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As U.S. Enrolls Fewer International Students, Universities in Asia Are Going the Other Direction



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A view of Harvard University's campus in Cambridge, Mass., on May 24, 2025. Ziyu Julian Zhu—Xinhua/Getty Images



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REPORTER

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American universities are beginning to see international student enrollment drop, coinciding with President Donald Trump's increasingly restrictive immigration policies, and institutions in Asia and Europe may stand to benefit.

Foreign student enrollment at U.S. universities for the 2026 spring semester fell by 20% from last spring, according to a new report by organizations including U.S.-based international education nonprofit NAFSA. The report, published on Monday, surveyed 149 U.S. schools. Around 62% of those institutions reported lower international student enrollment in both undergraduate and graduate programs compared to last year. At the graduate level, U.S. universities recorded an average fall of 24%.

Prospective students around the world may be responding to Trump's aggressive anti-immigration agenda, which has

directly targeted foreign-born students in the U.S. and created a less attractive higher education and job environment for non-Americans. The Trump Administration has also sought to reshape American higher education, including slashing or threatening to withhold funding from top universities.

Already, international student travel to the U.S. in August, including returning students, fell by 19% compared to the year before. The total number of international students enrolled across the whole country fell by 1.4% last fall, the first drop in three years. Some reports found that new international student enrollment in the fall fell by 17%.

The new data on this year's spring enrollment indicates even bigger declines may be coming, especially as many students who enrolled in fall 2025 would have applied prior to the Administration's changes.

"As long as the Administration acts as if it is in a world full of enemies, that is going to severely impact student numbers," says Simon Marginson, a professor of higher education at Oxford University and the founding director of the Center for Global Higher Education.

Some institutions across the U.S. could soon feel the impact of fewer international students, who often pay full tuition, on their budgets and on the intellectual diversity of their programs, analysts say.

Meanwhile, universities in Asia and Europe are reaping the benefits. Around 82% of institutions in the Asia-Pacific region—excluding Australia—and 47% of institutions in Europe surveyed saw growth in their undergraduate enrollment of international students, according to the new report. The survey included responses from institutions in Fiji, India, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, and Taiwan for Asia-Pacific, and Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and Turkey for Europe.

“It would be overstating it to say the U.S. has become unattractive in general—it is still the most sought after destination for international education—but the gap with other countries has narrowed,” Marginson tells TIME. And, he adds, “the rise of educational destinations in East and Southeast Asia looks like an unstoppable trend.”

Restrictive immigration policies pushing students away

Eighty-four percent of the U.S. schools that participated in the survey said “restrictive government policies” are the main cause for the decline.

The Trump Administration has imposed travel bans for more than a dozen countries and instituted new student visa restrictions and vetting rules, cracking down especially hard on Chinese students. The number of F-1 student visas issued from May to August last year fell by 36% compared to the same period in 2024, which indicates but does not directly equal a decline in enrollment. The Administration has also made applying for the H-1B visa, the most common skilled employment visa, more onerous and expensive, making job prospects in the U.S. appear less attractive.

And last spring, the Administration began pursuing sweeping, at times violent, mass deportation policies across the country, with Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents entering college campuses, arresting and detaining some international students, and revoking

thousands of student visas—although most students had their legal status restored. In a number of high-profile cases, the Trump Administration attempted to deport students with legal residency in the U.S., including green card holders, seemingly for their involvement in pro-Palestinian campus activism or over minor offenses. Some students previously told TIME that the various policies left a climate of fear and uncertainty.

“The Administration’s performative displays of hostility to foreign students—street seizures of students, forced expulsion of those on a data base for minor misdemeanors like parking fines—have seared into international market awareness,” says Marginson. “It takes years to correct such impressions even in a more friendly climate and right now the climate is not more friendly.”

According to the survey, Australia, Canada, and the U.K. also saw declines in international student enrollment. All three countries and the U.S., colloquially called the “big four,” have traditionally been considered the most attractive destinations for higher education in the world. But this spring, 44% of Australian institutions, 69% of Canadian institutions, and 42% of British institutions recorded a drop in international student enrolments at the

undergraduate level. Those declines were even more pronounced at the graduate level, with 67% of Australian institutions, 80% of Canadian institutions, and 65% of British institutions reporting lower enrollment numbers.

In these three countries, universities also pointed largely to restrictive government policies as the reason for their falling numbers.

Canada has sharply cut the number of student visas it issues, while Australia has increased scrutiny and reduced approvals for applicants from countries seen as likely to overstay their visas or use the visas as a form of back door migration. The U.K. has also restricted the ability for most students to bring their family members with them.

There's also the demand side, Marginson says, especially among Chinese students, who have traditionally been some of the biggest share of international students in these countries.

“We think that some education agents are advising families not to send students to the Anglophone countries” because of these restrictions, Marginson tells TIME.

“Perceptions that the U.S. is more unwelcoming of Chinese people is affecting demand for entry, and there are increasing doubts about the power of foreign degrees, especially from universities not at the very top of the prestige hierarchy, when graduates return to the tight labor market in China,” he adds. China is experiencing a youth unemployment rate of more than 16%.

U.S. universities adapt to falling foreign student enrolment

More than a third of the U.S. universities surveyed are concerned that fewer international students could lead to budget cuts. Already, several universities across the country have made plans to reduce spending and introduce other measures in light of declining international enrollment. Reuters reported in October that DePaul University in Chicago was looking at a hiring freeze, executive pay cuts, and discretionary spending limits after international enrollment fell by 30% in the fall.

Several universities have also faced fiscal crises, driven by a number of factors, that could be exacerbated by lower international student enrollment. The University of

Southern California, which saw a drop in international graduate student enrollment, laid off hundreds of employees since July as it seeks to reduce its budget deficit, and Northwestern University reduced its administrative and academic budgets and cut 425 positions across the institution last summer.

NAFSA found that the roughly 17% drop in new international student enrollment for fall 2025 translates to more than \$1 billion in lost revenue, with California, Massachusetts, and New York experiencing the biggest losses.

“Public sector foreign and out-of-state students are no longer a supplement to funding, they are core funding,” says Marginson. That could eventually mean that universities get more expensive for Americans. Fewer international students, he says, “creates pressures to raise fees for in-state students.”

Asian universities an attractive alternative

The downturn in international students going to the U.S. doesn't just affect budgets, Marginson says. It also means fewer high-caliber students, especially from China. That could impact research and innovation, especially in STEM, coming out of the U.S. as well as affect intellectual, cultural, and language diversity on American campuses.

Many of those highly competitive, well-qualified prospective students are instead being welcomed onto campuses in Asia.

While the majority of Chinese students looking to study overseas still choose one of the "big four" destinations, a growing number are choosing universities in other parts of Asia. The number of Chinese students attending American, Australian, and Canadian universities have declined over the past five years. Meanwhile, Chinese student enrollment in Malaysia grew from 9,000 in 2019 to 47,000 in 2024. In Thailand, the number of Chinese students grew from less than 6,200 in 2016 to 28,000 in 2024. Japan and South Korea have also seen increases in their Chinese student population, while around half of Singapore's 73,200 international students were from China in 2024.

East Asian and Southeast Asian countries are more convenient locations, says Marginson, and they're seen as culturally friendlier and significantly cheaper alternatives to U.S. universities. Asian countries are also "rightly perceived to have improved educational standards in the last two decades, backing public institutions with significant government funding and regulation of quality, and private institutions too with rigorous regulation for quality," he adds.

Although Monday's survey did not look at Chinese institutions, China is also increasingly seen as an attractive study destination. Most Chinese students still study at Chinese universities, which largely have lower fees and strong academic reputations, especially in STEM. Last year, China surpassed the U.S. in output of critical technology research, including A.I., according to the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, which looked at the top 10% most-cited scientific publications. Both the Chinese government and firms are also pouring a huge amount of money into research and development.

Chinese universities have seen more students from other parts of Asia and Africa enroll. The number of international students at Chinese universities grew from a low of around

250,000 during the pandemic in 2021 to around 380,000 in the 2024-2025 academic year, according to the country's Ministry of Education. These students hailed from 191 countries, with Asian students accounting for around 61% and African students around 16% of the cohort.

Analysts have argued that China's growing political and economic influence worldwide through the Belt and Road Initiative has facilitated closer relationships with and a more positive reputation among Asian and African countries, leading to greater academic exchange. China has also pushed to open itself up through more academic exchanges, new visa types, and promoting tourism. China's image, especially among younger generations, appears to have significantly improved in recent years, with some on social media adopting the "Chinamaxxing" trend.

Tuition fees are relatively inexpensive in China compared to other Asian countries and the "big four" countries. China has also attracted students through scholarships in Africa, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Southeast Asia, according to Marginson.

Still, non-Mandarin speaking students may be turned off by the language barrier, he adds. Hong Kong is benefitting the most of all destinations from the shifts in higher education, Marginson tells TIME. Its universities have risen in global rankings, as have several in mainland China, and have increased their enrollment caps for international students. It is also more accessible to English-speakers or those who want to study in English.

The U.S.-China geopolitical rivalry may also impact Chinese universities' reputation among some international students. The number of American students in China fell from around 11,000 in 2019 to fewer than 2,000 today, according to a March 2026 report by nonprofit U.S.-China Education Trust. The report pointed to reduced U.S. federal funding for China-related study, the suspension of many exchange programs, and pressures on U.S. institutions to downsize or end partnerships with China. The report also said there is a "widespread belief among students that time spent in China will jeopardize future U.S. government careers."

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