

Chinese students 'increasingly scared' about US study

Recruitment experts say visa and safety concerns 'spell trouble for all but the highest-ranked American institutions'

October 11, 2018

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A cold feeling: 'every day Chinese parents hear scarier news from the US'

Chinese students are becoming increasingly nervous about studying in the US, recruitment experts have warned, after it was revealed that Donald Trump considered implementing a ban on student visas for the country's nationals.

Last week, the *Financial Times* (<https://www.ft.com/content/fc413158-c5f1-11e8-82bf-ab93d0a9b321>) revealed that earlier this year White House aides had encouraged Mr Trump to stop providing student visas to Chinese citizens. The proposal was shelved over concerns about its economic and diplomatic impact, but recruitment experts spoken to by *Times Higher Education* indicated that the fact that it had even been contemplated was already having a chilling effect.

The US government has previously implemented tougher immigration restrictions for some Chinese postgraduate students, shortening from five years to one year the duration of visas for those planning to study high-tech subjects such as aviation, robotics and advanced manufacturing.

Andrew Chen, co-founder of WholeRen, a company that helps Chinese students apply to US universities, said that "Chinese parents and students are increasingly...scared about studying in the US".

Reflecting on recent cases involving his clients, Mr Chen said that four prospective university students in China have "just decided to abandon their US higher education plans" and study in Canada or Australia instead because of their parents' concerns about "security and unfriendliness" in the US.

Meanwhile, a client of WholeRen was “ready to attend 10th grade in a Pittsburgh public high school” – with a view to later enrolling in a US university – but is now looking elsewhere after his visa was rejected three times, Mr Chen said.

“If you look at stories on Chinese social media, every day Chinese parents hear scarier news from the US; other than regular school shootings, there is also ‘Trump considered banning all student visas from China’, ‘all Chinese students are spies’ [and] ‘Chinese STEM student visas will be shortened to one year only,’” he said.

Almost a third (32.5 per cent) of international students in the US in 2016-17 – some 351,000 – were Chinese, according to figures (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/overseas-student-enrolment-us-falls-7-cent-post-trump>) from the Institute of International Education’s Open Doors database. While Chinese numbers have continued to grow in recent years, there are fears that they could soon decline, as has been the case with student numbers from South Korea, Saudi Arabia and Japan.

A report published last week by the Council of Graduate Schools and Graduate Record Examinations showed that first-time enrolment of international graduate students from all countries decreased by 3.7 per cent between autumn 2016 and autumn 2017. The “current policy climate around US visas and immigration may be a contributing factor”, said CGS president Suzanne Ortega.

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Derrick Karst, director of international engagement at EduFair China, a platform that connects Chinese students with international universities, said that his organisation has been in touch with numerous Chinese students asking whether the changes in US policy have affected their study decisions.

In the short term, “students who have already selected the US are ready to follow through with their plans” because many of them have spent years preparing to enter US universities, he said. However, in the longer term, stricter immigration controls, Sino-American trade disputes and the rise of non-US universities in global rankings are “turning Chinese students away from American schools”.

“This spells trouble for all but the highest-ranked American institutions,” he said.

Rahul Choudaha, executive vice-president of global engagement and research at StudyPortals, a platform for international students, said that the timing of the news of the attempted ban on student visas “could not have been worse as students are in the midst of choosing and applying to universities for the next year”.

“With the presence of many world-class universities, [the] US had always been a preferred choice for many Chinese students. However, with the continuous anti-immigrant rhetoric, some students and families will start considering alternative destinations,” he said.

“Given that more than 350,000 Chinese students are enrolled in the US, contributing over \$12 billion [£9 billion], the political shock wave is a wake-up call for universities to become more proactive in communicating to students about the value of the US as a destination and also to develop strategies that de-risk dependency on one or two source countries.”

Bei Guo, vice-president of EIC Consulting, which helps Chinese students pursue international education, said that so far in 2018, “EIC has seen a more than 35 per cent growth in our UK market, which enjoys the highest growth over the other countries”.

But Terry Crawford, chief executive and co-founder of InitialView, an interview platform that helps US universities assess the communication and soft skills of international applicants, said that there was a “deep desire within China to go to a top university in the US”.

“Every individual in China knows someone who has had their lives transformed by attending university in the US, and they hope for the same opportunity,” he said. “They know that US presidents change but that the opportunity provided by a US degree at a top school will not.”

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