



# EVOLUTION AND OPPORTUNITY IN OVERSEAS STUDY: **UPDATE SPRING 2023**

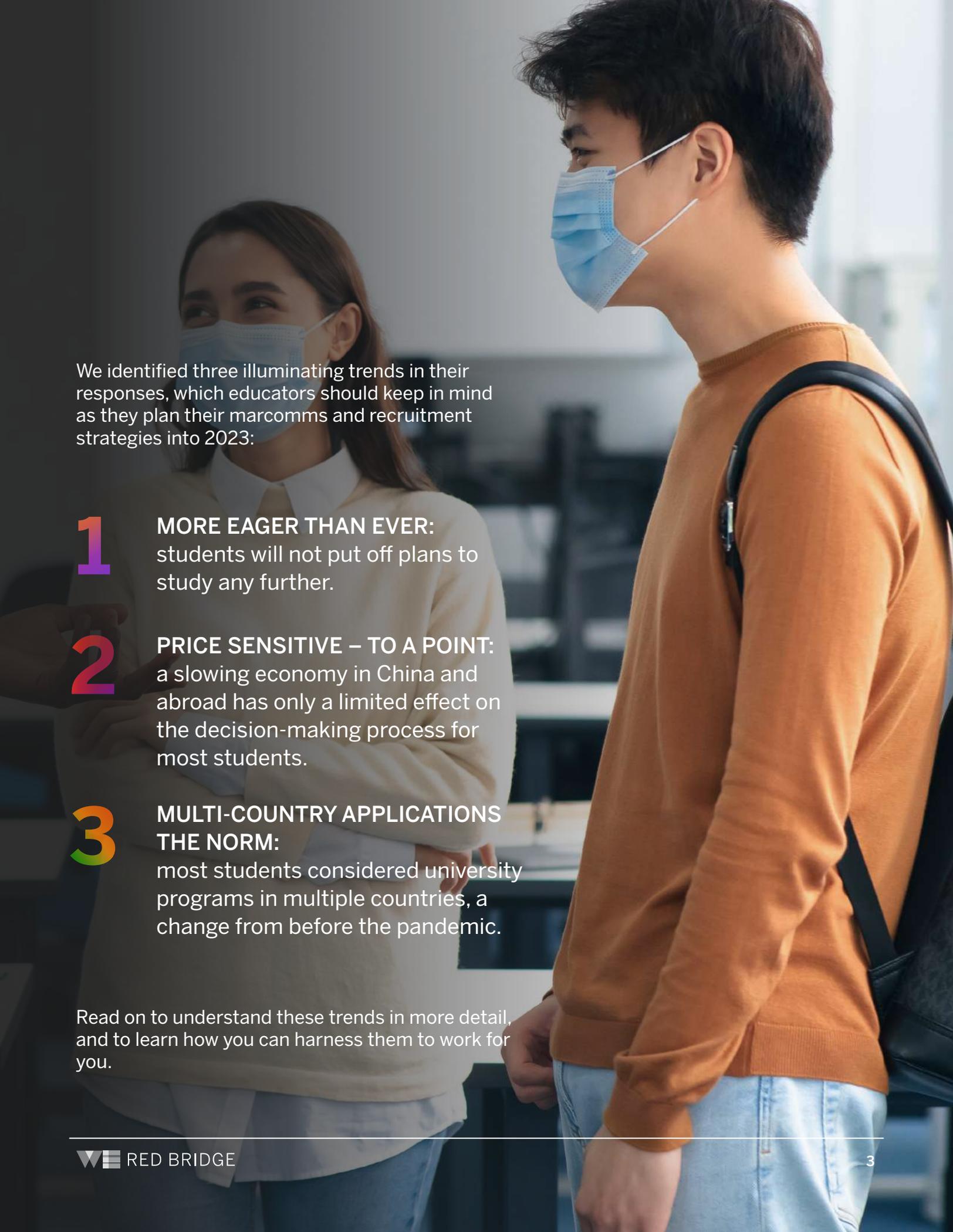
Compiled by WE Red Bridge, Shanghai  
March 2023



# INTRO

To spend 2022 in China was to experience whiplash, as a blur of severe lockdowns, makeshift quarantine centers, health codes, and PCR tests suddenly gave way to an avalanche of COVID infections and, in the blink of an eye, a quick return to normal life. In the first quarter of 2023, with flights beginning to return and masks less and less common, we felt the time was right to revisit how students are feeling about studying abroad as an update to our whitepaper published around the end of the zero-COVID policy in November.

While quantitative data on applications to overseas universities are still forthcoming, in December 2022 and January 2023, we checked in with 10 students from around China who are either planning to study abroad, have already been accepted at a university, or have already begun their course to understand how they are thinking about study abroad in light of all of the changes of the past few months.



We identified three illuminating trends in their responses, which educators should keep in mind as they plan their marcomms and recruitment strategies into 2023:

1

**MORE EAGER THAN EVER:**

students will not put off plans to study any further.

2

**PRICE SENSITIVE – TO A POINT:**

a slowing economy in China and abroad has only a limited effect on the decision-making process for most students.

3

**MULTI-COUNTRY APPLICATIONS THE NORM:**

most students considered university programs in multiple countries, a change from before the pandemic.

Read on to understand these trends in more detail, and to learn how you can harness them to work for you.

## MORE EAGER THAN EVER

With the lockdowns and zero-COVID policy of 2022 in the rearview mirror, Chinese students are enthusiastic about resuming their plans to study abroad. Many students postponed study abroad plans during the pandemic, working longer than they had originally intended or finding other means to occupy themselves in China as they waited for pandemic-related restrictions to lift or abate.

No longer: many of the students we spoke with indicated that they had formulated plans years ahead of the pandemic and nothing would prevent them from realizing their study abroad dreams. Even if they needed to accept their second choice of program or had to go to a less desirable city or country, they would not be dissuaded from studying abroad.

“

*I decided to go abroad when Shanghai locked down. [...] Even after the end of zero covid in December, I was still unhappy here. I'm looking forward to starting my program.*

”



– Male, 25, JD in the US

“

*Originally I planned to study abroad in 2021, but at that time many classes were being held online due to the pandemic. I held back a couple of years so that I could avoid online classes.*

”



– Male, 27, Masters program in the US

“

*I've wanted to study abroad for about 10 years, ever since I was in high school. In 2022, I'm not worried about the threat of online courses or COVID, so I will definitely go this year.*

”



– Male, 21, Masters program in the UK

““

*I'll definitely consider cost efficiency in choosing a university. The economy in Central China [where I'm from] has worsened.*

””



–Female, 32, MBA program in the US

““

*For me, the overall macroeconomic picture is a push factor. I did a comparison and most universities are more or less the same cost. I checked with my parents, and they said the money was already ready.*

””



–Female, 22, Masters program in the UK

““

*The economy strengthened my resolve to go. China's economy is bad, so lots of people [that I know] have decided to study abroad.*

””



–Male, 29, MBA program in the US

## PRICE SENSITIVE – TO A POINT

The decision to study abroad is never taken lightly or in isolation, and how to pay for it is always one of the biggest considerations, no matter the situation. China's economic growth in the last year was significantly down from previous years, and while the first few months of 2023 show encouraging signs in parts of the economy, analysts are unsure about its prospects long term.

Yet from the interviews we conducted, the slowing Chinese economy is not a greater factor in deciding if or where to study than it ever was. Some families are more price sensitive and others less so, however for students looking to study abroad in the coming few years, the money has mostly already been set aside and thus, while a great deal on education would be welcome, they said it would not materially affect their decision making process. Indeed, one student said the slowing economy actually encouraged her to study abroad earlier rather than to postpone it.

## MULTI-COUNTRY APPLICATIONS THE NORM

Possibly the greatest enduring legacy of the pandemic is the acceleration of the trend of multi-country applications. For many years, most students would first decide on a country in which to study, then on a university, and finally on a program. Yet most of the students we spoke to had considered the university program at the beginning, and then applied to similar programs across multiple countries.

One of the biggest losers over the course of the pandemic years was the United States, which many students said they felt was unsafe and chaotic. UK and Singapore ranked highly in terms of preference. Yet country-level considerations were just one factor the students we spoke to had considered, with others including the quality of the education and the rankings of individual universities and programs.

“

*I looked at programs in the UK and US. US is a bit more advanced [in the programs I want to study], but I am considering both.*

”



– Female, 23, PhD program in the US

“

*My family wanted me to go to Hong Kong as it's closer to home, but I looked at programs in the UK and Japan too. I'm not interested in Australia or the US because I want a one-year program. But for me, the offer I get is most important, not destination.*

”



– Male, 27, Masters program in the US

“

*I'm considering programs in the US and Singapore. Singapore is nearby and the tuition is better, but my boyfriend and his family are all in California.*

”



– Female, 26,  
Masters program in the US

“

*The US is unsafe. [...] Hong Kong is unstable, but the UK has good health care. You can just search all of this on RED, it's all there.*

”



– Female, 22,  
Masters program in the UK

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

### **1 Universities should brace for an influx in Chinese applications in 2023 and 2024 due to pent-up demand.**

While students continued to travel during the pandemic, our interviews reveal that many students did in fact postpone plans – but they will not postpone them further.

### **2 Focus on the strengths of individual programs to stand out in a globalized world.**

Chinese students are comparing programs in their chosen courses of study on a global level. Your competitors may be in a different country, not down the street – so to stand out, you must focus on the quality and rankings of your best programs.

### **3 Make the most of your economic advantage.**

While China's slowing economy is not the most important factor students are considering in studying abroad, it is still a factor. A scholarship they might be able to access, or possibly data around low cost of living, or even figures on average starting salaries, are all useful data points students will take into consideration as they decide where to study.

## HOW WE CAN HELP

WE Red Bridge has over ten years of experience working with clients across the education industry in China, including overseas universities, onshore international schools, testing organizations and associations, vocational training, and more.

WE Red Bridge is uniquely positioned to build narratives that resonate with Chinese students, their parents and agents, creating and deploying storylines strategically across online and offline platforms to reach target audiences.

Our services range from community and influencer management for WeChat, Weibo, RED, to bespoke integrated strategies and media engagement planning and execution.

Get in touch to learn more.

### KIT MENTION

Group Account Director, Corporate

✉ [kit@we-redbridge.com](mailto:kit@we-redbridge.com)

🗨 [kitmention](#)