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In Focus | China's STEM students turn to Singapore as Western study options shrink

City state's scholarships for students from China form an early-stage talent pipeline into its highly skilled workforce, experts say

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Illustration: Quoc Huy Truong

For generations, China's brightest science and technology minds followed a well-worn path: board a Westbound flight and claim a seat at a globally renowned university.

That once-reliable trajectory has fractured. [Escalating US-China tech competition](#) and tightening immigration policies across the "big four" study destinations – Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States – have redrawn the map for global student mobility.

As Western nations impose ever-stricter access controls and security protocols on their laboratories, a less conspicuous but significant shift is gathering momentum. A growing number of [China's top STEM talent](#) – scientists, technologists, engineers and mathematicians – are quietly redirecting their ambitions southwards, with Singapore emerging as one of the primary destinations.



The National University of Singapore is among the city state's universities vying to attract the brightest Chinese STEM students. Photo: Handout

Singapore's China scholarship pipeline

Among the pull factors is a decades-long, state-backed scholarship programme aimed at channelling top Chinese science students to Singapore: the Senior Middle 2 (SM2) scholarship programme.

Launched in 1997 as a joint initiative between the Singaporean and Chinese ministries of education, the programme recruits high-achieving second-year high school (Grade 11) youngsters from China to study at the city state's top institutions, including the national university of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

The Singapore government offers fully funded undergraduate education in science and engineering, along with living allowances. In return, recipients commit to working in Singapore for six years after graduation.

Singapore previously operated the Senior Middle 1 or SM1 programme, recruiting about 300 top-performing mainland Chinese secondary students annually to attend high school and junior college in the city state.

Chinese students and their families are asking where an overseas education can still deliver academic prestige, employability and long-term security
Liu Jiaqi, Singapore Management University

In 2024, that programme was succeeded by a scholarship managed by Business China – a non-profit organisation launched by Singapore's founding prime minister [Lee Kuan Yew](#) in 2007.

These long-running schemes have found renewed relevance as Chinese families pivot towards study destinations perceived as safer and more politically stable.

In many cases, plans for Western higher education have been thrown into disarray by [visa crackdowns](#), rising anti-China sentiment, restrictive immigration policies and the looming threat of policy reversals, prompting families to look elsewhere.

Education experts say Singapore's scholarship schemes are drawing academically gifted Chinese students into the city state's educational system during their formative years, absorbing them into its universities and eventually, its highly skilled workforce.

American education dream crumbles

The catalyst for a global shift in mobility remains the US, where the American education dream for Chinese families has faced political headwinds. A significant deterrent is [Proclamation 10043](#), signed in 2020 during Donald Trump's first term and strictly maintained across successive administrations.

It restricts Chinese graduate students and scholars in STEM fields with ties to certain institutions in the country, on the grounds of national security.



US President Donald Trump looks on as he signs executive orders and proclamations in the Oval Office at the White House, in May 2025. Photo: Reuters

"With that change, Singapore has become more attractive to mainland [Chinese] students who previously might have considered going to the West," said Yang Peidong, an NTU associate professor whose research focuses on educational mobility.

Lin Xiongji, an SM2 scholarship holder who arrived in Singapore in the mid-2010s, views the scheme as increasingly appealing.

"This can safely shield Chinese students from the growing uncertainty of studying in Western countries and offer a pathway to integrate into Singaporean society," he said.

The restrictions extend beyond American shores.

Canada's immigration ministry introduced a hard cap on international study permits, slashing targets significantly year on year through 2026, while postgraduate STEM students from China have faced prolonged, multi-month visa background checks for Australia in recent years.

At the same time, the UK government has moved to [curb net migration](#). Policy changes include a 2024 restriction preventing most international students from bringing their family members, and a decision to shorten the post-study Graduate Route work visa from two years to 18 months, effective January 2027.

Singapore benefits from the uncertainty surrounding studying in the West because it offers a middle position: it is not China, but it is also not perceived as hostile to China
Denis Simon, Quincy Institute

According to Liu Jiaqi, assistant professor of sociology at Singapore Management University (SMU), Chinese students now see overseas study largely through the lens of risk management, with Singapore emerging as a "lower-risk and high-value alternative".

"Chinese students and their families are asking where an overseas education can still deliver academic prestige, employability and long-term security without the political uncertainty now attached to some Western destinations."

Nearly 266,000 Chinese students studied in the US in the 2024-25 academic year, a 4 per cent decrease from the previous year, according to the Institute of International Education's latest annual survey of higher education institutions, published last November and sponsored by the US State Department.

That figure represents a 28 per cent decline from the peak of 369,548 in the 2018-19 academic year.

Meanwhile, [Singapore ranks second](#) among 28 popular study-abroad destinations for Chinese students, according to a 2025 report jointly published by China's Ministry of Education and the Beijing-based think tank Centre for China and Globalisation.

Singapore as a STEM talent hub



Singapore is emerging as a regional hub for science and technology, boosted by scholarship schemes that draw Chinese students into its universities. Photo: AFP

After being suspended for four years during the Covid-19 pandemic, Singapore's scholarship programmes resumed in 2024 on a smaller scale. Interest among Chinese families has remained strong since the relaunch.

Numerous prospective applicants and their families continue to exchange application tips and seek information about the scholarship on the Chinese [social media platform RedNote](#).

Denis Simon, a senior fellow at the Quincy Institute in Washington, said Singapore's scholarship framework functioned as an early-stage talent pipeline.

"It brings academically strong Chinese students into Singapore's system before university, socialises them into Singaporean institutions, and potentially directs them into Singapore's universities, research ecosystem and technology labour market," he said.

Lin, who is nearing the end of his six-year work bond and recently attained Singapore permanent residency, said he would stay on.

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"These programmes are great and predictable pathways for kids from ordinary families to rewrite their destinies, and are highly suited to those who do not want to spend a fortune studying abroad," he said.

Simon said Singapore was positioning itself as a "talent arbitrage hub" in the era of US-China rivalry.

"As Washington narrows access for some [Chinese STEM talent](#), Singapore can absorb a portion of that mobility and convert it into long-term human-capital advantage."

But he cautioned against viewing the scholarships purely through the lens of geopolitical rivalry, noting they were fundamentally about sustaining Singapore's workforce, innovation base, and bridge role linking China, Southeast Asia and the global economy.

"Singapore benefits from the uncertainty surrounding studying in the West because it offers a middle position: it is not China, but it is also not perceived as [hostile to China](#)," Simon said.

A tougher job market at home

Another strong pull factor for Singapore's scholarship programmes is China's increasingly [cutthroat job market](#).

Yang of NTU said applicants' motivations had remained largely unchanged over the years, but the circumstances surrounding their decisions had shifted.

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Singapore, he said, still offered "a much more advanced and globally connected higher education system and labour market" than many Chinese students perceived at home, where slowing economic growth, fierce competition and worsening employment anxieties had made the city state's schemes increasingly appealing.

Yang has also observed that many students remain in Singapore after completing their six-year employment bond, with some eventually becoming permanent residents or citizens.

Others return to China, where their international study experience and bilingual abilities give them a clear advantage in the job market.

Even so, many do not settle permanently in mainland China, instead becoming what Yang describes as "very mobile, highly skilled professionals whose careers take them to different places".

Liu of SMU cautioned that the meaning of overseas study was shifting in China, where its value was now "far more conditional".

In recent years, studying abroad has become a politically double-edged sword, with China's Ministry of State Security warning the public that students were prime targets for foreign intelligence recruitment. A prominent Chinese [business leader sparked controversy](#) last year by saying her company would not cultivate foreign-educated talent over spying fears.

Government departments, state-owned enterprises and politically sensitive industries are increasingly wary of foreign-educated candidates, fearing ideological divergence or security liabilities.

Liu said students and families were navigating "a fractured global education market, a difficult Chinese job market, and a political climate in which mobility itself has become more sensitive".