Kong when conceiving their overseas learning plans (Mok, Welch, & Kang, 2020; Mok & Kang, 2020). Therefore, as international students and their families will increasingly consider the health and security, the flow of international student mobility may shift from the traditional East-to-West mode into the East Asia-oriented mode (Marginson, 2020a).

However, the beneficial effects of proximity for East Asian countries are not evenly distributed among all East Asian higher education sectors. Based on the research findings, the traditional popular destination countries and regions in East Asia (like Hong Kong, Japan, and Taiwan) benefit the most in attracting Mainland China students due to its existing strengths (Li & Bray, 2007; Lee, 2017), while some other major traditional destination countries and regions like South Korea and Macau (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2019) lost their popularity in this study, which are listed in the five least popular destinations.

When assessing “winners” and “losers” in attracting international students, we should not ignore the negative social and economic consequences when some countries which would become winners because they would still have the financial capacity to support young people to study abroad. Analysing the internationalisation of higher education, particularly international student mobility, we should acknowledge that the social and economic inequalities will be further intensified across different parts of the world. For countries that could manage their economic growth during and right after the COVID-19 may rebound and continue to support international learning. In addition, for those traditional strong countries in terms of higher education, like the US and the UK, even though they, especially the US, are hard hit by the pandemic, they will still retain their attractiveness due to the reputation of their higher education sector, as well as the human capital investment considerations of the future students and their parents.

Nonetheless, it is not difficult to imagine some higher education systems or institutions have to face the cruel reality of closing down, especially when they are

relying heavily upon fees generated from international student bodies. The world, even in the post-COVID-19 period, will certainly be “divided” with the intensification of social and economic inequalities at the global scale because of different paces of economic recovery (Altbach and de Wits, 2020; Marginson, 2020b; O’Malley, 2017). It would raise heated debates on the value of internationalisation of education, especially when people have cast doubt on international education for “whose interests” well before the present global health crisis (Mok, Wang, & Neubauer, 2020).

### **Policy implications**

The findings presented above on Mainland China and Hong Kong university students’ attitudes towards studying abroad after the pandemic offer useful policy insights for HEIs across different parts of the world, especially when institutions have relied heavily on Chinese students as one of their primary funding sources or incomes. For small cities developed as university towns across the UK, Europe, the US, and Australia, the present survey indicates even these towns would welcome Chinese students to stay with them for international learning, whether they feel safe and secured would become major factors influencing their study plans. Are we ready to embrace the internationalisation of education even when the COVID-19 pandemic crisis is over? Is it ethical to take in foreign students if local residents are not ready to adapt to diverse understandings and experiences when managing the global health crisis, including the acceptance of “wearing face masks” as a preventive measure? These are critical issues for us to come together for reflections.

Among the top popular destinations in this study, Hong Kong’s position reaches the second, surpassing that of the UK. Hong Kong, as an international metropolis, is a popular choice for Mainland China students to study further. This survey about Chinese students’ plans for overseas learning was conducted after another survey reporting citizens living in the Greater Bay Area (GBA) in Guangdong province hold negative perceptions of Hong Kong earlier in April 2020 (Lingnan University, 2020b). Witnessing the protests and social unrest responding to the Hong Kong Government’s attempts to introduce the Fugitive Offenders amendment bill in 2019, the GBA survey shows people in Guangdong China find Hong Kong no longer

friendly, safe, and well managed in terms of urban governance. Such perceptions would inevitably affect Mainland students' preference to make Hong Kong their destination for further studies. Whether people outside the city perceiving Hong Kong as performing well in social management, safety, tolerance, and friendliness would have a direct impact on their decisions about studying and working in Hong Kong.

Although the above data indicate declining interest in international learning, Hong Kong stands out as a popular destination for those who opt for overseas learning, despite GBA citizens no longer considering the city as friendly and safe as it should be. A thriving world city depends on attracting and retaining world talents. The two surveys presented above draw valuable policy insights not only for the Hong Kong Government but also the society at large. The city is facing unprecedented challenges. Concerted efforts are urgently needed to put together to deal with the competition within and outside the GBA and to rebuild a friendly and hospitable Hong Kong. After fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, academic leaders in Hong Kong need to develop appropriate strategies to attract students from the GBA to come to the city for higher education and seriously engage with universities in the GBA for promoting innovation-centric entrepreneurship.

## **Conclusion**

While it is still in a hot debate on whether the COVID-19 pandemic will bring the end of the internationalisation of higher education, it is obvious the pandemic has profoundly influenced the global higher education (Marginson, 2020a), especially on the international student mobility. The pandemic will significantly decrease international student mobility due to the travel restriction, campus closure, and students' and families' consideration of health and safety. Compared to the traditional pull-push factors for international student mobility, the COVID-19 pandemic has re-ordered the factors when students are considering studying abroad. As health and safety become the primary concerns for Mainland China and Hong Kong students under the pandemic, the nearing East Asia countries and regions like Hong Kong (for Mainland students), Japan, and Taiwan become their first considerations due to their expected better management of the pandemic

and post-pandemic crisis, in addition to their close proximity to Mainland China and Hong Kong.

### **Limitations of the present research**

The present research adopts a quantitative method by using an online platform for distributing survey questionnaires to the respondents targeted for the study. The advantage for such a research method is easy to conduct, but the research team well recognises the limitations of the studies as the sampled respondents could not represent the broader student bodies in Hong Kong and Mainland China. However, such an online survey would have enhanced the research team to reach out to a wider range of students in Hong Kong and Mainland China; the data, after careful cleaning and analysis, could still offer useful insights for understanding the subject matter under review.

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