



QS World Grad School Tour

# Applicant Survey 2015

*In association with Cambridge English Language Assessment*

Part 1: International Student Motivations

October 2015



TopUniversities.com

*in association with* **Cambridge English**

## ABOUT THE REPORT

This report is based on survey responses collected from 7,153 students applying for graduate-level courses worldwide, conducted between late December 2014 and June 2015. Respondents completed an online questionnaire about their study plans, preferences, motivations and priorities. The results outlined here focus on identifying the key drivers for today's international postgraduate students, exploring changing trends in recent years, and highlighting significant points of variation between different applicant groups.

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## KEY FINDINGS

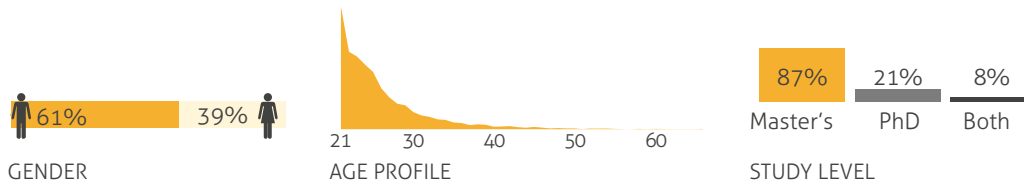
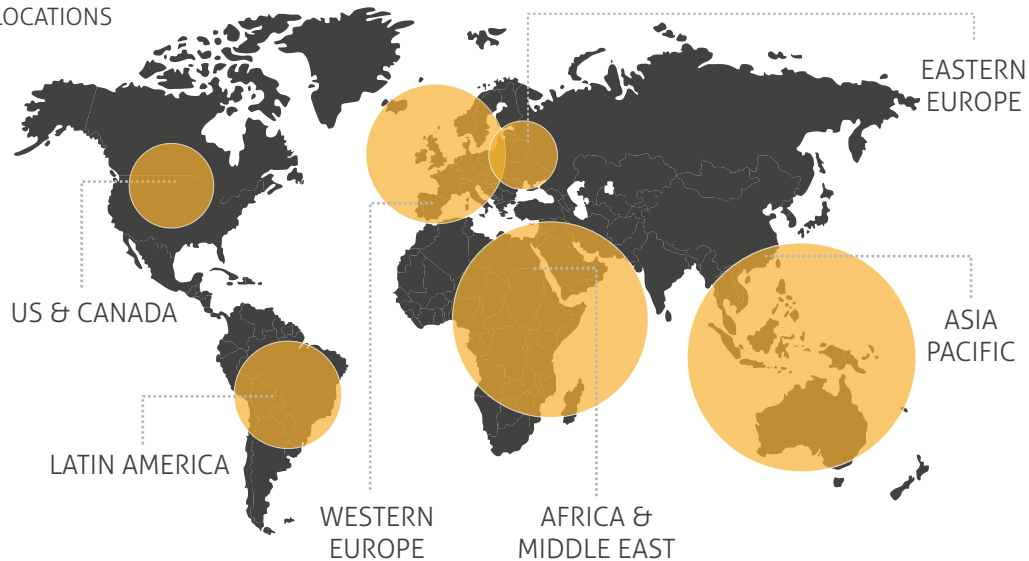
- **Employability-related factors are continuing to gain in importance throughout each stage of the applicant journey.** Survey trends over the past six years show prospective postgraduates are increasingly considering their future career prospects when making the decision to pursue a master's or PhD; when choosing a country in which to study; and when selecting an institution. Motivations may be linked to a specific professional plan, and/or to a more general sense of the need to become as 'employable' as possible.
- **Our survey demographics reflect growing global interest in the STEM subjects, particularly computer sciences and engineering.** This shift in the profiles of our survey respondents aligns with growing global awareness of high demand for STEM specialists, the rising profile of computing-related careers, and the impact of national schemes to encourage more young people to enter the STEM fields.
- **While the US and UK retain their stronghold at the top of the list of target study destinations, Germany continues to make significant gains in international appeal.** As Germany establishes itself as continental Europe's leading choice among prospective international postgraduates, nearby rivals France and Spain appear to be losing out.
- **Access to financial aid and post-study employment opportunities are becoming increasingly important factors in destination choice.** While overall, applicants' top priority is to ensure their qualifications will be internationally recognized, a growing number of prospective postgraduates say their country choice is influenced by funding availability and also by the fact that they would like to stay and seek work in the country after graduation.
- **Different countries appeal to international postgraduates with distinct patterns of priorities.** Those applying to Anglophone countries and most Western European destinations are predominantly motivated by securing internationally recognized qualifications. On the other hand, cultural interest and lifestyle are more likely to be prioritized by those applying to many Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking countries, as well as Italy, while many Asian destinations are attracting applicants with a focus on financial aid.
- **When choosing an institution, reputation remains the top priority for applicants at both master's and PhD level.** However, different segments of postgraduate applicants differ in placing a higher value on either the overall reputation of the institution, or its reputation in a specific subject area. Master's applicants are also especially likely to prioritize employability and career prospects when selecting an institution, as well as placing greater emphasis on the location, while PhD applicants are more likely to focus on funding availability.

## SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

### Who participated?



### LOCATIONS

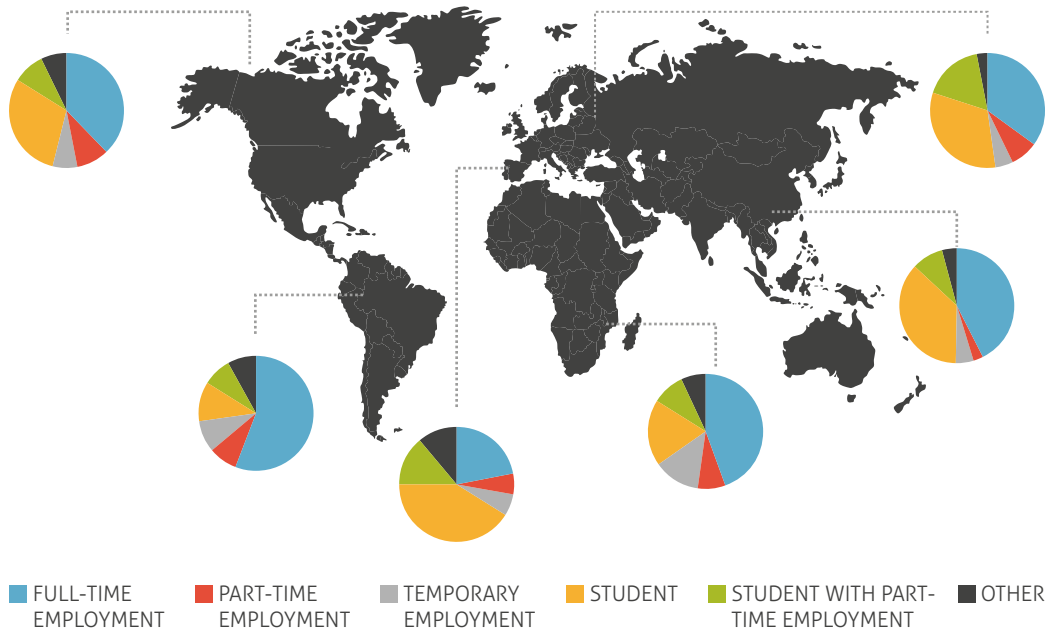


This year's survey draws on just over 7,150 responses from prospective postgraduate students in more than 150 countries. The majority (87%) of respondents are interested in applying for master's programs, with 21% interested in PhDs and 8% expressing interest in both study levels.

The age range of respondents reflects typical norms among postgraduate applicants, with two-thirds aged 25 or younger, and a further 22% in the 26-30 bracket. While the overall average age is 26, this varies across the world: 24 is the average among applicants in Eastern Europe and the Asia Pacific; 25 in Western Europe; and 26-7 in the remaining regions.

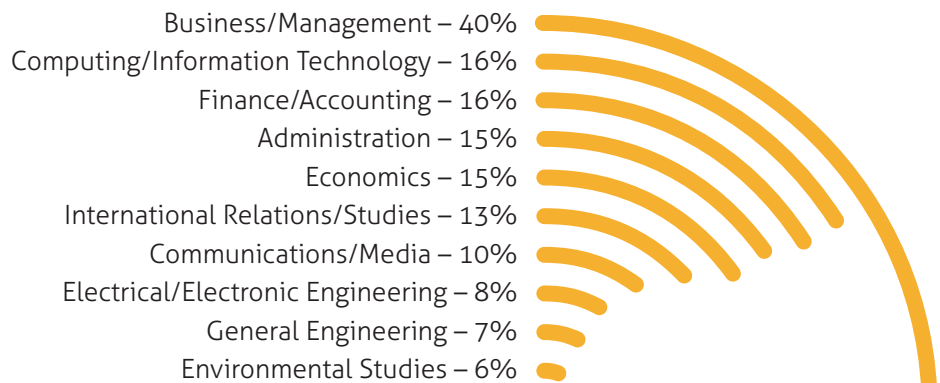
Around 40% of responses are from applicants in the Asia Pacific region, with a particularly high response rate from prospective students in India. The top 10 countries for response numbers also includes Nigeria, Pakistan, Ghana, Italy, Brazil, the US, UK, Greece and Kenya – demonstrating, overall, a diverse global spread.

### Current situation



Overall, the largest group of respondents (41%) are currently in full-time employment, with slightly fewer (39%) currently enrolled as students, either with or without a part-time job. This varies significantly depending on location; respondents in Latin America are the most likely to be in full-time employment, while those in Western Europe are the most likely to be current students.

### Subject interest

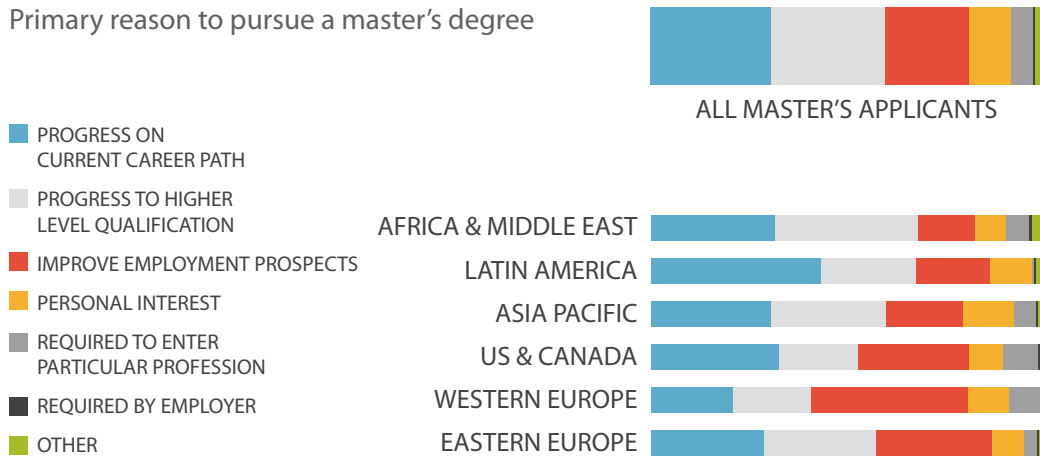


In terms of academic discipline, survey respondents are predominantly interested in business and management-related programs, reflecting the global popularity of this field at postgraduate level, as well as QS's own strong profile in this area.

Over the past five years, the survey has seen an increase in the proportion of respondents applying for courses in the STEM fields, particularly in computer sciences and engineering. Growing interest in these fields can be attributed to growing awareness of high global demand for STEM specialists, the rising profile of computing-related careers, and the impact of national schemes to encourage more young people to enter the engineering professions in particular.

# 1. MOTIVATIONS FOR PURSUING A POSTGRADUATE DEGREE

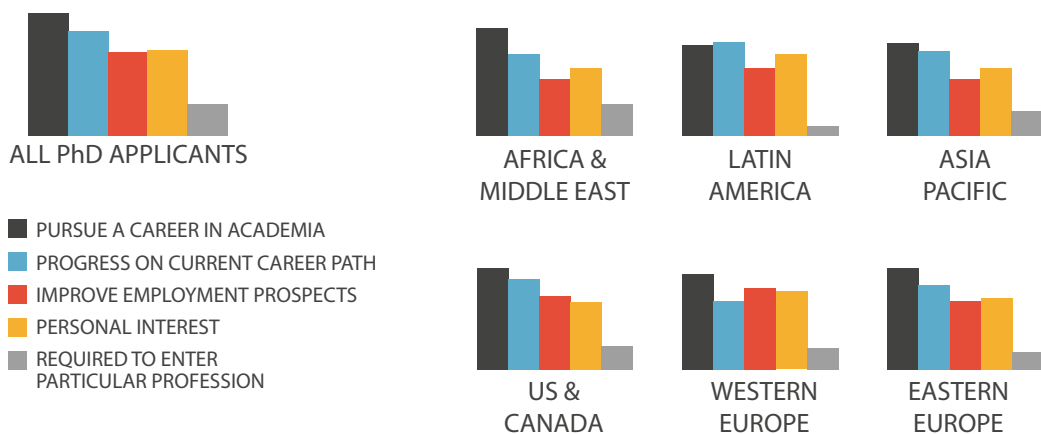
Primary reason to pursue a master's degree



*"I probably want to open a business myself, and I'd like to gain deep background knowledge of the subject and learn how to use it in real life."*

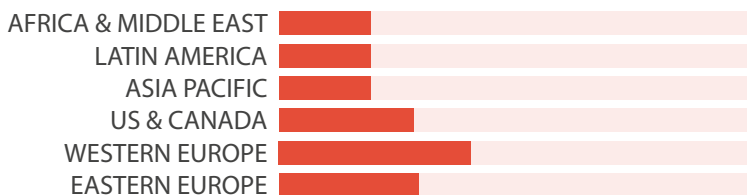
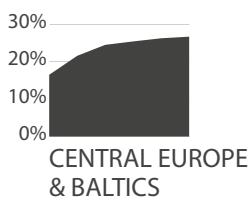
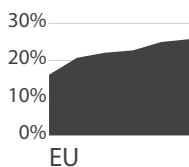
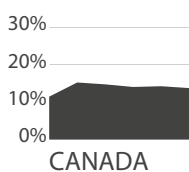
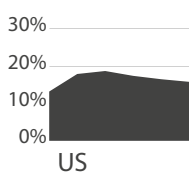
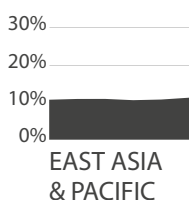
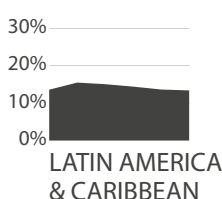
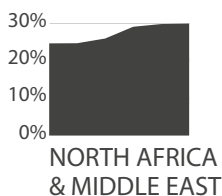
Hyunhung, 22, Korean, applying for a master's in business management

Main motivations in considering undertaking a PhD



The survey asks prospective postgraduates why they are intending to study a master's or PhD program. Due to survey reformatting, master's applicants were asked to select just one main motivating factor, while PhD applicants were able to select multiple options. While the two sets of responses are therefore not directly comparable, they nonetheless provide interesting insights into the key drivers behind study at each level.

### Employability looms large



Improve Employment Prospects (Master's only)

*"I don't feel that my undergraduate degree prepared me fully for the world of work, so I'd like to find what I want to do by further study, rather than jumping straight in."*

Cherry, 21, British, applying for a master's in international relations/tourism

Factors relating to employability loom large. Almost 60% of master's applicants say their prime motivation for further study is to progress in their current career, to improve their employment prospects more generally, or to enter a particular profession. The same set of ambitions is similarly prominent among prospective PhDs, and unsurprisingly many of the latter – though by no means all – are aiming specifically at careers within academia.

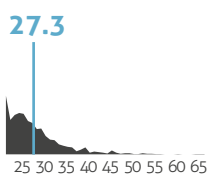
While "personal interest" comes lower down the list of priorities, it nonetheless remains an important factor for a significant proportion of postgraduate applicants at both study levels. This is particularly apparent among the PhD group, who were able to choose multiple options, but even among master's applicants, 11% identify this as their primary motivator.

Considering the geographic distribution of responses, there is a large degree of consistency in motivations for postgraduate study among applicants across the world – with a few notable points of differentiation. In particular, applicants in Western Europe are especially likely to be motivated by the general aim of "improving employment prospects", at both study levels.

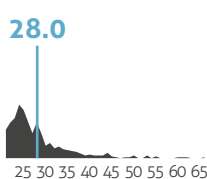
Youth Unemployment 2008-2013, source: the World Bank



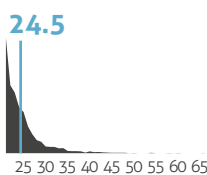
### Career building



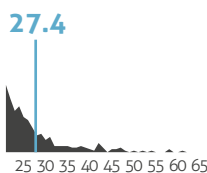
AFRICA & MIDDLE EAST



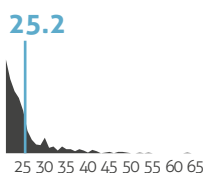
LATIN AMERICA



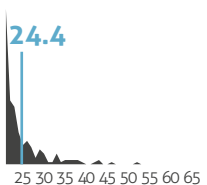
ASIA PACIFIC



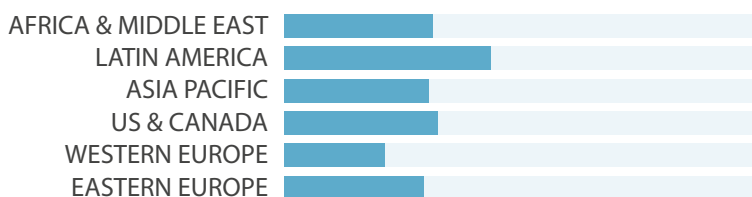
US & CANADA



WESTERN EUROPE



EASTERN EUROPE



Progress On Current Career Path (Master's only)

*"I think bachelor's degrees aren't enough anymore. I think employers are looking more for people with work experience and a master's or PhD."*

Anna, 22, German, applying for a master's in psychology

This aligns with the younger age profile of applicants in Western Europe, and the fact that they are more likely to be applying for postgraduate study directly from undergraduate level, meaning they are less likely to have a "current career" to build on. Their more general concern with employability may also reflect high levels of uncertainty and anxiety about graduate employment prospects (see youth unemployment figures on the preceding page), in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis which hit many European nations especially hard. In Western Europe in particular, it seems this has left today's postgraduate applicants with a strong sense of the importance of making themselves as robustly "employable" as possible.

Comparing this year's survey results with those collected in 2008-9, it's apparent that "personal interest" has declined as a core motivating factor for postgraduate applicants worldwide, while the desire to advance within a specific career path and/or to a higher study level has increased. The ambition of progressing within a current career has particularly grown as a key motivation for further study among applicants in the Asia Pacific, Western and Eastern Europe, and the US and Canada.

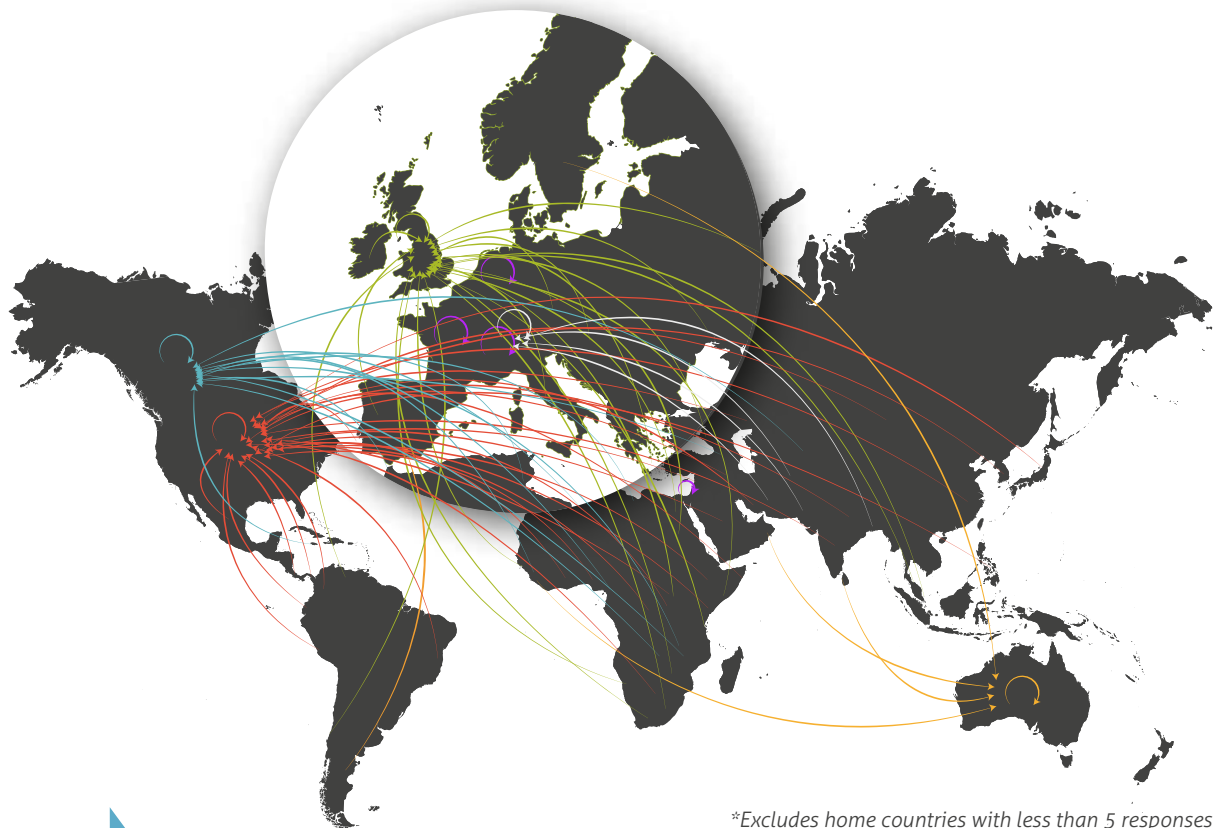
### Age distribution and average age of master's applicants

## 2. MOTIVATIONS WHEN CHOOSING A STUDY DESTINATION

Survey respondents are asked to identify the countries they are considering studying in, and the reasons for these preferences. Here, some of the most interesting insights come when we look at how these points interact, and compare the priorities identified by different cross-sections of applicants.

### Most popular study destinations

Top choice destination per home country, 2015\*



\*Excludes home countries with less than 5 responses

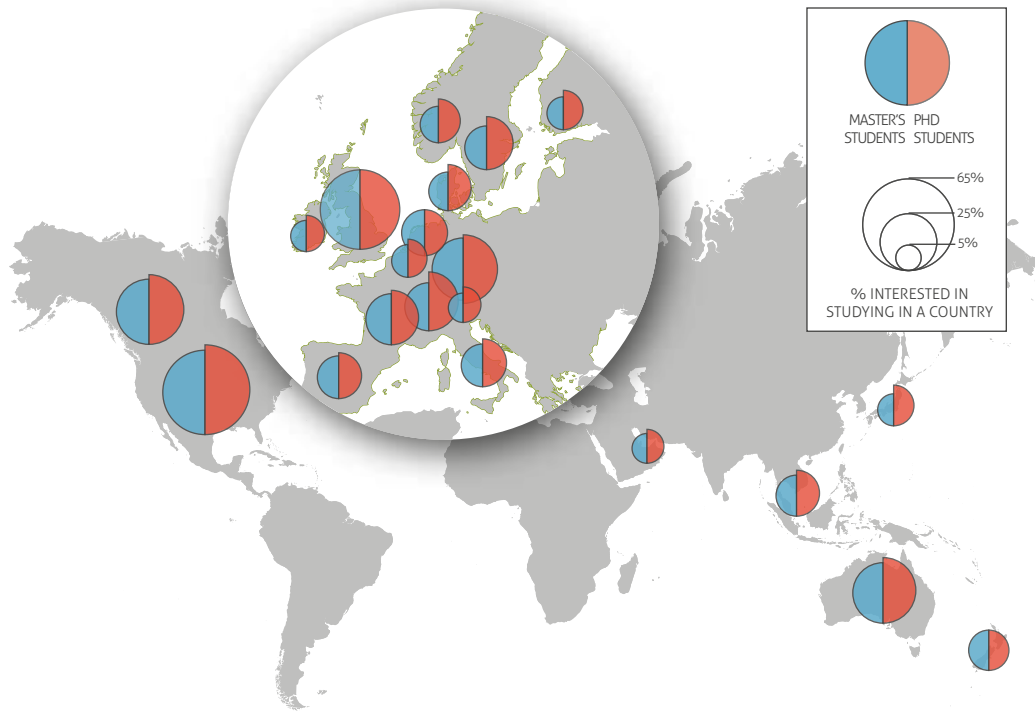
*"I love French culture, I love the food and Paris is absolutely beautiful. I'm also interested in Spain because of how massive the Spanish language is, and Asia because the business world is huge and I think it would be great to gain experience there with an internship."*

Clara, 20, British, applying for a master's in law

The US and UK remain the most popular destinations among our survey respondents, occupying the top two spots for applicants in all world regions. For prospective postgraduates in all regions outside of Europe, the US is the most popular choice, while within Western and Eastern Europe the UK is the most sought-after study destination.

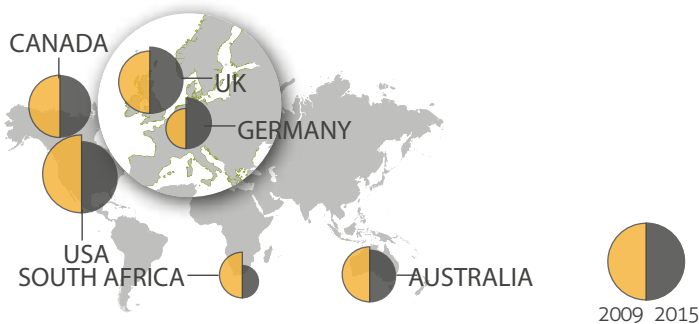
Other traditionally popular study destinations also perform as expected; Canada, Australia and Switzerland all remain in more or less the same positions within each region's top 20 in both the 2014 and 2015 survey results.

Most popular countries in which to study, 2015

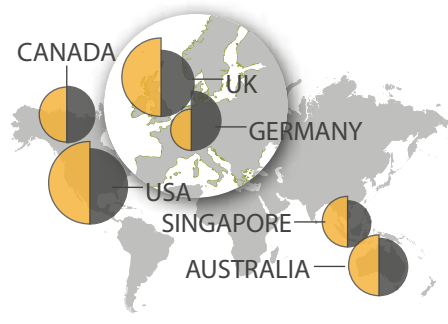


Germany has risen in preference, in many cases quite dramatically, among applicants in almost every region. This reflects the country's growing fame among international students beyond Europe, in large part accelerated by growing global awareness of its relatively affordable study costs, and robust economy.

Changing preferences among applicants in Africa & Middle East, 2009-2015



Changing preferences among applicants in Asia Pacific, 2009-2015



Top choice destination:  
Germany



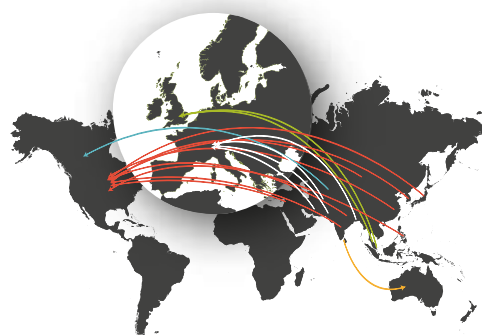
Top choice destinations from  
Africa & Middle East



Top choice destinations  
from Latin America



Top choice destinations from  
Asia Pacific



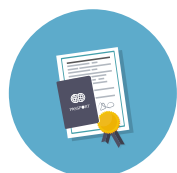
This growing interest in Germany has coincided with a fall in interest in neighboring France and, even more notably, Spain. Compared to its performance in 2014, the 2015 survey sees France overtaken by more popular rivals among applicants in most regions, while Spain has dropped an average of four places across the board. It seems Germany may be supplanting France and Spain as the primary (cheaper) European alternative to the UK.

While Germany is the strongest example, Northern European countries in general have been attracting more attention from prospective postgraduates this year. Sweden, the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, Finland and Belgium all saw a surge in popularity compared to their performance in the 2014 survey.

In 2014, we observed that students outside of Europe and North America were becoming more interested in their own regional education powerhouses. While interest in these countries is still higher than it was in 2009, the 2015 results see traditional 'Western' destinations regaining ground against their less conventional rivals.

In Africa and the Middle East, the United Arab Emirates and South Africa have become less popular; in Latin America, Brazil and Argentina are drawing less interest; and the Asia Pacific saw interest in India halve (dropping nine places), while Malaysia and Singapore are losing ground to countries like Germany and Sweden.

## Motivations for choosing a study destination



**63%**  
INTERNATIONAL  
RECOGNITION OF DEGREE

The most commonly cited consideration when choosing a study destination remains “international recognition of qualifications from destination”, closely followed by “scholarship/financial aid availability” and “cultural interest in and lifestyle of destination”.



**57%**  
SCHOLARSHIP/  
FINANCING AVAILABLE

The least-cited reason for choosing a destination is “visa situation”, followed by “destination is in/near to the country the applicant is working in”. Interestingly, applicants in the Asia Pacific are slightly more likely to select “other” than “destination is in/near to the country”.



**52%**  
CULTURAL INTEREST  
& LIFESTYLE

The leading factor for students in the US and Canada is actually a tie between cultural interest and lifestyle, and international recognition of qualifications. Meanwhile cultural interest and lifestyle is the dominant priority for respondents in Latin America and Eastern Europe, with international recognition of qualifications a reasonably close second place.



**47%**  
WORK THERE  
AFTERWARDS

International recognition of qualifications is the most important reason for survey respondents in Western Europe and the Asia Pacific. In both cases it comes 5% ahead of the second-place reason, which for applicants in Western Europe is cultural interest and lifestyle, and for those in the Asia Pacific scholarship/financial aid availability.



**38%**  
IMPROVE  
LANGUAGE SKILLS

Applicants in Africa and the Middle East are the only group for whom scholarship/financial aid availability is the leading reason for destination choice; this has a 5% lead over the second-place factor – international recognition of qualifications.

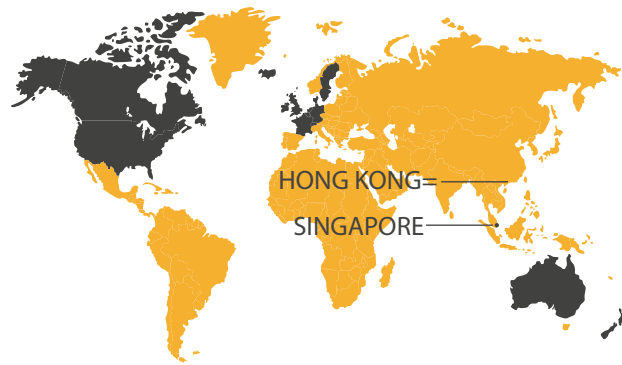


**33%**  
LOCATION OF  
TARGET SCHOOL

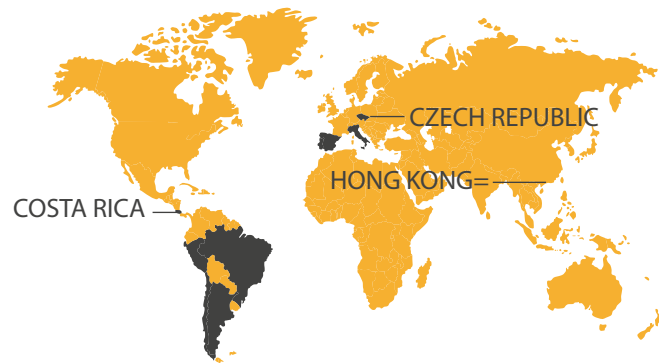
Compared to the 2008-9 survey results, scholarship/financial aid availability has become more important for applicants in all regions, as has the aim of seeking work in the destination country after graduation. In all regions except Western and Eastern Europe, international recognition of qualifications and cultural interest and lifestyle have become less important factors among prospective international postgraduates.

### In more depth

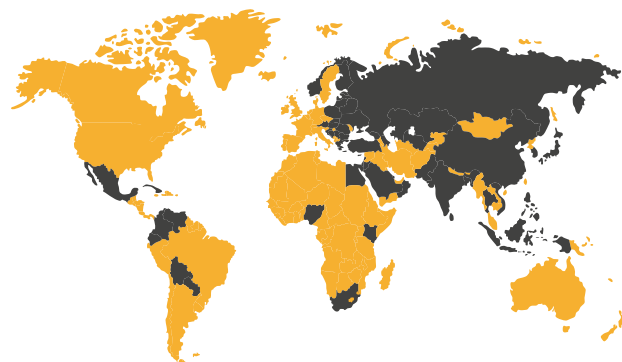
- DESTINATION CHOSEN DUE TO INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION OF DEGREE
- OTHERS



- DESTINATION CHOSEN BECAUSE OF CULTURAL INTEREST & LIFESTYLE
- OTHERS



- DESTINATION CHOSEN BECAUSE SCHOLARSHIP / FINANCING AVAILABLE
- OTHERS



When mapping out applicants' leading motivations for choosing their target destination, it's clear that the leading Anglophone and Western destinations tend to attract those who are primarily concerned with the international recognition of their qualifications. Meanwhile many Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking nations seem to appeal to students for reasons relating to cultural interest and lifestyle, while an even larger group of countries are attracting applicants whose top priority is financial aid.

Singapore, destination #12 for popularity in the 2015 survey, seems to appeal to prospective students for almost identical reasons to the leading Western destinations. But with this notable exception aside, destinations outside of Western Europe and North America tend to attract applicants with different patterns of priorities.

Students applying to the United Arab Emirates, for instance, are most interested in scholarship/financial aid availability, and are more likely to be concerned with creating a network and living near to their current country compared to other applicants. Those interested in studying in India are also more likely to prioritize scholarship/financial aid availability, and are more likely to want to work in the country afterwards.

*"I chose the UK because it's literally the breeding place for art and culture – it's so diverse. You come here, and you get inspired by so many things, you don't actually have to make an effort to get inspired, it just sort of comes to you."*

Ashna, 21, Indian, applying for a master's in fashion design

Although some countries are more popular among PhD applicants than master's applicants, there is next to no difference in motivations for destination choice between the two study levels. While percentages differ slightly, the overall order of priorities does not.

Male applicants are more likely to cite scholarship/financial aid availability than female applicants, and are less likely to be motivated by cultural interest and lifestyle. Males are also more likely to be influenced by the visa situation, while female applicants are more likely to want to study closer to home, or to choose their destination based on a family connection.

There is no major difference in motivations for destination choice when comparing applicants who are currently studying with those currently outside of education. And although there are some minor differences further down the list of country choices, respondents tend to share the same top five destination choices regardless of how they plan on funding the bulk of their studies.

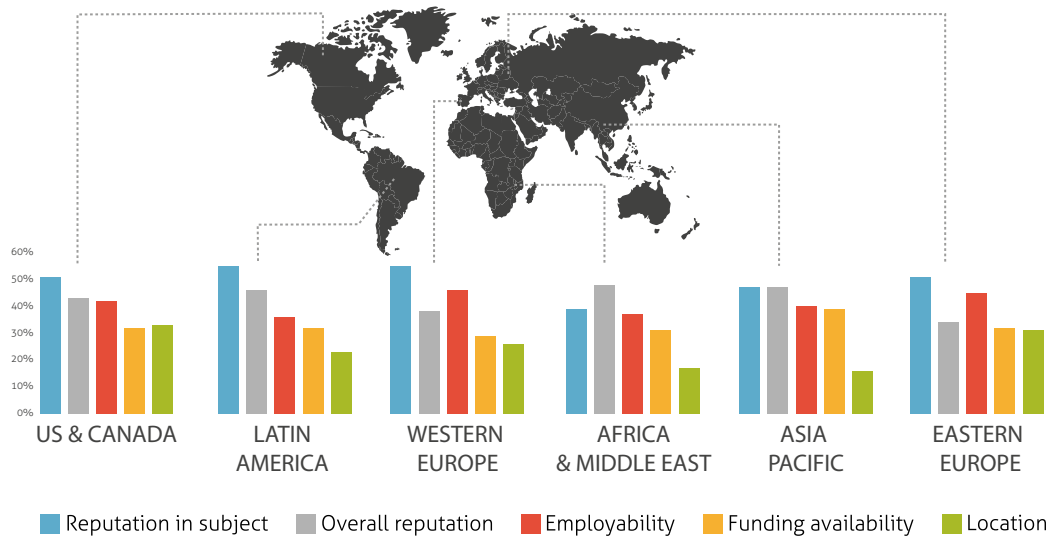
There is relatively little variation among applicants in different academic disciplines, especially the more popular fields. When comparing business/management students and electronic engineering students, for instance, their priorities are almost exactly the same.

### 3. MOTIVATIONS WHEN CHOOSING AN INSTITUTION

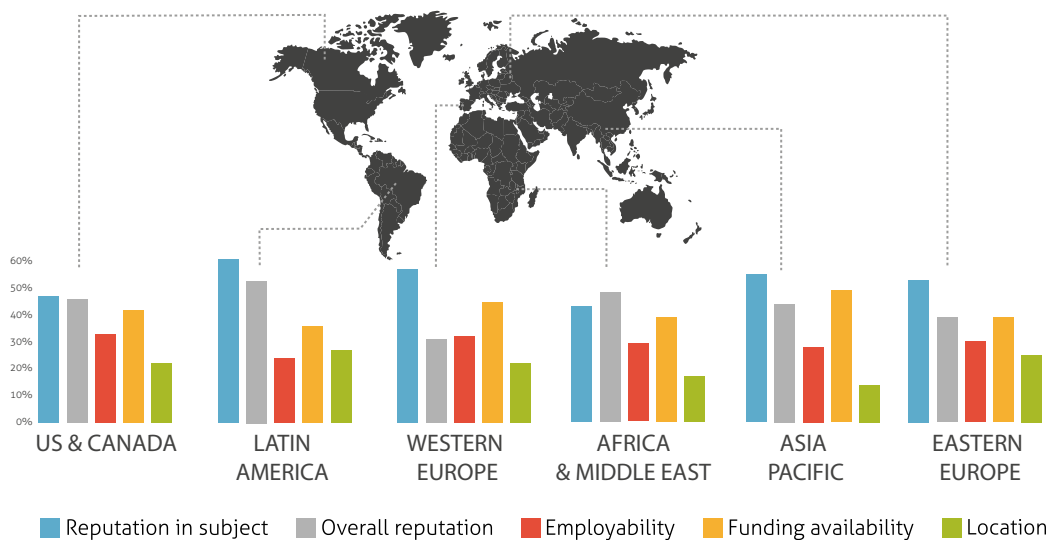
Choosing a country to study in is only the first part of deciding where to study, and perhaps the simplest. There are generally considered to be less than 200 countries in the world, but UNESCO reports that there are at least 16,000 universities worldwide.

To explore this next stage in the applicant journey, the survey asks respondents to identify their main priorities when choosing a specific institution. The list offers 11 options for master's applicants, and 12 for PhDs (the same set, with the extra option of "provision of specific specialist lab equipment").

#### How master's applicants choose an institution



#### How PhD applicants choose an institution





In Western and Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the US and Canada, the top priority for master's applicants is the institution's reputation in the relevant subject area. For applicants in the Asia Pacific, Africa and the Middle East, the top priority is the overall reputation of the institution, though in the case of the Asia Pacific the difference between first and second options is just 0.15%.

The same top five priorities are shared by master's applicants in all regions, albeit in slightly different positions. These top five factors are: overall reputation of the institution, an institution's reputation in the applicant's subject, location of the institution, funding availability and employability/career prospects. The least commonly chosen priority across all regions (except "other") is the course or institution having been recommended.

*"My main priorities are to firstly look at the employability rate of the course – I think this is the most important thing, to see if the university's students get employed soon after graduating."*

Anamil, 19, Indian, interested in a master's in finance

Compared to PhD applicants, prospective master's students are more likely to be motivated by employability/career prospects and the location of the institution.

PhD applicants in Africa and the Middle East are most concerned by the overall reputation of the institution. On the other hand, PhD applicants in the Asia Pacific, Eastern and Western Europe, Latin America, and the US and Canada all prioritize the institution's reputation in their subject. Overall, prospective PhD students place a higher value on subject-specific and departmental reputation than their master's equivalents.

With the exception of Africa and the Middle East, PhD applicants in all regions identify the following priorities within their top five: overall reputation of the institution, an institution's reputation in the applicant's subject, funding availability, employability/career prospects, and reputation of the department. Applicants in Africa and the Middle East substitute reputation of the department for location of the institution within their top five priorities.

PhD respondents are significantly more interested in funding availability than master's respondents, no doubt reflecting the longer time commitment required.

### In more depth

Overall, male master's applicants are equally likely to be concerned with the overall reputation of the institution and its reputation in their chosen subject – these two factors are tied at the top of their list. On the other hand, female applicants are most interested in the institution's reputation in their chosen subject.

Following on from overall and subject-specific reputation, the next most important factor for male master's applicants is employability/career prospects. This is also the second-place priority for female applicants, followed closely by the overall reputation of the institution.

There is a lot of shared ground in the priorities of master's applicants, even among those pursuing courses in very different subjects. In most cases, the top two choices are a close call between the overall reputation of the institution and the institution's reputation in a chosen subject. For business/management master's applicants, for example, the overall reputation of the institution is slightly more important than the subject-specific reputation.

*“Rankings are important, but it's not as important as the course you want to do, and how much attention is given to each student. What you are and who you want to be comes first.”*

Ashna, 21, Indian, applying for a master's in fashion design

Electronic engineering master's applicants diverge in placing a particularly strong emphasis on employability (the second-highest priority for this group), and being significantly more interested in the institution's reputation in their subject than its overall reputation.

Although both male and female PhD applicants place the greatest importance on an institution's reputation in their subject, male applicants are relatively more likely to also accord high priority to the overall reputation of the institution. Female PhD applicants are less likely to be concerned about the school's overall reputation and the departmental reputation, and are more focused on the funding available to them and the employability/career prospects of their degree.

As is the case with master's applicants, PhD applicants have similar priorities even across different academic areas, though with more variation than at master's level. Taking the same sample as before, business/management PhD applicants are most interested in an institution's reputation in their subject, followed by the overall reputation and the funding available. In contrast, electronic engineering PhD applicants are concerned first and foremost with funding availability, followed by the institution's reputation in their subject, and then the overall reputation.

## CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The trends outlined in this report should help higher education recruiters to strengthen their understanding of the key motivations influencing today's prospective international postgraduates. In particular, this year's survey reflects the growing importance of employability-related factors, the ongoing significance of reputation, and the mixture of location- and culture-based elements that combine to influence applicants' final preferences.

While these headline findings can all feed into better-targeted international communications, the quantitative data is likely to be most effectively applied when complemented by qualitative insight; in other words, when accompanied by conversations with applicants themselves about the significance of concepts such as 'employment prospects', 'reputation' and 'cultural interest'.

With this in mind, these final recommendations draw on the outcomes of a series of focus groups and individual interviews held in parallel with the survey, throughout 2015.

### • **Align your institution with employability**

As the survey results indicate, employment-related considerations are playing a growing role in the decisions of postgraduate applicants worldwide. Conversations with prospective students suggest a range of ways in which institutions can effectively engage in this space: by establishing and highlighting close links and partnerships with industry; by providing data on employment rates and case studies exploring specific career outcomes; by offering information about employability-boosting opportunities such as internships and mentoring programs; and by providing guidance on the possibility of staying on to seek work in the country after graduation.

### • **Highlight your reputational assets**

The survey reflects the fact that different types of reputation – overall, subject-specific and departmental – are accorded different weightings by different applicant groups. More in-depth consultation shows that while many prospective students correlate reputation with general and/or subject-specific rankings, most also consider additional measures when assessing reputation. For prospective postgraduates, this often includes assessing the profiles of specific faculty members and research groups – including research output, citations and significant achievements. This means all institutions have a rich body of material to draw on when seeking to establish reputation, though this is often not utilized to full effect, particularly when it comes to highlighting the strengths of leading faculty members.

### • **Sell your location – local and national**

This year's survey results indicate that motivations relating to cultural interest and lifestyle are especially significant for applicant groups, and constitute a particularly large part of the appeal of certain destinations. For many applicants, "location" also

continues to play a role when choosing a specific institution. Our conversations confirm that, while not usually deciding factors in isolation, local area and lifestyle are nonetheless important considerations for a majority of applicants – and this is often an area in which international applicants in particular are hungry for greater detail. There is demand for high-quality images and multimedia to provide insights into the local area and life; practical details about accommodation, transport and living costs; and opportunities to benefit from immersion in both the local language and wider culture, such as organized excursions or language programs.

• **Address the issue of affordability**

Finally, our survey results show that while cost in itself is rarely a make-or-break factor, *affordability* – for most applicants contingent on access to some form of financial aid – undoubtedly is. This is again reflected in our conversations with applicants, who frequently express frustration at insufficient or unclear information about the costs of study. Institutions are likely to benefit from ensuring all information relating to fees and costs is easily accessible, and presented alongside a range of practical funding options. Only if applicants are able to access all the information of relevance will they feel confident about shortlisting or selecting an institution.

For more insights into international students’ motivations, our full range of research is available at [www.QSDigitalSolutions.com/Resources](http://www.QSDigitalSolutions.com/Resources).

*“I want to study in the US because the US is the financial hub of the world; the world’s best investment banks have branches in the US. Studying in the US has always been my dream, and I believe it’s easier to get a good job there after graduating.”*

Anamil, 19, Indian,  
interested in a master’s in finance

*“It’s most important that it’s well-acclaimed and has a good name for itself. The university’s location is also very important – it has to be geographically accessible to a nice city, especially if I’m studying abroad.”*

Mahid, 23, British,  
applying for a master’s in  
geology/geoscience

This report was created for TopUniversities.com in association with Cambridge English Language Assessment using data collected from attendees of the QS World Grad School Tour. An international community for students and academics, TopUniversities.com is the home of the QS World University Rankings®, and offers a wide range of resources to help prospective and current students make decisions about their future education and careers.

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