

What Matters to International Students?

FOCUS ON
LATIN AMERICA



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 PROSPECTIVE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS?

Focus on Latin America

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 by 2015. While traditional student recruitment markets such as India and China continue to dominate, Latin America has emerged as an important and growing market in this space. According to the latest Open Doors data, Mexico is among the top 10 countries making up international student numbers in the US, with Venezuela and Colombia also in the top 20. The latest UNESCO figures show Colombians as the largest group of international students in Spain, with a further 10 Latin American countries among the top 20.

At QS, we engage with millions of current and prospective students all over the world on a daily basis. 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 key regions for student mobility, including China, India, the US, South East Asia, Europe and Latin America. Our qualitative research was accompanied by a short 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 reports, exploring key trends in each region.

While the bulk of this report is based on research collected in Mexico and Colombia, a broader regional context is provided by the QS World Grad School Tour Applicant Survey. This global survey has been running for almost 10 years, collecting more than 35,000 responses in the last three years alone. Respondents from across the Latin American region are well represented, making it possible to see how closely our findings in Mexico and Colombia correspond to wider regional trends.

A number of distinctive elements appear to characterise Latin American applicants; these relate to the factors motivating them to study abroad, the way in which they choose a destination, their plans post-graduation, and their priorities when deciding on an institution. These distinctive factors form the key focus of this report, alongside insights into their attitude to university rankings and reputation, and the challenges they face when applying to universities abroad.



Almost 60 focus groups
with ~300 participants



12 countries



15 cities



19 events



Over 1,800
survey responses

PUSH FACTORS: MOTIVATIONS FOR STUDYING ABROAD

One of the most distinctive characteristics among the students we spoke to in Latin America was their tendency to describe their motivations for studying abroad largely in terms of push factors – focusing on elements that were lacking in their own country. Applicants in this region often felt that there weren't enough relevant opportunities within their country, or the Latin American region more broadly. In order to achieve their ambitions, they felt the need to look elsewhere.

This tendency is especially noticeable when comparing Latin American applicants to their peers in more developed parts of the world, such as Europe or North America, who tend to focus more on the pull factors of studying abroad. Where a Latin American applicant would typically mention the lack of relevant study opportunities in their own country, a prospective student in Western Europe would be more likely to focus on the added benefits of studying their chosen course internationally.

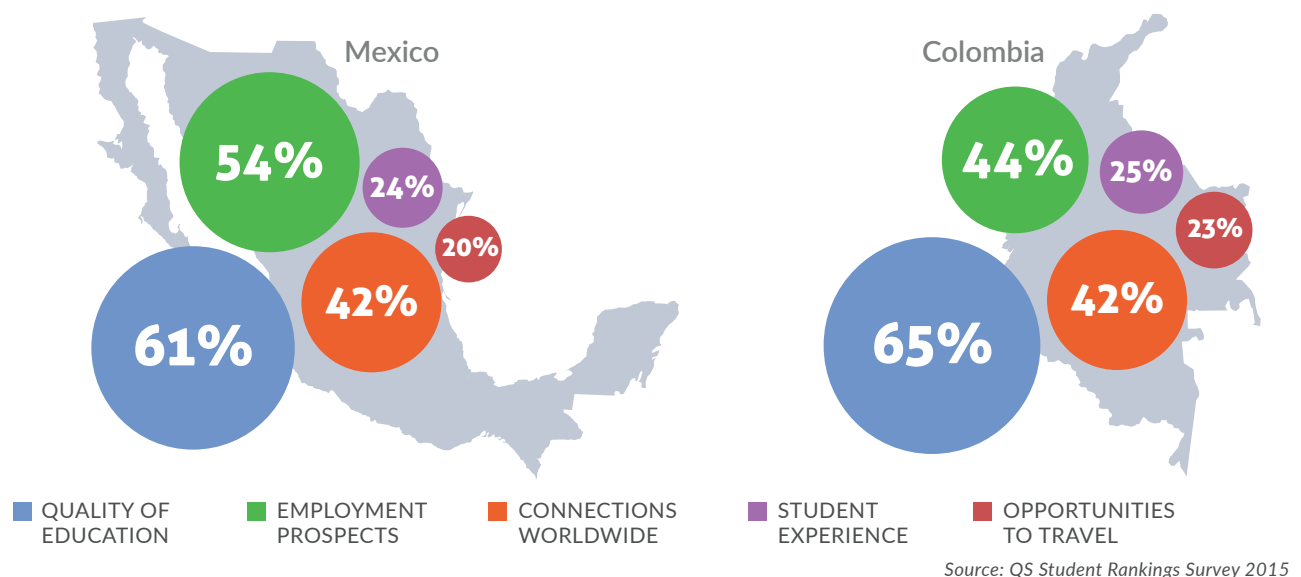
"I want to study further to improve my career; I want to specialise in communication design – here they don't teach that."

Diana, Colombia

Demand for more specialised programs

Many of the Latin American students we spoke to were keen to pursue further studies in order to specialise, and this desire played a key role in motivating them to look abroad. The underlying motivation here was often related to career progression, as reflected in the words of prospective master's student Diana, in Colombia:

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF STUDYING AT AN INTERNATIONALLY RECOGNISED UNIVERSITY?



"I want to study further to improve my career; I want to specify in communication design - here they don't teach that." This is echoed by Daniel, a prospective electrical engineering student in Colombia: "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."

"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

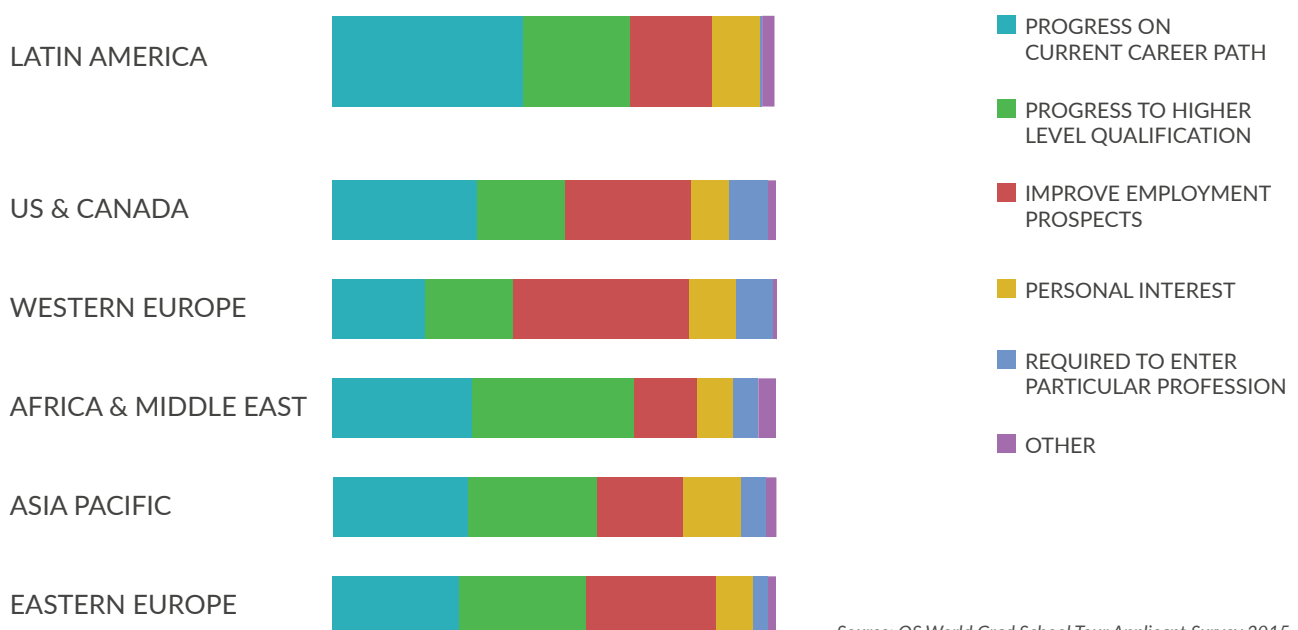
Likewise Miguel in Mexico told us, "My main target is to get knowledge about working with big data. At this moment

in Mexico, there aren't many universities to offer this master's." And Ximera, a prospective master's student in Mexico, explained: "I want to act but in Mexico such master's degrees don't really exist, so it's necessary to go outside." As this selection should indicate, the perceived lack of opportunities to specialise in a chosen area was reiterated by prospective students across a wide range of subjects and sectors, spanning both the sciences and the arts.

Academic prospects and research facilities

A related group of push factors emerged among prospective students looking to pursue research-based degrees, at both master's and PhD level. Many of these students felt compelled to study internationally due to perceptions about the limited scope of academic avenues open to them at home, alongside a lack of developed research facilities.

PRIMARY MOTIVATION FOR PURSUING A MASTER'S DEGREE



Source: QS World Grad School Tour Applicant Survey 2015

Maria, a PhD applicant in Colombia, explained: “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. If I achieve this, I can be in control of developing my skills and becoming who I want to be.” Ricardo, in Mexico, voiced similar frustrations about research limitations in his own country: “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.”

International reputation and career opportunities

Like prospective students worldwide, many of those in Latin America perceive studying abroad, especially at a university with a strong reputation, as a means to improve their career opportunities. Gonzalo in Colombia summed up his motivations: “A master’s is what you need to get a job

here and be competitive, and if you study abroad, you have the best choices. There are also travelling opportunities of course, but I’m mainly looking for career enhancement.”

While sharing this motivation with students the world over, Latin American applicants are particularly likely to focus on the push factors involved, describing their own country’s universities as unable to provide the desired level of international reputation. For instance, John in Colombia told us: “Recognition of my qualifications abroad is why I want to study abroad, as our education isn’t recognised widely sadly.”

“Recognition of my qualifications abroad is why I want to study abroad, as our education isn’t recognised widely sadly.”

John, Colombia

SEEKING SPECIALISED STRENGTHS: CHOOSING A COUNTRY

Citing insufficient local expertise as a key reason to study abroad, students in both Mexico and Colombia tend to choose a destination based on beliefs about where they will find the best programs, facilities and expertise in their chosen field. We encountered a widespread perception that certain countries have a better overall standard of teaching in particular subject areas. So, for example, Mexican master’s applicant Sergio told us, “I suppose we all understand that the USA is best in business, Germany in technology – or, in my case, Australia in environmental studies.”

This focus on specialised strengths also leads Latin American applicants to place an especially high value on subject-specific reputation when choosing an individual university. This trend is reflected in the QS Applicant Survey, in which Latin American respondents are especially likely to cite reputation in their subject as the number one priority when choosing an institution.

“I suppose we all understand that the USA is best in business, Germany in technology – or, in my case, Australia in environmental studies.”

Sergio, Mexico

Program content prioritised over university reputation

While the survey shows students in this region placing a high value on subject-level reputation, they were in general less likely to prioritise the institution’s overall reputation – particularly if asked to choose between this and a program which closely matched their interests. Elsewhere in the world, applicants were typically much

more conflicted when posed this hypothetical situation; many ultimately said they would prioritise reputation, due to its perceived correlation with future employment prospects.

Colombian master’s applicant Gloria is representative of the thought process we encountered in Latin America, in which course content is the ultimate priority: *“I think reputation is important, but when I was thinking about doing my master’s I wasn’t thinking about Harvard or the big names. I was thinking about the university that has the topics I want to learn. I’m looking more that the topics they teach me will work for what I want. The university I will find is not Harvard, but it matches with the things I need.”*

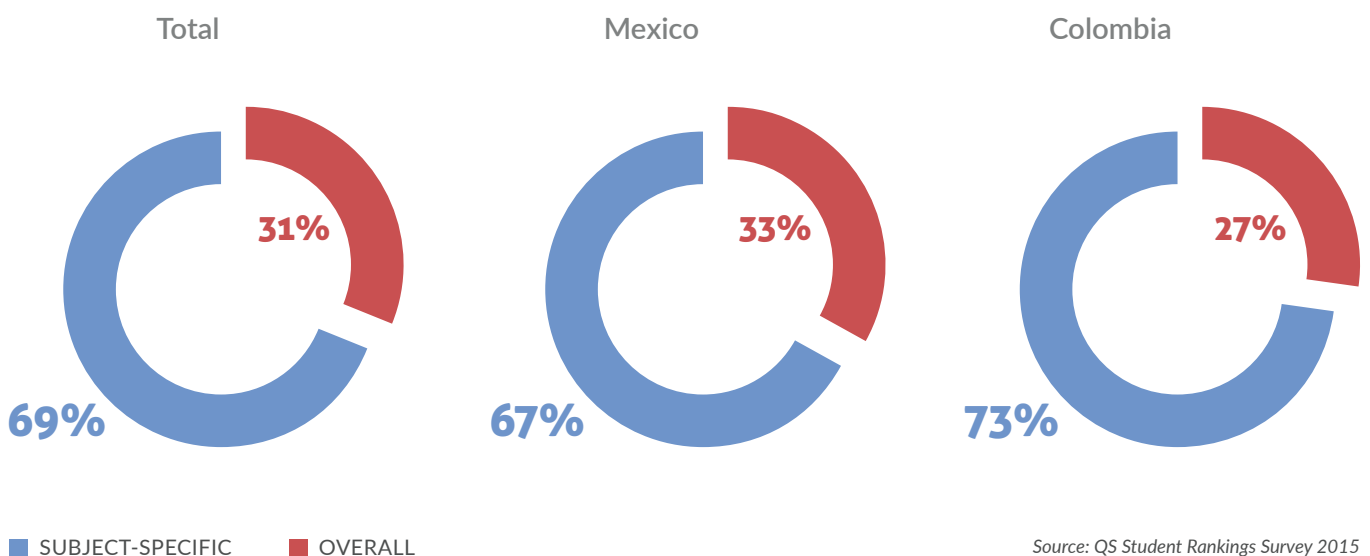
Many of the Latin American applicants we spoke to were also keen to return to study in a country where they had previously spent time – often as part of a student exchange program – or with which they had some other personal connection, often through a relative. In

Mexico, for instance, economics student Fernando was torn between choosing a university in London, where he believed he would find the best programs in his field, or opting for France, where he had already spent time on an exchange program. Similarly, José in Colombia was keen to return to Germany, where he had previously studied on an exchange program, and he placed greater weight on his personal experience than on the international ranking tables: *“German universities don’t really partake in the rankings or pay close attention, so neither do I.”*

“I think reputation is important, but when I was thinking about doing my master’s I wasn’t thinking about Harvard or the big names. I was thinking about the university that has the topics I want to learn...”

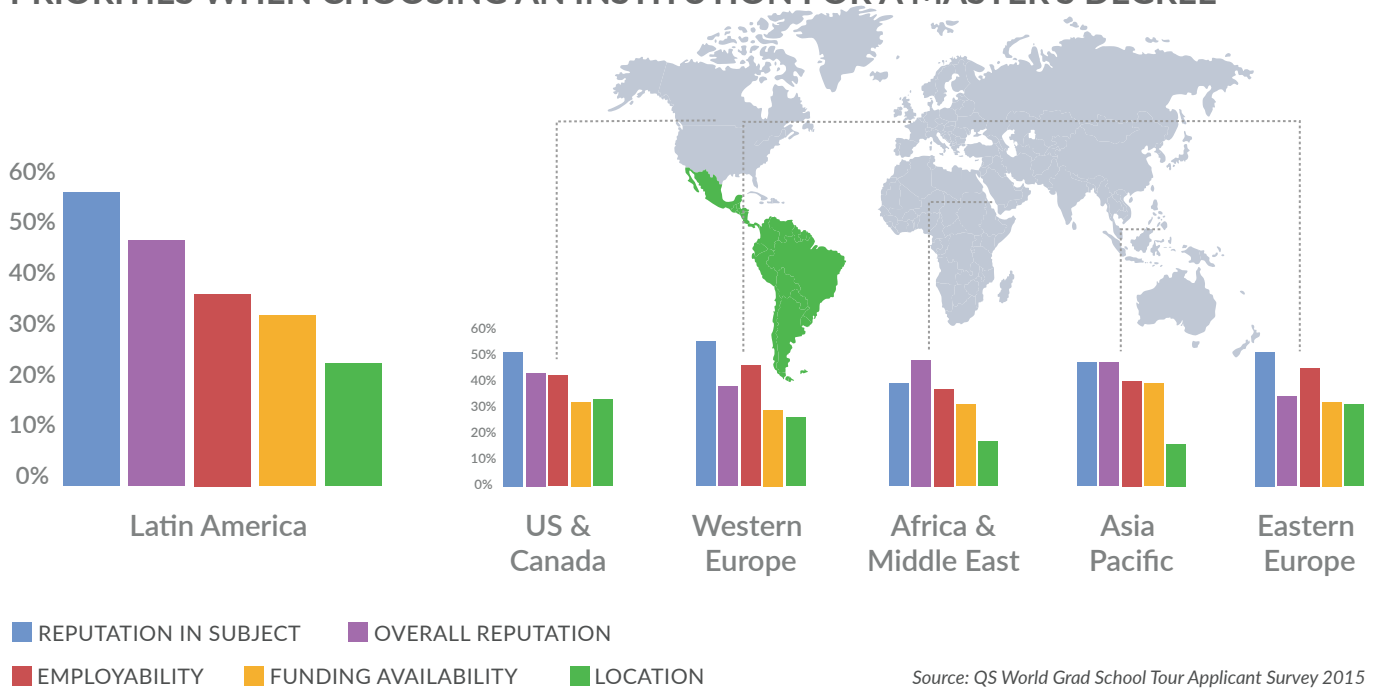
Gloria, Colombia

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



Source: QS Student Rankings Survey 2015

PRIORITIES WHEN CHOOSING AN INSTITUTION FOR A MASTER'S DEGREE



Case study

Name: Sabrina
 Location: Mexico City

Currently working as a freelance graphic designer, Mexican applicant Sabrina is looking for a master's degree in illustration or a similar subject. She's considering studying in the US as she has some connections in New York who could help her settle in, but is also interested in the UK as she believes UK universities offer the best programs in her field.

Keen to gain new ideas from outside the Mexican graphic design world, Sabrina hopes to return with new skills and knowledge that will help her start her own design company. "I want to come back to Mexico, because I really like this country. It needs us. I want to come back here because I want to design social things, to

improve the country and make good things. So for me it's that – to come back and to have even more tools to hire people and give them jobs, and to do something good for this country."

In addition to funding, the main challenges she identifies are finding sufficiently detailed information about the courses she's interested in, and completing the TOEFL and IELTS. While she speaks English to a good level, she says these exams have been demanding in terms of the financial commitment – including fees for preparatory courses and the tests themselves – as well as the time and energy required.

CONTRIBUTING TO NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: LONG-TERM MOTIVATIONS

When discussing their motivations for studying abroad, the Latin American students we interviewed stood out from their peers elsewhere in the world in another interesting respect: they tended to focus not just on benefits to their own career and personal development, but on their hopes of making a positive impact on their home country and wider society. While feeling pushed to leave in order to access more specialised programs and facilities, they were equally keen to bring back their new knowledge and skills, contributing to the development of their own nation's expertise.

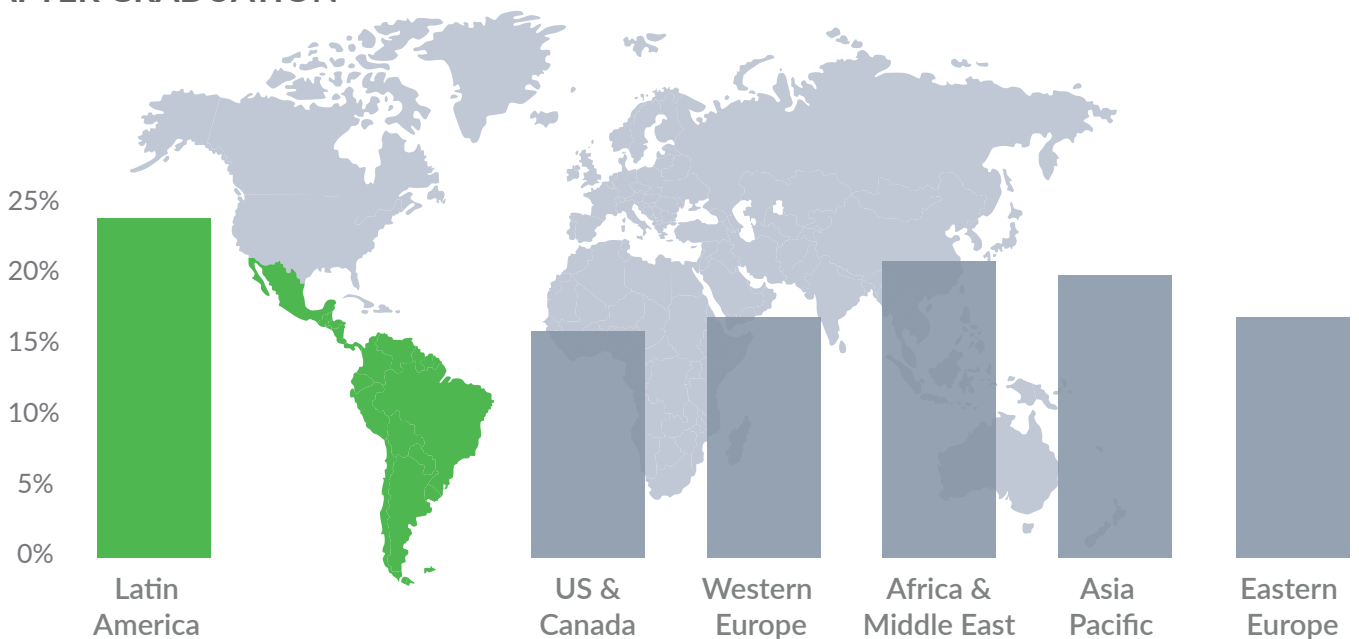
To give just a few examples of this frequently recurring theme, Colombian applicant Daniel told us, "I can't leave the development of my country in the hands of others, so learning abroad is with a motivation to get back." This was

closely echoed by Mariana in Mexico: "I want to go away to learn something new, get the international experience and bring it back to Mexico." And Colombian student Maria summed up the sense of the chance to make a real impact, due to the remaining scope for development: "I have a special bond with my own country; there are problems here and change is needed, but you can also make a difference."

"I can't leave the development of my country in the hands of others, so learning abroad is with a motivation to get back."

Daniel, Colombia

PERCENTAGE OF APPLICANTS AIMING TO RUN THEIR OWN BUSINESS AFTER GRADUATION



Source: QS World Grad School Tour Applicant Survey 2015

Entrepreneurship with a national conscience

A significant number of prospective students in these countries envisage themselves starting their own businesses when they return home – an ambition which is often linked to the goal of contributing to their nation's development. Colombian applicant Sandra summed up this desire: *"I want to come back from studying abroad as I think this country has a lot to offer, and we need to take things we learn and create companies to help the development of the country."* Others similarly cited the

desire to create new and exciting jobs for others as a motivation for starting their own businesses, feeling they could make the most impact this way.

This entrepreneurial trend is reflected in the QS Applicant Survey, in which Latin American respondents are especially likely to see themselves running their own business in 10 years' time, and also more likely to cite 'leadership development' as their main priority when choosing an employer.

"I want to come back from studying abroad as I think this country has a lot to offer, and we need to take things we learn and create companies to help the development of the country."

Sandra, Colombia

APPROACHES TO UNIVERSITY RANKINGS

Compared to other regions we visited, Latin American students tend to hold a relatively pragmatic approach to rankings – typically consulting them for a specific purpose, rather than as an assumed part of the process of choosing a university. As discussed above, students in this region tend to be strongly motivated by opportunities to access more specialised programs, and to prioritise course content and facilities. While not usually their main concern, rankings tables could have a role to play in helping them identify the best institutions in their field, with subject-specific rankings especially highly valued.

Rankings as an indicator of reputation

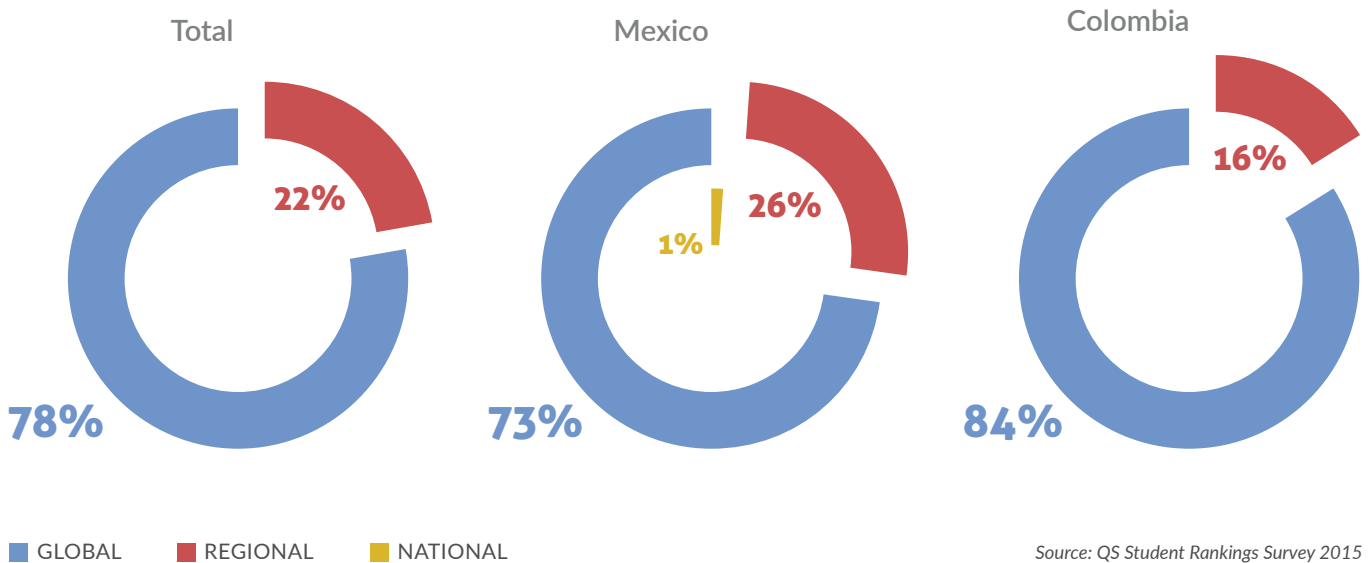
Like prospective students worldwide, those in Latin America acknowledge the significance of university reputation as a door-opener in the employment world. Ulises in Mexico summed up this belief, and the related

role of rankings: *"I think the reputation is quite important, especially if you want to build an international career. You know how good universities are in your own country, or you have a feeling. But you don't have this reference about universities in other countries, so rankings are useful to get a sense of where to go."* He added, however, that he would ensure the program itself was of interest to him before considering the ranking; as for many students in this region, program match remains the primary consideration.

Rankings as an indicator of quality

Applicants in Latin America are relatively likely to perceive rankings as a way of gauging not just external reputation, but the actual quality of experience on offer. Sebastian in Colombia told us: *"Rankings are very helpful to check out your options. It's like when you go to the market and you see some products and some just have the*

WHAT GEOGRAPHICAL SCOPE OF RANKINGS DO YOU FIND MOST USEFUL?



'good quality stamp', you immediately want to buy it." Along the same lines, Oscar in Mexico explained: "I used the subject rankings to filter. 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 university will be able to choose the smartest." With so many students in these countries motivated to study abroad in order to access a higher quality of education, it's significant that they perceive rankings as a way of assessing this.

Priorities when consulting rankings

While valuing rankings as a way of assessing both reputation and quality, Latin American students rarely say the ranking is their number one priority. As discussed above, they're concerned first and foremost to find a course that reflects their interests and offers the right opportunities to specialise. In addition, they also tend to prioritise their chosen country over international rankings.

"Rankings are very helpful to check out your options. It's like when you go to the market and you see some products and some just have the 'good quality stamp', you immediately want to buy it."

Sebastian, Colombia

"I used the subject rankings to filter. A well-known university will have smart people and you will become smart because you will be surrounded by them."

Oscar, Mexico

CHALLENGES & CONCERNS

Like prospective students everywhere, those in Latin America are often frustrated by the difficulty of accessing all the information they need, including sufficient details about course content, costs, funding and admission requirements. At the same time, we encountered some more distinctive concerns in this region, including issues relating to language proficiency, finances and over-qualification.

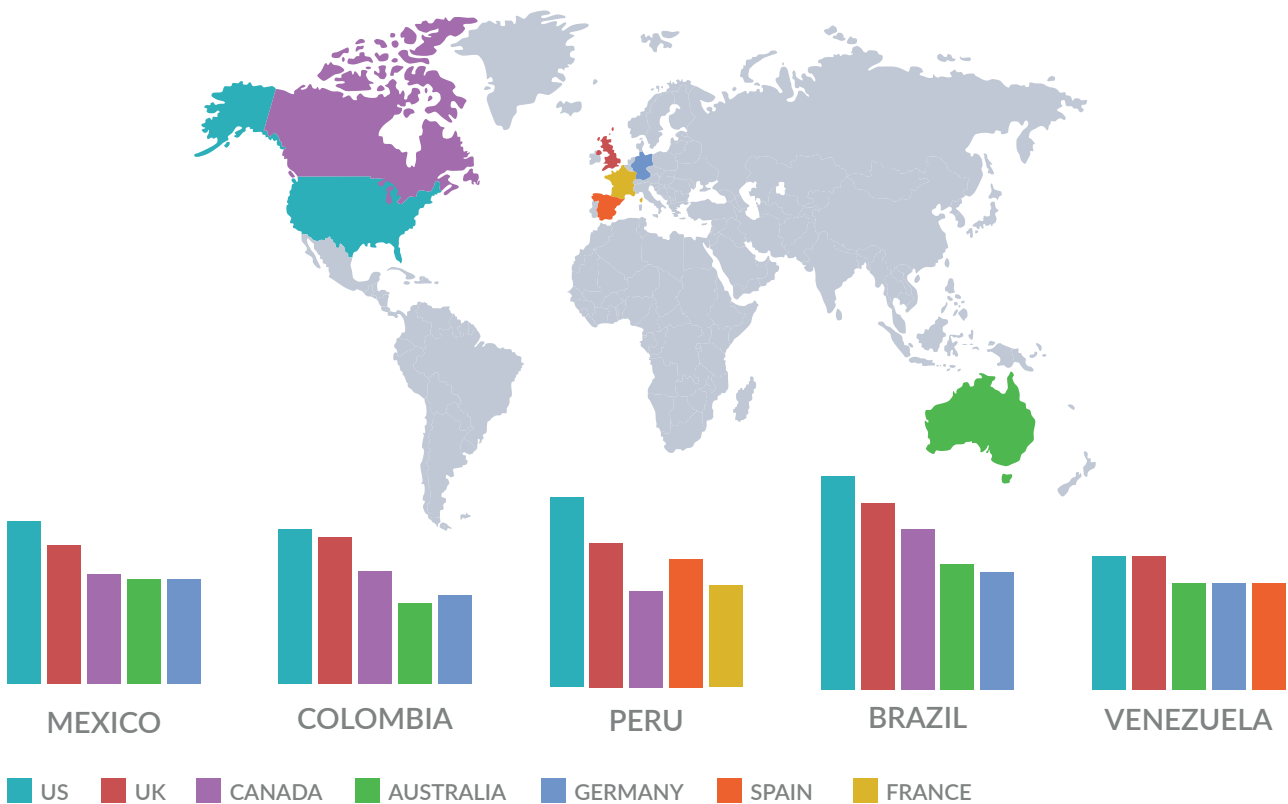
Language barriers

While many Latin American students choose to study abroad in a fellow Spanish- or Portuguese-speaking country, many also opt for countries in which English or another language is the main language of tuition. Among

“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!”

Lina, Colombia

TOP FIVE STUDY DESTINATIONS FOR LATIN AMERICAN APPLICANTS



Source: QS World Grad School Tour Applicant Survey 2015

Latin American respondents to the QS Applicant Survey, the most-coveted destinations are the US, the UK and Canada, followed closely by Australia and Spain.

“If you have a great program but you can’t have a scholarship... you just very sadly put it aside.”
 Valeria, Mexico

For those applying to study in a foreign language, meeting language requirements is often a major source of concern. A significant number of those we interviewed were uncertain about whether they possessed the required language level, expressing a desire for clearer guidelines. This group were often interested in opportunities to enrol in preparatory language courses, and were more likely to consider universities offering this support. Even for students who felt confident about their language level, the process of completing required language exams was often experienced as a significant added strain on time, energy and finances.

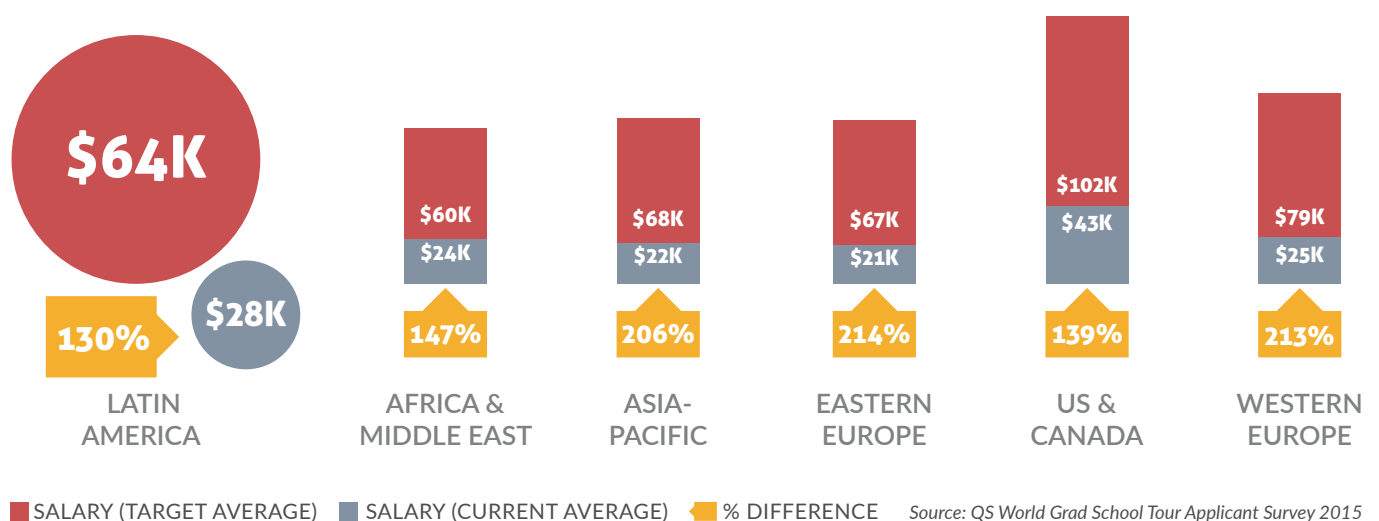
Aside from admission requirements, many students spoke about experiencing some degree of language barrier when researching options online. This could range from major difficulties in accessing information, to frustrations about the terminology used on university websites. In Mexico, for instance, Mariana told us, “The terms universities use on their websites are very confusing, especially for international students.” This was echoed by many others, including Colombian applicant Lina: “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!”

In some cases, difficulties accessing information could give rise to concerns that they would not be entirely welcome or supported, due to a sense that resources had been primarily provided for other groups.

Finances

While costs and funding are major concerns for students the world over, our Latin American focus group participants felt they faced a particularly gargantuan challenge in this regard. They spoke about the difficulties of travelling from a developing country to study in more

EXPECTED SALARY INCREASE AFTER COMPLETING A POSTGRADUATE DEGREE



developed parts of the world, unfavourable exchange rates, and the impossibility of studying in a country such as the US or UK without obtaining assistance. As Mexican applicant Valeria said, *“If you have a great program but you can’t have a scholarship... you just very sadly put it aside.”*

Over-qualification

A third distinctive concern we encountered among Latin American students was the risk of becoming overqualified for careers in their own country, as a result of studying internationally. This sets them apart from students in many other parts of the world, where the general belief tends to be that higher levels of study – especially when combined with international experience and/or a prestigious institution – will lead to improved employment prospects wherever they seek work.

In Mexico, one student shared the story of a friend who struggled to find work after returning from completing a PhD abroad. After being repeatedly told, *“You are too much, we can’t hire you”*, he returned to the same job he’d held before studying abroad. Similar concerns were voiced by others, including Colombian applicant José: *“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.”*

“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.”

José, Colombia

FINAL THOUGHTS

For university leaders, our research highlights a number of opportunities to strengthen engagement with prospective students in Latin America. Institutions recruiting in this region are likely to benefit from emphasising specialised expertise, a variety of programs and facilities, and ensuring full course details are easily accessible.

There is also an opportunity to engage with the entrepreneurial ambitions of many Latin American applicants, by highlighting practical entrepreneurial knowledge and skills, as well as extracurricular opportunities to develop leadership experience. Specialised programs focusing on building social enterprises or initiating social change are also likely to appeal to many of the most ambitious applicants in this region, as are courses focusing on areas of academia

and industry not widely available for specialised study in Latin America.

Our focus groups in this region also provide evidence for the efficacy of short-term study experiences – exchange programs, summer schools and internships abroad – in determining Latin American students’ future preferences about where to study. Institutions offering preparatory language courses, and clear information about language requirements, are also likely to move up many Latin American students’ shortlists.

For insights on the distinctive priorities, challenges and motivations of international applicants in other key recruitment areas, keep an eye out for upcoming reports in this series, or contact us directly for information about future projects.

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.



TRUSTED • INDEPENDENT • GLOBAL

www.iu.qs.com

Copyright © 2016 QS Intelligence Unit