

# Difficulties and Strategies in the Overseas Education in China for Local Colleges and Universities in the Post COVID-19 Epidemic Era

**Dandan Cao**

*International School, Chongqing Technology and Business University, Chongqing, 400067, China*

**Abstract:** *In 2020, the sudden COVID-19 epidemic swept the world, affecting and changing the world's political, economic, educational and other fields in many aspects. In the face of the great changes unseen in a century, the education of overseas students in China is also facing unprecedented opportunities and challenges. Especially for local colleges and universities, the opportunities and challenges are more obvious. Starting from the needs of national strategy and the problems and difficulties faced by local colleges and universities in the overseas education in China, this paper aims to re-understand the actual situation of the education of local colleges and universities, and put forward countermeasures on how to solve the practical difficulties and achieve the goal of improving the quality and efficiency of the international development of local colleges and universities.*

**Keywords:** *local colleges and universities; international education in China; difficulties and strategies*

## 1. Introduction

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic spread globally, posing significant challenges to international education in China. In just three years, there have been many changes in various aspects of international education in China, including enrollment promotion, teaching methods, and management practices. Currently, the COVID-19 pandemic has entered a phase of normalized management. How local universities, especially regional ones, can fully utilize their own characteristics and advantages to overcome difficulties and challenges in the post-pandemic era and achieve the goal of international development, quality improvement, and efficiency enhancement is a topic that deserves deep reflection and discussion.

## 2. The Necessity of International Education in China as a National Strategy

International education in China has always been an important part of Sino-foreign cooperation and overall diplomacy, with its main objectives being "talent cultivation" and "serving the national diplomatic strategy." By admitting and nurturing international students in China, it can establish a bridge for communication between China and the world, promote exchanges, deepen understanding, enhance mutual trust, advance cooperation, and cultivate a group of outstanding young people and international friends who are knowledgeable about China, love China, and are friendly towards China. This, in turn, enhances the country's cultural soft power and international influence.<sup>[1]</sup> The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation requires higher-level, higher-quality, and more influential international education as support. With over 70 years of development, international education in China has made significant achievements. Currently, China has become the largest destination for international students in Asia and the third-largest globally, with approximately 500,000 international students enrolled.<sup>[2]</sup> International students in China are seen as "an important potential resource and target for public diplomacy" and "an important carrier for deepening cultural exchanges and enhancing the country's soft power."<sup>[3]</sup> The high-quality development of international education in China is not only a concrete manifestation of building a strong education nation but also a rightful obligation to strengthen international talent exchange and promote mutual understanding among peoples of different countries, advancing the building of a community with a shared future for mankind.<sup>[4]</sup> Although international education in China has been severely impacted by the pandemic in the past three years, with the control and mitigation of the pandemic, the number of international students coming to China is expected to rapidly rebound and even experience explosive growth. In the post-pandemic era, how regional universities can enhance their own international education levels and quality, optimize

enrollment and management of international students, expand the international influence of education, and cultivate international students knowledgeable about China to serve the overall national diplomatic strategy are urgent issues that need to be addressed.

### **3. Challenges Faced by Local Universities in International Education for International Students**

#### ***3.1 Sharp Decline in the Enrollment Scale of International Students, Enrollment Opportunities Shrinking***

The global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound and far-reaching impact on international education in China. In the short term, due to the pandemic, China has implemented relatively strict control measures, preventing international students from entering the country. Many international students who intended to study in China are currently in a state of uncertainty and hesitation. Among them, the most severely affected groups are self-funded degree students, language students, and students engaged in credit-based intercollegiate exchange programs.<sup>[5]</sup> In the long term, the pandemic has led to an overall decline in the global economy. Some international students who were considering studying in China may face worsening economic conditions in their home countries and may be unable to afford the cost of studying abroad, leading them to abandon their plans to study in China. Consequently, the enrollment scale of international students in China has experienced a "cliff-like decline." In the post-pandemic era, global economic recovery will take some time, and competition among countries for international student sources is expected to intensify, which will have a profound impact on international education for international students in China. Looking at the domestic situation, although local universities have achieved some results in international education over the years, their performance is not impressive on a national scale, and the gap between them and key universities and designated institutions is still significant. Key universities and designated institutions have stronger international influence and regional competitiveness, more flexible policies for independent enrollment, and offer a wider variety of scholarships with higher amounts. As a result, local universities have further limited opportunities for enrolling international students, and the enrollment situation is not optimistic.

#### ***3.2 Relatively Lower Quality of Student Sources, Insufficient Program Development***

In 2018, the Ministry of Education issued the "Quality Standards for Higher Education of International Students in China," which was the first quality standard document specifically for international education in China. It serves as a nationwide unified basic guideline for universities to conduct international education and as the fundamental basis for internal and external quality assurance activities in international education. However, due to the gap in overall strength and international influence between local universities and key institutions, local universities are relatively disadvantaged in selecting international student sources, which hinders the improvement of the quality of international education in China. International students at local universities mostly come from Southeast Asia, countries along the "Belt and Road" initiative, or African countries. These countries often have lower levels of basic education, resulting in lower high school academic performance among students. There are significant differences in learning attitudes and habits, leading to an overall lower quality of student sources. Furthermore, local universities themselves have a limited number of programs with qualifications to admit international students, a shortage of all-English courses, and a lack of well-established branded programs. This insufficient program development has become a major shortcoming in the international education efforts of local universities.

#### ***3.3 Decreased Motivation and Interest in Learning among International Students***

Three years of the pandemic have restricted international mobility, and online learning, with its physical distance, can lead to a sense of detachment, which is detrimental to the emotional connection and engagement required for effective teaching. Online teaching lacks the presence, interaction, and hands-on experience required for effective education. It reduces shared experiences between teachers and students, weakens emotional connections, and limits non-verbal communication, which hinders empathy.<sup>[6]</sup> Therefore, online remote learning has significantly reduced the overall experience of international students, making it difficult to stimulate their motivation and interest in learning. Surveys have shown that while international students are generally satisfied with online teaching by instructors, their overall acceptance of online education is not high.<sup>[7]</sup> International students still prefer traditional

in-person learning. Additionally, the pandemic has severely impacted the economic and employment environments in many countries, leading to unstable financial situations for some students and uncertain job prospects. Some international students without scholarships or with low scholarships have chosen to take leaves of absence or drop out, reflecting a lower level of motivation and interest in learning. These situations are more pronounced among international students at local universities.

### ***3.4 New Challenges in the Management of International Education for International Students in China***

As the pandemic recedes, domestic universities have started the comprehensive work of bringing international students back to campus for classes and resuming their studies since 2023. This places higher demands on the management teams of universities responsible for international students. Now that we have entered the phase of normalized pandemic prevention and control, the management personnel at each school not only need to prevent the resurgence of cases within the campus but also bear the dual responsibility of preventing the importation of cases from outside. Unlike key universities and designated institutions, the management teams at local universities often face challenges such as insufficient manpower, dispersion across different colleges, relative lack of management experience, and unclear management responsibilities. Therefore, in terms of work systems, emergency response, student psychological counseling, and other aspects, how to mobilize various departments to collaborate and establish a well-organized, functional, and efficient management team for international students remains a key focus of the management work at each university. In addition, the pandemic has had a significant impact on the academic progress of many international students, with cases of leaves of absence and dropouts occurring frequently. Ensuring a smooth transition for international students in terms of academic continuity and graduation preparations, helping new international students quickly adapt to their study life in China, and making arrangements for students who have not yet returned to campus are also issues that the management teams need to address.

## **4. Strategies for Local Universities in International Education for International Students**

The difficulties and challenges in international education for international students are objective, but within the crisis, opportunities can be found. The following are some strategies addressing these issues and challenges, with the hope of providing insights into the top-level design and policy-making for international education for international students in local universities in the post-pandemic era.

### ***4.1 Increase Promotion Efforts for International Education in Local Universities***

During the three years of the ongoing global pandemic, China has effectively controlled the virus, demonstrating its national strength and responsibility. The international community widely recognizes China's efforts in pandemic prevention and has referred to China as a "safe haven." This favorable image of China's pandemic control can significantly benefit the enrollment of international students in Chinese universities. Therefore, local universities should leverage this advantage, plan in advance, and intensify their promotional efforts to strengthen the "Study in China" brand. Before the pandemic, universities primarily used traditional methods such as printed promotional materials, Weibo and WeChat accounts, and English-language websites for enrollment promotion. In the post-pandemic era, these traditional methods have limitations in reaching potential student markets, and local universities should utilize online media extensively to align with communication preferences of global youth. Leveraging their regional advantages and characteristics, universities should enhance the promotion of their specialized programs and branded projects on international social media platforms. Moreover, institutions should tailor their promotional strategies to specific countries and regions based on market demand for international education. Furthermore, universities should use overseas friendly schools and cooperative bases as windows to promote collaborative projects through various means, both online and offline, ensuring the sustainability of existing programs and building a strong reputation, thus expanding their global influence and reputation. Additionally, leveraging alumni resources can help expand the market in traditional source regions, as alumni with their own study experiences can influence friends and relatives or ethnic Chinese communities to choose China for education.

### ***4.2 Enhance Top-Level Design and Expand Source Country Layout***

Before the pandemic, the main source countries for local universities were Southeast Asian

countries such as Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Laos. Regardless of the past or the future, these countries will continue to be the main sources of international students for local universities. Therefore, it is essential to maintain these advantages and explore new source countries.

With the continued advancement of the "Belt and Road Initiative," there has been increased collaboration between countries along the belt and road and China in infrastructure, economics, trade, and culture. Due to the similar time zones and relatively good internet connectivity between China and these countries, local universities should increase their investment and presence in the countries along the "Belt and Road." Universities should actively cooperate with high-quality educational institutions in these countries to expand their channels for recruiting international students.

In terms of short-term program enrollment, local universities should continue to strengthen ties with global partner institutions. Leveraging Confucius Institutes, Confucius Classrooms, and overseas language and culture centers, universities should expand resources and channels, attracting international students for short-term study, visits, and exchanges, diversifying the categories of international students and supplementing the number of long-term students.

#### ***4.3 Leverage Specialized Programs, Collaborate, and Share Resources in International Education***

With the development of global internationalization and multilateral cooperation, the diversification of study abroad goals has become more prominent. The demand for specialized, applied talent development has expanded, presenting opportunities for local universities in international education. Unlike high-level, comprehensive key universities and designated institutions, local universities often have distinct educational characteristics, such as strengths in fields like finance and management, engineering and transportation, electronics and communication, medicine and healthcare, and teacher education and the arts. Local universities should capitalize on these unique strengths by identifying their niche positions, creating distinctive international education programs and courses, and not only offering Chinese-taught courses but also expanding English-taught programs to increase the breadth and appeal of their academic offerings.

After experiencing three years of the pandemic, the mode of international education has evolved. The construction of online Chinese language teaching resources can follow the principles of shared construction and shared use, establishing a global Chinese teaching community. The same approach can be applied to the development of online course resources in other disciplines. In the post-pandemic era, universities should make use of the accumulated experience in online teaching and the resources created during the pandemic to adopt a blended learning model, combining online and offline teaching. Local universities can plan ahead and build virtual classrooms, using "Internet+" and smart technologies to enhance interactions between teachers and students and among students themselves, improving the presence and effectiveness of online learning, and enriching the supply of high-quality educational resources for various majors. Additionally, when developing online courses, local universities can collaborate with provincial universities, domestic institutions, and enterprises, sharing their strengths, building and sharing high-quality courses, and compensating for the relative deficiencies in major and course development of local universities, laying a solid foundation for international education for international students in the post-pandemic era.

#### ***4.4 Continue to Offer Short-Term Online and Offline Exchange Programs and Competitions***

During the pandemic, many offline short-term experiential programs in Chinese universities were forced to suspend, leading universities to launch online short-term "virtual" programs. For international students, online programs are more accessible due to the lack of associated costs. These programs not only filled the gap left by the suspension of offline programs but also attracted several times more international students due to their affordability. Therefore, in the post-pandemic era, it is still crucial for local universities to continue offering short-term language and culture exchange programs, both online and offline.

In terms of competitions, local universities can use a variety of formats, such as online and offline collaborative projects, group discussions, and professional knowledge competitions, to enrich classroom learning content and provide more opportunities for practical experience and practice in their respective fields. Moreover, talent competitions, knowledge competitions related to Chinese culture, and other programs can be organized to enhance international students' understanding and appreciation of Chinese culture. Encouraging students to participate in competitions can help them find enjoyment and a sense of achievement in their studies, maintain their interest in learning, and enhance their

motivation and competence in their respective fields.

#### ***4.5 Actively Promote Cooperative Education and University-Enterprise Joint Training***

During the prolonged global pandemic, universities worldwide have been exploring new ways of teaching and collaboration to provide international students with education from different countries, regions, and institutions without significant mobility. Joint education and joint training for international students between domestic and foreign universities have become a new trend in this regard. In the post-pandemic era, cooperative education and joint training models can still be promoted. For example, local universities can collaborate with their overseas partner institutions to offer joint education programs and recognize each other's credits. Through these cooperative programs, local universities can recruit international students in an organized manner. Simultaneously, local universities can leverage their unique strengths in various fields to engage with outstanding domestic alumni resources. By collaborating with local alumni, universities can establish university-enterprise partnerships, employing models such as customized training to provide more internship and practical opportunities for international students, enhancing their professional capabilities, increasing their alignment with the job market, and thus increasing the attractiveness of their programs.

#### ***4.6 Enhance Teachers' Digital Literacy and Online Teaching Competence***

The three-year pandemic has significantly accelerated the development of online education. In the post-pandemic era, a blended teaching model that combines online and offline modes may become the norm in the field of Chinese international education. Therefore, teachers need to possess digital literacy and information skills, understand the development of the "Internet+" era, and master modern information networks and intelligent technologies to integrate them into teaching.<sup>[8]</sup> The online courses and resources accumulated during the pandemic can still serve as beneficial supplements to traditional face-to-face teaching, providing students with more learning materials and opportunities for practice, even after the resumption of in-person classes. Local universities should proactively support and encourage teachers to participate in training programs for online teaching technology. Regularly organizing training and research on online teaching methods and the effectiveness of online learning will help teachers adapt to the blended teaching model, enrich their teaching methods, and maintain the quality of education in the post-pandemic era.

#### ***4.7 Strengthen the Capacity of International Student Management Teams and Risk Management***

As the pandemic gradually subsides and policies are relaxed, the number of international students is expected to rebound rapidly. Local universities should leverage the experience gained during the pandemic to further enhance the management capacity and risk response capabilities of their international student management teams. According to the requirements of the Ministry of Education's "Quality Standards," the management of international students in China should transition from scale expansion to connotation development, aiming to improve quality and efficiency. Lower-quality student sources can affect talent development, so to achieve quality improvement, universities should focus on the entrance and elevate the source quality as much as possible. While this may conflict with the expansion of enrollment scale, it is beneficial for students' learning and management. To enhance the capability of managing international students, local universities should strengthen communication and learning among their management teams, sharing experiences and learning from each other to improve their ability to explore and identify sources. Furthermore, universities should establish a management system for international student management cadres, taking into account their specific circumstances and tailoring the system to their needs. Regular training should be provided to enhance the cross-cultural communication ability of management personnel, as well as their ability to manage and intervene in the physical and mental health of international students, continuously improving the team's management capabilities and operational efficiency, thus ensuring the success of international education for international students in local universities in the post-pandemic era.

## **5. Conclusion**

In the post-pandemic era, the high-quality development of international education for international students in China is not only a necessary requirement for educational reform and development but also the path to enhancing the country's soft power and international competitiveness. Local universities

should fully recognize the challenges and issues facing international education for international students under the new era and new circumstances. They should also emancipate their thinking, carry out top-level design, leverage their own advantages, establish institutional mechanisms suitable for their own institutions, create branded programs and projects, and enhance the competitiveness and influence of international education for international students.

## References

- [1] Li Yequn.(2012) *Several Thoughts on the Development of International Students Education in China*[J]. *China Higher Education Research*, (9),27-29.
- [2] Gao Yang.(2017) *Focus on China as the World's Third-largest and Asia's Largest Destination for Study Abroad after the 19th CPC National Congress*[J]. *Study Abroad*, (21),12.
- [3] Wei Liqing, Chang Cuiming. (2021)*The Communist Party of China and International Students in China* [J]. *International Education Exchange*, (3), 13-19.
- [4] Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. *Huai Jinping: Accelerating the Construction of an Education Power to Provide Fundamental and Strategic Support for the Comprehensive Construction of a Modern Socialist Country*[EB/OL]. (2023-01-03) [2023-05-26]. [http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_xwfb/moe\\_176/202301/t20230105\\_1038295.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/moe_176/202301/t20230105_1038295.html).
- [5] Yin Hao, Liu Haitian.(2021) *Challenges and Strategies for the Development of International Education for International Students in the Post-Pandemic Era*[J]. *China Geological Education*, (2), 10-14.
- [6] Shi Jinsheng, Wang Lufei.(2021) *Survey and Research on Online Chinese Language Teaching for International Students in Universities under the Background of the COVID-19 Pandemic*[J]. *Language Teaching and Research*, (4), 23-33.
- [7] Cui Xiliang.(2020) *Chinese International Education in the Context of Global Public Health Emergencies*[J]. *Chinese Teaching in the World*, 34(3), 291-299.
- [8] Lu Jianming, Cui Xiliang, Zhang Wangxi, et al.(2020) *"Chinese International Education in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Challenges and Countermeasures" Everyone Talks About (Part 2)* [J]. *Language Teaching and Research*, (5), 1-16.