International Scholar Mobility to the United States Claws Back from Its Pandemic Plunge

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Abstract

Geopolitics are reshaping global science as the United States decouples from China and aligns with India. Scholar mobility from South Korea maintains resilience while mobility from Brazil continues its steady ascent. Post-pandemic scholar mobility to the United States lingers at levels from 15 years ago. As emerging powers expand academic partnerships and research activity, adaptation imperatives loom for the United States to retain leadership in science.

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This year's Open Doors 2023 Report on International Educational Exchange not only captures the current state of scholar mobility in the United States but also reflects a complex nexus of geopolitical tensions, national security concerns, and the evolving nature of global scientific collaboration. At its core is the United States' strategic pivot away from China in science and technology, leading to stricter visa policies and increased scrutiny for Chinese scholars. Internationalization, once a unanimously positive goal in higher education, now receives a more mixed reception among policy makers.

The data reveal divergent trends in international academic mobility to the United States. While international student enrollment at United States higher education institutions has rebounded to prepandemic levels, international scholar mobility lingers at levels from 15 years ago. Though the number of scholars climbed 13 percent in 2022-2023 to 102,366, this recovery remains below the 106,123 scholars hosted in 2007-2008 and lags 25 percent behind the prepandemic high point of 2018-2019—an inflection point reversing 20 years of expansion.

The United States, traditionally a leader in global science, is witnessing changes in its position due to simmering geopolitical tensions, new strategic alliances, and the diversification of historic patterns of academic mobility. The pandemic introduced additional volatility, impacting travel, visa processing, and funding, as well as the growth of virtual collaborations in addition to physical mobility, which will influence long-term academic mobility trends. Nonetheless, challenges for the United States also present opportunities for expansion and diversification as emerging powers like China and India, among others, reshape global science.

Mobility Restarts, Tensions Remain

China, India, and South Korea remained the top three nations sending scholars to the United States, and Brazil, ranked fourth, exhibited the most substantial average annual growth in the number of scholars heading to the United States over the last two decades. STEM fields maintain their stronghold in international scholar mobility, representing 78 percent of international scholars in the United States. This year's report shows steady growth in the physical and life sciences, which make up half of all STEM scholars in the United States, a reflection of the urgency of addressing global health and environmental challenges. The data reflect broader geopolitical changes, the rise of nationalism, and a strategic reevaluation of relations with China, United States strategic alignments with India, and the diversification of mobility patterns.

US-China Tensions

The number of Chinese scholars in the United States saw remarkable growth from 2000-2001 to 2020-2021, peaking at 46,256. However, escalating tensions between the two countries, fueled by trade disputes, intellectual property rights issues, and intensifying competition in technology and higher education, have led to tighter United States visa policies for Chinese scholars, particularly in high-tech and strategically crucial fields like artificial intelligence. The United States Department of State and the Department of Homeland Security have implemented more stringent visa policies affecting Chinese scholars.

Policy shifts and political rhetoric have culminated in a drastic reduction of Chinese scholars to 19,556 in the 2022-2023 academic year, marking a 59 percent decrease from 2018-2019. This sharp decline is indicative of wider United States initiatives aimed at

mitigating China's growing influence and safeguarding national security interests. The 2018 China Initiative resulted in a decline in joint scientific papers between the two countries, falling from 62,904 in 2020 to 58,546 in 2022, and a notable percentage of American scientists have severed ties with Chinese collaborators due to the China Initiative. In response to United States policy shifts, China has implemented strategies to encourage its overseas academics to return home, utilizing their knowledge to enhance its national development—a strategy commonly known as "reverse brain drain".

US-India Strategic Alliances

India showed significant growth in sending scholars to the United States, with a record number of 16,608 in the 2022-2023 period, paralleling the all-time high of 268,923 Indian international students and its role as a key United States ally. The country's scientific publications have soared, growing annually by 11.4 percent between 2003 and 2022, ranking India as the world's third-largest producer of science papers, surpassing the United Kingdom, Germany, and Japan in volume.

In sharp contrast to the United States' strategies towards China, India's burgeoning academic relationship with the United States is exemplified by the US-India initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET) which aims to bolster collaboration between businesses and academic institutions. Moreover, the Indo-US Global Challenges Institute, a collaboration between the Association of American Universities (AAU) and the Council of Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT Council), focuses on high-impact research partnerships in key areas such as semiconductor technology, sustainable energy, pandemic preparedness, and other critical scientific domains.

US-South Korea Resilience

South Korea's scholar numbers increased to 6,646 in the 2022-2023 academic year. Despite being off from its peak of 9,975 in 2008-2009, mobility between the two countries demonstrates remarkable resilience. South Korea's rebound in scholar numbers is more than a mere recovery from pandemic-induced disruptions; it represents a strategic recalibration of academic alliances in a world where distrust between the United States and China has grown, and the dominance of Euro-American powers is being contested. It also reflects South Korea's robust investment in research and development, which has positioned the country as a global innovation leader, especially in technology and engineering.

US-Brazil Ascendancy

This year's data also illustrate how mobility patterns are diversifying beyond the traditional East-to-West movement. Brazil has been steadily climbing the ranks as a top origin country for scholars and the fourth leading place of origin in the 2022-2023 academic year, sending more scholars to the United States than Canada, Germany, and Japan. This increase aligns with Brazil's focused efforts in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. The country has significantly invested in scientific research, infrastructure development, and incentives for international collaboration.

The New Geopolitics of Academic Mobility

As the United States adopts a more inward-looking stance, other nations are poised to step in, potentially altering the epicenters of knowledge production and collaboration. This transition may herald a more multipolar scientific landscape fueled by diverse global partnerships and alliances. Such changes in the global landscape pose challenges for the United States in retaining its status as a premier destination for international academic talent. Fundamental to this transformation is the United States's strategic shift away from China, particularly in fields of science and technology, resulting in more stringent visa regulations and heightened scrutiny of Chinese scholars.

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The future of United States scholar mobility and its role in the global scientific exchange will depend on how well it adapts to the new geopolitical landscape of academic mobility. To adapt, the United States must tackle key barriers hindering international scholar mobility. This includes extending visa durations, creating clearer paths to permanent residency for STEM scholars, and boosting research funding for collaborative projects and exchange programs. The effectiveness of the United States response will determine whether it continues as the leading destination for research talent and scientific collaboration. ◢