

LEADING THE NEWS

EDUCATION

30pc SLUMP IN HK STUDENTS OPTING FOR STUDIES IN U.S.

Figures show countries such as Britain, Canada and Australia that offer streamlined routes to permanent residency are growing in popularity

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The number of Hong Kong students pursuing studies in the United States during the first seven months of this year has fallen by 30 per cent compared with the same period in 2019, just before Covid-19 emerged in the city, official data shows.

While the American consulate for Hong Kong and Macau insisted demand remained strong, an education consultant said students were opting to study in countries that offered permanent residency following a shorter post-graduation period.

According to data from the US government, a total of 1,385 visas were granted to Hong Kong students from January to July.

That was a 30 per cent drop from pre-pandemic levels, when 1,962 visas were granted to students from the city during the same period in 2019. A total of 304 and 1,621 visas were approved in 2020 and 2021, respectively.

In previous years, the number of US student visas granted would peak in July, one month before the American academic year started.

Authorities in the US announced last November that the country's borders would be

completely reopened to fully vaccinated foreign travellers, who had been limited to essential travel since March 2020.

A report by the US Department of Commerce from March had already spotted the trend, attributing the "slight decrease" in the overall number of students from Hong Kong during the 2020-2021 academic year to the pandemic and concerns about public safety in the country.

The report found the number of Hong Kong students in the US that year had fallen to 5,878 from the previous year's figure of 6,778, a 13 per cent drop.

But a department report from January last year said US authorities expected an increase in students looking to study in the country. It came after Hong Kong's anti-government protests and the imposition of the national security law in June 2020. The Beijing-imposed law outlaws secession, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign forces.

"Inquiries about sending students to US high schools have increased significantly. Interest in overseas education by parents is partly due to political instability and partly due to the work prospects that come with a US education," the report said.

In response to the implemen-

tation of the national security law, Canada and Australia rolled out streamlined emigration pathways specifically for students from Hong Kong in June and November in 2021, respectively.

A total of 4,390 student visas were granted to Hongkongers by the Canadian government between January and July of the same year. The figure represents a more than threefold increase from the 1,295 recorded during the same period in 2019.

During the first seven months of this year, Australia approved nearly 2,000 student visas, up from 1,400 logged between January and July in 2019.

Britain is considered the most popular destination for Hongkongers looking to pursue their education overseas, with 6,511 student visas issued in 2021.

In comparison, Canada approved 6,365 student visas last year, the figure was 2,805 for Australia and 2,206 for the US.

A spokeswoman for the US consulate did not respond to a question on what could have caused the drop in student numbers from the city, but suggested "interest in studying in US high schools, universities and graduate programmes remains strong".

Kitty Wu, director of Litz USA Student Service, a Hong Kong-based education consultancy specialising in US education since 1989, said she did not agree with the consulate's assessment.

"I am quite sure that the interest in studying in the US among Hong Kong students is not that strong now when compared to the past. It marks a big difference." But Wu said top-tier students were still attracted to American educational institutions, including the country's Ivy League.

Meanwhile, a report by HSBC concluded the US was the most expensive country to study for international undergraduate students in terms of average tuition fees. The cost of studying for one year in the US was US\$29,254, with the next highest being Australia at US\$23,275.

The average fee charged by British universities was US\$20,542, while Canada cost US\$15,591.

Watch out for monsters



Giant sea monsters look out from the roof of the Mills in Tsuen Wan, as part of an exhibition co-hosted by the arts hub and British inflatables group Designs in Air.

The Fantastical Beasts of the Sea exhibition will run until October 31, and offer visitors a chance to search for inflatable installations around the Mills and win prizes. Photo: Sam Tsang

LABOUR

Call to expand scheme for foreign talent

Current plan allows some professionals to work for two weeks without a visa

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The government should expand admission criteria for a pilot scheme that allows overseas talent to temporarily work in Hong Kong without a visa, a lawmaker and an adviser on innovation have said, ahead of a relaxation of Covid-19 travel curbs.

The scheme, which was rolled out in June, allows overseas professionals in 10 designated industries to take up pro bono or paid jobs in Hong Kong for two weeks without applying for a work visa.

Under the current criteria, talent may qualify if they are involved in large-scale international events, as well as sectors such as innovation and technology, arts and culture, medical and healthcare, sports, higher education, heritage, aviation and the creative sector.

But lawmaker Duncan Chiu, who represents the technology sector, said the scope of the initiative was too narrow, as only select semi-official bodies approved by the Security Bureau could apply to invite people from overseas to

come on a visa-free basis. "This won't help to solve the manpower shortage in the industry," he said.

Eric Yeung Chuen-sing, an honorary president of the Smart City Consortium, which offers advice to the government on innovation, said the technology sector had not widely benefited from the scheme as it was mainly aimed at helping government-backed institutions host events.

"Attracting talents to come to Hong Kong would require other policies and facilities," he said.

Yeung, also a founding president of the Hong Kong Esports Association, said sports clubs might not be interested in the scheme as athletes did not need a work visa anyway, provided they did not receive money from a local host to compete in the city.

A spokesman for the bureau in May said individuals seeking to qualify for the scheme must be invited by an authorised host organisation, with proof required that the person possessed much-needed skills in Hong Kong and their work was "conducive to economic development or achieving relevant policy objectives".

The scheme also covers ath-

letes, coaches and visiting sports professionals, if they are invited by the relevant associations or the Hong Kong Sports Institute.

But Chiu, who chairs Hong Kong Squash, the governing body of the sport in the city, also suggested granting successful applicants a month-long stay instead of the existing two weeks, citing the

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ERIC YEUNG, SMART CITY CONSORTIUM

recent plans to ease the city's strict entry regime. "Local squash players need sparring partners to come and train with them for at least a month. That's the time they need to learn from their trainers," Chiu said.

Sources revealed that the scheme had failed to attract many applications in the four months

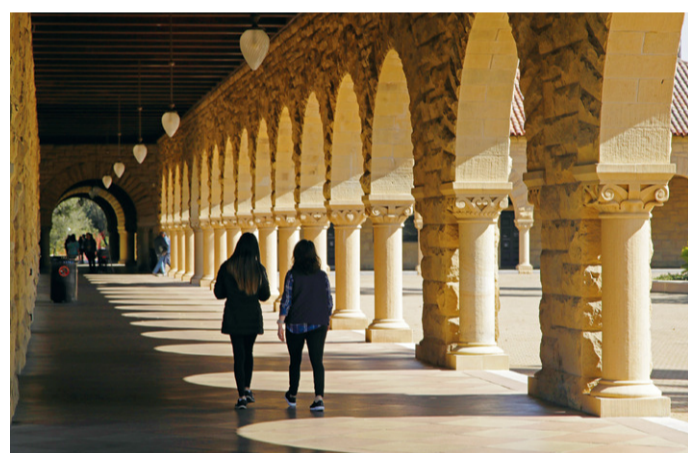
since its inception in June. The Post has contacted the bureau for figures on the number of applications received for the scheme.

For those seeking to qualify for visa-free travel in the arts and culture sectors, overseas professionals must receive an invitation from the Culture, Sports and Tourism Bureau, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, the Arts Development Council or the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority.

Activities sponsored or supported by host groups, but which they did not organise, are excluded from the scheme.

But legislator Kenneth Fok Kai-kong earlier wrote to Secretary for Culture, Sports and Tourism Kevin Yeung Yun-hung and suggested the list of host organisations include nine of the city's major performing arts groups, including the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra, Hong Kong Repertory Theatre and the Hong Kong Ballet.

"The exchange of talent is also crucial as Beijing supports Hong Kong in becoming a centre for arts and cultural dialogue between China and the world... I hope that the bureau can consider the actual needs of the art groups, and include them as host bodies," he wrote.



The Ivy League Stanford University is still a popular choice. Photo: AP

SPACE

Chinese scientists join global satellite team to study threats

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Chinese space scientists are teaming up with researchers from around the world to develop shoebox-size satellites to study big threats to the planet, from climate change to cosmic radiation.

More than a dozen countries, including the United States, China, Russia and Brazil, will help build the satellite networks to collect and share data.

Daniel Baker from the University of Colorado Boulder in the US, said no country could – or should – go it alone when it came to such existential problems. "I'm excited that we not only get to do basic science but also address issues that are of real consequence to humans," he said.

Baker, who is leading the effort, said he expected some of the satellites to be in orbit by 2025.

The satellites will be grouped in constellations to give scientists a bigger picture by combining data rather than relying on the single-point observations of missions in the past.

"[The previous approach] led to uncertainty and ambiguity about whether the things we measure at that one particular point represent the characteristics of the whole system," Baker said, adding that the project was possible thanks to advances in small-satellite technology and low-cost launches.

Each satellite will weigh as little as a few kilograms, and have two or three instruments on board. They will be a simple design to ensure they are easy to build and use to process data.

Baker said small satellites would not only revolutionise the way space science was conducted for major space nations, but also expand capacity for emerging players in areas such as South America and Africa.

The project is organised by the Committee on Space Research (Cospar) in Paris, an organisation formed in 1958 and open to all countries.

"Cospar provides a neutral platform for countries to work together in difficult geopolitical situations," said Wu Ji, a Beijing-based senior space scientist and member of the Cospar task group for the project.

Wu heads the development of a constellation to study radiation zones known as the Van Allen belts, which contain energetic particles that are a danger to spacecraft and astronauts operating above the Earth's atmosphere.

We not only get to do basic science but also address issues of real consequence to humans

DANIEL BAKER, UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO

Originally from the sun and deep universe, these particles are trapped by the Earth's magnetic field in doughnut-shaped regions at high altitudes, and change depending on the sun's activities.

Wu said a dozen or more small satellites would be sent to measure particles and magnetic fields, and how they varied with space and time. He said scientists from China, the US, Japan, Russia, Brazil and Finland had shown interest in contributing.

A second constellation will focus on the middle atmosphere to detect how the elements of the global atmospheric system – such as ozone – change in real time. And a third network will look at the ionosphere, a layer in the

upper atmosphere that can be directly affected by powerful energy outbursts of the sun, knocking out technology from GPS systems to power grids.

Other contributions could come from Britain, Egypt, the Czech Republic, South Korea, Spain, Israel and India, according to the task group's website. China has offered to launch some of the satellites from an ocean platform in international waters.

Amal Chandran, deputy chair of the Cospar task group and former director of the Satellite Research Centre at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, said the city state was interested in the scientific aims of the project and could act as a bridge between countries.

"As a neutral country which has excellent relations with countries in the West and East, Singapore is in a position to facilitate collaboration and the joint development of spacecraft, spacecraft-launch vehicle integration and so on," Chandran said.

He said one challenge for the project was gaining funding from government agencies and making it a truly international effort.

There are also political hurdles. For example, the US' International Traffic in Arms Regulations forbid any satellite with parts built in the US being launched on a Chinese rocket.

"We are hoping to make the argument that these satellites are scientific activities which are beneficial to the world science community, and there is no reason to treat them as sensitive technologies," Baker said.

Roger Bonnet, former director of the European Space Agency's scientific programme, said he hoped that Cospar would again "help with the redirection of international space science opportunities in the context of war".

"After all, science is better than war," Bonnet said.

U.S.-CHINA TENSIONS

Biden in 'geopolitical minefield' on vow to defend Taiwan

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US President Joe Biden stepped into a geopolitical minefield over Taiwan independence last week, analysts say, amid uncertainties over his planned in-person meeting with President Xi Jinping this autumn.

In an interview aired last week, Biden said that unlike the case with Ukraine, he was ready to defend Taiwan militarily against "an unprecedented attack" from mainland China, which observers saw as a shift away from decades of US ambiguity.

In another comment on the fate of the self-ruled island, Biden also told CBS' *60 Minutes* that while his administration was not encouraging any moves, "Taiwan makes their own judgments about their independence" and "that's their decision".

Although the White House was quick to clarify that the United States policy on Taiwan, known as strategic ambiguity, had not changed, Beijing lodged an official protest over Biden's comments, the fourth time since August 2021 that he had vowed to defend the island.

"If the previous three times [Biden] said it were 'gaffes', it is clear now that he meant what he said," said Zhiqun Zhu, a professor of international relations at Bucknell University.

"It shows that the Biden administration is trying to move from strategic ambiguity to strategic clarity on the Taiwan issue. We already see the US has been upgrading relations with Taiwan in recent years, and both Congress

and the White House are moving in that direction."

Secretary of State Antony Blinken defended Biden's comments and insisted "there has been no change" to the US policy of only recognising Beijing, and he voiced opposition to "unilateral changes to the status quo" by either side, according to the State Department.

But Sourabh Gupta, a senior fellow at the Institute for China-America Studies in Washington, said the independence issue was "an absolute minefield to wade into".

"And it places him [Biden] even further away from official US policy which is to 'not support' Taiwanese independence," he said.

If strategic ambiguity on the defence of Taiwan gave way to strategic clarity, according to Gupta, "the US position on the unsettled legal status of Taiwan will also in most likelihood change" in the event of an unprovoked and unprecedented inva-

sion of Taiwan. "Ambiguity for ambiguity and clarity for clarity. But it takes an exceptionally brave man or an exceptionally reckless man to take a theoretical walk into this Taiwan independence minefield," he said.

He added that Washington's decades-old "strategic ambiguity" was becoming less ambiguous, especially with the last two administrations relentlessly challenging the principle the US "does not challenge the position" that "there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China".

Gupta said he believed Biden's unusually harsh remarks on Taiwan were partly related to the situation in Ukraine, which dominated his United Nations General Assembly speech last week.

"In a year in which peace and security has been utterly shredded, Biden is using the [UN] session as a teachable moment to tell a great power adversary that the disturbance of peace and security in the Indo-Pacific will doubtlessly invite a telling American

response. Draping himself in the flag as the protector of peace, security and deterrence in the multilateral system can only be win-win in Biden's calculus, as well as in the calculus of many member states, big and small."

Former US State Department official and China specialist Jessica Chen Weiss questioned Biden's combination of pledging to fight while leaving decisions about independence to Taiwan, which amounted to "an unconditional US defence commitment" and "blank check" for the island.

"Such comments will do more to feed Beijing's sense of urgency than they will bolster deterrence. And Biden's comments risk emboldening those on Taiwan who seek to change the status quo by pursuing steps towards de jure independence, permanent separation or US diplomatic recognition," Weiss said.

Although Biden's remarks have dimmed hopes about the easing of cross-strait tensions any time soon, observers believed the planned Xi-Biden summit in November on the sidelines of either the Group of 20 summit in Bali, Indonesia, or the Asia-Pacific Economic Conference forum in Bangkok, Thailand, would not be affected.

Philippe Le Corre, a non-resident fellow in the Europe and Asia programmes at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said the lack of communication between the two governments was worrying.

"Still, everyone I know in Washington wants to avoid an armed conflict and therefore is recommending Taiwan to keep the status quo," he said.



Joe Biden and Xi Jinping speak via video link last November. The two presidents are expected to meet in person this autumn. Photo: AFP