

# What Matters to International Students?

FOCUS ON  
CHINA



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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 China

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. China is the unparalleled largest market for international students worldwide. There are 75% more Chinese students currently studying overseas than there are students from India, the second-largest sender of international students. UNESCO figures confirm that China is also among the top 10 most popular destinations for international students (hosting around 2% of all international students). The UNESCO data shows the top three destinations for Chinese students to be the US, Japan and Australia, with a range of Asian and European countries also featuring in the top 10.

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, 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 reports, exploring key trends in each region.

While the bulk of this report is based on research collected in Shanghai and Beijing, additional context is also 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. In compiling the current report, we considered trends among Chinese respondents to this survey, alongside our on-the-ground research in these two major cities.

A number of distinctive elements characterise Chinese applicants, often arising from the intense competition they face on returning to seek work in China. The challenge of gaining a foothold in China's glutted graduate jobs market means they tend to place a very high priority on university reputation and employment prospects. At the same time, they're motivated to study abroad to access a different educational experience, improve their intercultural communication skills, encounter new ways of thinking, and learn from some of the world's leading hubs of business and innovation. These factors form the key themes of this report.



Almost 60 focus groups  
with ~300 participants



11 countries



15 cities



19 events



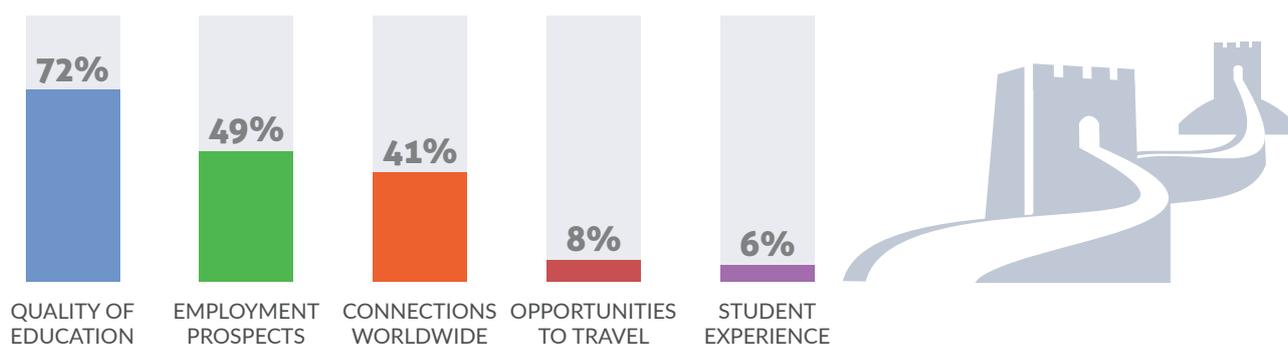
Over 1,800  
survey responses

## 1,000 REASONS TO STUDY ABROAD

Given that China is the number one sender of international students worldwide, it is perhaps not surprising that Chinese students cite a broad variety of motivations for studying abroad. It should be emphasised that the underlying motivation is usually connected to employability; our research suggests that

Chinese applicants are above all keen to study abroad – especially at a famous university – in order to improve their chances in China’s highly competitive graduate jobs market. While this will be explored in more detail in the following sections, here we outline some of the more specific reasons given for studying internationally.

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



Source: QS Student Rankings Survey 2015 (Chinese respondents only)

#### *Desire for a different educational experience*

As the chart above shows, accessing a better quality of education is the most commonly cited benefit of studying at an internationally recognised university among surveyed Chinese applicants, followed by employment prospects. Similarly, ‘teaching quality’ is their main concern when comparing institutions abroad (see chart on page 5).

This desire for a different educational experience was frequently mentioned by our Chinese focus group participants. Many said they felt that the Chinese

higher education system was lacking, often highlighting a lack of emphasis on practical knowledge and work preparedness, unengaging teaching methods, and limited research facilities. Interestingly, many students believed the Chinese system to be especially limited in their own subject area, but this sentiment was in fact expressed across a broad spectrum of subjects, including sciences, arts, humanities and business.

For example, Sofie, applying for a master’s in international politics, told us: “If you’re into research – like technology, hard science – it’s pretty fine here. But in terms of practical stuff, and also things that are useful for

your career or useful for you to explore yourself, it's not very inspirational, it's not very helpful, the facilities." Her view that Chinese universities were "fine" for those pursuing scientific research was questioned by PhD applicant Cheng, who explained: "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... I think the laboratories in the United States are very good. The instruments, the teachers, and the atmosphere of the research - that can give me broader horizons."

Cheng also mentioned that schemes such as the Thousand Talents Program mean those who study abroad have access to higher academic positions and salaries on their return to China, providing an additional incentive for overseas study: "They want to excite people to come back, so they give them high salaries, give them cars, give them all things."

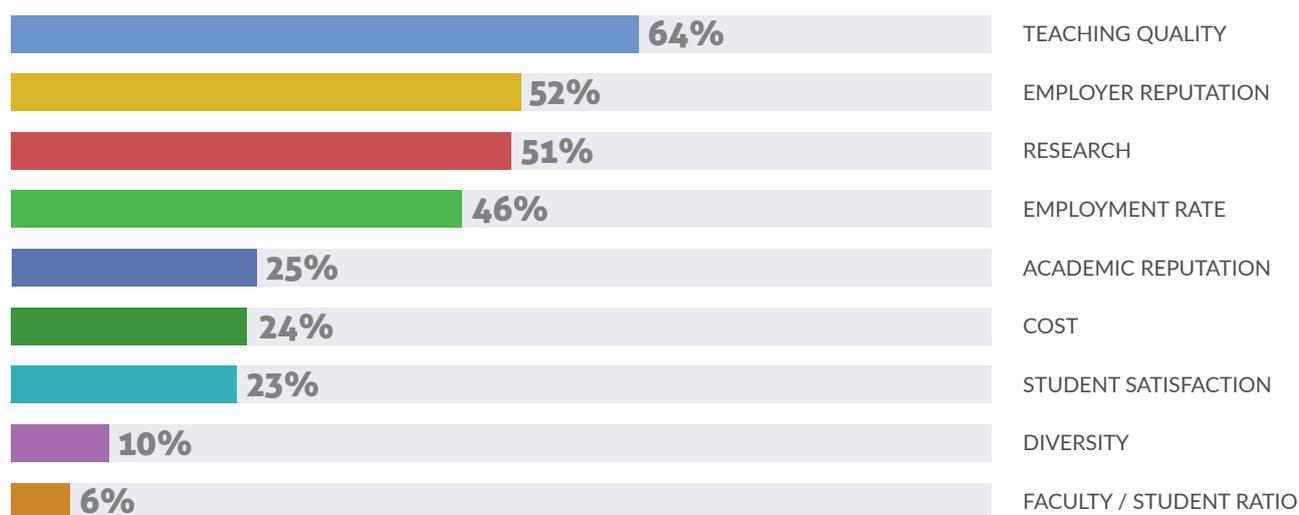
Meanwhile, anthropology student Tao, also seeking a career in academia, felt that studying abroad was almost a requirement in order to progress in her field: "For my major, anthropology, we call it a Western major, because it's come from outside. In China only a few universities have

this department." She added that "almost every lecturer or professor" in her current Chinese university had graduated abroad, "from America, Europe, at least Hong Kong" - adding to her belief that an international degree was virtually indispensable for those pursuing an academic career.

*"...I want to apply for schools abroad and see how foreign students attend class, and the atmosphere they are in."*  
 Shuxiao, Shanghai

Speaking more generally, Shuxiao, planning to study human resources, articulated her hopes of experiencing a more engaging approach to teaching and learning: "In most Chinese universities the teachers are more likely to teach students the theory [sic] 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."

## WHICH INDICATORS ARE MOST IMPORTANT TO YOU?



Source: QS Student Rankings Survey 2015 (Chinese respondents only)

### Fresh perspectives and insights

Just as Chinese students are keen to experience new ways of learning, they are equally excited about encountering new ways of thinking, and alternative approaches to their field. Many felt they would gain fresh perspectives through face-to-face communication with academics and students from other countries. For instance, prospective master's in finance student Xiang spoke about having read books by Western writers, and feeling inspired by the prospect of learning directly from them: *"They always give different points. Chinese talk and their talk, it's different. So if I can have the chance to chat with them, I think that is a wonderful experience."*

Xiang was also especially keen to spend time in one of the world's major financial hubs, as a way of gaining insights to help drive forward China's own move towards free-market capitalism: *"China has a short capital market history. 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."* This

was a common perspective among those interested in studying and working within the business and finance sector. There are parallels to be drawn here with the students we spoke to in India, who were also keen to gain international exposure as a way of injecting fresh creativity and productivity into the way businesses were operated in their own country\*.

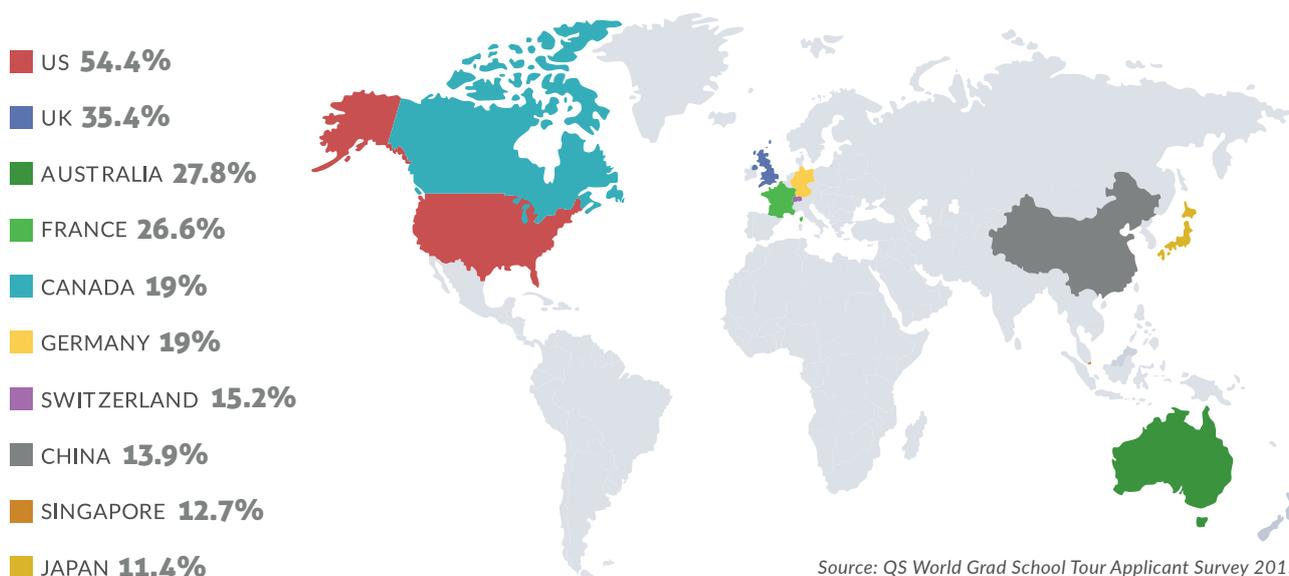
Beyond the business sector, Chinese applicants in other fields were similarly keen to learn from other nations, travelling to parts of the world where innovation is particularly intensive. For instance, computer science applicant Ashley told us: *"I think the most interesting place in the world to understand computer engineering is Silicon Valley. So I really want to go there to see what are they doing there."*

### Intercultural communication skills

Ashley (quoted above) was among many Chinese students who highlighted the importance of gaining a more international perspective, as the world – and

\* See the full report, *What Matters to International Students: Focus on India*.

## TOP 10 STUDY DESTINATIONS FOR CHINESE APPLICANTS



China – continues down the path of globalisation. Zhiyi, who already had his own business, said one of his main motivations for studying a master's abroad was to improve his intercultural communication skills: *"[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."*

Yuhan, seeking a master's in economics, elaborated on the importance of developing these cross-cultural competencies while studying abroad: *"Whether I 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."* In addition, some Chinese applicants stressed that they would like to make use of their English language skills. As Kathryn said: *"After all these years of learning English, we finally have to find an opportunity to use it."*

Finally, for some Chinese students, applying to study abroad simply means they can apply to more universities, and therefore increase their chances of acceptance. This point was made by master's applicant Yiqiao, who pointed out that *"the risk is really high"* of not gaining a place to study within China's own competitive higher education system, making international applications a better bet.



## Case study

Name: Weibing  
Location: Beijing

Having already started working, Weibing feels that as a mathematics graduate, his knowledge of business is *"a little bit weak"*. He believes studying a business-focused master's degree abroad will give him a stronger understanding of both the technical and managerial aspects of his company.

As is the case for many Chinese students, consulting university rankings is a natural part of Weibing's decision-making process. While this is largely with the aim of being able to impress future employers, he also believes highly ranked universities are likely to offer *"excellent programs"*.

After using rankings to create a shortlist, he focuses on researching *"the department, the professors, the career services"*, and is also keen for more information about *"the job opportunities after graduation, alumni networking, scholarships, funding."*

Speaking about the importance of career services in particular, he highlights the importance of choosing a university which attracts prestigious companies to its campus to recruit graduates directly. While acknowledging that those in scientific fields may be more concerned with research opportunities, he emphasises that local job prospects are a high priority across all disciplines – *"not how the school will prepare me, but the job opportunities in the area, in the region or in the country."*

Highlighting another relatively common anxiety among Chinese applicants – of not being accepted to study at any university – Weibing also suggests that rankings could be used to reduce this risk, as a means by which to gauge the difficulties of gaining a place. *"If I want to guarantee that I get admission this year, I may select some top universities from the ranking, and maybe some in the middle and some in the bottom."*

## APPROACHES TO RANKINGS

University rankings are widely consulted in China, and hold a particularly strong significance for prospective students in this part of the world. Chinese applicants themselves are often aware that rankings are taken especially seriously in their own country. As Zhiqin, applying for a master's in finance, told us: *"Rankings are very popular in China; everything is rankings."*

Chinese students explain the significance of rankings primarily by reference to the intense competition for graduate-level jobs within China. Keen to avoid joining the so-called "ant tribe" – the disconcertingly large number of university graduates who end up in menial, low-paid employment – Chinese students approach rankings as a way to ensure their degree will be sufficiently prestigious to save them from this fate.

Weibing, applying for a master's in business and mathematics, summed up this widely shared motivation for consulting rankings: *"When you are going to talk with your employer, they will say which university are you from? And you will say, I'm from Blah Blah Blah University, and oh I never heard about it... No matter how great your GPA is, it doesn't matter. That's why I think we all pay much*

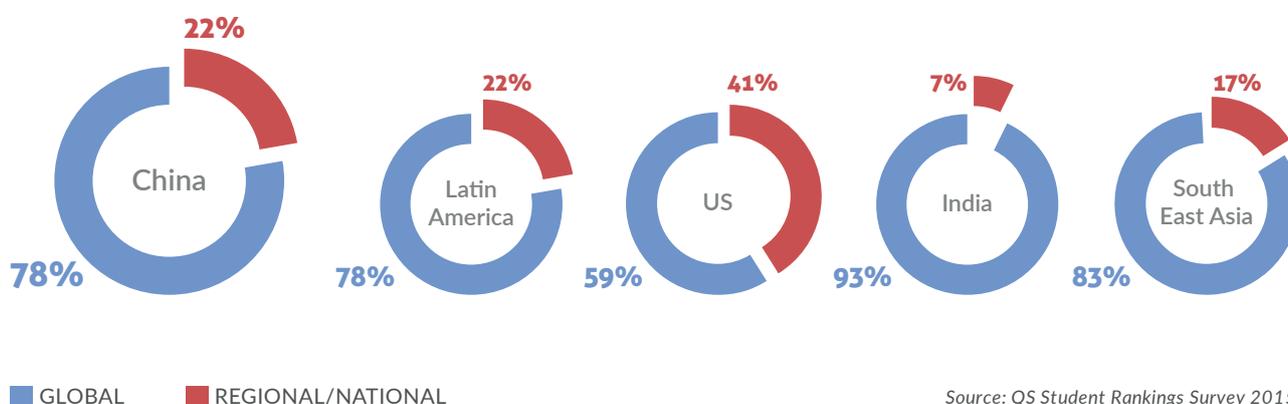
*attention to the rankings."* Or as Xiang summarised, the ranking is simply an "admission ticket" for entry to China's competitive professional sectors.

The students we spoke to very clearly associated rankings with their future return to China, and often stressed that they would be likely to prioritise differently if they planned instead to remain and seek work abroad. This point was made by prospective master's in finance student Kathryn: *"If you graduate from very famous universities like Yale or Harvard... if you're working in China this may make a lot of difference. But if you want to stay where you studied abroad, maybe the kind of talent or the*

*"If you want to come back to work in China, choose the ranking. If you decide to stay, especially in the States, choose the curriculum."*

Zhiyi, Beijing

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



Source: QS Student Rankings Survey 2015

qualifications are more important.” Similarly, Zhiyi, applying for a master’s in management, advised: “If you want to come back to work in China, choose the ranking. If you decide to stay, especially in the States, choose the curriculum.”

### Playing the fame game

With their future employment prospects in mind, many Chinese applicants acknowledge that a high ranking in itself is no guarantee. What they really need to assess is the level of fame and status their chosen institution holds among Chinese employers, and this does not always correspond entirely to the order of the international ranking tables. Indeed, many of the students we spoke to shared examples of cases when even a degree from a relatively highly ranked university had failed to secure the desired job. These stories of friends, family members, and in some cases themselves, encourages Chinese applicants to aim for a place at the most famous universities possible.

Aside from their concern with employment outcomes, Chinese applicants also associate rankings with a more general sense of social prestige, or “face”. Studying at a well-known university is seen as a way not just for them, but their families too, to improve their status. Conversely, graduating from an unknown institution

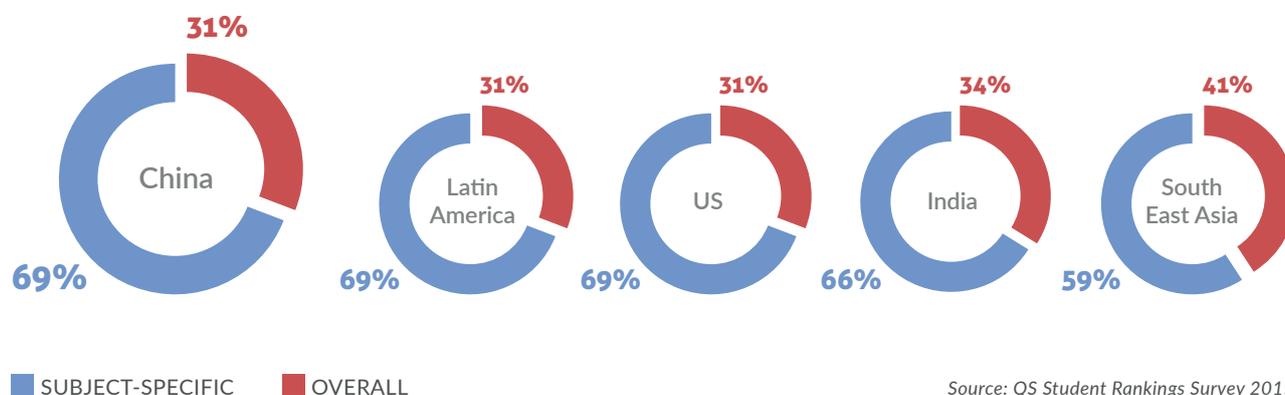
could be seen as a source of social embarrassment. As Dinna, an engineer considering an MBA program, told us: “For our parents, maybe they will put a lot of pressure on us, like you have to apply for this top university in the world, otherwise when I want to show off to my friends and colleagues, oh what kind of no-name university – they will feel ashamed.”

More generally, Chinese applicants often mention consulting rankings with, or on the suggestion of, their parents. Compared to students in the other locations covered by this project, Chinese participants were especially likely to say their parents had prompted them to review the ranking tables. For example, Zhonglin, who had completed a master’s degree in the UK, recalled: “My parents gave me a suggestion. They went on the website, printed out the university rankings and told me: ‘Look, this means good’, so I followed.”

“My parents gave me a suggestion. They went on the website, printed out the university rankings and told me: ‘Look, this means good’, so I followed.”

Zhonglin, Beijing

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



Source: QS Student Rankings Survey 2015

### Rankings as an indicator of quality?

Despite placing a particularly high significance on reputation, Chinese applicants are much like their peers elsewhere in the world in their approach to using and interpreting rankings. As the charts show (see pages 8-9), they follow the general trend in expressing a preference for subject-specific rankings, and – as would be expected amongst those aiming to study abroad – they place a higher value on international ranking tables, rather than regional or national comparisons.

Chinese students are also similar to students worldwide in consulting the rankings mostly towards the start of their university research, using the tables to create a shortlist. Again like those elsewhere, they often believe that rankings are – to at least some extent – a reflection of internal quality, as well as external reputation. This perspective was expressed by Kathryn: *“I think good [highly ranked] universities offer you a good platform, maybe you have these students helping you in your later life... Also some well-known professors will deliver their speeches, so in these well-known universities we have more resources and more good teachers, we get better education and better people skills.”*

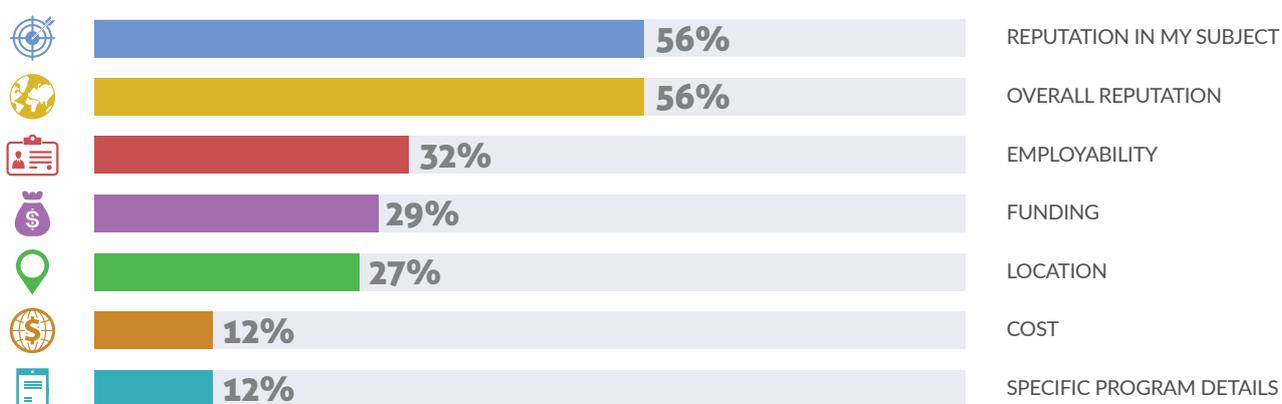
Similarly, though Sofie was critical of the idea that rankings should be correlated with educational quality, she nonetheless conceded that highly ranked institutions’ status as a “scarce resource” would make them more likely to attract a strong pool of candidates and higher levels of funding. For this reason, she felt that rankings would indeed bear a relationship to the quality of the experience on offer.

Finally, Chinese students are no different to those elsewhere in the world when it comes to reviewing – or rather not reviewing – the methodology used to compile the ranking tables. Though possessing a more or less accurate understanding of the types of factors assessed, they had very rarely actually checked this. After all, the appeal of the rankings is largely as a time-saving device, and this is true for Chinese applicants as much as any others.

*“I think good [highly ranked] universities offer you a good platform, maybe you have these students helping you in your later life...”*

Kathryn, Shanghai

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



Source: QS World Grad School Tour Applicant Survey 2015 (Chinese respondents only)

## DETERMINING THE TRUTH

While students across the world are keen to ensure they get a true picture of the university experience they're signing up for, this seems to be a particularly strong concern for those in China. Although placing a high value on external reputation, Chinese students also emphasise the importance of consulting less formal sources – particularly peer reviews – to establish the veracity of the image presented in rankings tables and official university websites.

*"I think she's very honest and I trust her in the rest of the information session."*

Zi, Beijing

For instance, Kathryn told us: *"I think that the information you can get so far is like officially published, but [what I want to know is] the true situation – students like us... How they feel, how they really study in this university, and do they have a difference before and after they enter, how much they can change and benefit from the university, like the first-hand feeling."* Along with a number of her peers, Kathryn also said she would be wary of taking student opinions presented on official university websites at face value, saying: *"We don't know whether they are decorated [i.e. edited] or not."*

Many others similarly emphasised the importance of seeking 'unofficial' perspectives, and the majority of students we spoke to had already attempted to do so, often through forums such as *ChaseDream*. They also highlighted the value of advice from senior students at their current university, as well as friends who were already studying abroad, or had done so previously. These peer perspectives, whether gained through

personal networks or online platforms, form a particularly significant part of their decision-making process.

Some of the students we spoke to again associated this with the Chinese concept of "face", expressing the opinion that universities would be reluctant to show any weaknesses, as they would want to maintain their face. It seems possible that familiarity with this concept at least partly underlies Chinese students' emphasis on getting beyond the publicly presented image.

When meeting university representatives in person, Chinese applicants again stressed that they would be looking for signs of trustworthiness and integrity. For example, prospective master's in finance student Zi said she would be impressed by *"patience and honesty"*, giving the example of a university spokesperson who had admitted that it is difficult for Chinese students to gain admission to US institutions. As a result, Zi said: *"I think she's very honest and I trust her in the rest of the information session."*

*"I think that the information you can get so far is like officially published, but [what I want to know is] the true situation – students like us... How they feel, how they really study in this university, and do they have a difference before and after they enter, how much they can change and benefit from the university, like the first-hand feeling."*

Kathryn, Shanghai

## FIGHTING FOR A PLACE IN CHINA'S PROFESSIONAL SECTORS

It's no secret that one of the key motivations for prospective international students around the world is to improve their employment prospects. For Chinese applicants, however, this takes on a whole new level of intensity. Well aware of the 'ant tribe' problem mentioned earlier, they understand that the university they study at could have a huge and lasting impact on their future prospects.

This situation can be further intensified by the high hopes and expectations of parents, who are understandably keen to ensure the best experience and outcomes for their only child. This adds to the existing pressures exerted by the high-stakes Chinese employment market in which the fame of your university really can make or break your future career prospects.

In addition to seeking universities with high levels of fame and prestige within China, students are keen to assess several other factors, which they believe will improve their employment outlook.

### Opportunities for internships

While work experience is increasingly sought-after by students across the globe, this is worth exploring as a

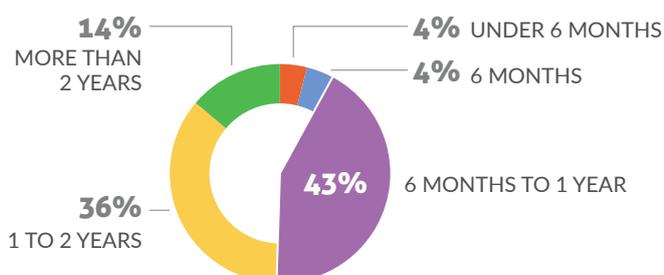
particularly prominent priority in the context of Chinese applicants. For example, when asked how a university could make a good impression on him, Zhiyi answered: "I really want to know if I can get an internship. So you have more confidence - like, I didn't pay for nothing."

Like many Chinese applicants, Zhiyi stressed that information about internship opportunities was often lacking from university websites, highlighting an opportunity for universities to improve communications in this space. Some, such as MBA applicant Summer, felt that statistics on work experience provision should be incorporated into university rankings, since this is such a key concern for Chinese students.

Often aware of differing regulations, Chinese students would in some cases say they had chosen a study destination on the basis of whether or not they would be able to gain work experience during and/or after their studies. This focus seems to be reinforced by those in advisory roles, including academics within China. Xiang outlined his plan of studying at a reputable university while gaining work experience, explaining: "My teacher always tells me, if you do finance, what is important is experience."

## DEMOGRAPHICS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

### INTENDED STUDY DATE

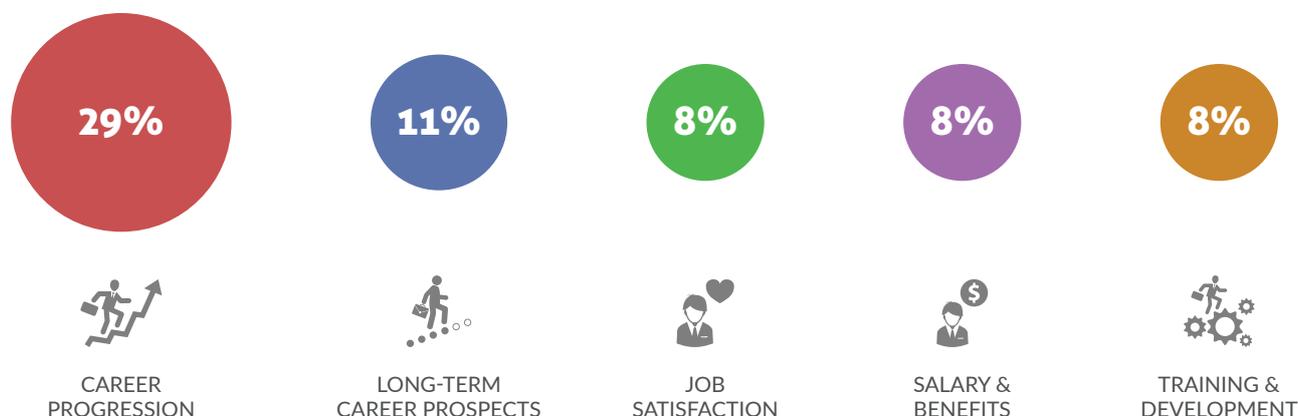


### CURRENT WORK EXPERIENCE



Source: QS Student Rankings Survey 2015

## TOP 5 PRIORITIES WHEN CHOOSING AN EMPLOYER



Source: QS World Grad School Tour Applicant Survey 2015 (Chinese respondents only)

### Developing an international outlook

Chinese applicants place a high value on the international perspective they will gain from studying abroad, which they perceive as a catalyst for career advancement. As Gary, considering a range of options, told us: *“I want to study abroad because the education systems are different between China and the Western countries, so if you want to create a huge – I mean not huge, but unique business in the future – it might be better to know about other people’s thoughts.”*

As well as gaining new approaches to business, many Chinese applicants spoke about the importance of expanding their understanding of international markets, believing that this would become increasingly valued within China. Lixia, seeking a master’s in management, said: *“China has an emerging economy. It’s now undergoing its most profound national reform, and it is becoming a more and more open market. I think international perspectives must have quality for a professional in international companies, and studying abroad can provide such international perspectives.”*

*“China has an emerging economy. It’s now undergoing its most profound national reform, and it is becoming a more and more open market.”*

Lixia, Shanghai

In order to develop the desired international outlook, Chinese applicants are keen to be immersed in a foreign culture, and almost forced to leave their comfort zone. A number of those who had already studied abroad spoke about their sense of disappointment at having finally made it to their dream university abroad, only to find that most of the students in their class were also Chinese. Zhonglin, who had completed a master’s in social sciences in the UK, recalled: *“All students in my program were Chinese, perhaps only one or two were foreign. All of us [when] we go anywhere we don’t speak English, we speak Chinese, so what is the point of going abroad? We talked about this with the university, about the distribution of students, we told them: ‘You have to do something about this!’”*

## FINAL THOUGHTS

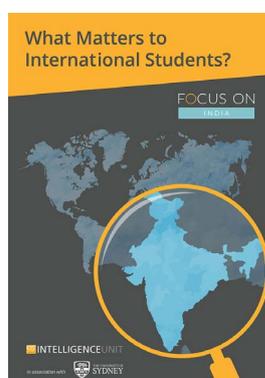
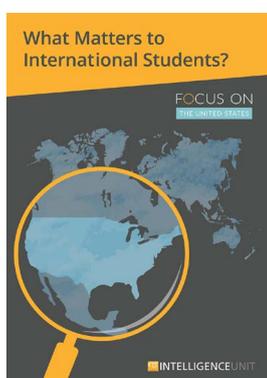
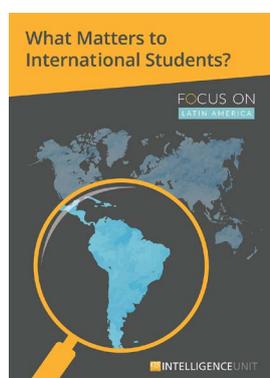
For higher education professionals, our research highlights a number of opportunities to strengthen engagement with Chinese students. Of course, becoming well-known within China – and especially among prominent Chinese employers – is not a task that can be achieved overnight. In the longer term, institutions may consider investing in branch campuses and/or partnerships with high-profile Chinese universities and employers, in order to attain invaluable status and visibility within the country.

Universities reaching out to Chinese applicants should also highlight the quality of the educational experience they have to offer, emphasising opportunities for practical learning and exposure to a wide range of perspectives. Highlighting innovative aspects of the locality – such as leadership in a particular area of technology or commerce – is also likely to be effective, as is reassuring Chinese applicants that they will be joining a well-balanced community of both local and international students.

There is also scope to make a strong positive impression on Chinese students by providing in-depth information about local opportunities to complete internships, as well as examples of employment outcomes. Perhaps more challenging is finding ways to meet demand for ‘unofficial’ perspectives on the university, by facilitating unmediated peer-to-peer communications. Institutions would be likely to benefit from encouraging their current cohort of Chinese students to share their experiences through forums and social networks – both those run by the university, and third-party platforms.

Finally, university representatives should be willing to admit to difficulties and areas for improvement, as a way of demonstrating integrity and honesty, alongside a willingness to help. Providing a truthful picture of what is assessed during admissions, and just how challenging it may be for a Chinese student to gain a place, would also be appreciated.

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



*Coming soon...  
Focus on South East Asia,  
and a global overview of  
the project.*

## 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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