

What Matters to International Students?

FOCUS ON
THE UNITED STATES



Dasha Karzunina

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

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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.

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 the United States

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. The United States is one of the few countries that host significantly more international students than they send abroad (around 13 times more, in the case of the US). The latest UNESCO figures confirm that the US remains the leading destination for international students, hosting around 19% of the world's mobile students. Having said this, it is also the seventh biggest sender of international students worldwide, with the top two destinations for US students being the UK and Canada.

At QS, we engage with millions of current and prospective students all over the world on a daily basis. Our most-used resource, the QS World University Rankings®, is created primarily for the information and interest of prospective students, and it's important to us that we continue to provide materials in line with student needs. With this in mind, we initiated a series of focus groups with prospective students in key regions for student mobility, including China, India, the US, South East Asia, Europe and Latin America. Our qualitative research was accompanied by a short survey, 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 New York City and Washington DC, a broader national 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 US are well represented, making it possible to see how closely our findings in these two major cities correspond to wider national trends.

A number of distinctive elements appear to characterise US applicants. These relate to their high prioritisation of location, lifestyle and travel opportunities; strong desire to get the best value for their money; focus on building professional connections; and expectations about flexible and personalisable study programmes. These factors form the key themes of this report, alongside insights into US students' attitudes to university rankings and reputation.



Almost 60 focus groups
with ~300 participants



11 countries



15 cities



19 events



Over 1,800
survey responses

SHOW US THE ROI!

While return on investment (ROI) is a priority for prospective students worldwide, it plays a particularly prominent role in the decision-making process of those in the US. Compared to the other regions covered by the project, surveyed students in the US stood out in placing a particularly high priority on employment rates when comparing universities (see chart below) – and they also place a relatively strong emphasis on cost. Our focus group conversations confirmed that this is one of the very first pieces of information they seek. As accounting student Bryant summed up: *“First thing I look at is price. If it’s expensive and doesn’t show any form of aid, swipe left.”*

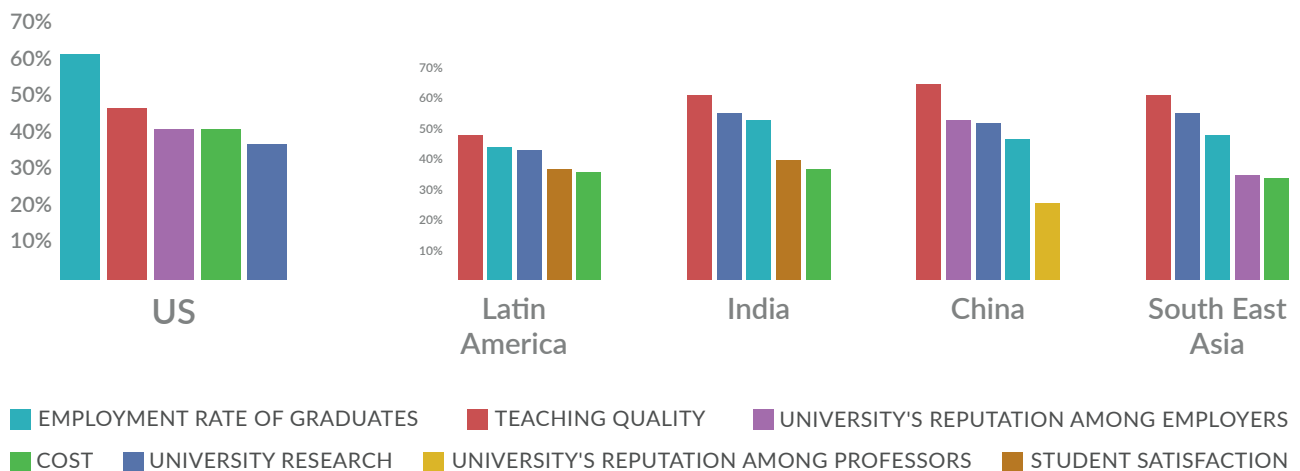
This particularly strong focus on costs may be surprising given that prospective international students in the US have a comparatively higher spending power than their counterparts elsewhere in the world. But the high costs of studying domestically mean value for money remains

“My girlfriend is from France and my youngest brother is at university in England and you can save money by doing it over there. I would like to do it here, but unless I get a huge scholarship I’m not going to bother.”

Ace, New York

Many are aware that studying outside of the US is likely to be less expensive, and this is often a strong motivating factor among those considering international study. For instance, medical administrator Ace, seeking a specialised MBA programme, explained: *“My girlfriend is from France and my youngest brother is at university in England and you can save money by doing it over there. I would like to do it here, but unless I get a huge scholarship I’m not going to bother.”*

WHICH RANKINGS INDICATORS ARE MOST IMPORTANT TO YOU?



Source: QS Student Rankings Survey 2015

Alongside the upfront cost, US students are also keen to assess the likely return on this investment, in terms of salary impact and earning potential. As our survey results show, they are especially likely to prioritise not only cost, but also employment outcomes. This focus on value and ROI is summarised by another MBA applicant, Ashley: *“Even though the highest-ranked English universities are often very expensive, they still take less time to pay back than some of the high-ranked American universities... Universities in Europe are generally better value for money and have a better return on investment.”*

“Even though the highest-ranked English universities are often very expensive, they still take less time to pay back than some of the high-ranked American universities...”

Ashley, Washington DC

Demand for more information about costs and ROI

Many of the US students we spoke to expressed frustration at the difficulty of finding clear information about fees and financial aid when consulting university websites. As Ace said, *“The tuition fees [information] is always five or six clicks in. It always advertises how it is a world-class university, very diverse, there’s always pictures of the campus and the list of the programme, but when you’re looking for the tuition and how to get scholarships it is the hardest thing to find.”*

We also encountered significant demand from US students for more detailed information relating to employment outcomes. They want easier access to graduate employment data, and more detailed information about career prospects, including starting salaries, roles, and specific outcomes for international students. Morissa, applying for a master’s in communications, told us: *“[The] employment rate is*

important, but especially for international students. How do they help students that want to stay there? How many people remain in the country after graduation? Not many schools seem to have these kinds of stats at the moment.”

Assessing value for money

As well as focusing on post-graduation ROI, US students are also keen to assess value for money in terms of the student experience itself. They want to know how the university allocates funding, and whether this aligns with their own priorities. Bryant, studying accounting at a US university, voiced the common perception that universities charging high fees do not always live up to the level of service expected: *“From experience in my school which is around \$33,000 a year, I don’t feel I’m getting the full experience for my investment. Sometimes, we might want to start a student club and they tell us they don’t have money for that, but then you see how much the president gets paid and it makes no sense.”*

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Bryant, New York

When assessing ROI, US students are also likely to consider the networking opportunities available, often rating personal connections among the most valuable assets they will graduate with. The quality of the network they will join, and the extent to which the university supports networking activities, are often key factors when assessing value for money. In the words of HR professional Shana, *“It’s really all about what happens after you graduate, not about how well you do. Maybe medicine and law would be exceptions as you really have to show your skill there, but with something like business, it’s about getting those connections afterwards.”*

FLEXIBILITY AND PERSONALISATION: FINDING THE RIGHT PROGRAMME

PRIORITIES WHEN CHOOSING AN INSTITUTION FOR A MASTER'S DEGREE



Source: QS World Grad School Tour Applicant Survey 2015 (US respondents only - top five choices from a list of 11)

While finances are a key consideration, money is rarely a motivation on its own. As well as assessing the costs and expected financial impact of each option, US students are also highly focused on identifying the programme and institution that will best match their individual professional and personal goals. Indeed, for some, the level of costs involved – especially within the US – makes focusing on financial outcomes appear essentially pointless.

Crystell, applying for a master's in international affairs, voiced this perspective: *"Here in the US I would be paying out of state tuition with no scholarship, and I don't think, no matter how much I work, I could ever reimburse my father who paid all of that. I am not studying a major that is going to provide me with such income. So I don't really look at the salaries, it is more about passion."* She added that she would choose a lower-ranked university if the programme on offer was a better match for her interests – a view shared by a significant number of her peers.

Given the relatively flexible and multidisciplinary approach to higher education in the US, it makes sense that US students applying to study abroad often place an emphasis on finding a course which offers a similar degree of flexibility. Compared to prospective students elsewhere

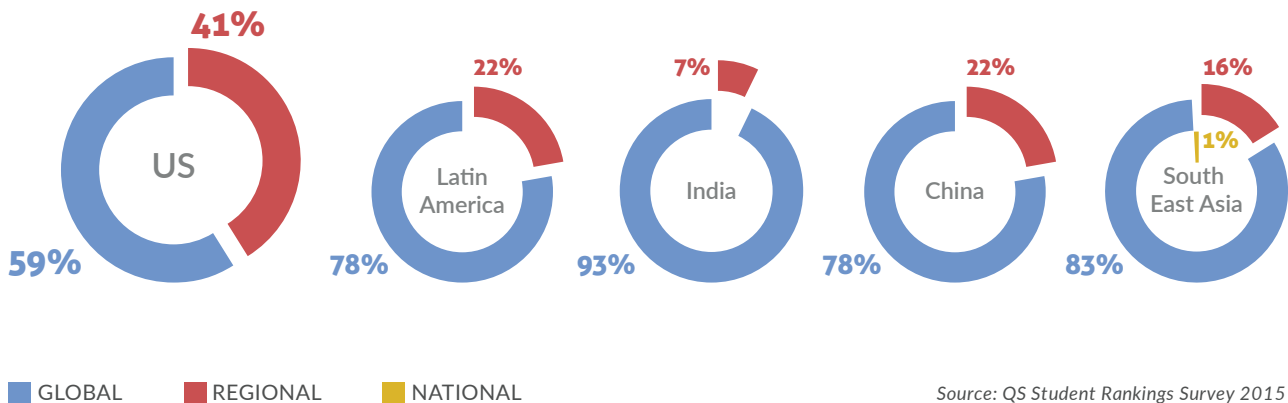
in the world, US applicants are often especially keen to be able to personalise study programmes to match their own unique blend of interests. Neurology student Maria, for instance, said: *"Personalising it is really important to me as I don't want to get a degree that everyone else is getting. I want to get it in a way that is best for me and things that I like. What I don't like is 'you can only do this', no freedom."*

Similarly, physics student Kenny said he would prefer to study in a smaller institution, as he believed this would offer greater freedom for him to craft his own academic pathway: *"If there was a very small school and a very large school, I would look at the small school so long as they have the funding. It gives me more of an opportunity to take things the direction I would like to, whereas a much larger nationally or internationally recognised institution might have a few more rules and a pathway to follow."*

Lawrence, seeking a master's in design or business, perceived this demand for highly personalisable courses as a distinctive trait of his generation: *"It's something that's really common with millennials as we have such divergent interests, so finding the right programme becomes difficult. If we find a programme that addresses at least some of these interests... that's more important than the reputation."*

APPROACHES TO RANKINGS

WHAT GEOGRAPHICAL SCOPE OF RANKINGS DO YOU FIND MOST USEFUL?



US students stand out in their approach to the various information sources available when selecting a university, including rankings. They tend to be comparatively more confident and independent than their peers elsewhere in the world, preferring to assess the data and make decisions for themselves, rather than relying on advice from other authorities. They are also relatively savvy in their understanding of what rankings can be used to assess, and where they are limited. The US applicants we spoke to often seemed more interested in specific statistics relating to employment and alumni satisfaction, rather than in overall rankings. However, US students align with those in other parts of the world in believing that university rankings and reputation are an important door-opener when it comes to impressing potential employers.

"If you are looking for a job in a top company, they will be looking for a top degree from a top university."

Jian, New York

Rankings and ROI

As discussed earlier, US applicants are strongly focused on return on investment, and their attitude to rankings is no exception. As Jian, looking to pursue a master's in international relations, stated: *"If you are looking for a job in a top company, they will be looking for a top degree from a top university."* So while US students may not believe rankings to be straightforwardly representative of the quality of the educational offering, they do perceive the value of having a highly ranked university on their résumé. As Lawrence told us: *"I do look at rankings and think they're particularly important when someone is trying to get a job. I shorten my list with the rankings."*

Some students, such as Shana, looking to study brand management, were dubious about whether employers would place much value on a degree from a university they hadn't heard of before: *"It's really easy for someone to say 'I got the top degree or the top grade' but if they don't really recognise the school, they don't really understand what you've accomplished."*

As is common among students in many locations worldwide, US students tend to view the rank of an institution, and its 'name' or reputation, almost interchangeably. Often they are more concerned with assessing the lasting name and legacy of an institution, rather than its precise rank; they understand that the latter can fluctuate more, especially if monitored in a number of different university rankings. As Morissa put this: *"I look at rankings but... it was more the name than the number, what people say and think about an institution."* On the other hand, Aaron, who is looking to work in government management, perceived a close correlation between the quality of the programme, networking opportunities, and rankings: *"The quality of the programme is going to mean a lot more to me and that will lead me to make strong connections. How will I know it's good quality? You look at the rankings, you have to."*

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Aaron, Washington DC

There is also a perception among US students that poor academic performance can be counteracted by attending a highly reputed institution. The assumption is that obtaining a place at a school with a good name is sufficient in itself, regardless of grades. This is summarised by Aaron: *"If the institution is prominent, you are prominent by proxy."* Some students also express the viewpoint that it is the school's responsibility to help them build a network, in order to boost their future career prospects. As Nyah, applying for a master's in education, shared: *"The school should help you in that first step of networking and trying to get out there when you're trying to find a job."*

Rankings and connections

Many of the US students we encountered expressed the view that *who* you know is likely to be more important than *what* you know. They tend to be exceptionally focused on building connections, and although divided on the question of whether rankings reflect educational quality, they generally agree that a higher-ranked university will be better suited for creating a professional network.

For example, Lawrence highlighted this perceived correlation between university prestige and networking opportunities: *"I would go to a university where I could meet great people, not just the programme. This Ivy league school will provide you with those connections."* This is representative of a common perception among US applicants; they do not necessarily believe highly ranked universities will provide the best programme or the best campus environment, but they agree that these institutions will attract ambitious students and staff of high calibre, almost by definition. Consequently, opting for a higher-ranked university is seen as a way of meeting interesting and go-getting people, while studying in a high-performance environment where peers also challenge and stimulate one other.

It should be noted that the US applicants we surveyed expressed a stronger preference for regional – rather than international – rankings, compared to students elsewhere in the world (see chart on page 7). This can be largely explained by their stronger preference for studying closer to home, leading them to focus on comparing universities within their own region.

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Lawrence, Washington DC

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

US students are known for being comparatively unlikely to study outside of their own country, due in large part to the abundance of renowned universities within the US. But regardless of whether they choose to study domestically or internationally, they stand out from other groups of prospective students in placing a strong

emphasis on location and lifestyle when choosing a university. In this section, we explore why so many choose to remain in the US, what motivates those who decide to study abroad, and how considerations about location influence their decision.

WHY STUDY AT AN INTERNATIONALLY RECOGNISED UNIVERSITY?



Source: QS Student Rankings Survey 2015

What deters US students from studying abroad?

Statistics on US student mobility tend to consider only those who study outside the US. However, moving to study in a different state can often be as much of a change as for a European student to move to a different country in Europe. With this in mind, many of the US students we spoke to were open to new locations, even though not always outside of the US.

Those planning to study within the US would often mention having already visited a particular state or

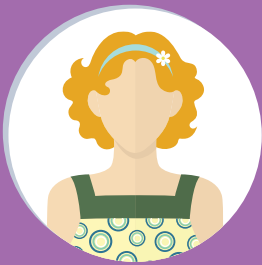
region, therefore feeling confident that they understood the local environment. For example Aaron told us: *"I have a lot of friends that have gone to university and a lot of what they talk about is the environment they were in. I want to study in the States, but North East. Most of these places I've travelled to and I know people there so that's how I know about the environment."*

US students generally seem fairly certain not only about what and where they want to study, but also where they want to work post-graduation. Some are sure they want to work and build a career in the US, and believe that

studying within the US higher education system will best prepare them for this. One example of this is MBA applicant Bryant, who said: *“I think of everything from the point of view of my future employer – what will they want to see on my CV? I want to study in the US because I want to work in the US, so it would be most relevant to study the system here.”*

With future career prospects being such a key consideration for US students, any perceived difficulty

in finding employment after studying internationally is likely to be a strong deterrent. Ashley, considering studying abroad in the UK, explained: *“One of my reservations about UK schools is that I won’t be able to stay and work there after graduation, that it will be difficult to get a visa. Location is most important. Job opportunities come straight after.”*



Case study

Name: Morissa
Location: New York

Seeking a master’s in communication outside of the US, Morissa is keen to find a course which matches her interests while also improving her earning potential – *“something that speaks to me but also makes money”*. She views studying abroad as a chance to *“fully integrate”* in a new culture, travel more widely, and add value to her CV. Speaking about feeling *“kinda stuck”* in the US, she hopes to become a *“better person”* through exposure to new perspectives.

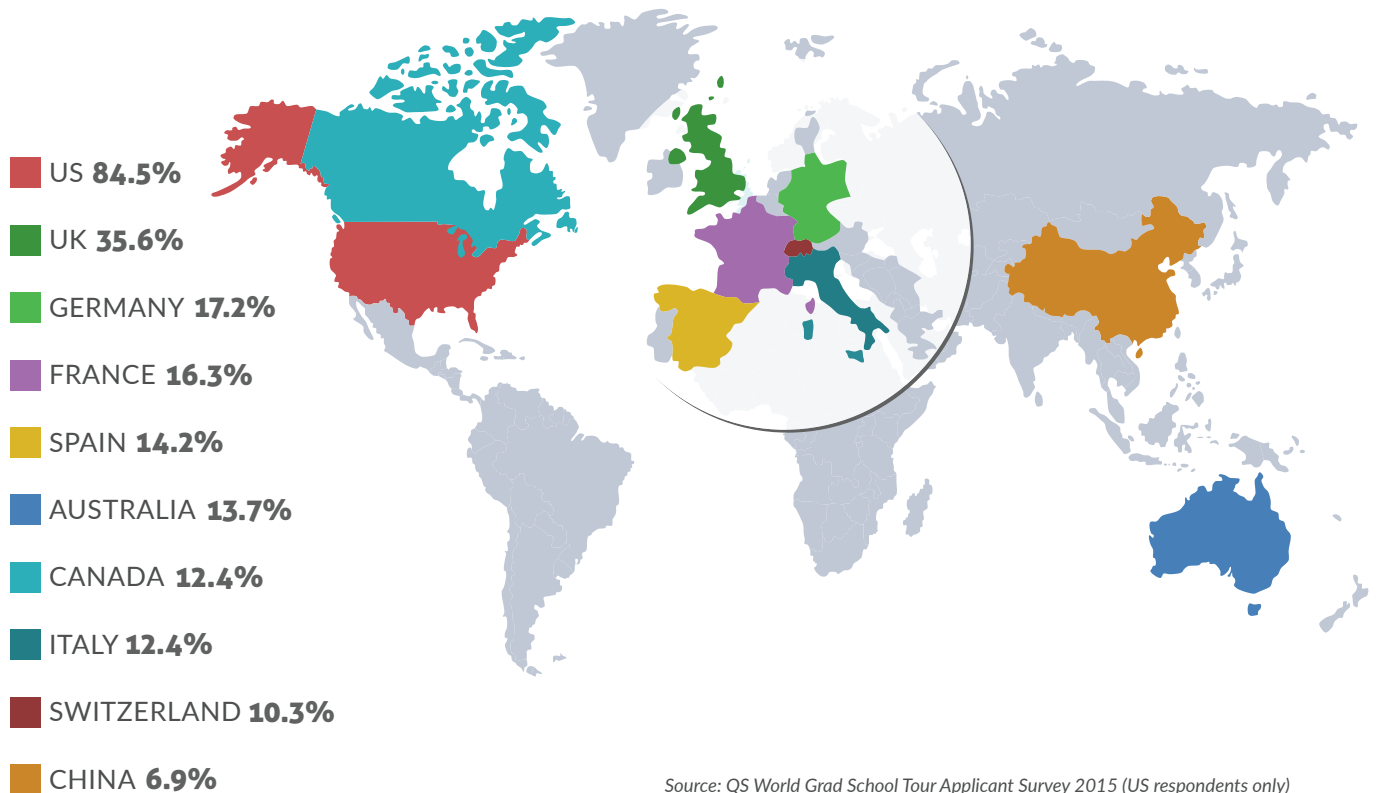
Morissa is considering a number of European countries – including Ireland, from which she claims ancestry – but says English universities hold a special appeal due to their strong reputation. *“When you have a degree from England, it means more, especially in the US. They don’t even need [to know] what it is, they just to see London and that speaks for itself. Unless you go to a top Ivy League school in the US, going to an English school will be more impressive.”*

While she consults rankings and is keen to study at an institution which is a *“household name”*, Morissa

emphasises that she would only consider a university if the course was right. When comparing options, she also places a high priority on financial aid, information about employment rates, student satisfaction, and evidence that the institution is *“investing in the student experience”*. A final criterion is that the university should be evolving to keep pace with contemporary issues and technologies. *“If they’re stuck in a different century, it doesn’t matter what their ranking is... [I’m looking for] a school that understands what will happen in 20, 40 years from now.”*

During her research so far, Morissa reports some *“shockingly bad”* experiences of university websites: *“You think: is this a real place or is this a scam?”* However, she’s also had some very positive experiences during face to face conversations with university representatives, and has been especially impressed by those offering personalised advice: *“The ‘let me help you’ attitude is the best.”*

TOP 10 STUDY DESTINATIONS FOR US APPLICANTS



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

What motivates US students to study abroad?

As is evident from the survey results (see page 9), US students love to travel. As much as they might enjoy the comforts of the US lifestyle and appreciate all the opportunities available in their own country, a strong adventurous spirit often prevails. Christine, considering a PhD in engineering, is representative of this segment of US students keen to explore new cultures: “I’ve always been interested in the world, which is why I’ve gone for a degree in international relations. I want to integrate into another culture... There’s no place I don’t want to go.” For some US students, studying abroad is valued as an opportunity to visit multiple countries, and this consideration can impact on their choice of destination. For instance Ruturaj, who’s hoping to study in London,

spoke about the importance of being well-placed in order to visit as many countries as possible: “Of course, studying abroad is one of the coolest experiences, so I would love to live in Europe. Location is also important as I want to be well connected so that I can travel.”

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Ruturaj, Washington DC

As is seen from the Applicant Survey results (see below), when choosing a study destination, US students stand out from other groups in placing a very high priority on ‘cultural interest & lifestyle’, which is equally as important to them as ‘international recognition of qualifications’. This correlates with the perception that the US is itself home to many of the world’s most famous universities, so studying abroad tends to be more about the cultural aspects. However, some countries (especially the UK) are also prized for the strong reputation of their universities. For instance, while prospective student Morissa was open to the idea of studying in a range of different European countries, she felt that a degree from a UK university – particularly an English one – would add immense value to her résumé (see case study on page 10).

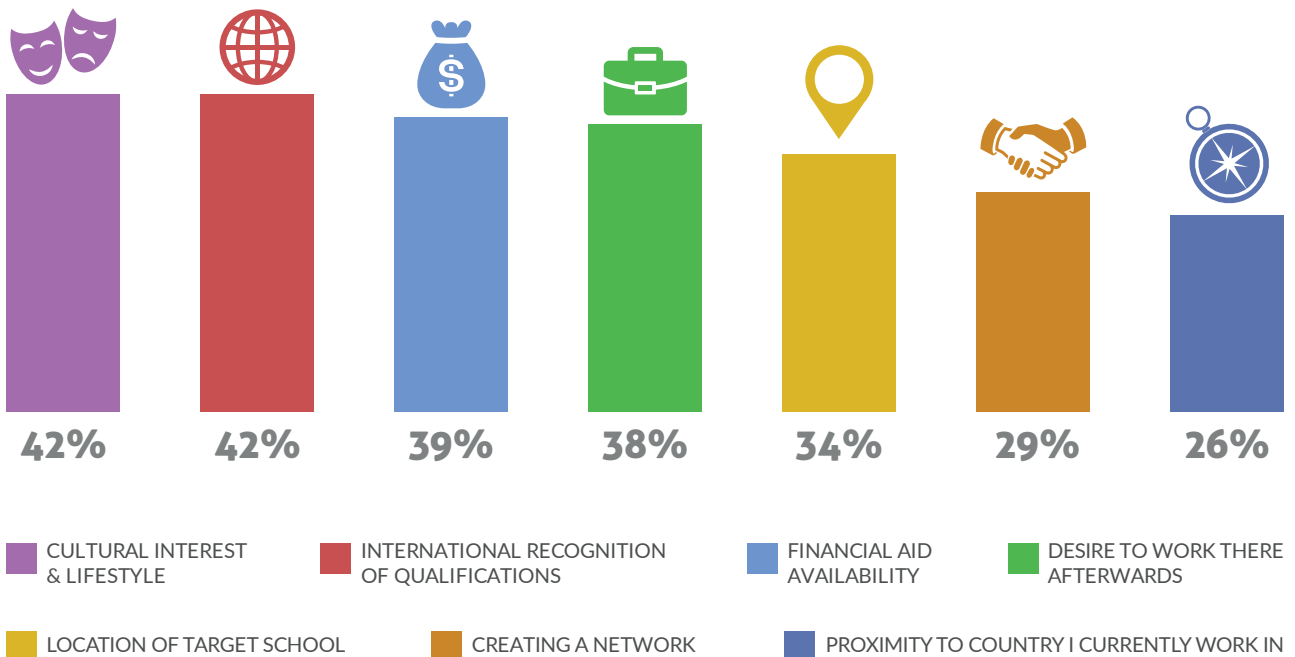
Much like students elsewhere, US applicants are also keen to ‘broaden their horizons’, hoping to gain new

perspectives on education and work by studying abroad. Those who have already spent time studying or working abroad are generally keen to repeat the experience. Ashley, for example, spent some time teaching English in Japan: *“It seems that Americans who have lived abroad and have been expats, seem to have this urge to go back abroad. When you go abroad you change and so when I came back, I don’t necessarily feel like I fit into the culture here.”*

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Ashley, Washington DC

PRIORITIES WHEN CHOOSING A STUDY DESTINATION



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

Campus environment and student experience

Given that US applicants feel so strongly about the location of their university and the ‘vibe on campus’, it’s unsurprising that many believe visiting the institution is the only way to truly assess whether or not it is right for them. This accords with their more general desire to assess options for themselves, rather than relying on information or guidance provided by others. Jian expresses this belief: *“You have to visit. In my own opinion that is the only way you can judge. When you listen to different people they have different opinions. When you go there in person you get a better understanding of whether that school is the right fit for you.”* Along the same lines, many US students are keen to be offered more online tools such as virtual tours, to help them assess the campus when unable to visit. Nyah, for example, said: *“If I can’t travel to a school I think it is important to see virtual tours of the school and it is hard to find that.”*

“If I can’t travel to a school I think it is important to see virtual tours of the school and it is hard to find that.”

Nyah, New York

More frequently than students elsewhere, those in the US also tend to mention the climate and the general quality of life as important factors to consider when choosing a university – both within and outside the US. When asked to identify the most important aspects of his future university, Bryant created the following priority list: *“1. Rankings and general reputation. 2. Location: it should be enjoyable and warm.”*

“You have to visit. In my own opinion that is the only way you can judge. When you listen to different people they have different opinions. When you go there in person you get a better understanding of whether that school is the right fit for you.”

Jian, New York

Also emphasising the importance of local lifestyle, Aaron explained: *“This idea of quality of life and city transportation is important. For me, it’ll probably have to be a city in the US. People that work in business will look at the location of where you worked and studied and its reputation. If the programme was good but location average, I don’t think I will have the same opportunities or enjoy myself as much – I know what I like.”*

FINAL THOUGHTS

For higher education professionals interested in recruiting students from the US, our research highlights a range of opportunities to strengthen engagement with this group. In particular, providing information relating to value for money and return on investment – including up-front costs, university investment in student facilities and services, and employment outcomes – is a key first step in gaining the attention of prospective students in the US.

Related to this, institutions should seek ways to communicate the quality of networking opportunities available. This can be achieved by showcasing the calibre of students, faculty members and alumni, as well as highlighting schemes and initiatives designed to facilitate network creation. US applicants are likely to respond especially well to such assurances that they are joining a high-performing and ambitious community of students and graduates, which will prove valuable in their future career.

Next, institutions should bear in mind US applicants' tendency to search for institutions where they will have some say in deciding their own programme of study, by choosing from a range of different and perhaps interdisciplinary course options.

Finally, the importance of location should be taken into account. Universities aiming to attract US students are likely to benefit from highlighting the attractions of their own campus and wider location, including the quality of life, opportunities to explore and integrate with surrounding culture, ease of travel to other destinations, and the prospects of finding employment locally post-graduation.

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

ABOUT QS

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

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

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



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