



Future Flows: Chinese students to Australia

(Information as at 12 December 2025)

Chinese demographic change and demand for an Australian education

China is undergoing significant demographic shifts that will affect student mobility and international education. High school graduates are expected to peak around 2032, with about 17 million students sitting the university entrance exams. Beyond 2032, graduate numbers are projected to decline sharply, reflecting the drop in births from 17.86 million in 2016 to just over 9 million in recent years.

Outbound student mobility from China is influenced by demographic shifts and evolving preferences among traditional student groups. Australia's reputation as a destination remains strong and likely to be sustained for at least the next seven or eight years. Chinese demand for overseas education has not significantly declined.

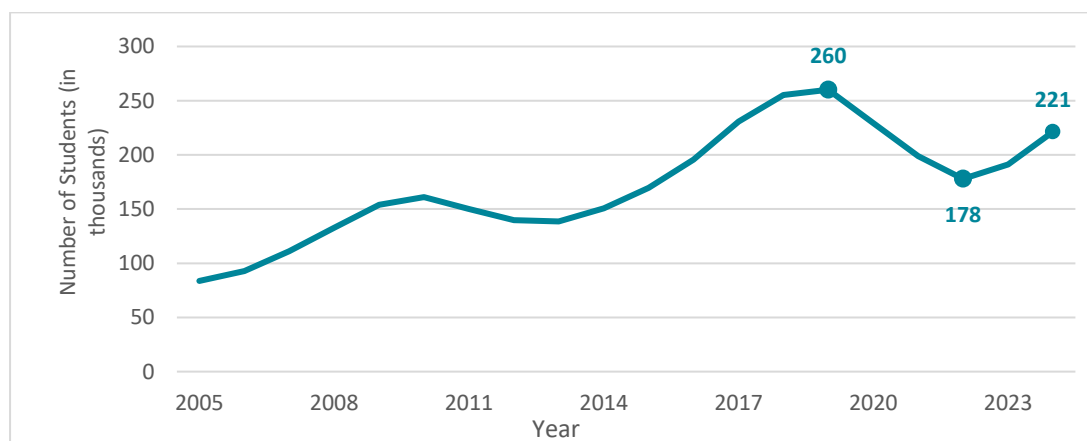
Chinese International Student Flows

Over 700,000 mainland Chinese students study abroad each year, making China the world's largest source of international students. Chinese estimate shows over 87% of Chinese graduates return to China after completing their studies overseas.

Chinese international students in Australia

Chinese students are the largest cohort in Australia, making up 22 per cent of the total international enrolments. Numbers grew from 83,662 in 2005 to a peak of 260,075 in 2019—a 211 per cent increase—driven by China's expanding middle class and Australia's proactive international education policies (see Chart 1). COVID-19 disrupted this trend in 2020, but enrolments are rebounding, especially in higher education.

Chart 1: Mainland Chinese Students in Australia 2005-2024 (Enrolments)



Source: Australian Government Department of Education (2025) [International students studying in Australia between 2005 and 2024](#), 25 July 2025

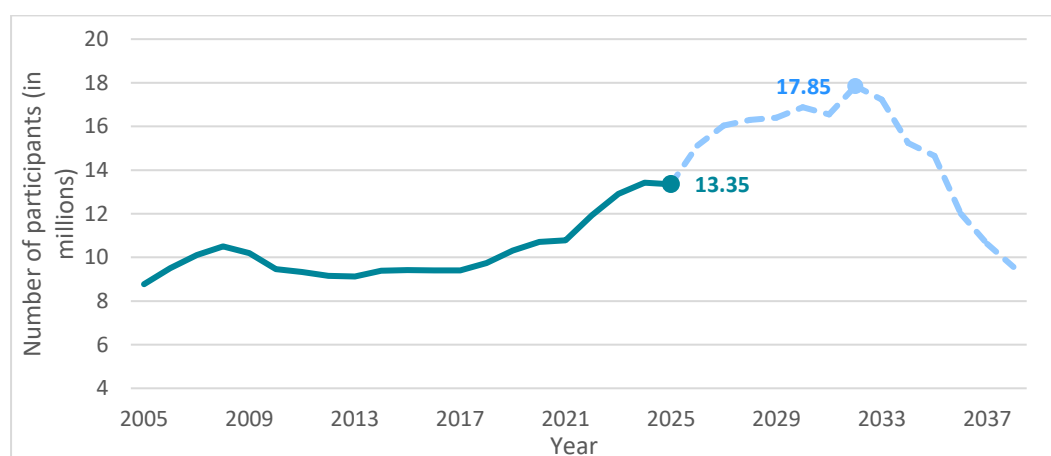
As of September 2025, 76 per cent of Chinese international enrolments were in the higher education sector, mainly in master's coursework programs, followed by bachelor's and doctoral degrees. Most Chinese VET students are undertaking a diploma, certificate IV or advanced diploma and most Chinese international school students enrol in a Senior Secondary Certificate of Education.

Demographic pressure and domestic competition

A total of 13.4 million Chinese students registered to sit the National College Entrance Exam (Gaokao) in 2025, and this is expected to increase over the next decade. This increase is driven by a surge in births that occurred between 2007 and 2017; and by growing high school enrolment rates.

The peak year for Gaokao population is estimated to occur around 2032, with estimates suggesting around 17.8 million students are expected to take part (see Chart 2). In November 2025, the Chinese Minister for Education, Huai Jinpeng publicly confirmed that the high-school graduate population is expected to reach its peak in 2032. Following this peak, a sharp decline is anticipated, reflecting the rapid fall in fertility from 2018 onward.

Chart 2: China's Gaokao attendance — actual data (2005–2025) and projections (2026–2038)



Source: Gaokao data for 2005 – 2025 are from MoE data. Estimate for 2026 onwards are from online estimate based on birthrate and high school attendance, Sohu

Competition for high-ranked universities in China

Amidst these demographic changes, competition for places at China's top universities remains intense. For students who miss out on a place at such a university, overseas study is likely to remain an attractive option. Between 2015 and 2025, China's Gaokao attendance increased by 42 per cent, but admissions (student places) for China's Top 9 and Top 39 universities have remained relatively stable.

Drivers of Student Choice

Rankings

Admission to top-ranked universities within China is highly competitive, largely due to population scale and exams such as the Gaokao. Chinese universities currently appear less often than Australian ones in global top rankings, but this is changing. An Australian degree continues to carry strong prestige for Chinese students when global rankings are considered.

Interest in overseas study is declining among elite Chinese university graduates but rising among students from non-elite institutions, who see study abroad as a career advantage.

Priority disciplines and trends in subject choice

Chinese student choice of academic majors tends to mirror broader Central Government priorities. Current policy encourages fields such as artificial intelligence, quantum technology, and interdisciplinary innovation. These priorities are shaping demand for transnational education partnerships focused on advanced science and technology across both VET and higher education, increasing competitive course offerings within China.

Financial factors

Over 90 per cent of Chinese students studying abroad are self-funded. China's growing middle-income population – especially in second-tier cities – has expanded access to international study. These families tend to adopt a more cost-conscious approach, weighing overseas education against expected returns, particularly employment outcomes. Career readiness and employability are now central to the value proposition.

Global factors shaping student choice

The relationship between governments can also influence Chinese student choices or perceptions of a prospective study destination. Chinese student flows can decrease when relations with a destination country and China's Central Government are strained and increase when relations are stable or improving. We are seeing Chinese students choosing a broader range of destinations, including in Southeast Asia. Australian universities with branch campuses in Southeast Asia may benefit, although competition will be high—especially as more Chinese institutions are building their footprint in the region.

Perceptions of Australia

Australia is often perceived by many Chinese students as safe, stable, and accessible. Geographic proximity, similar time zones, and strong bilateral relations support long-term study plans. Australia's reputation for safety is also a key consideration for Chinese families.

Conclusion

Looking ahead, we expect strong Chinese demand for overseas education pathways to be sustained over the next 5 to 10 years. By aligning offerings with student needs, maintaining strong institutional reputations, and fostering constructive engagement with China, Australia is well-placed to remain an attractive study destination for Chinese students over the next decade.

Enquiries

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