

Bright Minds on the Move: Russia's Brain Drain to China

Elena Denisova-Schmidt and Zhaoheng Xu

This article examines the growing number of Russian students pursuing higher education in China. It highlights how China's open-door policies, global ambitions, and modern academic environment attract talented students dissatisfied with Russia's outdated educational system and rigid corporate culture. While this inflow of talent benefits China, Russia faces the challenge of an emerging academic brain drain. Russia must reflect on what is driving this problem and take decisive action to mitigate its effects.

Global higher education is experiencing a significant realignment, as the Global South emerges as a dynamic center for international study and the long-standing dominance of the Global North begins to wane. The increasing movement of Russian students to China both reflects and contributes to this broader transformation. In 2025, Russian students constituted about 4.5 percent of all international students in China, maintaining their position among the top 10 sending countries. While trailing behind larger student populations from South Korea, Thailand, and Pakistan, Russia has consistently ranked as the leading country from Europe or the Commonwealth of Independent States sending students to China. Although Russian undergraduates form the majority in absolute numbers, the country particularly stands out at the postgraduate level. In 2022, 3,800 master and doctoral students from Russia accounted for nearly 15 percent of all advanced-degree international students in China, reflecting strong interest in specialized technical and business programs.

In a recent study, we explored the motives that drive Russian students to pursue higher education in China. Conducted in April 2025 at selected world-class Chinese universities, the study examined a balanced mix of genders, academic levels, and disciplines across the social sciences, humanities, and STEM fields. Sixty percent of participants were enrolled in Chinese-taught programs, while 40 percent took courses in English. It should be noted, however, that linguistic proficiency in Chinese is usually high among Russian students, even those in English-taught programs. On the Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi test for Chinese as a foreign language, the average reported level is HSK 5 (out of six levels in total). This degree of fluency allows for meaningful engagement with Chinese academic and cultural environments regardless of the primary language of instruction.

A More Inclusive China

Russian students in China expressed a nuanced awareness of current geopolitical challenges, particularly those involving Russia's global position and the shifting dynamics between East and West. Several students acknowledged that recent political

tensions have made studying and working in Western countries more difficult through visa restrictions and limited funding opportunities. In comparison, China is viewed as a relatively welcoming and stable alternative for higher education, though students recognize the tightening academic rules around foreign influence and digital surveillance. Many students reported that they did not experience any geopolitical pressure in China. In fact, they found most Chinese people to be very friendly toward foreigners. One possible explanation for this is China's long-standing etiquette culture. While not all students cited geopolitics as a primary motivator, many noted that the broader international context increasingly shaped their educational and career decisions.

China as an Alternative to Russia

Russian students cited dissatisfaction with the quality of education at home as a key "push" factor for choosing China as a study destination. Some students perceived Russian universities—even highly prestigious schools—as relying on outdated pedagogical methods that no longer reflect modern realities (e.g., outdated curricula and a lack of integration with new technologies and global educational trends). Some Russian faculty reportedly continue to teach as they did decades ago, making it difficult for students to engage with relevant and contemporary material. Several interviewees also mentioned corruption as a pervasive issue, especially in relation to admissions and examinations. Another recurring theme among students was dissatisfaction with the rigid, sometimes hierarchical and often unfriendly academic culture in Russia, starting with secondary schools. Concerns about the quality of education were often paired with skepticism about Russian corporate environments.

Proximity and Partnership

For students from Siberia and the Russian Far East, China presents a geographically convenient alternative to western Russia. Both regions are far closer to major Chinese urban centers than to Russian university cities such as Moscow and St.

Petersburg. This proximity reduces travel time and expenses, making Chinese universities not only accessible but also logistically practical for students from these regions. Moreover, the ease of cross-border movement reinforces China's allure as a destination for higher education and future professional life. In addition to geographic and logistical advantages, the region's close economic, academic, and cultural cooperation with China—as well as with neighboring countries such as South Korea and Japan—further enhances East Asia's appeal as a hub for education and career development.

A Strategic Bet on a Rising Power

Beyond geopolitical and geographic considerations, many Russian students and their families saw China as a strategic place to study due to its growing status as a global superpower. China's rapid economic development, technological innovation, and increasing influence in global affairs make it an attractive environment for students seeking long-term opportunities. For several interviewees, studying in China was not simply an educational decision but also a calculated investment in their future careers. Others emphasized China's international reach and the potential to build transnational careers. The perception of China as a stable, upwardly mobile power contrasts with students' frustrations about stagnation and unpredictability in Russia, solidifying their decisions to pursue education in an emerging global center.

A New Era of Sino-Russian Cooperation

The accelerated development of Sino-Russian collaboration across the trade, energy, and infrastructure sectors, particularly through joint projects like the Belt and Road Initiative, has generated critical demand for skilled professionals capable of turning strategic visions into practical implementation. As bilateral ties continue to strengthen across multiple dimensions, emerging young professionals have assumed growing importance as key mediators who will facilitate future economic partnerships, political dialogue, and cultural exchange between

the two nations. Moreover, studying in China is a must for those who want to become teachers of Chinese as a foreign language. These students viewed immersion in China's linguistic and cultural environment as essential for achieving native-like fluency and gaining authentic pedagogical insights. Studying in China also provided access to specialized programs in Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages, further reinforcing these students' professional goals and positioning them as cultural intermediaries in an increasingly China-curious Russia.

Why Bright Minds Look East

It should be stressed that there is no single impetus behind this trend; most students expressed having several motives at once or shared that their motives had changed during their studies. It is also interesting to note that many students had strong family support: their families had helped them on their higher education paths by sending them to China for language courses, with some even moving to other cities to access better secondary schools (e.g., those offering Chinese); organizing private tutoring; and sending their children to a Confucius Institute.

The flow of Russian students to China signals a shift in the global geography of higher education. This trend marks the rise of emerging education and knowledge hubs in Asia, challenging the traditional Western model of academic mobility. As one of Asia's fastest-growing higher education systems, China's open policies and sustained investment have made it an attractive destination for talented students worldwide. By bringing in young minds from outside, China's higher education system is gaining intellectual vitality and global influence, accelerating its emergence as an influential international education center. Meanwhile, the persistent outflow of high-achieving students from Russia, who are disillusioned by an apparent disconnect between the Russian education system and the labor market, deserves closer attention. If left unaddressed, this trend could gradually weaken the country's competitiveness and appeal in the global talent landscape.

Elena Denisova-Schmidt is associate professor at the University of St. Gallen, Switzerland, and a research fellow at the Center for International Higher Education, Boston College, USA. Email: elena.denisova-schmidt@unisg.ch.

Zhaoheng Xu is associate professor at Shanghai University, China. Email: zhxu@shu.edu.cn.