



What matters to international students

Focus on Southeast Asia



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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.

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WHAT MATTERS TO PROSPECTIVE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS?

Focus on South East Asia

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. South East Asian countries have been contributing to global international mobility figures for quite some time, although to a varying extent. Vietnam and Malaysia, for example, have been sending large numbers of students abroad for over a decade, while Indonesia has more recently emerged as a student mobility giant. UNESCO data reflects the continued influence of colonial ties on student movement, with Indonesia among the top 10 countries sending students to the Netherlands, while Malaysia is a top five source for the UK. Vietnam is among the top 10 senders of international students to the US, while Australia and New Zealand enjoy an abundant supply of students from a variety of countries in South East Asia, including the Philippines and Thailand.

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 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 the current report is based on research collected in Malaysia and Indonesia, 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 South East Asia region are well represented, making it possible to see how closely our findings in these two countries correspond to wider regional trends.

A number of distinctive elements appear to characterise South East Asian applicants, relating to the way in which they research and select institutions, study destinations, and even careers. These distinctive factors form the key focus of this report, alongside insights into student attitudes to university rankings and institutional reputation.



Almost 60 focus groups
with ~300 participants



11 countries



15 cities



19 events



Over 1,800
survey responses

PREPARING FOR THE GLOBAL WORKPLACE

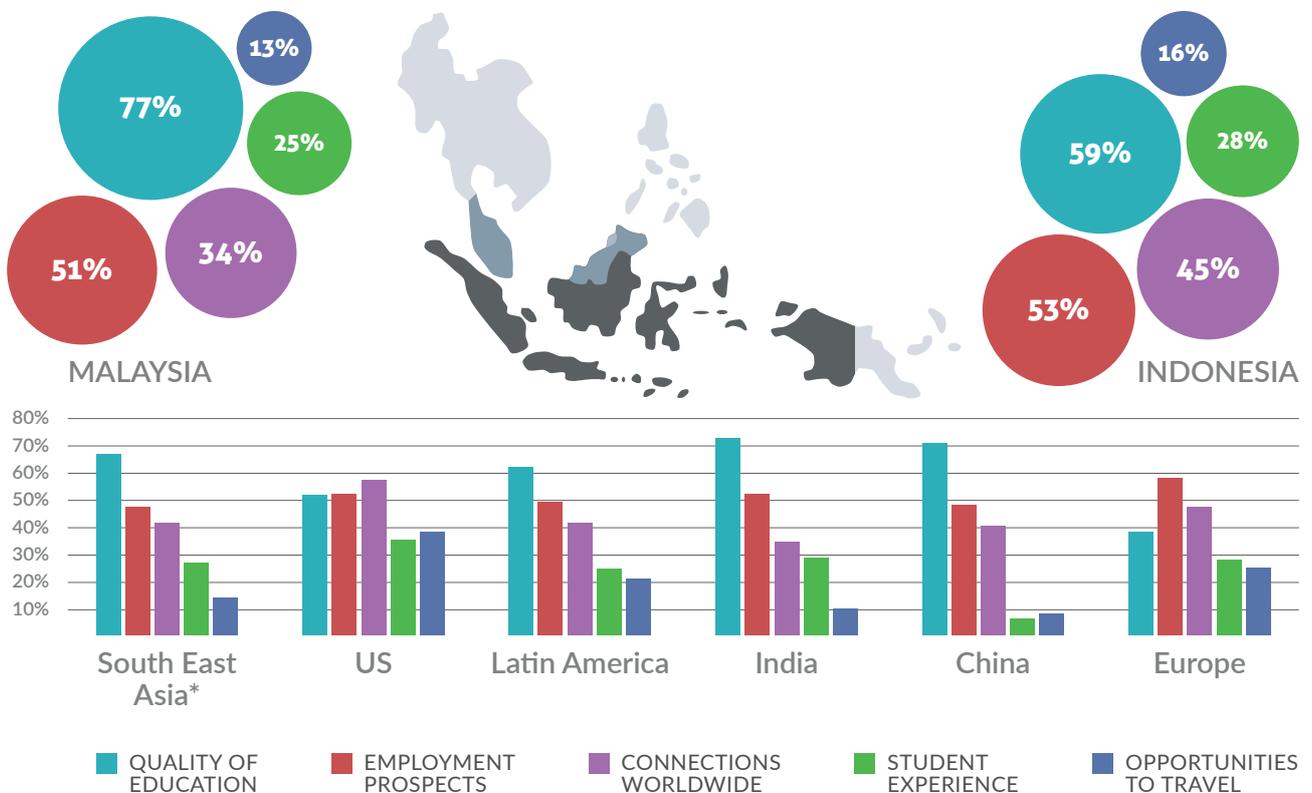
Employability is a burning issue for prospective students across the world, and those in South East Asia are no exception. Yet while there is a shared global emphasis on career outcomes, approaches to this issue vary significantly worldwide – and even within South East Asia, different national contexts are reflected in different sets of priorities. This is evident in our research, focused on the two geographically proximate, but economically and culturally distinct, nations of Indonesia and Malaysia.

Gaining a competitive edge

One key point on which Indonesian and Malaysian applicants agree is the importance of acquiring

international experience and a global outlook, in order to compete in the modern workplace. Like students the world over, those in South East Asia understand that employers are increasingly seeking graduates with international experience. Some of those we spoke to highlighted particular skills and attributes which they believed would be strengthened by international study, and in-demand among employers. Indonesian applicant Fajar, for example, spoke about the flexibility and adaptability required of both international students and new recruits: “When one comes to a different country, they have to deal with a lot of ambiguity, and a new workplace is pretty much the same!”

BENEFITS OF STUDYING AT AN INTERNATIONALLY RECOGNISED UNIVERSITY



*Responses from Indonesia and Malaysia combined

Source: QS Student Rankings Survey 2015

Often, however, applicants explained the value of international study simply in terms of the higher status accorded to degrees completed abroad. Indonesian applicant Dicky explained: *“I’m choosing to do a master’s to improve my career, of course, and abroad because if you graduate from a university abroad, it’s more respected here in Indonesia [...] We still have the colonial-era mentality, ‘If you graduate from a Netherlands school, you must be smarter than someone graduating from a national school’, and I probably agree with that.”* He added that simply studying abroad was sufficient to achieve this status boost, regardless of the prestige of the individual institution.

Many Indonesian and Malaysian applicants felt that a bachelor’s degree was no longer sufficient for many careers, and that international study was also increasingly becoming the norm for professionals on their desired career trajectory. For some, concrete examples of this were very close to hand – a number of the students we spoke to were being sponsored by their companies to complete a master’s degree abroad. Indonesian master’s applicant Jupiter told us, *“It’s actually company policy to study further overseas.”*

“The benefits of studying internationally are the exposure and larger opportunities which are available when compared to the ones existing at the local level.”

Elisa, Malaysia

Even among those who knew they could get a job with their current qualifications, there was a widespread belief that international study would lead to increased opportunities, and a higher salary. Malaysian applicant Elisa, for instance, explained her decision to apply for a master’s degree abroad, five years into her career: *“The benefits of studying internationally are the exposure and larger opportunities which are available when compared to the ones existing at the local level. I believe career opportunities are more developed after you study internationally.”*

To a greater extent than in many of the other locations covered by this research project, South East Asian students were often engaged in anticipating future employment trends, attempting to get ahead of the game by qualifying themselves for the most secure or dynamic industries – ‘careers of the future’. Indonesian engineer Chandra, for instance, explained that he was keen to “diversify” his skillset: *“Although everyone is telling me that the industry I’m currently in will have a good future and that I should stay in the country, that’s not the current situation and I can’t see the conditions changing.”* He was considering a range of options, including consulting and managerial roles, and seeking qualifications to match – seeking a career change for the sake of securing employment for years to come.

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

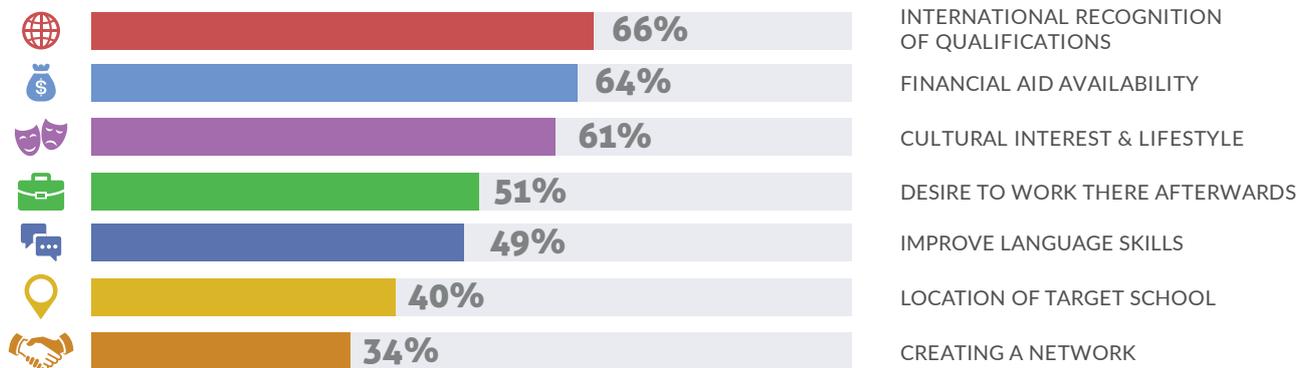
Fajar, Indonesia

Building a global network

While students in both Indonesia and Malaysia agreed that studying abroad would be likely to boost their careers, Indonesians were more likely to view networking and diversity on campus as key elements in this. As the chart on page 4 shows, Indonesian respondents rated ‘connections worldwide’ as the second leading benefit of studying at an internationally recognised university, second only to quality of education, while Malaysians were more likely to focus directly on ‘employment prospects’. Our research also found that Indonesians were more likely to prioritise the opportunity to join a diverse community of students and staff.

This makes sense given Malaysian students’ wider exposure to a multicultural environment within their own country, due to the high levels of ethnic diversity in the country’s resident population, as well as the fact that Malaysia is itself a popular destination for international study. Compared to many of the Western European and

PRIORITIES WHEN CHOOSING A STUDY DESTINATION



Source: QS World Grad School Tour Applicant Survey 2015 (South East Asian respondents only)

American students we spoke to, both Malaysians and Indonesians tended to have spent less time travelling abroad during their childhood and early adulthood – but Malaysians were less likely to feel they'd had limited exposure to other cultures.

These trends were borne out in our focus groups, in which Indonesian applicants were especially focused on the networking aspects of international study, and opportunities to gain exposure to new and varied perspectives from outside of their own culture. As HR applicant Fajar explained, *"It's not even the knowledge so much, it's the international exposure and the ability to interact with different people."* Similarly, engineering applicant Valerius emphasised the value of *"the experience and the people that I will meet who will have different opinions to me"*, adding, *"It's really easy to think like everyone else when you've lived in a country your whole life."*

Work experience

Like students elsewhere in the world, those in South East Asia recognise the value of work experience, perceiving this as increasingly essential in order to obtain their desired career objectives. Many students from this region are keen to gain some work experience abroad alongside and/or after their studies, and this can affect their decision about where to apply. As the chart above

shows, in the latest QS World Grad School Tour Applicant Survey, over half of South East Asian respondents cited a desire to stay on and seek work as one of their reasons for choosing a study destination.

Malaysian applicant Loay explained his decision to study abroad by reference to the prospect of gaining work experience, explaining: *"I'm passionate about what I'm doing and I think it will put me in a better position with employers as it's currently difficult to get a job, especially if you don't have experience."* Meanwhile, Indonesian applicant Nadia, though conceding that she may end up working for her family company, nonetheless emphasised her belief that she would benefit from the experience of working internationally: *"It's beneficial for me to have international input. It is about the social status and showing initiative and standing out."*

The popularity of the Netherlands for Indonesian students was also, for some students, at least partly due to the opportunity to gain work experience. For instance, Dendy explained, *"I would prefer the Netherlands because after we graduate from master's programmes, their government offers a working visa, so I would love to get some work experience there and then return to Indonesia."*

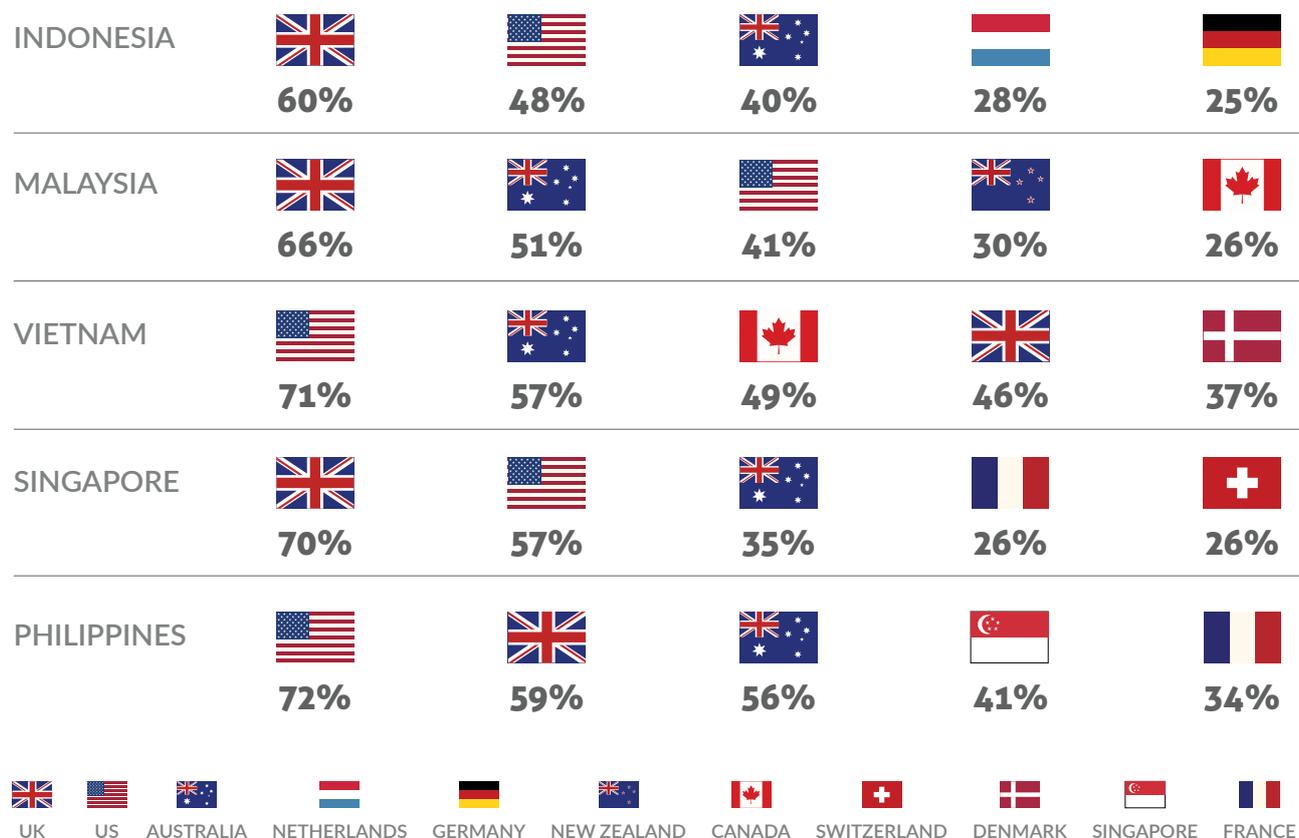
LOCATION

Much like students in other developing parts of the world, South East Asian students share the perception that studying abroad offers opportunities to access a higher quality of education, and that certain countries are leaders in particular industries, offering stronger employment prospects as well as greater expertise within universities. However, we found that students in South East Asia paid close attention to their future destination beyond considering employment prospects and qualifications. They also took account of proximity to family members, student satisfaction levels, living

costs, transport links and safety. Indonesian students seemed particularly concerned with safety, and were often looking for a location with low crime rates.

In the QS World Grad School Tour Applicant Survey, students in Malaysia and Singapore are significantly more likely to say they want to study in their own countries, compared to those elsewhere in South East Asia, and these two nations are also attractive study hubs across the region. The chart below (which excludes applicants' own country) shows the popularity

TOP 5 STUDY DESTINATIONS FOR SOUTH EAST ASIAN APPLICANTS



Source: QS World Grad School Tour Applicant Survey 2015

"I would like to go to a country where I will not get too much of a culture shock, where adapting to a different culture would not be that difficult."

Elisa, Malaysia

of Australia across South East Asia, and New Zealand also features in the top 10 in all of the countries considered. Aside from the strong interest in the UK and US, a broad range of European destinations are also popular choices. The Netherlands is particularly desirable among surveyed Indonesian applicants, while France is an in-demand destination across the region, placing above Germany for most groups.

How important is location?

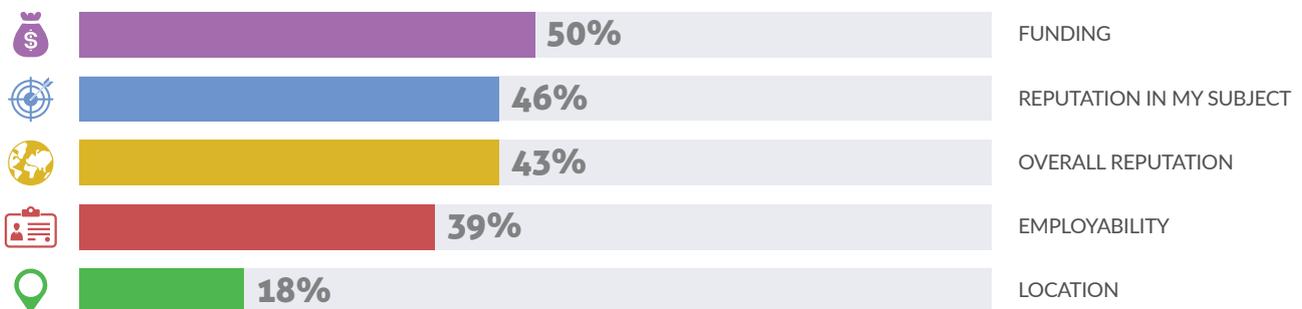
Despite the generally strong emphasis on university rankings and reputation amongst South East Asian students (explored on pages 11-13), some felt that the right location was either more important than

attending a highly ranked university, or equally important. Interestingly, students' perceptions about the relationship between reputation and location, and of the same country, often differed significantly. For instance, Loay in Malaysia explained that the appeal of studying in Australia was closely tied to the reputation of Australian universities: *"Location is important because I know that certain countries have better universities than others, for example Australia. Reputation is linked to location."* On the other hand, Rizki in Indonesia explained that she was considering Australia irrespective of the reputation of its universities: *"Curriculum and location are more important for me. I personally like challenging things and have a spirit of adventure."*

"Curriculum and location are more important for me. I personally like challenging things and have a spirit of adventure."

Rizki, Indonesia

PRIORITIES WHEN CHOOSING AN INSTITUTION FOR A MASTER'S DEGREE



Source: QS World Grad School Tour Applicant Survey 2015 (South East Asian respondents only)

South East Asians, particularly Indonesians, are very community-spirited – having family, friends and professional connections nearby is often an important factor when choosing a destination abroad. Assad from Indonesia explained that having one strong connection in a particular university or country made him feel more confident about applying: *“I’m looking at Stanford as they have just the programme I’m interested in, but I also know a professor there so I’m inclined to apply.”* This also partly explains why so many students are looking to study in former colonial power states – due to existing connections and the likelihood of family and friends living there, or at least a sense of familiarity.

“... I would love to be in Europe. Based on this, I’m interested in a Swiss university because they’re good in engineering and I know that’s what the country’s renowned for as well.”

Assad, Indonesia

National reputation and employment

Much like students elsewhere in the world – particularly, we found, those in Latin America, India and China – South East Asian students tend to have perceptions about the specialised expertise and strengths of entire countries, not just individual universities. These national reputations are often linked to beliefs about enhanced employment prospects, which can impact on destination choice. Indonesian applicant Assad explained that although he had not yet decided on an exact discipline, he already had ideas about where he’d like to be, based on his overall field of interest: *“I’m confused about what I want to study so I’m narrowing the list based on my study*

options and location. I would love to be in Europe. Based on this, I’m interested in a Swiss university because they’re good in engineering and I know that’s what the country’s renowned for as well.”

Fellow Indonesian Ivan said location would be a close second priority, following the quality and content of the programme. He believed his future prospects would be greatly improved by studying in a developed country: *“The programme has to be the priority as there aren’t many universities offering this exact programme (water treatment). Second is location as I want to study in a developed country because I will have a better standard of learning.”* Meanwhile Dicky, mentioned on page 5, was choosing a location based on factors he believed would give him a competitive edge in terms of employment, as well as a boost in social status on his return to Indonesia, noting: *“Even if you graduate from somewhere like Malaysia, that’s more respected [than a domestic degree].”* He also intended to remain abroad for a few years after graduation, if possible, to gain some work experience.

“The programme has to be the priority as there aren’t many universities offering this exact programme (water treatment). Second is location as I want to study in a developed country because I will have a better standard of learning.”

Valerius, Indonesia

Beyond careers

While employment outcomes are a key factor, South East Asian students’ interests and criteria for an excellent location stretch well beyond specific career concerns. Applicants in this region are interested in exploring new cultures and settings, meeting new people, and especially

in taking on personal challenges – they are driven to push themselves and aim high. This partly stems from the motivation to enhance their professional development, but it also reflects a strong sense of curiosity about other cultures, and the desire to develop the ‘global citizen’ mindset – in common with students across the world.

Andrew in Malaysia, looking to study a PhD in environmental sciences abroad, shared his aspirations: *“The benefits of studying in an internationally recognised institution are that, apart from experience, I can visit different countries, explore different cultures, establish networks and links with different people.”* Similarly, Indonesian Assad explained that as well as being attracted by Switzerland’s strong engineering profile, he was also enthusiastic about the opportunities for further travel and exploration opened up by its position: *“It’s in the heart of Europe so I can travel.”*

“The benefits of studying in an internationally recognised institution are that, apart from experience, I can visit different countries, explore different cultures, establish networks and links with different people.”

Elisa, Malaysia

The environment

Students in South East Asia, especially in Indonesia, seem to have a particular concern for the kind of environment they will be entering on campus, and in a new city and country. They want to know whether there is a sense of community, whether they will be welcome and fit in, whether it is safe and family-friendly. This concern was iterated more frequently in this region as compared to others for a number of reasons. South East Asians have a community-oriented mentality; a number of applicants

we encountered were seeking an environment suitable for relocating as a family unit; and some applicants raised racism concerns. Indonesian applicant Nadia described a fairly typical set of concerns: *“Ranking is not really my priority, as I believe it’s more about the students on campus. I would go somewhere I have family. If a university had a low reputation, I would still consider them if the programme was right. Location is important; how easily accessible, how safe, what the campus is like.”*

Ardiyan, who was being sponsored to study a master’s abroad by his company in Indonesia, agreed that location was more important than rankings – in his instance, because he was relocating his family. He noted that Scandinavian countries were his main preference. Fellow Indonesian Dicky, who was also concerned about safety, explained why he felt confident about studying in the US: *“It should be friendly, the environment. Because I think it can sometimes be difficult for Muslims to live abroad. The news always reports them getting harassed and abused. I have a few friends in the US and that’s not what they’re telling me; they said Americans treat them like family.”* Elisa from Malaysia was also keen to choose a destination where she would quickly feel at home: *“I would like to go to a country where I will not get too much of a culture shock, where adapting to a different culture would not be that difficult.”*

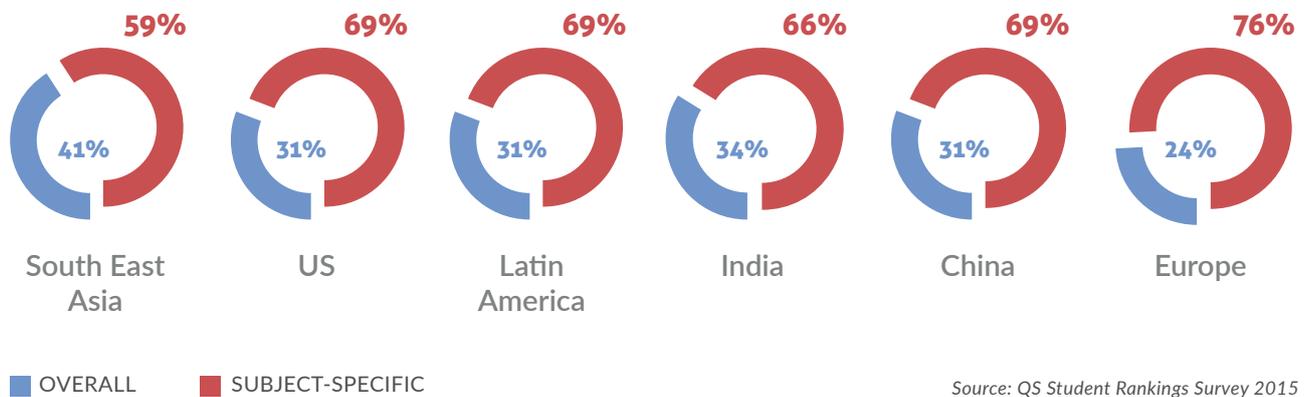
Seeing as there are few available and reliable information sources through which to assess the ‘feel’ of a place, word of mouth feedback and recommendations are important for students in this region – explored in more detail on page 14.

“If a university had a low reputation, I would still consider them if the programme was right. Location is important; how easily accessible, how safe, what the campus is like.”

Nadia, Indonesia

RANKINGS

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



Like their peers elsewhere in the world, the students we surveyed in Indonesia and Malaysia expressed a preference for global rankings, rather than regional or national tables, when choosing an institution abroad (see chart on page 12). They also followed the general trend in placing a higher value on subject-specific rankings – preferring the big picture in geographic terms, but the specialised approach at subject level – though to a slightly lesser extent than students in other parts of the world (chart above).

“If the ranking is general, we can see the usual universities at the top. If we filter by subject, we learn about new universities, which is much more helpful.”

Valerius, Indonesia

When asked about these preferences, students typically explained that the global tables were particularly useful when comparing universities in several different countries, while the subject-specific rankings could help

them identify institutions that were most “relevant” for them, as well as offering more opportunities to explore previously unfamiliar options. As Indonesian applicant Valerius said, “If the ranking is general, we can see the usual universities at the top. If we filter by subject, we learn about new universities, which is much more helpful.”

Again like students elsewhere in the world, those in Indonesia and Malaysia reported using rankings predominantly towards the start of their research, as a quick way to identify and shortlist institutions in their desired countries and subject areas. However, they often also spoke about returning to the rankings later in the process, in order to compare and check the reputations of specific institutions.

Indonesian applicant Nadia, for instance, said she typically consulted rankings only after gathering information from other sources: “I actually look at the campuses and research universities themselves first, and then I look at the rankings when I have a tie.” Likewise Malaysian applicant Faizal explained: “I would consult the rankings near the end of my research. So when I find universities that I like [...] I will check to see where they are ranked.”

Scholarships and company sponsorship

Students in these countries often had a rough idea of the rankings range they were aiming for – an institution in the global top 50, top 100, or another cut-off point. For many, this was defined by the requirements for a national scholarship programme, or set by their sponsoring company. Faizal explained, “Our Malaysian government will only provide us with a scholarship to study in one of the top 100 or 200 universities worldwide.” Likewise, Valerius told us: “In Indonesia, there’s a programme offering scholarships to those students that go to a highly ranked university, particularly if they get into the top 50.”

This connection with funding provides a strong incentive to consult rankings, even for students who claimed they would otherwise pay rankings little heed – such as Malaysian applicant Chun Yew: “Rankings are not important to me; I prefer to look at the course content and availability of scholarships first to see if it’s right for me, then consult the rankings. The Malaysian government can give a scholarship if I go to a top 200 university published by QS and The Times [sic] I think.”

The same process often applies for those being sponsored by a company. Indonesian MBA applicant Jupiter explained that he consulted the global rankings

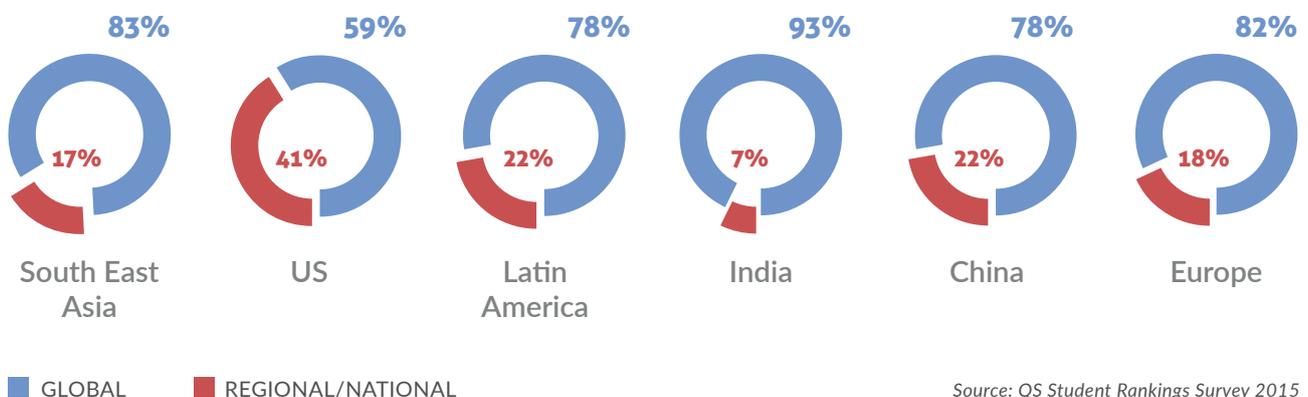
“because that’s the company policy – you have to be in the top 150 universities in order to get the funding.” However, he also noted that it was possible to gain company sponsorship for an institution outside of this range, as long as a “compelling reason” could be put forward.

A chance to impress employers

For those students not already being sponsored, rankings were often viewed as a means by which to impress future possible employers. Like their peers worldwide, South East Asian students perceive rankings as a reliable gauge of university reputation – and in turn a means by which to assess their own future value in the graduate jobs market. Echoing many of the students we spoke to elsewhere – particularly in the US and China – South East Asian students often felt that when it comes to getting a foot in the door, the prestige of your university matters more than grades, skills or course modules.

As Jupiter explained, a highly ranked university is a quick and simple way to impress employers: “It’s easier to justify why you’re better than the one next to you when you’re competing for a job.” Likewise fellow Indonesian applicant Assad argued: “The first impression is very important, so I want to make a good impression. Not to be arrogant, but I want to assure them that we’re on the same level.”

WHAT GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE OF RANKINGS DO YOU FIND MOST USEFUL?



Source: QS Student Rankings Survey 2015

He added, *“In fact, if you come from a highly reputable university, your grades don’t matter.”*

While this postulated shortcut approach to assessing job applicants is certainly open to criticism, the students we spoke to generally felt that the assumptions involved made sense. Jupiter stated, *“The reason you’re better is because it’s difficult to get into a good university.”* The same argument was put forward by fellow Indonesian applicant Nesya, who said: *“It’s kind of hard to get a master’s from a top university. So if you can get in, you have proved to yourself and everyone else that you can be a role model.”* She added that differences in grading systems and standards made it difficult for employers to compare grades across countries, concluding: *“Better to compare the rank.”* This was particularly interesting in light of her own experience of studying in both Indonesia and the Netherlands; she did not question the fact that employers would view her Dutch institution more favourably, despite having personally found the latter to be less academically challenging.

Meanwhile, Indonesian applicant Fajar felt that while studying abroad in itself would suggest graduates had gained certain qualities (see page 4), so too would the status of their institution: *“To me, the most important thing is where you studied, not what you studied, especially when it comes to business. [...] If an applicant has come from a good international university, it will tell me something about their ability to work under pressure and their ability to deal with ambiguity.”*

Personal challenge and ambition

While funding requirements and career prospects are two key parts of the picture, a final significant factor in South East Asian students’ use of rankings is the strength of their own personal ambitions and desire for continued development. In comparison to students elsewhere in the world, those we met in this region tended to adopt a relatively uncritical approach to rankings, accepting a fairly straightforward correlation between rankings and quality of education/experience. As Malaysian

applicant Fahim put this: *“I think rank is most important, as I think universities that are ranked highly will have the best professors, best facilities and provide the best level of education.”*

Fahim added, *“I’m also likely to get more challenged in these kinds of universities”* – and this idea of being ‘challenged’, as noted on page 10, recurred during our focus groups, particularly in Malaysia. For some, this was connected to their sense of having already studied at an internationally prestigious university, within Malaysia. As prospective PhD student Faizal explained: *“My current university is already ranked around the top 300, so I would like my next one to be ranked higher.”*

“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

However, there is more to this than the quest for external reputation and prestige. Faizal also anticipated that a highly ranked university would provide an effective catalyst for personal growth: *“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.”* This belief was echoed by many of his peers, such as fellow Malaysian Jacob, who said he was aiming at an institution within the global top 50 *“because I want something challenging”*.

Jacob also felt that higher-ranked universities were easier to assess and compare in general: *“Usually the top universities have a lot of information and a lot of statistics.”* As this suggests, while many South East Asian students place a strong emphasis on rankings, they always do so within a broader context of priorities and practicalities – explored in the following section.

OTHER PRIORITIES AND INFLUENCES

Alongside the factors discussed so far – career progression, location, rankings and reputation – South East Asian students consider a range of other information sources and factors. Much like students in India and China, applicants we spoke to in Malaysia and Indonesia were particularly keen to get advice from friends and family, current and future professors, and other students.

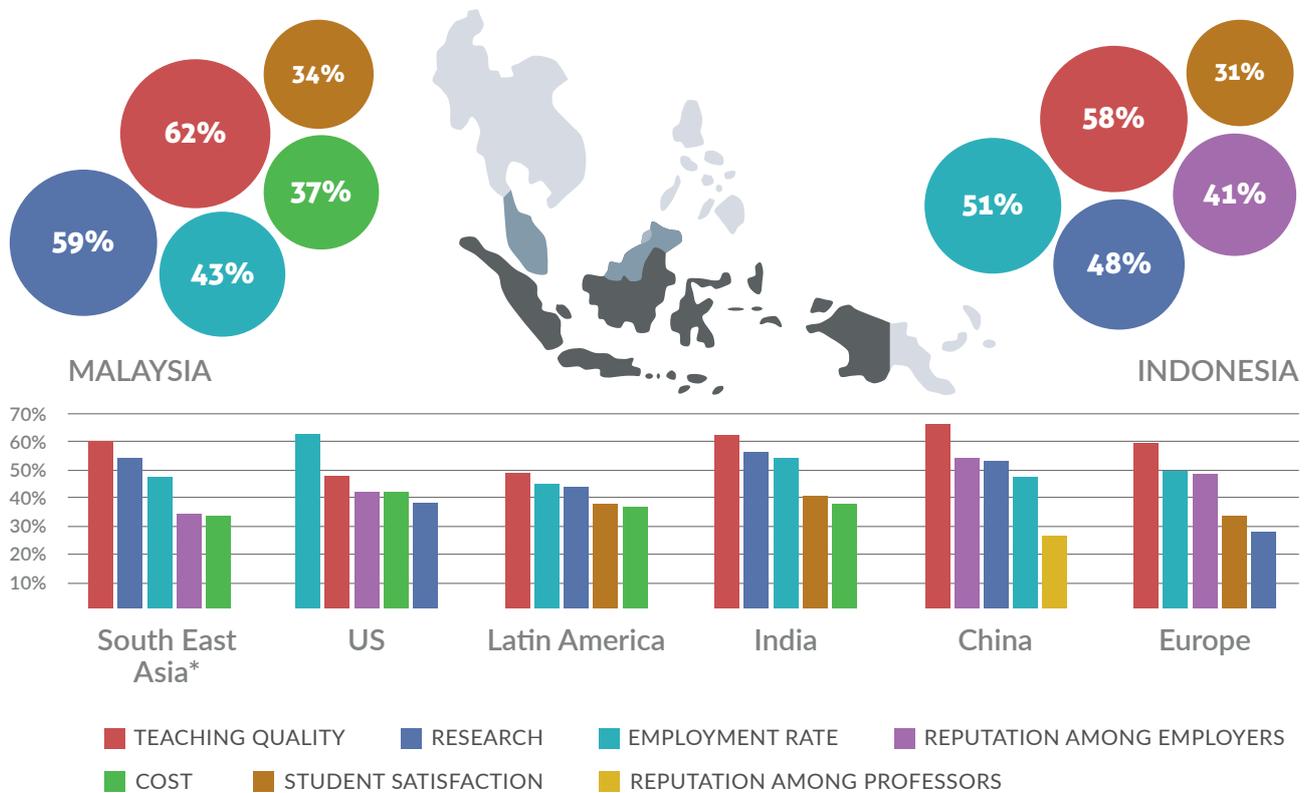
Word of mouth

South East Asian applicants are often keen to get input from friends and family members at every step in the application process – from choosing a location,

to choosing a programme and an institution. Fahim in Malaysia outlined a fairly typical approach, combining personal networks with general research online: “I go by the universities that are recommended to me by friends and family, but also universities that I hear positive things about, a lot of which are in the US. But I would often just Google top universities for X subject and follow the search.”

Likewise, Indonesian applicant Septian explained that he would gather practical information about admissions requirements and courses from university websites, while gaining additional confidence through feedback from family and friends: “I would always begin by Googling things. I find a lot of information on university websites. I

WHICH RANKINGS INDICATORS ARE MOST IMPORTANT TO YOU?



*Responses from Indonesia and Malaysia combined

Source: QS Student Rankings Survey 2015

have family members in Australia – that’s why I want to study there. I do think it’s good to get advice from family and friends, I do trust it.” Continuing the theme of trust, Malaysian applicant Marie said that although university websites are seen as the ‘official sources’ of information, she would be more likely to trust the advice she receives from professionals in her field: “As sources of information, I would usually contact responsible persons in my areas of interest, as well as university websites, although the latter are rather subjective.”

“I am mostly concerned with research and facilities [...] I also want to be sure that my supervisor will have enough time for me, so I will look at professors’ profiles and ensure that they don’t have too many students assigned to them.”

Sura, Malaysia

While students such as Nadia, in Malaysia, mentioned being more likely to consider institutions where they had existing connections – “I found Loughborough University in the UK through rankings, but I also had friends there and so now I’m considering it” – others were also keen to build new connections, in order to get insider feedback on the institution. As Malaysian applicant Sura said, “It would be good to meet some current or past students, to see what their experience was like.” In this, South East Asian applicants are part of a global trend in which students are increasingly keen to access peer reviews prior to committing to an institution.

Future professors and facilities

The experience and research of future professors is often of particular importance to South East Asian applicants. As the chart on page 14 shows, university research is a particularly high priority for Malaysian applicants –

second only to teaching quality as a key factor when comparing options. Many of those we spoke to were keen to find out about the expertise and prestige of future lecturers and supervisors, with this being of course particularly significant for prospective PhDs.

Sura, a PhD applicant in Malaysia, emphasised the importance of professor availability: “I am mostly concerned with research and facilities [...] I also want to be sure that my supervisor will have enough time for me, so I will look at professors’ profiles and ensure that they don’t have too many students assigned to them.” Loay, another Malaysian PhD applicant, explained that getting the right setting in which to pursue his research interests is his personal priority: “I look at the supervisors, i.e. professors. It’s really important to me that our interests match up before I send in my proposal or apply. I also care about how involved the university is with industry and how much their research actually gets used.” This desire for industry links and a focus on real-world applications was a recurrent theme in our focus groups, particularly in developing countries.

“The second [priority] is the professors and how many papers have been published, because I think there’s a link between how many have been published and the facilities.”

Vandru, Indonesia

Facilities often came up as a key aspect for South East Asian students, in some cases due to concerns that poor facilities would limit their research potential. Indonesian master’s applicant Vandru believed the quality of the available research facilities in his field of engineering would directly impact on his productivity. After employment prospects, he said professors and research publications would be his next priority – believing this

would also reflect the quality of facilities: *“The second [priority] is the professors and how many papers have been published, because I think there’s a link between how many have been published and the facilities.”* Meanwhile Jacob in Malaysia expressed the view that a strong reputation implies good professors and facilities, adding an additional incentive to consult university rankings and other reputation metrics: *“The facilities are important and teachers, professors, are more reputable [at a highly ranked university]. I want to do research, so good reputable professors are important to me.”*

Malaysian PhD applicant Andrew was among those calling for more information to be provided about academics and research opportunities: *“University websites are ok; you can find the required information. However, you can’t find the research areas of academics, which is of interest for PhD students. There should also be information about their availability, because most of them have limited capacity to coordinate students on research topics.”*



Case study

Name: Dicky
Location: Jakarta

Having graduated from an Indonesian institution with a degree in English language and literature, Dicky is preparing to apply for a master’s in a US university, with the ambition of pursuing a career in playwriting. Although he feels that studying abroad, especially in a prestigious country such as the US, will improve his career prospects, this is not his sole motivation for pursuing a master’s degree; he’s equally concerned with personal development: *“My bachelor’s degree is actually enough to get a job, but I want to study further, and maybe even get a PhD, to improve my personal skills.”*

He is quite particular about the location of his future institution, believing that US universities will best prepare him for his chosen career, as well as providing more opportunities in general: *“The US has more work opportunities; I can easily join a Broadway theatre. As you know, the US is the land of hope! I would be happy to stay there after if a good job comes up.”* Having recently

married, he is also looking for a location with low crime rates, a friendly environment, and good opportunities for his wife – who is also seeking a degree abroad: *“I’m looking to stay relatively close to my wife – we need a number of good universities in a city.”*

Like many other applicants in South East Asia, Dicky is looking for various forms of financial support, and wants to ensure his university had a good name and as high a ranking as possible. This, he says, is due to the correlation between a high rank and social status achieved within Indonesia. He is looking to build connections and stand out to future employers through the prestige of his chosen university, and of US institutions in general. Like the majority of applicants worldwide, he prefers an honest approach from universities and is keen to hear practical information, instead of generic marketing messages.

University websites

Like prospective students worldwide, those in South East Asia make frequent use of university websites during their research – to get a feel for the location, programme information, and detailed professor profiles. Indonesian applicant Ajar was among those who felt university websites should help prospective students find out about local life and “*the environment of the city*”. Noting his personal passion for football, and his interest in studying in a football-mad city such as the UK’s Manchester, he continued: “*I want to get involved and integrate. Universities should provide information on living there and of course admissions and costs, the nightlife and entertainment are important too.*”

“Sometimes, I have to click more than 10 links before I get to any kind of useful information. Good universities, however, tend to provide much better information. [...] Sometimes, if a lot of the detailed information is missing, I choose not to apply.”

Assad, Indonesia

As we found to be true elsewhere in the world, South East Asian students make rapid and lasting associations between the quality of the website and the quality of the university itself. Indonesian Assad told us: “*Sometimes, I have to click more than 10 links before I get to any kind of useful information. Good universities, however, tend to provide much better information. [...] Sometimes, if a lot of the detailed information is missing, I choose not to apply.*” As can be seen from Assad’s experience, having a poorly functioning website can have severe consequences. Riszajidien from Indonesia specifically highlighted “*the look of the website, how easily one can navigate and how accessible it is*” as crucial factors when making a first impression.

Scholarships

Financial aid is often a key priority for students from this region, and, as explored on page 12, often underlies their use of international rankings, as well as influencing their choice of destination and institution. The students we spoke to in Malaysia and Indonesia frequently mentioned government schemes encouraging them to apply to the top-ranked universities, in order to access premium financial support. Interest in scholarships not related to the rankings was equally high.

Information about scholarships – particularly eligibility requirements – was named by most students in this region as the information they had most difficulty accessing, alongside visa requirements for each country.

Dicky from Indonesia was among those advocating an honest approach when it comes to conversations about finance, calling for universities to provide the full picture up-front: “*If they can tell me about the tuition fee and whether they have scholarships available, I will be interested. I want them to honestly tell me about the practicalities straight away, as I don’t want to waste my time.*” Others confirmed that scholarships are a key component of their research, and play a significant role in determining which destinations and universities they will choose.

“If they can tell me about the tuition fee and whether they have scholarships available, I will be interested. I want them to honestly tell me about the practicalities straight away, as I don’t want to waste my time.”

Dicky, Indonesia

FINAL THOUGHTS

For universities, our research highlights a number of opportunities to strengthen engagement with prospective students in South East Asia. Institutions recruiting in this region are likely to benefit from emphasising opportunities for personal challenge; information about the local environment; details of national strengths and post-study employment opportunities; and a willingness to engage on the question of funding.

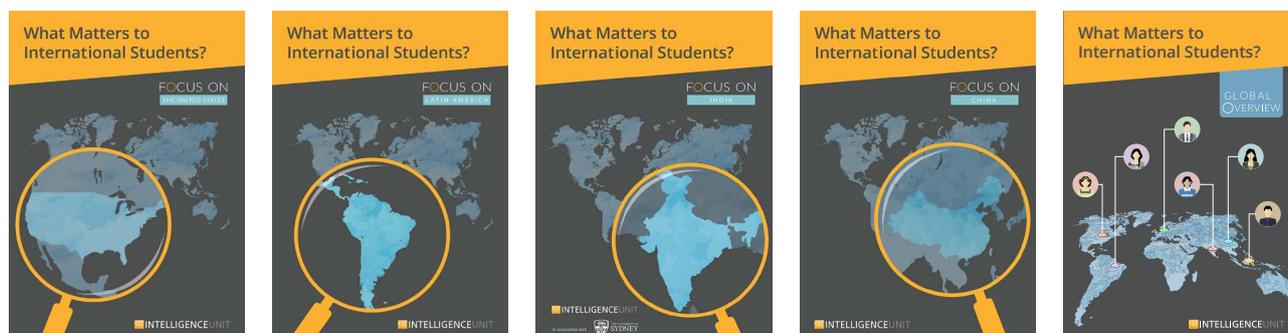
Highlighting diversity on campus, and opportunities to build an international network, is likely to be an effective approach when targeting applicants in South East Asian countries with less culturally diverse populations, who are keen to broaden their exposure to other traditions and mindsets.

More broadly, students in this region are keen to get a feel for the community they will be joining, both on- and off-campus. There's an opportunity here for universities to provide both reassurance and stimulation – referring to safety and cultural integration, as well as opportunities for wider travel and exploration. Feedback from current and past students could be of particular use in helping to 'sell' the location.

Across the world, applicants are seeking study destinations that offer opportunities to gain work experience alongside and/or after their studies. For South East Asian students, this is coupled with a focus on future career trends and emerging sectors – and they are likely to be attracted by institutions and courses which display a similar set of priorities.

Finally, our focus groups reflect the extent to which South East Asian applicants are motivated by the desire to challenge themselves – a factor which drives them to seek out high-achieving and dynamic environments in which to study. Institutions can speak to this desire through reference to the strength of their own reputations, but also by providing details about levels of academic supervision and support; innovative research and investment in facilities; profiles of accomplished academic staff; and examples of high-achieving alumni.

For insights on the distinctive priorities, challenges and motivations of international applicants in other key recruitment areas, take a look at the other reports in this series. If you're interested in a particular region or topic that has not been covered by this project, please get in touch by emailing 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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