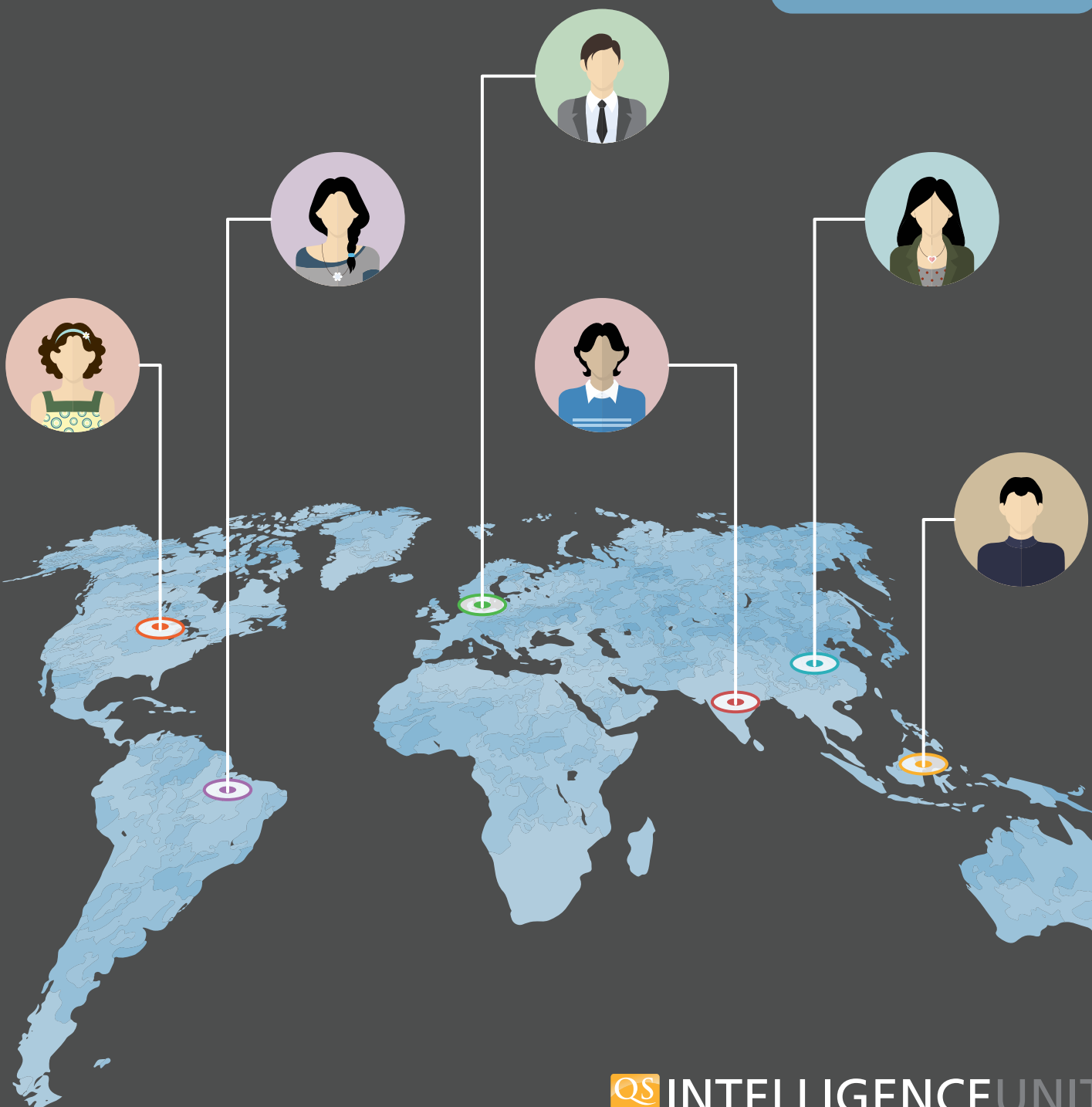


# What Matters to International Students?

GLOBAL  
OVERVIEW



### **Dasha Karzunina**

As International Research Liaison in the QS Intelligence Unit, Dasha combines a largely public-facing role with extensive involvement in the unit's research, analysis and rankings delivery. She specialises in qualitative research, having run focus groups with prospective international students from all over the world. Leading on key partner relationships, she regularly liaises with university officials and presents at higher education conferences. Coming from a student leadership background, Dasha represented the academic interests of over 30,000 students in one of the biggest Students' Unions in the UK. During her time as Education Officer, she led a series of insight projects into student experience and campaigned for universities to improve their offering.

### **Laura Bridgestock**

Part of the QS Digital Solutions team, Laura Bridgestock is the editor of *TopUniversities.com*, the student-focused platform on which the QS World University Rankings® is published. Attracting just under 30 million unique visitors in 2015, the site is one of the world's most-visited resources for prospective students. As well as focusing on the continued development of QS's online resources for students, Laura also contributes to the company's work in providing insights for the higher education sector, including reports on student motivations and priorities, online behaviour and mobility trends.

### **Georgia Philippou**

Graphic designer Georgia Philippou also works within the QS Digital Solutions team, creating innovative infographics and visualisations based on QS's research and rankings. Her work is featured on *TopUniversities.com* and *TopMBA.com*, and across the company's social media channels. Georgia is the lead designer for a range of print and online publications, including a popular range of guides for prospective students, as well as market research reports for higher education professionals.

## WHAT MATTERS TO INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS?

### Global Overview

The number of foreign tertiary students enrolled worldwide increased by 50% between 2005 and 2012, with the total number estimated to have surpassed five million in 2015. As universities compete to attract more of these mobile students, insights into international students' choices and motivations are in high demand. Although it is well-known that China and India are the largest providers of international students worldwide, countries including the US, France, and Malaysia are also in the top 10 according to UNESCO. At the same time, countries such as Indonesia and many Latin American nations are viewed with growing interest as emerging markets, with large young populations and government-funded scholarship programmes.

At QS, we engage with millions of current and prospective students all over the world each year. Our most-used resource, the QS World University Rankings®, is created primarily for the information and interest of prospective students, and it's important to us that we continue to provide materials in line with student needs. With this in mind, we initiated a series of focus groups with prospective students in a variety of locations, including China, India, the US, UK, France, Italy, Russia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico and Colombia. Our qualitative research was accompanied by a short survey, the QS Student Rankings Survey, exploring the same issues in a quantitative format. Having run a total

of almost 60 focus groups and collected over 1,800 survey responses, we are able to present a series of region-specific reports, alongside this global overview.

The series also draws on the QS World Grad School Tour Applicant Survey, a global survey which has been running for almost 10 years, gathering more than 35,000 responses in the last three years from over 150 countries. In compiling the current report, we considered trends reflected in this survey, alongside our on-the-ground research in 11 countries.

Our aim in this report is to explore the shared motivations and priorities of prospective students around the world, as well as significant regional differences, through the following themes:

- **Motivations for studying abroad:** Why internationally, why at an internationally known university, why in a particular location?
- **Employability as a key driver for international mobility:** Underlying contexts and concerns, beliefs about how to become more 'employable', impact on choice of university.
- **Rankings & other information sources:** How and why rankings are used, growing importance of peer reviews, varying sources and influences depending on location.



Almost 60 focus groups  
with ~300 participants



11 countries



15 cities



19 events



Over 1,800  
survey responses

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The project highlights key underlying motivations and priorities shared by prospective international students worldwide – particularly relating to employability – alongside significant differences in their approach to choosing a location, institution and programme. Key trends identified include the following:

### *Why study abroad?*

- Students worldwide believe studying abroad will improve their employment prospects; this is a major shared motivation across all locations covered.
- For students in developing regions, international study is often valued as a chance to study at a more globally famous institution than would be possible locally; experience a more practical and/or interactive teaching style; and access more specialised or established programmes.
- Aside from anticipated professional gains, students worldwide are strongly motivated by opportunities for personal development through immersion in a new culture and membership of a diverse student community.

### *Employability, employability, employability*

- Applicants are increasingly seeking opportunities to develop interpersonal skills and leadership qualities at university, in order to become more employable.
- Those in China and India are especially keen to improve their experience in communicating internationally, while US students are highly focussed on forging professional connections.
- Students from developing parts of the world often show an entrepreneurial streak, with Indian and Latin American students particularly interested in starting and running their own businesses.

### *How and why do students use rankings?*

- A majority of applicants prefer subject-specific rankings. Most believe there is a correlation between ranking position and reputation – and therefore see rankings as a way to gauge future employment prospects.
- Chinese and South East Asian students are especially likely to feel pressure to attend a highly ranked university in order to secure a graduate job, while those in the US perceive a correlation between rankings and networking opportunities.
- While many students associate rankings with quality of education, they also understand that rankings provide only a partial picture, to be supplemented by other sources.

### *Other information sources*

- Applicants feel most confident about choosing a university abroad when able to access multiple sources of information, which add up to provide a consistent picture.
- Demand for ‘peer reviews’ appears to be growing globally. Those in the US are least likely to seek out the opinions of others, while Indian applicants are most proactive in reaching out to gain peer feedback.
- Worldwide, students report frustrating experiences with university websites, which can result in a negative impression of the institution and/or dropped applications. Positive encounters with universities are most often associated with a personal approach, whether face to face or remotely.

## WHY STUDY ABROAD?

### BENEFITS OF STUDYING AT AN INTERNATIONALLY RECOGNISED UNIVERSITY



Source: QS Student Rankings Survey 2015

There are, of course, a huge number of different factors motivating students to study internationally. During our focus groups, many of the same motivations were named by students in each location, but often with different prioritisations and perspectives. The clearest distinction to be made is between students in developing and developed parts of the world. Unsurprisingly, those in the first category tended to focus more on the push factors involved, talking about what they felt to be missing or still developing in their own higher education system. Those in the US and Western Europe, on the other hand, placed a greater emphasis on the additional benefits to be gained from studying abroad, above and beyond existing opportunities at home.

This trend can be seen in the chart above, which shows that surveyed students in developing regions are more likely to perceive international study as an opportunity to access a better quality of education. Those in the US, on the other hand, place greatest value on the extended networking opportunities opened up by international

study, while in Europe, improved employment prospects are the strongest pull.

#### Quality of education

The desire to access a higher quality of education – frequently expressed by the students we engaged with in Latin America, South East Asia, India, China and Russia – was often very closely associated with the communication style and experience of teaching staff, as well as levels of engagement and interaction. While conceding that assessing teaching quality beforehand was no easy task, many prospective students had invested significant time in researching the work and profiles of faculty members at shortlisted universities. For example, Indian applicant Vivesh, keen to study an MA in Music at the University of California, Berkeley, told us: “I really want to learn from very good teachers. So I’ve been following the journals of some of the professors from Berkeley, and that helped a lot. The teaching they are

*doing there is very different from the teaching they do here [...] For me the teachers are the most important thing."*

For many of Vivesh's peers in India, teaching quality was closely associated with a practical and application-focused approach to teaching and learning, which they felt to be lacking in their own country. For instance, Rohit, applying for a master's in finance, said: *"In India you cannot learn and apply new things at the same time. You can either learn or apply."* Similarly, master's in management applicant Gaurav explained, *"Teaching is important because in India we only learn theoretical but not practical."*

Similar perspectives were expressed by applicants in China, who were likewise keen to access more application-focused and engaging teaching styles. This was expressed, for example, by Shu, who was interested in applying for a master's in human resources: *"In most of the Chinese universities the teachers are more likely to teach students the theoretical knowledge instead of practicing. So the students in a very boring class – often you will see they are sleeping [...] I want to apply for schools abroad and see how foreign students attend class, and the atmosphere they are in."*

### **Research opportunities**

The majority of students involved in this study were interested in applying for postgraduate-level studies, including both master's and PhD programmes – meaning research opportunities were often high on their agenda. Again, those in developing parts of the world often approached this from the perspective of what they felt to be lacking in their own country, and the greater opportunities available elsewhere.

For Chinese PhD applicant Cheng, for instance, studying abroad – especially in the US – represented the opportunity to access more advanced research facilities, expanding the scope of what he could hope to achieve: *"The reason I want to go abroad is that my laboratory is very poor and I have to work, work for a long time to get good research, so I think the laboratories in the United States*

*are much better than my laboratories. The instruments, the teachers, and the atmosphere of the research – that can give me broader horizons."*

Similar motivations were expressed by many of the Colombian and Mexican students we spoke to, such as Mexican student Ricardo, interested in pursuing a master's and PhD in biological sciences: *"I'm interested in studying elsewhere because normally here we don't get so many opportunities for basic research. Abroad there are a lot of technologies that are essential."*

*"My motivation is the freedom of research. We have a problem in my university that we don't get to research what we like, but I suspect it's different in other countries."*

Maria, Colombia

While many students – science-focused PhD applicants in particular – mentioned the importance of high-quality facilities and advanced technologies, others were also motivated by the prospect of having greater freedom to pursue their own research interests. This was a key issue for Colombian PhD applicant Maria: *"My motivation is the freedom of research. We have a problem in my university that we don't get to research what we like, but I suspect it's different in other countries."*

### **Specialisations & subject strengths**

For many students, a key motivation for studying abroad comes from the desire to access more specialised and established programmes in their chosen field. We found this to be a particularly prominent motivation for students in Mexico and Colombia, as well as a key concern for many in China, Malaysia, Indonesia and India.

In Colombia, for instance, prospective master's student Diana told us: *"I want to specify in communication design*

– here they don't teach that." Similarly, Mexican applicant Miguel told us: "My main target is to get knowledge about working with big data. At this moment in Mexico, there aren't many universities to offer this master's." In China, PhD applicant Tao explained: "For my major, anthropology, we call it a Western major, because it's come from outside. In China only a few universities have this department." A final example comes from Malaysian student Jacob, who was keen to study a master's degree in industrial psychology: "It's a relatively new area in Malaysia [...] People are not exposed to psychology here; in the UK I'll be in a more mature culture where they are well-practiced."

As these examples suggest, while students often felt that their own chosen subject was particularly unavailable or

under-established in their own country, this belief was in fact voiced across the full spectrum of academic areas – including sciences, arts and humanities, and in the business field.

On the more positive side, students often reformulated perceived limitations in terms of future opportunities, viewing international study as a way of contributing to the development of their own country. This was a particularly strong recurring theme in Mexico and Colombia, where it was often teamed with a social-entrepreneurial ethos (see page 15). In China as well, students were often aware of the opportunity to bring back lessons from other countries, and especially from the world's leading financial hubs, at what they felt to



## Case study

Name: Maria  
Location: Colombia

Maria is interested in studying theatre and/or languages abroad, most likely in Europe. She feels she could learn a lot from being exposed to the arts industry in a more developed country. She is also keen to meet new people and learn about different cultures. However, like many of her peers in Latin America, she is convinced she will be returning home after graduation.

In fact, one of her key motivations for studying abroad is her commitment to improving her own country: "I would personally love to live in a different country but I have a special bond with my own country because there are problems here, but you can also make a difference. There's a lot to do with theatre and visual arts in particular." She believes one of the main challenges Colombians face is the language barrier – the ability to

speak English, the lingua franca, confidently.

She uses the subject rankings to find out about her particular specialisation, as well as relying on word of mouth and the experience of other students: "You look at university and you look at the campus and what people have to say about the campus. Videos are especially good for this." Although Maria is especially looking to learn more about the programme, she is also concerned with tuition fees, living costs and the quality of the accommodation. The desire to study in a country that's best for her subject remains predominant, however: "I love universities in this country but when I think about my programme, it's not that strong. I wish I didn't have to choose between doing what I love and the reputation of the university."



be a pivotal point in their nation's development. Xiang, for instance, explained: *"There are many things we need to learn from the USA and UK, London and New York, to have more great advantages in the world of financial development."*

### **Improved professional & social status**

For students in the majority of countries we visited – notably excluding many of those in the US and Western Europe – studying abroad presents an opportunity to get a more internationally famous university on their CV than would be possible domestically. Along with opportunities to specialise and the benefits of international experience in itself, this is perceived as an effective way to stand out in a competitive graduate jobs market (explored in greater depth in pages 11-15).

For Chinese students in particular, the benefit of studying abroad is closely tied to institutional fame and prestige – particularly if they intend to return and compete for jobs in China. Statistics student Ye expressed this widespread concern: *"When I return to China I want my university to be more famous so that I can find a good job. They won't ask me what course I took, but they will ask me which university I'm from."* Many of the Chinese students we spoke to mentioned that their prioritisation would be likely to change if they intended to seek work elsewhere in the world; as master's in management applicant Neo said: *"If you want to come back to work in China, choose the ranking. If you decide to stay [abroad], choose the curriculum."*

Indian students, similarly aware of the challenges of standing out in their own national employment market, likewise perceive studying overseas as a way of differentiating themselves. Priyank, seeking a master's in manufacturing management, explained: *"Considering the country we live in [...] various domains get saturated after two to five years. You need to have the kind of education that separates you from the crowd, from millions of people. An international degree will do that."* These motivations are explored in greater detail on page 12.

### **Personal development**

Anticipating an intensive period of personal challenge and growth, prospective international students worldwide are united in being highly motivated by opportunities for personal development. They expect studying abroad to fast-track their development in all kinds of ways, helping them to become more confident and independent, better communicators, and versed in understanding alternative ways of living and thinking.

Malaysian student Marie Eugene expressed a widespread belief about the broadened horizons to be gained from studying abroad: *"International study gives you a free flow of thoughts, allowing you to think 'out of the box' about a wide range of topics. In Malaysia people studying locally have limited perspectives, and people abroad tend to be engaged in more programmes of study, which extends their knowledge and perspectives."*

*"International study gives you a free flow of thoughts, allowing you to think 'out of the box' about a wide range of topics..."*

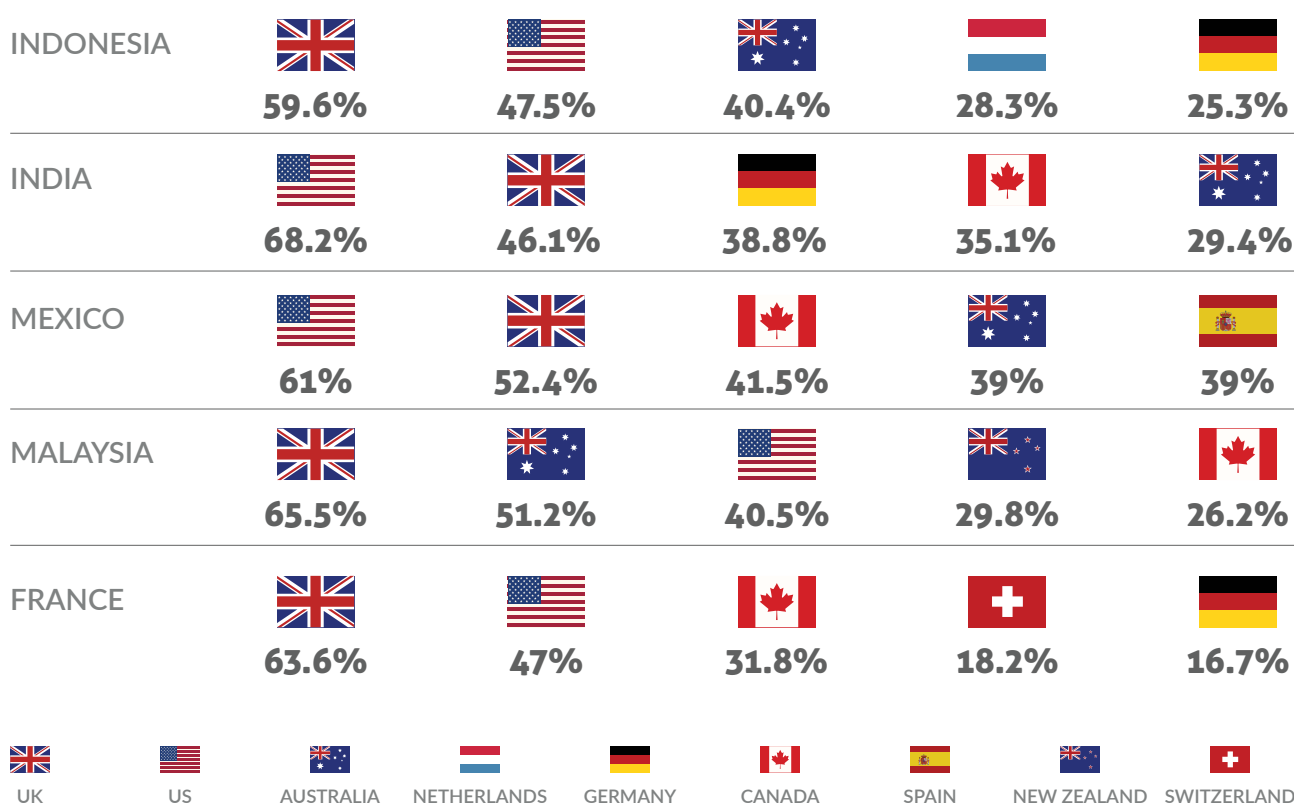
Marie Eugene, Malaysia

Independence emerged as an especially high priority for many of the Indian students we spoke to – in terms of both the academic and personal spheres. These dual goals were expressed by prospective economics student Hariharan: *"I'm hoping to be more independent through living abroad as so far I've only lived in Bombay with the parents [...] I want to do more self-study. I want to be able to take the initiative."*

Many students also anticipate becoming more confident, and international, communicators. For some applicants, this includes the opportunity to improve their proficiency in a second language. More broadly, many are simply



## TARGET STUDY DESTINATIONS: VARIATION BY COUNTRY



Source: QS World Grad School Tour Applicant Survey 2015

keen to gain confidence in conversing and connecting with those from other cultures and contexts. This was voiced by Chinese applicant Kaitlin: *"I think international experience will really help me a lot, whether I go abroad for further study or live in a foreign country, or I come back after graduation; I think it can make me more outgoing and know how to communicate with people of different backgrounds."* A key point of convergence between students in developing and developed countries, this same perspective was expressed by those in the US and Western Europe. US student Morissa, for example, said she felt studying abroad would make her a *"better person"*, helping to break down *"prejudgement"* and improve her *"understanding of the world"*.

Similarly, Mexican student Sergio, applying for a master's in environmental technology, emphasised social skills among the main benefits of studying abroad. Like many others, he linked these personal gains to a professional context: *"When I see me studying in Germany or Belgium, or wherever, I see me becoming an easy going person, more friendly. [...] That helps for finding a good job. [...] It's not good that you are a genius in something but you don't have friends – you are not going to be able to do anything."*

As Sergio's example illustrates, many prospective students view even the social side of the experience at least partly in terms of their longer-term career expectations. They're aware that employers increasingly value skills that can be developed through international

study – including adaptability, cultural awareness and intercultural communication. As a result, the majority feel that studying abroad will in itself – regardless of their university's profile – enable them to impress future employers. As prospective UK medical student Linessa put this: *“Going to a university like Oxford shows you're ambitious, but studying abroad shows your initiative and that you are willing to do things differently.”*

### **Appeal of a specific location**

An additional set of motivations relates to students' desire to experience life in a particular part of the world. For many, this is grounded in a long-established interest, while for others it stems from a more recent discovery. Students often mention feeling a sense of personal connection with a place, through family members, friends, and/or a personal visit. Some students mentioned wanting to study in a country from which they claimed ancestry, travelling to a location in which they already had friends or relatives, and/or returning to study in a country they had previously visited – often as part of an exchange programme earlier in their studies. Broader cultural and historic links between nations also exert an influence. In Indonesia, for example, the Netherlands remains a particularly popular destination, reflecting the

two nations' longstanding ties (see chart on page 9).

Meanwhile the US and UK continue to see significant returns from the global reach of their cultural exports – including films, TV shows, literature and celebrities from various walks of life. Speaking about his desire to study in the US, for instance, Chinese applicant Xiang mentioned the many popular American TV series he has watched, as well as the impact of books and images: *“You read it, you know it, so you want to see it.”* In Italy, Valeria spoke about her long-standing fascination with English culture: *“I've loved England since I was a child, so it's a personal, emotional and cultural connection.”*

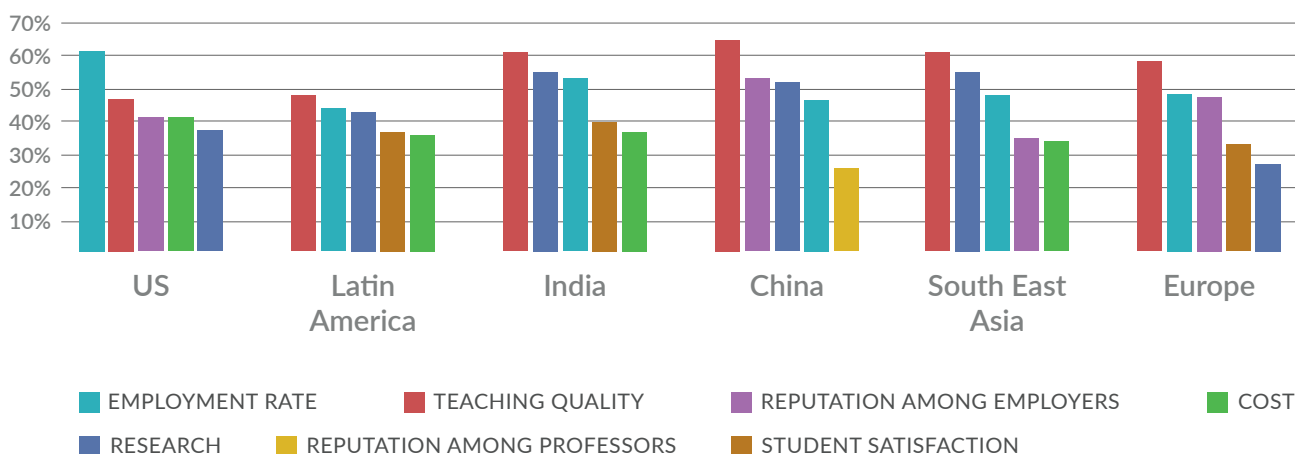
Others explained their fascination with a particular location in terms of more recent technologies and media. Mexican student Sergio, for example, explained his interest in studying in either Auckland or Ghent as originating in the Snapchat Stories created for each city as part of the app's 'Life' series. At the same time, he expressed a belief, shared by many prospective international students, that certain countries are more advanced in particular fields of study: *“I suppose we all understand that the USA is best in business, Germany in technology – or, in my case, Australia in environmental studies.”*

## HIGHLIGHTS:

- Students worldwide believe studying abroad will improve their employment prospects; this is a major shared motivation across all locations covered by the project.
- For students in developing regions, international study is often valued as a chance to study at a more globally famous institution than would be possible locally; experience a more practical and/or interactive teaching style; and access more specialised or established programmes.
- Aside from anticipated professional gains, students worldwide are strongly motivated by opportunities for personal development through immersion in a new culture and membership of a diverse student community.

## EMPLOYABILITY, EMPLOYABILITY, EMPLOYABILITY

### WHICH RANKINGS INDICATORS ARE MOST IMPORTANT TO YOU?



Source: QS Student Rankings Survey 2015

In the midst of the many different factors influencing prospective students, employability is the one overarching theme, uniting students across the globe. This is often one of the key drivers underlying the decision to pursue further levels of study, and to do so abroad. At the same time, approaches to improving and assessing employment prospects differ, depending on students' cultural and personal backgrounds, as well as national economic and demographic contexts.

The aim of enhancing their career prospects underlies many of the more immediate aims expressed by the students we engaged with, including the desire for more practical programmes, the urge to develop and strengthen a range of soft skills, and wanting to build a professional network. For example, Indonesian applicant Jidra, who had been encouraged to study a master's overseas by his current company, told us: "What companies look for is not just the grades but what

they think you have. They want to see what you can offer after you graduate and how you can benefit the company. Your contacts are also important."

*"People skills are, according to me, the most important. More important than any technical skill."*

Shubham, India

Many students showed a high level of awareness of the importance of developing soft skills, viewing international study as an effective way to achieve this. Indian applicant Shubham, for instance, felt that in at

least some sectors, the ability to communicate effectively was more important than anything else: *“People skills are, according to me, the most important. More important than any technical skill.”* He explained the value of studying abroad largely in terms of the opportunities provided to develop these communication skills, through living in an unfamiliar environment alongside students of many different backgrounds.

In some cases, the desire to meet employers’ needs can override more personal passions or interests. This was especially prominent in Indonesia and Malaysia, where students often expressed concerns that certain industries were declining, potentially leading to a shortage of work. Indonesian engineering graduate Chandra explained that he was looking to change fields in order to become more employable: *“I don’t want to end up in a situation where I can’t get a job and so feel I need a back-up plan and so am re-educating myself. Maybe consulting or a managerial position?”* Yasin, an international graduate in Malaysia, was also trying to predict the next best industry to work in: *“I cannot find a job here in Malaysia; I tried applying but had no luck. I found ecommerce interesting and discovered businesses will shift to this in the future.”*

*“I cannot find a job here in Malaysia; I tried applying but had no luck. I found ecommerce interesting and discovered businesses will shift to this in the future.”*

Yasin, Malaysia

### **The value of an international degree**

For those in particularly competitive graduate labour markets, studying abroad may be perceived not just as an appealing experience, but as an almost essential step towards a desired career path. The latter case was especially felt by the students we spoke to in China and India. As part of the world’s two largest populations,

with the number of graduates outpacing graduate-level job opportunities, applicants strongly felt the need to differentiate themselves in order to get the attention of employers. Indian applicant Priyanka put it this way: *“I am looking to do something that will give me an edge over things. That will give me a bang on the door.”*

*“Having an international degree attracts companies here in India; they will be able to hire you easier. In India, social status is very important. If you have it, everyone is with you; if you don’t, everyone abandons you.”*

Gaurav S., India

In both India and China, the improved professional standing conferred by an internationally famous university was often seen as being accompanied by a closely related upgrade in social status. Indian student Gaurav S. expressed this sense of the two-fold status boost provided by studying at an internationally known university: *“Having an international degree attracts companies here in India; they will be able to hire you easier. In India, social status is very important. If you have it, everyone is with you; if you don’t, everyone abandons you.”*

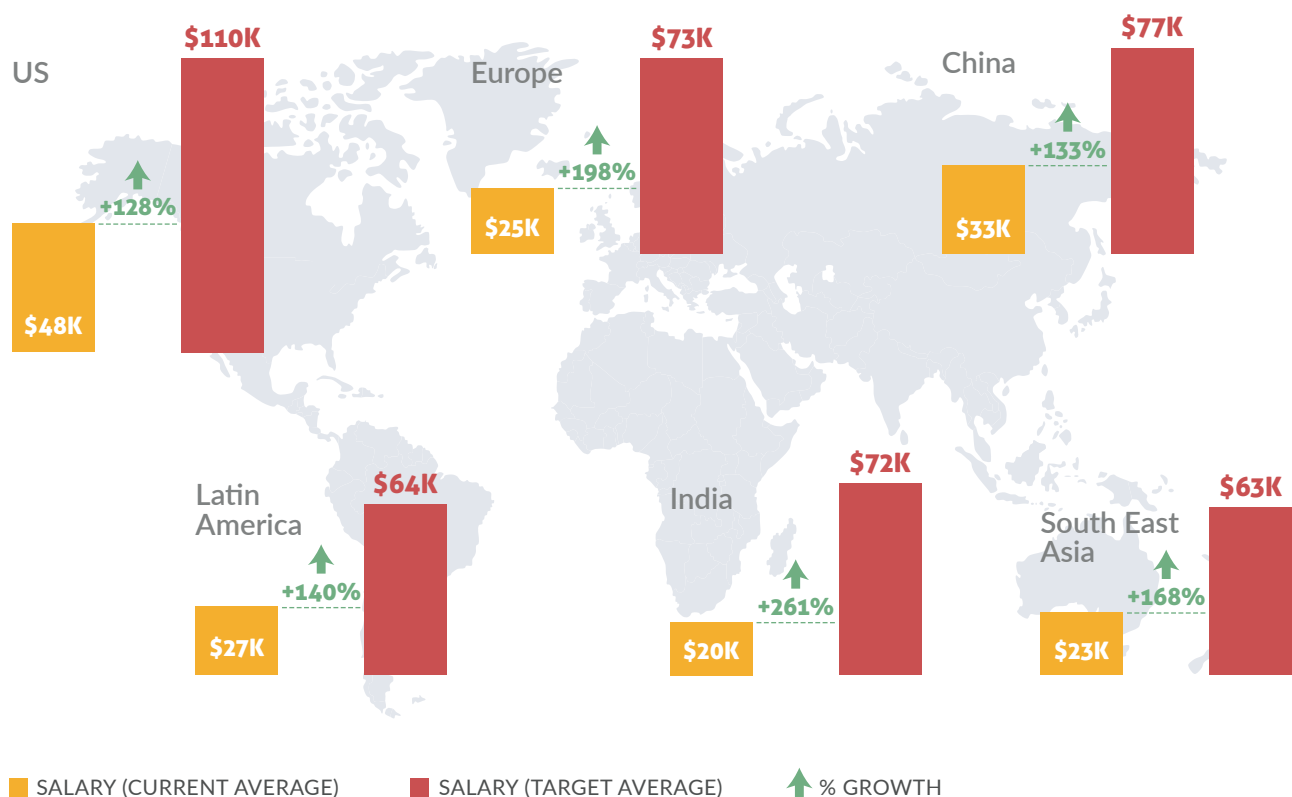
Similarly, students in China mentioned the draw of social prestige, though with a keener sense of the importance of studying at a particularly famous institution. Engineering graduate Dinna, considering an MBA, explained that the acquired status extends also to family members, providing an additional set of incentives to study at a very prestigious institution: *“For our parents, maybe they will put a lot of pressure on us. Like, you have to apply for this top university in the world, otherwise when I want to show off to my friends and colleagues, ‘Oh what kind of no-name university’ – they will feel ashamed.”*

While Chinese students were often concerned that even

studying abroad at a well-known university may not be sufficient to secure their desired job on returning to China, in Latin America we encountered the opposite anxiety. Students in both Mexico and Colombia expressed a belief that international study, especially to a high level and/or at a prestigious institution, could actually make them less employable in their own country – as they could be seen as overqualified for the roles available. Colombian applicant José, for instance, told us: “I think that if you go to a highly ranked university and come back to Colombia, you might struggle to get the job offer that you want because you will be overqualified. This happens a lot in Colombia.”

An additional incentive to study at a prestigious institution comes from the belief that famous universities will offer better networking opportunities. In the words of an American HR professional Shana: “It’s really all about what happens after you graduate, not about how well you do. Maybe medicine and law would be exceptions as you really have to show your skill there, but with something like business, it’s about getting those connections afterwards.” While students everywhere in the world mentioned the value of networking opportunities at university, this was a particularly high priority for those in the US, as shown in the chart on page 5.

### EXPECTED SALARY CHANGE AFTER COMPLETING A POSTGRADUATE DEGREE



Source: QS World Grad School Tour Applicant Survey 2015

### Is all employment good employment?

Students who are investing in studying abroad to improve their employment prospects do not just want to get a job; they want to find work that is relevant to their career ambitions and interests. With this in mind, many students expressed a desire for access to more detailed information about what graduates of an institution/programme go on to do. Italian student Anna, discussing the importance of employment rates as a measure of success, stated: *“Employment rate is important, especially for students to be getting work in relevant sectors, not just jobs!”* This was echoed by US student Cara, who summed up: *“Are they working at McDonalds, or are they working at McKenzie?”* – adding, *“You can really play with the statistics.”*

For some students, their chosen career path also played a significant role in determining their choice of study destination. Many are keen not only to study a specialised programme, but to do so in a setting which is particularly known for leadership in their field. In Colombia, for instance, electrical engineering student Daniel explained: *“The problem is, I chose a career which*

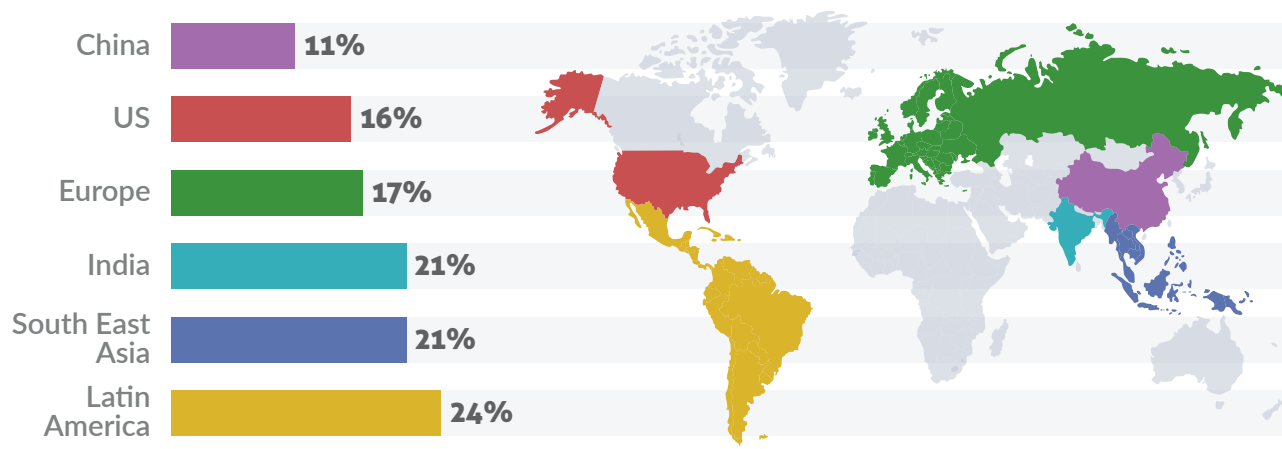
*isn't fit for Colombia yet as it's not a country that produces high tech, like Korea, so I have to move.”*

### Employment at university

Given their overall focus on employment and the pressure of getting a job soon after graduating, many applicants are anxious to gain work experience alongside their studies. We encountered a shared sense that relevant work experience has become a prerequisite for entry to many career paths, and widespread demand for universities to provide more assistance in helping students access internships and part-time work. Chinese student Zhiyi, when asked what would make him consider a university, answered: *“I really want to know if I can get an internship. So you have more confidence – like, I didn't pay for nothing.”*

Aside from internships, many students want their degree itself to have a practical orientation. They want to know that what they are learning will be useful, and they want opportunities to practice applying this knowledge. This is often cited as one of the distinguishing elements of better-quality education, and was a particularly common

## POSTGRADUATE APPLICANTS INTENDING TO BE RUNNING OWN BUSINESS IN 10 YEARS



Source: QS World Grad School Tour Applicant Survey 2015

motivation among Chinese, Indian and Russian students to study abroad. As Russian applicant Andrey shared: *“I’m attracted by the different style of teaching, less theory, more practice, and you stand a better chance of getting work experience.”*

*“Employment rate is important, especially for students to be getting work in relevant sectors, not just jobs!”*

Anna, Italy

### **Becoming an employer**

It turns out that the ‘E’ word stands not only for employability but for entrepreneurship as well, especially in India and Latin America. In India, we found many students were keen to join a tradition of running family businesses. For instance, Shubham explained: *“For me, why I plan to do this course, it’s actually quite dependent on my background. I’m from a business family, my father’s into textiles. So I’ve got that business acumen in me, and naturally I want to end up doing my own thing, become an entrepreneur.”*

In Mexico and Colombia, many students were driven to ‘give back’ to their respective countries, expressing a strong sense of national responsibility and pride. Colombian student Daniel, for instance, told us: *“I can’t leave the development of my country in the hands of others, so learning abroad is with a motivation to get back.”* Similarly, Mexican applicant Sabrina explained that her motivation for international study came from a desire to *“come back and to have even more tools to hire people and give them jobs, and to do something good for this country.”* These views were shared by many of their country-mates.

Many of the Chinese students we met were also interested in developing their business skills abroad, gaining an international perspective and improving their intercultural communication skills. Zhiyi, who already has his own business, told us: *“[Growing my business] requires that I communicate with foreigners [...] How to communicate with them, how to do this international communication, and how to organise people from different cultures, become key issues for my management skills.”* He believed he would become a better employer and manager by learning to communicate with people from different backgrounds, and he expected international study to provide this experience.

## **HIGHLIGHTS:**

- Applicants are increasingly seeking opportunities to develop interpersonal skills and leadership qualities at university, in order to become more employable.
- Those in China and India are especially keen to improve their experience in communicating internationally, while US students are highly focussed on forging professional connections.
- Students from developing parts of the world often show an entrepreneurial streak, with Indian and Latin American students particularly interested in starting and running their own businesses.

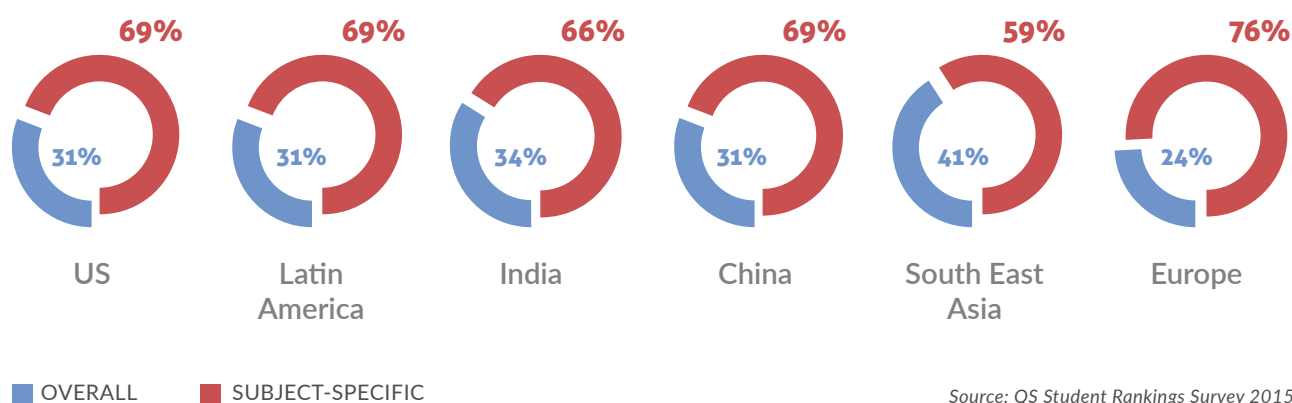


## HOW AND WHY DO STUDENTS USE RANKINGS?

We asked prospective international students not only whether they use university rankings, but how and why, to find out more about the role rankings play in their decision-making process. As the charts on pages 16-17 show, a majority of surveyed students prefer subject-specific to overall rankings. Yet while they value the more specialised approach at subject level, the opposite is the

case in terms of geographic range, with global rankings preferred over regional or national rankings – particularly when choosing a university abroad. Despite this overall agreement, attitudes to rankings differ significantly depending on students' location, background, chosen programme of study, and the industries they aspire to work in.

### DO YOU FIND SUBJECT-SPECIFIC OR OVERALL RANKINGS MORE USEFUL?



Source: QS Student Rankings Survey 2015

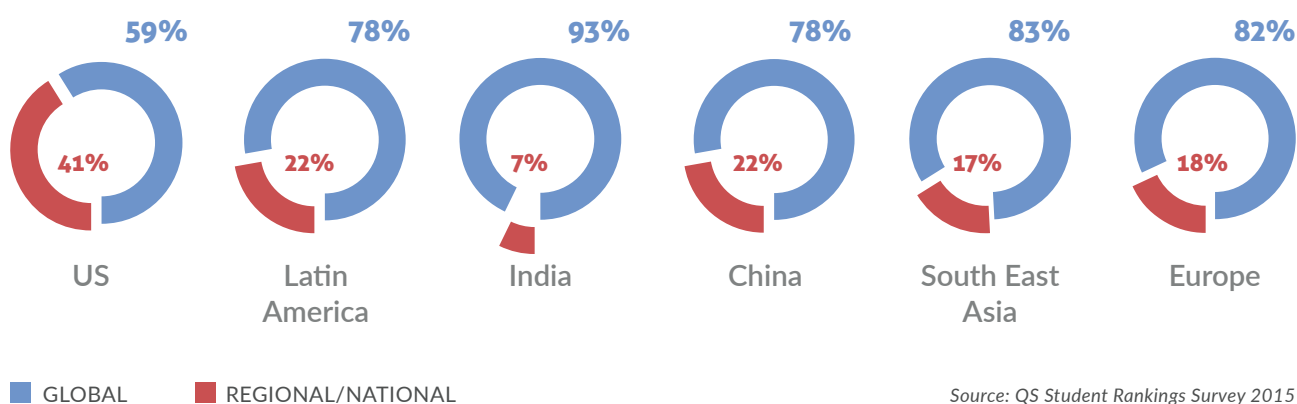
#### Value of subject rankings

Whether motivated to specialise in a particular area, gain practical experience, or have the freedom to develop their own personalised study plan, students around the world often said they would choose a lower-ranked university in order to get the curriculum right. However, they were divided on the question of whether a university's rank in a particular subject would be more important than the institution's overall reputation. Those on both sides of this argument tended to believe their chosen approach provided the best gauge of employer perspectives, while some felt that subject-specific rankings would be more

closely correlated with quality of education. In both cases, rankings were valued by students as a quick filter when sorting through the myriad of possible universities abroad.

In the most recent QS World Grad School Tour Applicant Survey, Chinese students rated overall and subject-specific reputation equally, as the two leading priorities when choosing an institution for a master's programme (as shown in the chart on page 19). This reflects the strong emphasis on institutional reputation in China, alongside Chinese students' widespread motivation to study their chosen subject in a highly developed setting (see pages 6-8).

## WHAT GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE OF RANKINGS DO YOU FIND MOST USEFUL?



The ultimate appeal of the subject rankings lies in students' desire for more granular comparisons; indeed, many expressed a desire for rankings comparing specific programmes and courses, rather than just subject areas. Students want to understand and assess the experience they are personally signing up for, on a particular course and in a particular department. This is one reason for the growing importance of peer reviews, particularly from current students or alumni who have studied the same programme and/or share the same background (see page 21 for more on this).

*"The most important indicators that I would use are career opportunities, quality of lectures, subjects and programmes offered."*

Ali, Malaysia

When we asked students what factors rankings should assess, many mentioned the quality and reputation of the various subjects on offer. Malaysian student Ali shared a commonly cited list of priorities: "The most important indicators that I would use are career opportunities, quality

of lectures, subjects and programmes offered." A number of students stressed that quality and reputation in their desired subject comes first. Italian applicant Sarah, for example, felt that the overall prestige of the university would not necessarily provide a reliable guide to her individual experience: "There are famous universities which are not the best in that subject."

*"If the institution is prominent, you are prominent by proxy."*

Aaron, US

### Rankings as a way to assess ROI

A majority of the applicants we spoke to agreed that rankings provide an important indication of future employment prospects; this perception was clearly reiterated by students in each location we visited. Even those with a more sceptical perspective on the value and reliability of rankings – especially common among students in the US and some parts of Europe – believe that employers are likely to be influenced by university

reputation, and that rankings provide a good gauge of this.

The basic assumption that rankings correlate with employment outcomes was expressed particularly directly by Russian applicant Arthur: *“Rankings must be the only way an employer can distinguish between two candidates with the same skills and experience.”* In other instances, students explained that they believed higher-ranked universities would not only be more likely to impress employers, but would also have stronger existing ties with industry. In the words of Indonesian master’s applicant Kevin: *“I checked the best ranked universities and I believe they can help you get better job opportunities after you graduate.”* Others – particularly, but certainly not only, in the US – spoke about the likelihood that higher-ranked universities would offer a better networking environment, as they would attract a high calibre of students and faculty members. In the words of US applicant Lawrence: *“I would go to a university where I could meet great people, not just the programme. This Ivy league school will provide you with those connections.”*

*“I believe that studying in a place where everyone is really hard working will challenge me and excite me. It will put some positive pressure on me.”*

Faizal, Malaysia

In China, students explained their especially strong focus on rankings by reference to the exceptionally tough competition for graduate jobs they face. As Xiang summarised, the ranking is an *“admission ticket”* for entry to China’s competitive professional sectors. Or, as Weibing put it: *“When you are going to talk with an employer, they will say which university are you from? [...] No matter how great your GPA is, it doesn’t matter.”* Though this was particularly keenly felt by Chinese students, those

elsewhere in the world also felt likely to be judged in the context of their institution’s prestige. As US applicant Aaron phrased this, *“If the institution is prominent, you are prominent by proxy.”*

*“[The ranking is] obviously a sign of the quality of a university because it takes into account various qualities of that place, maybe teaching, maybe placements, maybe student/teacher ratio, maybe the living environment...”*

Sunny, India

For students in some locations, there is an even more immediate financial incentive to consult rankings. In countries such as Malaysia, Mexico and Colombia, students mentioned governmental scholarship schemes that are directly tied to international ranking tables, offering generous support for students who gain a place at a top-tier institution abroad. Malaysian student Chun explained: *“The Malaysian government can give a scholarship if I go to a top 200 university published by QS and the Times I think.”*

It should also be noted that students by no means believe rankings are the sole, or necessarily the best, way to assess their future employment outcomes. In cases where they feel factors such as industry connections and work experience are more important, they are likely to prioritise these over rankings. Indian student Ayush, for instance, provided an example of a university he was interested in for reasons other than the ranking: *“It is not listed in the top 50 when it comes to materials engineering but they have excellent centres with Boeing, Tata and Rolls Royce which guarantee you perfect placements. So if that’s my concern, I won’t be looking at its total profile, I’ll be looking at what I want for my future.”*

### Rankings as an indicator of quality

While approaching rankings largely as an indicator of external reputation, students in all the locations we visited also felt that rankings – to at least some extent – would provide an indication of educational quality, resources and opportunities. Chinese applicant Kathryn expressed this belief: “In these well-known universities we have more resources and more good teachers, we get better education and better people skills.” Similarly, Indian applicant Sunny – who, like the vast majority of students we spoke to, admitted he hadn’t actually reviewed any ranking methodologies – made the following speculations: “[The ranking is] obviously a sign of the quality of a university because it takes into account various qualities of that place, maybe teaching, maybe placements, maybe student/teacher ratio, maybe the living environment...”

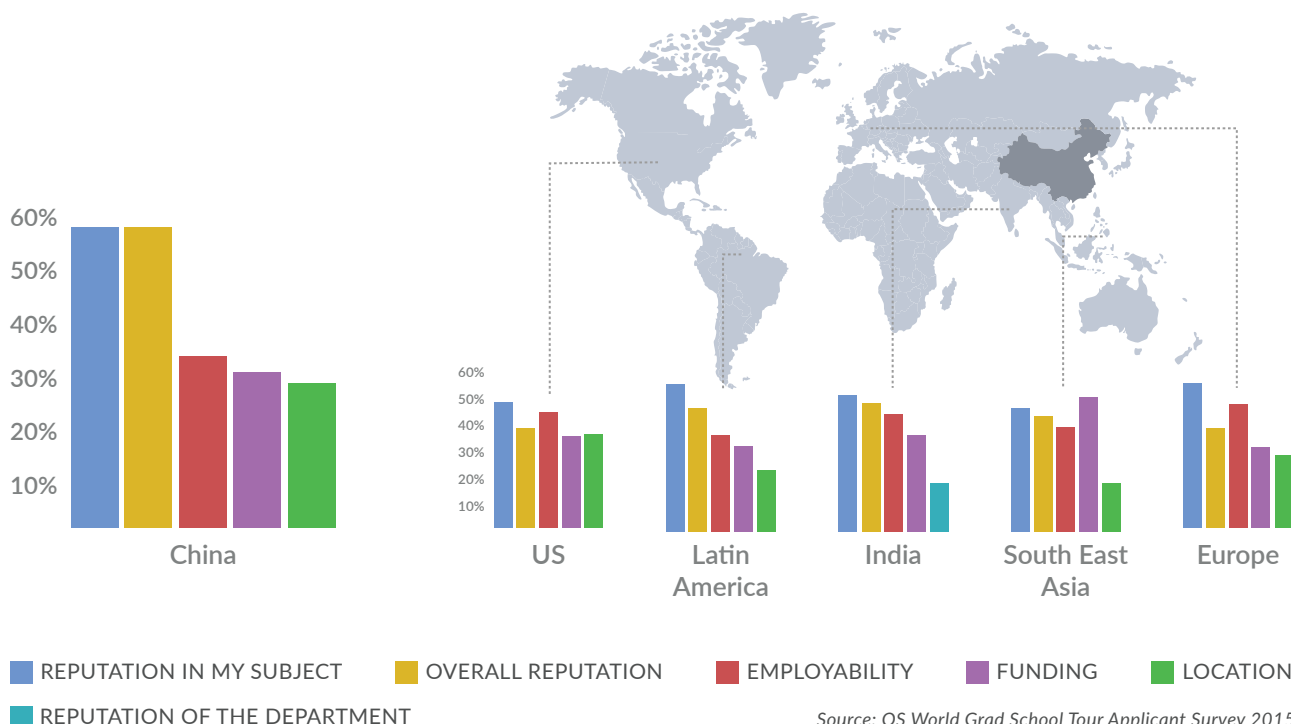
Many students also believed that highly ranked

universities would attract especially talented and ambitious students – providing not just an attractive networking pool, but also a stimulating academic environment. Mexican student Oscar explained: “A well-known university will have smart people and you will become smart because you will be surrounded by them. Reputation means quality students, because many students will apply to that university and the university will be able to choose the smartest.” Likewise, Malaysian student Faizal expanded on his ambitions: “I believe that studying in a place where everyone is really hard working will challenge me and excite me. It will put some positive pressure on me.”

### The limitations of rankings

Almost all the students we spoke to were aware that rankings had limitations, and none approached rankings as their sole information source. For most, rankings were

## PRIORITIES WHEN CHOOSING AN INSTITUTION FOR A MASTER'S DEGREE



viewed as a starting point, to help them create a shortlist of universities and discover institutions they were not previously aware of. Commonly perceived limitations of rankings include the lack of comparisons at programme level; failure to take account of employment rates or student satisfaction; and the impossibility of reliably assessing teaching quality.

*“In these well-known universities we have more resources and more good teachers, we get better education and better people skills.”*

Kathryn, China

Moreover, despite the apparent simplicity of the rankings as a tool – which is a large part of their appeal – students sometimes find them difficult to interpret, struggle to understand the methodology (in fact, rarely attempt to do so), and are confused by the variation in results produced by different rankings. As Italian student Valerio complained: *“The same university is fourth in one*

*ranking, and very different in another ranking. So I don’t know which one is the right one.”*

Although students realise that rankings reflect only a limited number of indicators, many are nonetheless eager for additional factors to be incorporated, so that rankings could provide more of a one-stop source of information. As mentioned above, we also encountered widespread demand for more granular comparisons – going beyond subject-specific rankings to compare universities’ offerings in specific programmes. Valerio again summarises a common frustration: *“The problem with rankings is that they don’t see the specific programme.”*

Students worldwide emphasise the importance of consulting rankings alongside alternative sources of information. As Indian applicant Krishna argued, *“Rankings are not more important than goodwill – what people say about it [the university].”* The closer the corroboration between different sources, the more confident students feel about making a decision. At the same time, the decision-making process involves an ongoing process of negotiation and re-assessment of their own priorities, as they refine what really matters most to them, and the points on which they are willing to compromise.

## HIGHLIGHTS:

- A majority of applicants prefer subject-specific rankings. Most believe there is a correlation between ranking position and reputation – and therefore see rankings as a way to gauge future employment prospects.
- Chinese and South East Asian students are especially likely to feel pressure to attend a highly ranked university in order to secure a graduate job, while those in the US perceive a correlation between rankings and networking opportunities.
- While many students associate rankings with quality of education, they also understand that rankings provide only a partial picture, to be supplemented by other sources.

## OTHER INFORMATION SOURCES & INFLUENCES

### *Personal connections & peer reviews*

Word of mouth recommendations and personal advice remain important sources for many prospective students, including feedback and suggestions from family members, friends, tutors and other students. In China, we found applicants were especially likely to mention tutors and senior students at their current university as an important and useful source of information, as well as being highly likely to seek advice via specialised online forums – particularly the popular *ChaseDream.com*.

*“I contacted one current student who gave me a negative opinion about that university. So I will think twice before applying.”*

Chintan, India

While students in most regions expressed a desire for greater access to peer reviews – feedback from those already enrolled in a particular institution or course – few had succeeded in (or even attempted) accessing these. Among the groups we engaged with, Indian students stood out as the most proactive in establishing entirely new connections to gain these insider views, often through online networking platforms such as LinkedIn. Though they noted that this process was certainly not easy or guaranteed to bring results, they were likely to accord significant sway to feedback gained in this way. Indian applicant Chintan, for instance, told us: *“I contacted one current student who gave me a negative opinion about that university. So I will think twice before applying.”*

Students in both India and China also highlighted the

lasting influence of guest lectures. A positive experience of a visiting professor, especially if combined with opportunities for personal interaction, could strongly predispose them to consider the institution with which the speaker was affiliated.

*“It gives me more of an opportunity to take things the direction I would like to, whereas a much larger nationally or internationally recognised institution might have a few more rules and a pathway to follow.”*

Kenny, US

At the other end of the spectrum, students in the US were least likely to mention personal advice – from peers or others – as an important source of information. Recognising that each individual student will have different priorities and a unique experience, they placed a strong emphasis on making an independent choice, using unmediated sources of information as far as possible. In accordance with this tendency, alongside a relatively high prioritisation of location and lifestyle-related factors, they were especially keen to visit the campus in person before making a decision, and to access virtual tours online when physical attendance was not possible.

### *Course match*

Finding the right programme of study is, of course, a key consideration for most prospective students, taking on varying levels of importance depending on their academic field, study level and location. Among the

groups we engaged with, we found those in Mexico and Colombia were especially likely to place a high priority on finding the right programme, often mentioning that the specialisation they wanted was not widely available in their own country. This group were least likely to say they would be willing to compromise on curriculum, while those in other regions often admitted that if they had the opportunity to study at a notably higher-ranked institution, they would make a concession on the course.

One example of this came from UK master's applicant Ffion, who said she'd compromised on her choice of specialisation in order to get a place at a very well-known university, explaining this decision largely in terms of the strong employment outcomes for graduates of the institution: *"I've definitely chosen the ranking over my subject. [...] Because of the employment rate after."*



## Case study

Name: Kaitlin  
Location: Beijing

Currently majoring in Chinese literature and language with a minor in international trade, Kaitlin plans to transfer to economics, and believes this will be easier to accomplish outside of China. She's also motivated by the prospect of boosting her career progression by gaining international experience, as well as opportunities to develop her communication skills and make friends from other countries.

She describes rankings as *"very important to students in China"*, largely because of their perceived correlation with reputation, and therefore with employment prospects: *"There are so many university graduates in China, and employers need to select the best from them. So how to determine which one is the best, I think the reputation of the university is very important."*

While Kaitlin has conducted most of her research online, face-to-face meetings with university representatives have also had a significant impact. She describes being particularly impressed by a representative of

a UK institution who first took the time to listen to her, and then suggested a programme that closely matched her own interests and situation. She's now considering this as an option, despite never having heard of the school before. Torn between prioritising reputation or curriculum, she suggests: *"It depends on your major. If you are a liberal arts student, I think the school's reputation is the most important factor for you. But if you are in technology, I think the programme is the most important."*

Like many of her peers, Kaitlin is keen for more information about opportunities to gain work experience alongside her studies, and also complains that admission criteria are often too vague. *"Information such as the GRE or TOEFL scores – it's visible. But other factors, such as your internship experience and your research experience, it's invisible. I think it's a little subjective [...] I don't really know how universities choose students."*



In fact, regardless of whether they placed a stronger priority on course match or university reputation, students tended to explain their choices in terms of employability. Some felt a highly specialised course would be the best route for them to achieve their desired outcomes, while others believed the fame of their institution would have the biggest impact – much as they were divided on the issue of whether subject-specific or overall rankings would be a better gauge of employability (see page 16).

*“It’s not even the knowledge so much, it’s the international exposure and the ability to interact with different people.”*

Fajar, Indonesia

Those in the US were most likely to mention the importance of flexible and personalisable study options, explaining that they wanted to shape their own individual programme, gaining a distinctive set of knowledge and skills. As neurology student Maria put this: *“I don’t want to get a degree that everyone else is getting. I want to get it in a way that is best for me and things that I like. What I don’t like is ‘you can only do this’, no freedom.”* Similarly, physics student Kenny explained that he would prefer to study at a smaller institution as he felt this would provide greater freedom: *“It gives me more of an opportunity to take things the direction I would like to, whereas a much larger nationally or internationally recognised institution might have a few more rules and a pathway to follow.”*

Fellow US applicant Lawrence – interested in studying a master’s degree in design and/or business – suggested that his generation had a general tendency towards multidisciplinary, leading to a growth in demand for more flexible and cross-departmental degrees. *“It’s something that’s really common with millennials*

*as we have such divergent interests, so finding the right programme becomes difficult. If we find a programme that addresses at least some of these interests [...] that’s more important than the reputation.”*

### **Information about the student community**

Many prospective students are keen to find out about the student community they will join, perceiving this as a major component of the experience on offer, while also recognising the long-term value of establishing a network of personal and professional connections. As mentioned earlier, many students were also keen to study at an institution where their classmates would be talented and hard-working, believing that this environment would spur them on to realise their own full potential. Often they are also interested in how international the intake is – partly for reassurance that they will themselves be well-supported, but also because they recognise the value and pleasure of being part of a diverse community.

*“If I attend a school in London, for example, and it costs £20,000, I have to know when I can recover this investment [...] because otherwise it’s a waste of money.”*

Pietro, Italy

In India, for instance, Shubham M. told us he was keen to find out about the student community because *“They are what I’m going to experience.”* Fellow Indian applicant Hariharan emphasised the importance of being part of an internationally diverse community, with a broad range of activities on offer, as two ways to get the maximum benefits from international study: *“At the end of the programme I want to be more liberal-minded because in the professions I want to pursue, you have to consider different perspectives. If there are*

*debate clubs, sports clubs, I will definitely get involved. Going abroad should make me comfortable with different cultures; [the] staff and student body should be diverse.”* Similarly, Indonesian student Fajar, applying for a master’s in HR and/or business, explained the value of studying abroad: *“It’s not even the knowledge so much, it’s the international exposure and the ability to interact with different people.”*

### Costs & return on investment

At some stage in the decision-making process, cost makes an inevitable appearance, alongside funding opportunities and attempts to assess return on investment. As the chart on page 24 shows, survey respondents in the US were most likely to name costs among their leading priorities when comparing institutions – perhaps unsurprising in the context of the high study costs and levels of student debt within the US. When researching universities internationally, costs and funding remain strong priorities for US students, and indeed the lower costs of study in many locations can provide a powerful incentive to go abroad. As prospective MBA student Ashley told us, *“Even though the highest-ranked English universities are often very expensive, they still take less time to pay back than some of the high-ranked American universities. [...] Universities in Europe are generally better value for money and have a better return on investment.”*

Elsewhere in the world, costs and funding may not be the very first items on prospective students’ checklists, but they are certainly close to the top. Keen to avoid wasting their own time, students are usually quick to check the viability of a potential study option. This involves reviewing the financial situation, as well as admission requirements and whether their desired course is available. If any of this information is missing or difficult to find, many students say they are unable to seriously consider the institution.

As explored earlier, return on investment is also part of the assessment process for many students. This

can mean seeking out details such as employment rates, average salaries, and specific examples of the career paths graduates have progressed to. This aspect emerged as a particularly prominent concern among the US students we spoke to, but was a recurrent theme worldwide. In the words of Italian student Pietro: *“If I attend a school in London, for example, and it costs £20,000, I have to know when I can recover this investment [...] because otherwise it’s a waste of money.”*

*“I’ve definitely chosen the ranking over my subject. [...] Because of the employment rate after.”*

Ffion, UK

### Location

Even for those without a specific destination in mind, location enters into the equation to some extent; applicants want to feel confident that they’ll be happy in their new home, whatever this means for them. As explored below, there is significant demand for more information in this area, including virtual tours, to help international students feel confident that they understand what to expect from the university campus and surrounding environment.

As we’ve seen, many international students are keen to get as much ‘added value’ from the experience of studying abroad as possible, and this can influence their choice of destination. Some are keen to study in a location which is known as a leader in their field – such as a financial or technology hub. Others are keen to find a base which offers opportunities for further travel during their time abroad – thereby gaining even more international experience.

### What information is missing?

Students in all the locations we visited mentioned at least some difficulty in accessing all the material they needed to confidently reach a decision. Missing or ambiguous elements often included quite basic information, such as details of the course curriculum and teaching staff, costs and funding opportunities, admission requirements and the application process. Many students also expressed demand for more supporting information, such as peer reviews and case studies; more detailed data and examples relating to employment outcomes; opportunities for internships and work experience; and information about lifestyle factors such as accommodation and transport infrastructure.

Many expressed frustration at the experience of attempting to access sufficient information using official university websites, often claiming that a bad experience online would leave them with a negative impression of the institution itself, and leave them less likely to apply. Chinese applicant Weibing articulated a widespread experience of feeling let down by university

websites: *“I have to click, click, click, click, click – many times – but it still gives me a very ambiguous answer. This is very bad.”* A common response to unsatisfactory sites was outlined by Indonesian applicant Assad: *“Sometimes, if a lot of the detailed information is missing, I choose not to waste my time and not apply.”*

Applicants in the Latin American countries we visited were most likely to mention language proficiency as a concern and potential barrier – both when researching their options, and when applying for admission. Many in this group said they would appreciate more information about the language level required, as well as details of language support available to incoming students, and more accessible terminology on university websites. As Colombian applicant Lina put this: *“Even though I speak good English, there are things I don’t understand. It’s supposed to be for international students, but I don’t think so!”*

## HIGHLIGHTS:

- Applicants feel most confident about choosing a university abroad when able to access multiple sources of information, which add up to provide a consistent picture.
- Demand for ‘peer reviews’ appears to be growing globally. Those in the US are least likely to seek out the opinions of others, while Indian applicants are most proactive in reaching out to gain peer feedback.
- Worldwide, students report frustrating experiences with university websites, which can result in a negative impression of the institution and/or dropped applications. Positive encounters with universities are most often associated with a personal approach, whether face to face or remotely.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

For higher education professionals engaged in recruiting internationally, we hope this research will add new depth and insight to existing data sources and best practices. In particular, the following key points should be emphasised:

- **Employability.** Our research demonstrates the significant extent to which employability is considered by prospective students when deciding what and where to study, and demand for institutions to step up to the challenge of preparing them for a competitive graduate (and global) workplace. For institutions aiming to attract students from a broad range of backgrounds and locations, focusing on employment-related initiatives and campaigns is likely to prove effective. This includes offering courses incorporating practical elements, in-demand specialisations, internships and/or work placements, extensive and proactive careers services, and networking opportunities.
- **Demand for more information.** Alongside high demand for more information and support specifically relating to employability, prospective students are hungry for more information across all areas – from accommodation and campus life to details about teaching staff and contact time. Our conversations with students often unearthed a significant gap between what they expect or want, and the level and quality of information currently available – presenting a challenge for institutions to be more transparent, improve user journeys on their websites, and commit to regular updates.
- **Peer reviews.** While demanding more from institutions, students are also keen to balance out ‘official’ narratives by accessing insider views. Universities should be aware of this growing trend, understand how powerful peer reviews can be, and where possible, facilitate direct communication between prospective, current and former students. It is also important to regularly assess current students’ satisfaction levels, and make results publically available.
- **Personal responses.** A personal approach to communications is another common thread uniting students across borders. Regardless of differences in local cultures and norms, students in all the countries we visited said they value a personal quality in interactions with universities – whether this means meeting a representative in person, or receiving a personal response via email. Seeking signs of trustworthiness, they also praised university representatives who appeared to focus on helping (rather than just marketing), and presented an honest image of the university.
- **The role of rankings.** Finally, we hope this research will provide new insight into how and why students consult rankings – particularly highlighting the widespread belief that rankings provide a good proxy measure of employment prospects; that they to at least some extent reflect quality of education and other aspects of the student experience; and that subject-specific rankings tend to be more highly valued. At the same time, it should be reiterated that rankings are always just one factor considered among many, afforded a higher or lower weighting depending on the individual student. Institutions not featured in the ranking tables are likely to benefit from foregrounding other ways of assessing success – such as employment rates, case studies, student satisfaction surveys and profiling the roles and companies that graduates progress to.

For more in-depth explorations of key trends in each location covered by this project, region-specific reports are available to read online at [www.iu.qs.com](http://www.iu.qs.com) and [www.qsdigitalsolutions.com](http://www.qsdigitalsolutions.com).



If you are interested in first-hand access to insights, want to explore a particular topic or region, or would like to partner with us on future research projects, please do not hesitate to get in touch, on [dasha@qs.com](mailto:dasha@qs.com).

## ABOUT QS

Established in 1990, QS is dedicated to providing independent and authoritative research and resources for both prospective students and higher education providers worldwide. The QS World University Rankings®, published annually since 2004 and hosted on student-focused platform TopUniversities.com, is among the most-consulted resources in the sector.

In response to growing public demand for comparative data on universities and other higher education providers, and for institutions to develop deeper insight into their competitive environment, the QS Intelligence Unit was formed in 2008. Committed to the key values of rigorous integrity, undeniable value, unique insight and charismatic presentation, QSIU strives to be the most trusted independent source of global intelligence on the higher education sector.

In addition to the research and insights provided by QSIU, the company offers a range of services to help prospective international students find the right institution – and vice versa. This includes a global series of higher education fairs; an annual publication cycle of guides, reports and e-papers; and a dynamic range of online platforms.

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