



**Student mobility
and motivation:**

China

**Inbound and outbound
student perceptions**

Powered by the QS International Student
Survey and Global Student Flows

2026

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Foreword



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China remains central to global student mobility, both as an important source market and, increasingly, a destination for international students. This report shows that students are becoming more deliberate, more outcomes-focused and more selective about where they place their trust.

Students considering China continue to value affordability and a welcoming environment, but they are also paying close attention to visa access, post-study work and employment prospects. Chinese students considering study abroad are showing a similar focus on value, with teaching quality, career outcomes, cost and trusted sources of information all shaping their decisions.

The data provided here helps institutions move from broad assumptions to clearer decisions. By bringing together projected student flows and student perception data, it offers a more rounded view of where demand is moving, what students need to hear and how institutions can communicate with greater relevance, speed and confidence.

It's a challenging moment for student recruitment, but challenge can also bring sharper focus. With the right insight, institutions can understand where demand is moving, respond to students' expectations with greater confidence and make decisions that are grounded in evidence rather than assumption. QS is here to support that work, helping universities navigate complexity, identify opportunity and engage students in ways that are timely, relevant and useful.



Turn insights into recruitment **results**

Find, engage and recruit more of your ideal students

How we can help:

- Make confident market decisions
- Increase admissions resilience
- Strengthen your recruitment pipeline
- Convert interest into enrolments

1,500+

universities worldwide trust us to grow and diversify their student cohorts

14,000+

compliance checks delivered over the past five years

50,000+

students engaged through QS recruitment events

Discover what's possible with QS

[Explore our student recruitment solutions](#)

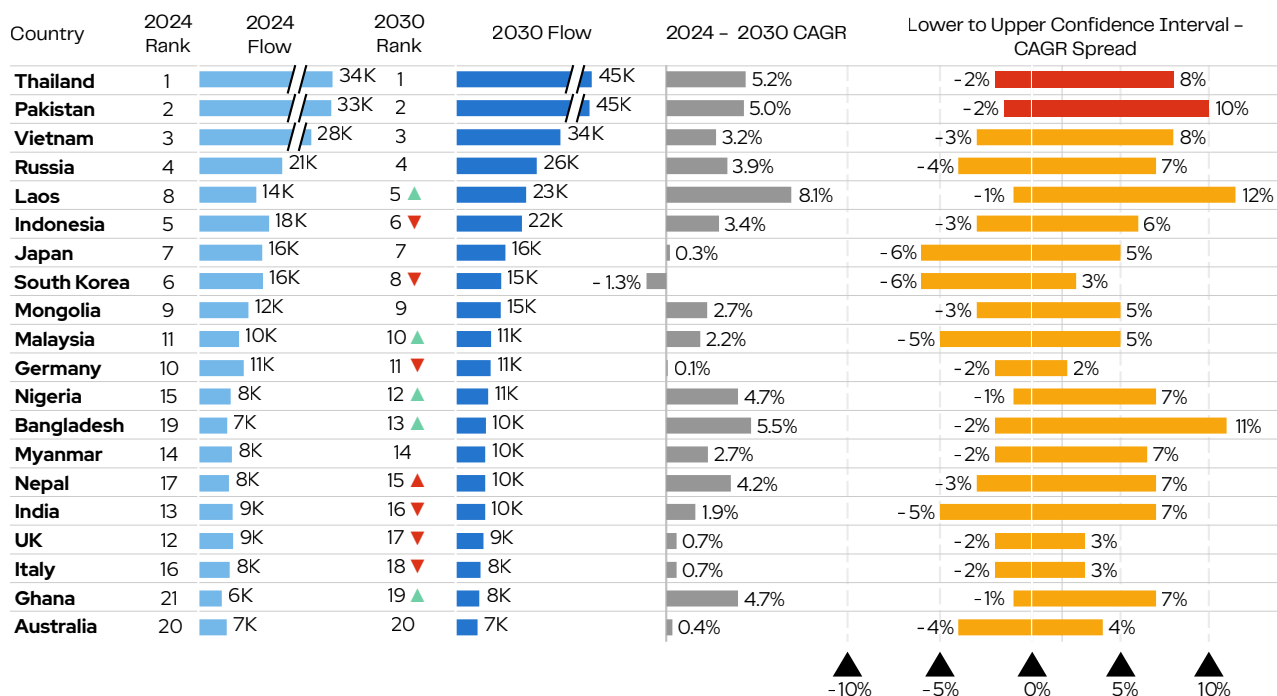


China: Market overview

Inbound mobility trends

In the 2025 Global Student Flows: China report, we projected that China's position in the international student recruitment market would strengthen, with international enrolments expected to grow by 2.5% to reach 550,000 by 2030. The leading source markets for China are projected to be Thailand, Pakistan, Vietnam and Russia (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Top 20 source countries to China, 2024-2030F



Source: QS Global Student Flows, October 2025

Outbound mobility trends

For decades, the 'Big Four' Anglophone destinations — the US, the UK, Australia and Canada — dominated outbound flows from China. That pattern is starting to shift as visa restrictions, student caps and changing market conditions affect demand. Between 2019 and 2024, the share of Chinese student enrolments in the 'Big Four' fell from 64% to 56%. We still expect Chinese outbound mobility to grow, but future growth is likely to be less concentrated in these four destinations.

Chinese students to South Korea, Malaysia, Vietnam and New Zealand are projected to grow by between 7-9%.

Flows from China to Spain are expected to grow by a CAGR of 5.2%, and 3.3% across Europe as a whole.

No 'Big Four' destination is expected to grow their Chinese student numbers by over 5%.

[**Read more in Global Student Flows: China**](#)





Executive summary

China's student mobility story is increasingly shaped by perception, where students consider what a destination can offer, how clearly institutions communicate value, and which information sources students trust.

For students considering China, a welcoming environment and affordability remain central, but their decision-making is becoming more practical. Visa access, post-study work rights and graduate employment are rising in importance, while cultural appeal and broad perceptions of teaching quality are less dominant than in previous years.

For Chinese students considering study abroad, reputation alone is becoming a weaker differentiator. High-quality teaching remains the top country-choice factor, but students are placing greater weight on tangible outcomes, including graduate employment, post-study work access and cost. Their information sources are also changing. While university websites remain the most useful source of information, social media, alumni discussions, rankings and education agents are gaining influence. This points to a more selective and evidence-seeking student audience.

Institutions competing for Chinese students will need to show return on investment clearly, localise their digital presence and respond quickly with personalised information that supports confident decision-making.

Outbound trends

What do Chinese students want
from global institutions?

At a glance

Where are students going? Fast-growing destinations by 2030



Chinese outbound mobility continues to grow, but beyond the traditional ‘Big Four’ destinations.

The share of Chinese students enrolling in the US, UK, Australia and Canada fell from 64% in 2019 to 56% in 2024.

What do they want to study?

Top subjects in 2026

#1

Business & Management 25%

#2 Computing 11%

#3 Creative Arts & Design 10%

#4 Engineering & Technology 8%

#5 Communications & Media 6%

Biggest changes since 2022

▲ Creative Arts & Design +5%

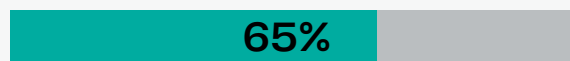
▲ Computing +2%

▼ Social Sciences -5%

▼ Business & Management -4%

What do Chinese students want from study abroad destinations?

Top decision drivers in 2026



High-quality teaching



Welcoming to international students



Well-ranked universities



Appealing culture / lifestyle



Graduate employment opportunities

Fastest-rising factors since 2022

▲ Post-study work rights +14%

▲ Graduate employment +11%

▲ Affordable tuition fees +8%

▲ Visa access +5%

How quick do students expect responses?

34% expect a response to an enquiry within 24 hours

70% expect responses within 3 days or less

25% expect to know the outcome of their application within 24 hours

Most influential information sources

73% Official university website

65% Rankings

61% Social media

41% Education agents

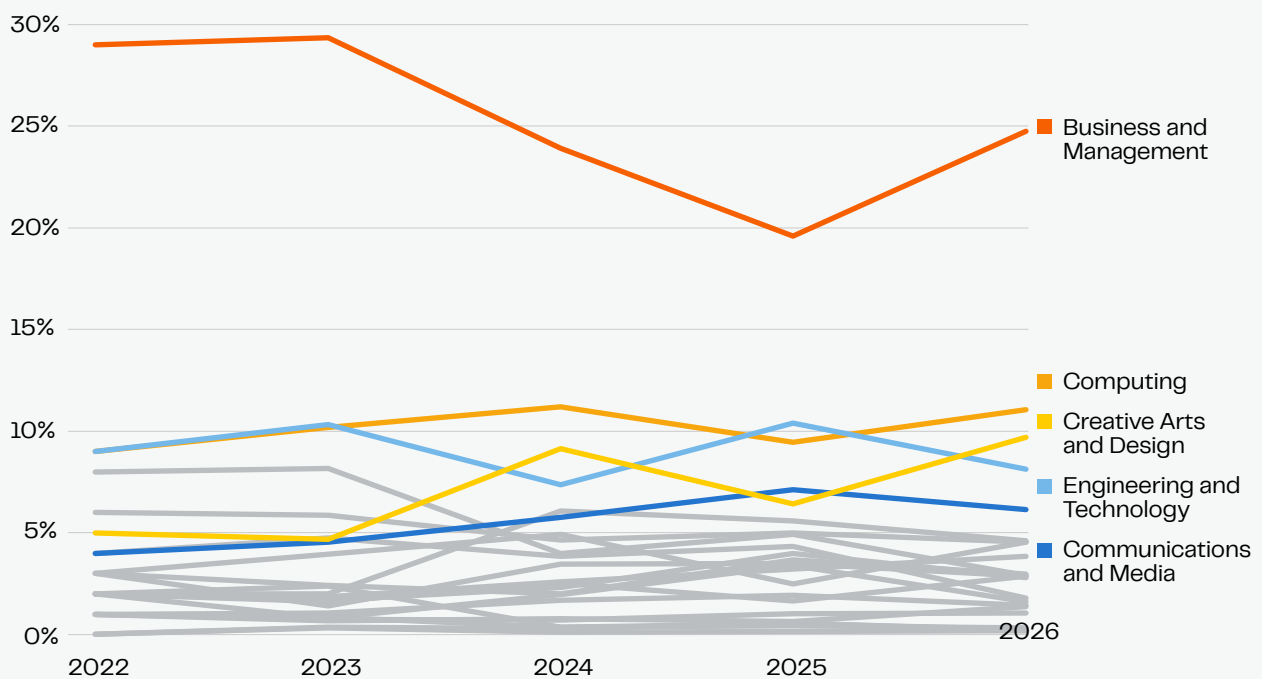
39% Family and friends

Subject level interest

Business and Management remains the leading programme choice for Chinese students considering study abroad, although interest has declined since 2022. Most other subject areas have remained broadly stable, with changes of only one to two percentage points over time. The clearest increase is in

Creative Arts and Design, where interest has risen by five percentage points to 10%. The largest decline is in Social Sciences, which has fallen by five percentage points.

Figure 2. China outbound mobility: What do Chinese students want to study abroad?



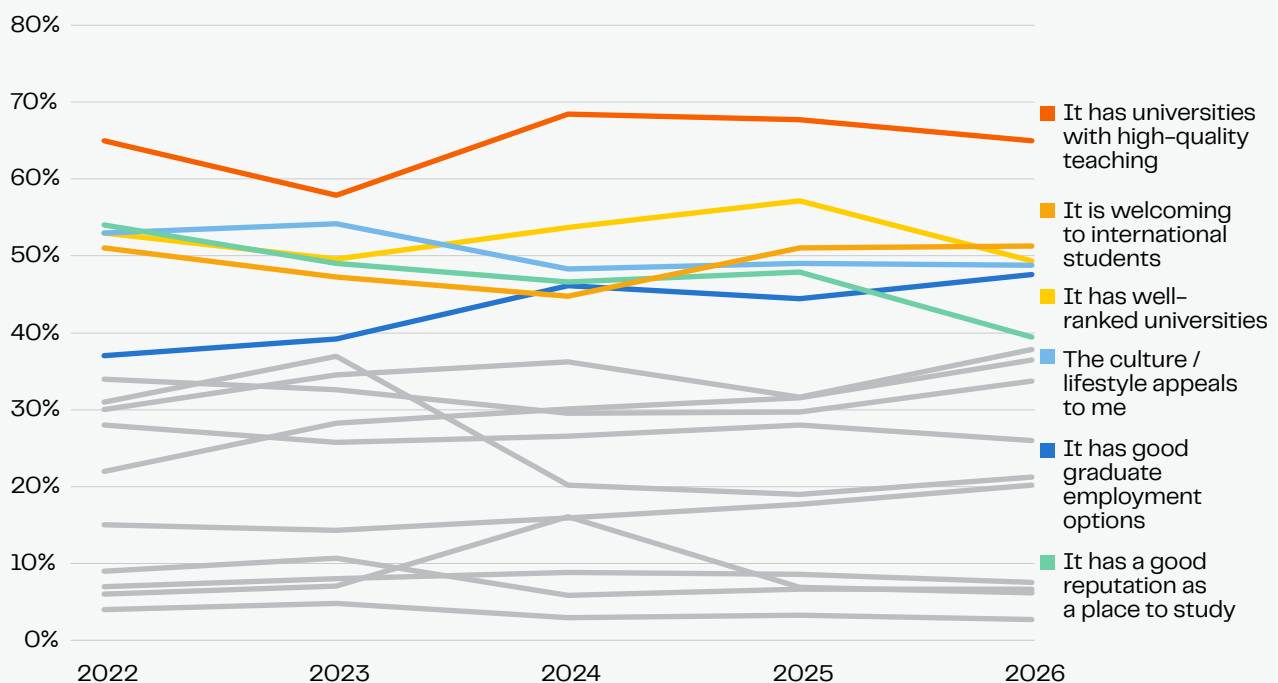
Source: QS International Student Survey

Key questions to consider:

- Does your Chinese student application pipeline align with shifting subject choices?
- How are you marketing your engineering and computing programmes to Chinese students?
- Do your subject-level marketing messages align to the factors they deem important?

What drives outbound mobility?

Figure 3. China outbound mobility: Important factors when choosing a country



Source: QS International Student Survey

Return on investment and access have become more important to Chinese students considering study abroad, pointing to a stronger focus on outcomes. The importance of graduate employment options has increased by 11 percentage points since 2022, while access to post-study work visas has risen by 14 percentage points. Cost is also playing a larger role, with 38% of students identifying it as important in 2026, compared with 30% in 2022.

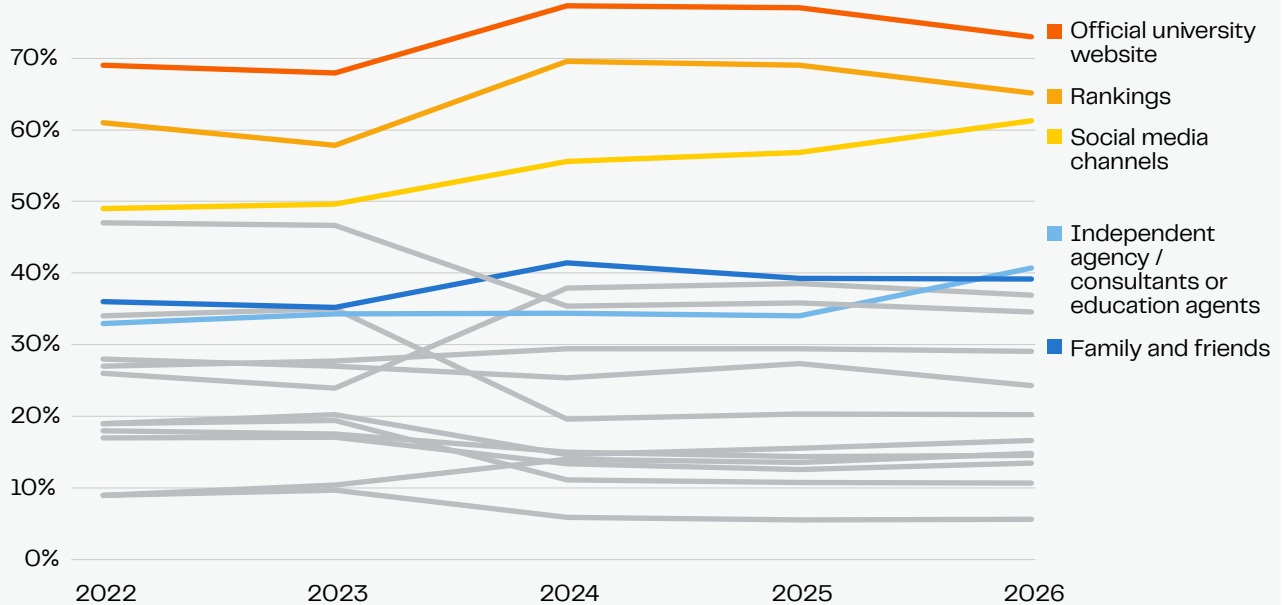
High-quality teaching remains the most important factor when choosing a country, but other reputation-led factors have weakened. The importance of a country's overall reputation as a study destination has fallen by 15 percentage points since 2022. Well-ranked universities and an appealing culture have each declined by four percentage points.

Key questions to consider:

- How are you adapting your messaging for a Chinese market that is placing more emphasis on outcomes?
- How can you demonstrate teaching quality beyond reputation-based measures? Are you doing this better than peers?
- Which data points can you use to evidence return on investment for students choosing your country?

The sources of information students use to make decisions

Figure 4. China outbound mobility: Information sources



Source: QS International Student Survey

When researching study abroad options, Chinese students are placing greater value on trusted and targeted sources over broader searches. University websites remain the most useful source of information, while social media has grown sharply in importance since 2022, rising by 12 percentage points. Alumni discussions, rankings and education agents have also become more useful, suggesting

that students are looking for sources with clear credibility and relevance.

By contrast, 20% continue to find university fairs and information sessions useful, but that number has declined since 2022, with online searches seeing a similar fall. Non-institutional higher education websites have also declined by eight percentage points.

Key questions to consider:

- Are your owned digital channels localised to maximise Chinese audience engagement?
- How are you working with agents to ensure your institutional narrative resonates?
- What recruitment channels are you using that are becoming less effective in engaging Chinese students?



Student conversion and communication

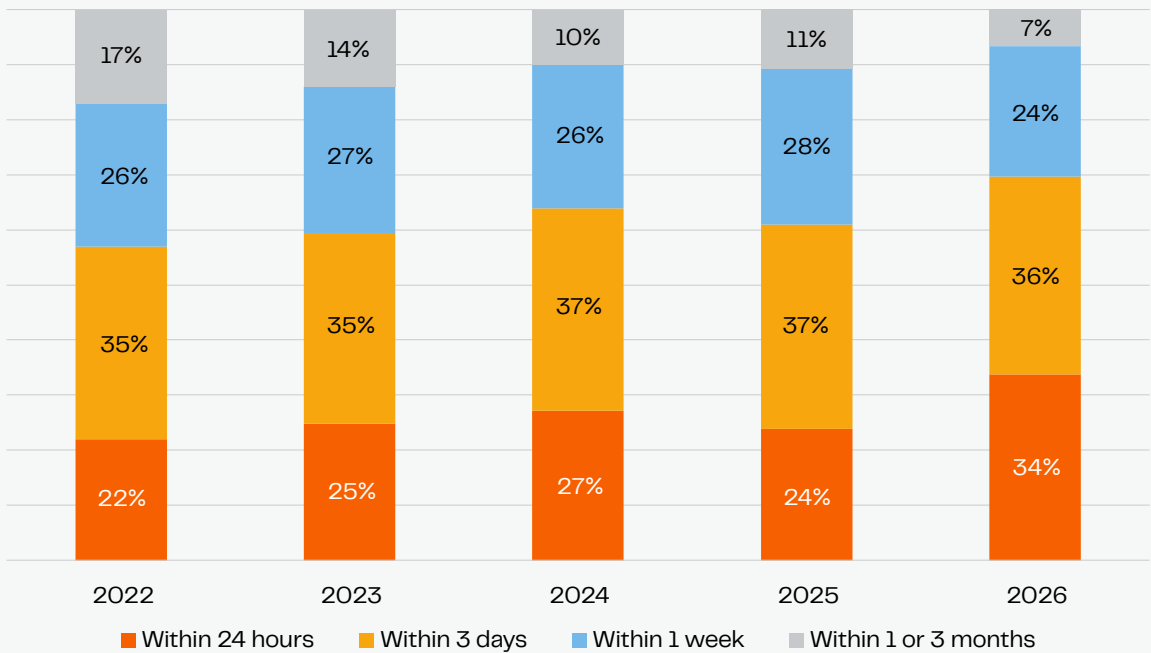
Regardless of communication type, increasing numbers of Chinese students expect a response within 24 hours, and tolerance for longer waits is falling. In 2026, 34% of students expect a personal enquiry response within 24 hours, up from 22% in 2022. Speed therefore matters not only as a service standard, but as a point of differentiation. Many students are considering multiple institutions at once, so a fast, relevant response can help sustain momentum while competitors are still processing enquiries.

Only 16% of students are considering or applying to a single university. A further 14% are considering two, 18% are considering three, 10% are considering four and 16% are considering five. Notably, 44% are considering five or more institutions, including 15% who are considering more than 10. This reinforces the urgency of enquiry, application and offer holder management. When students are actively comparing options, delayed communication risks losing attention, confidence and intent.

Key questions to consider:

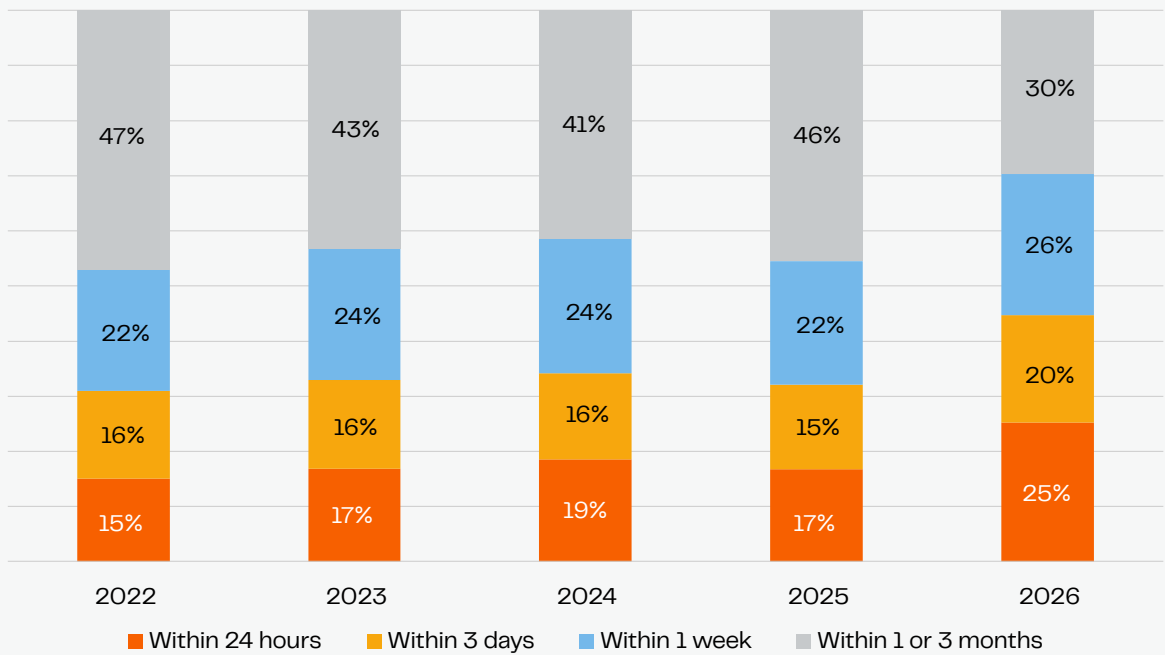
- Are you tracking your response times? If so, do your metrics match student expectations?
- How can you improve response times and manage enquiries more efficiently?
- What steps can you automate or prioritise to ensure high-intent enquiries receive timely, personalised follow-up?

Figure 5. China outbound mobility: Expectation of time to receive a complete and personal enquiry response



Source: QS International Student Survey

Figure 6. China outbound mobility: Expectation of time to receive the outcome of their application



Source: QS International Student Survey

Inbound trends

What do China-bound students
want from institutions?



At a glance

Where are students coming from?

Top growth markets by 2030



550,000

international students projected
in China by 2030

What do they want to study?

Top subjects in 2026

#1

Engineering & Technology 17%

#2 Business & Management 13%

#3 Computing 11%

#4 Medicine & Dentistry 9%

#5 Subjects Allied to Medicine 7%

Biggest growth area:



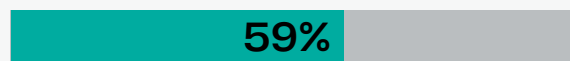
Medicine & Dentistry:
+2% since 2024



Business & Management:
-6% since 2022

What do students seeking study in China want?

Top decision drivers in 2026



Welcoming to international students



Affordable cost of living



Post-study work opportunities



High-quality teaching



Affordable tuition fees

Fastest-rising factors since 2022

▲ Post-study work rights +6%

▲ Visa access +4%

▲ Professional networks +3%

▲ Graduate employment +3%

How quick do students expect responses?

26% expect an application outcome within 24 hours

46% expect responses within 3 days or less

20% are willing to wait a month for an application outcome

Most influential information sources

73% Official university website

58% Online search

49% Social media

43% University fairs

32% Rankings

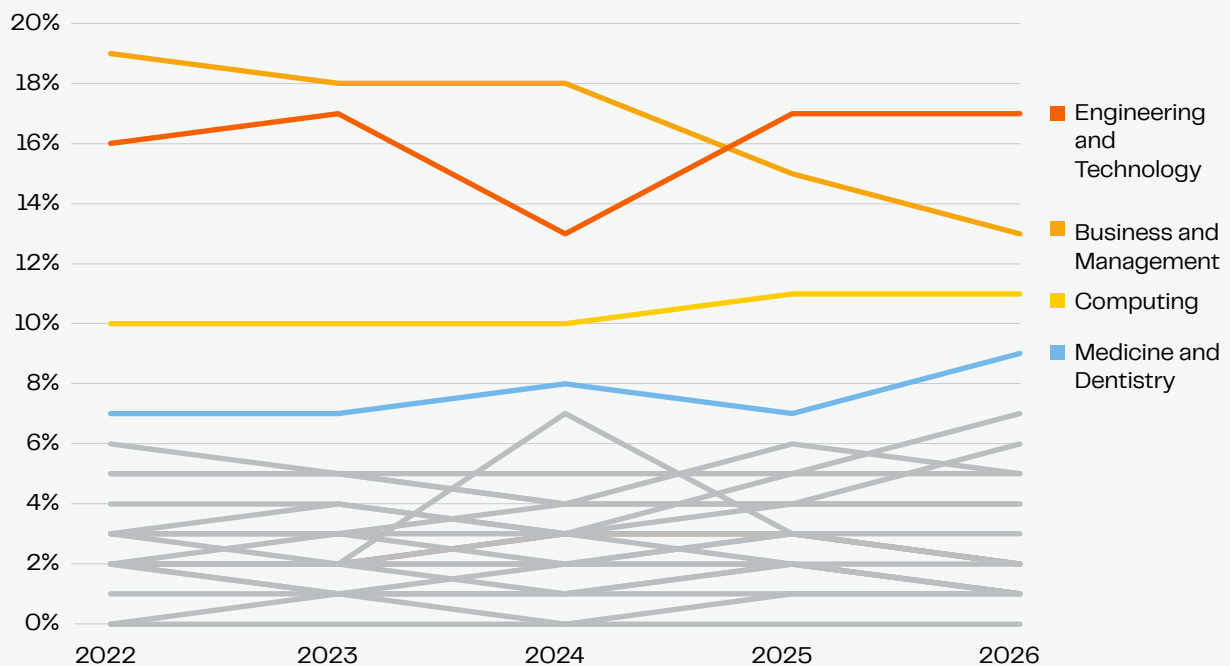
Subject-level interest

For the first time since 2022, Engineering & Technology has become the most popular subject area among students interested in studying in China. Business and Management continues to be popular, but interest has declined year on year since 2022. Medicine and related subjects have seen a particularly sharp rise, increasing from 10% of interested students in 2024 to 19% in 2026.

These trends align with other QS metrics:

- In Life Sciences & Medicine, the median Employer Reputation rank of China's C9 League has steadily improved since 2023 from 141 to 63.
- In Engineering and Technology, the C9's median rank has improved 16 positions since 2023.
- In Business and Management, on the other hand, the C9 League has seen slight declines in Employer and Academic Reputation.

Figure 7. China inbound mobility: What do China-bound students want to study?



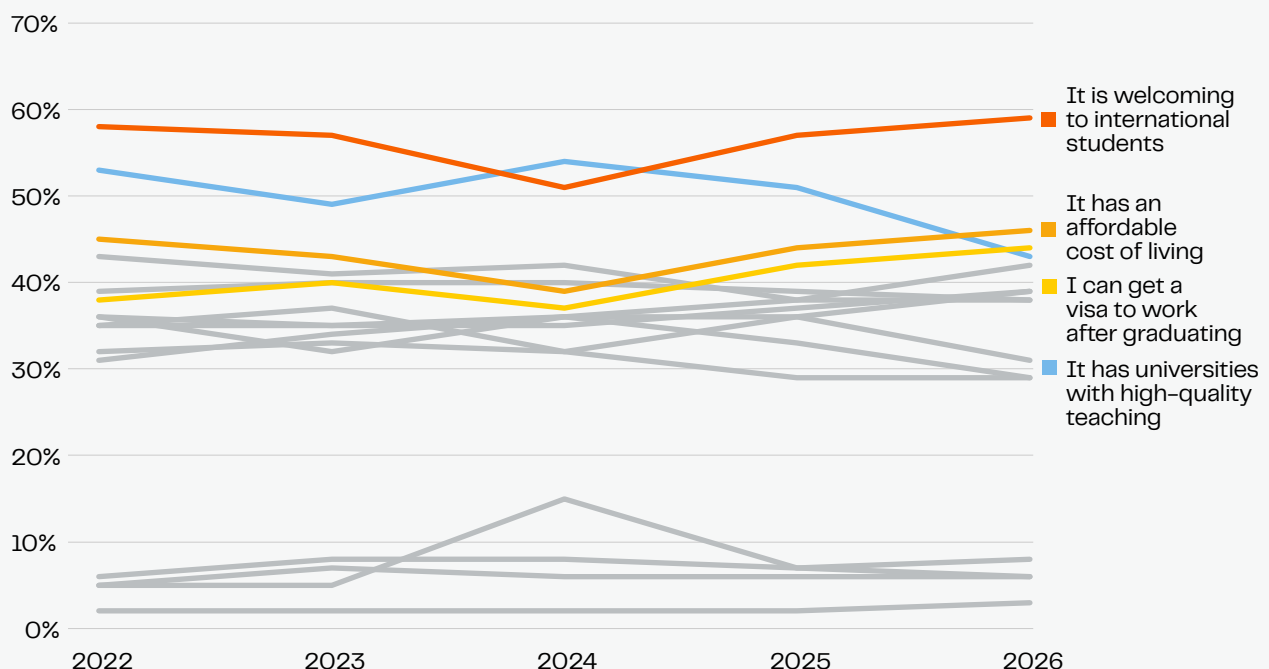
Source: QS International Student Survey

What drives inbound mobility?

A welcoming environment continues to be the biggest factor for students looking to study in China, and affordability of studying and living continues to be a crucial driver of inbound mobility. Below this, however, there have been significant shifts in priorities.

There are signs of increased practicality among students seeking Chinese study. Visa access, post-study work rights, and graduate employment options have all seen increases since 2022, while high-quality teaching and appealing culture have dropped in importance.

Figure 8. China inbound mobility: Important factors when choosing a country



Source: QS International Student Survey

Key questions to consider:

- The leading source markets for China are projected to be Thailand, Pakistan, Vietnam and Russia. How are you evidencing a welcoming environment to them?
- How can you showcase the return on investment from studying at your institution?
- How will you adapt your marketing strategy to students' increasing focus on visa access, and post-study work?

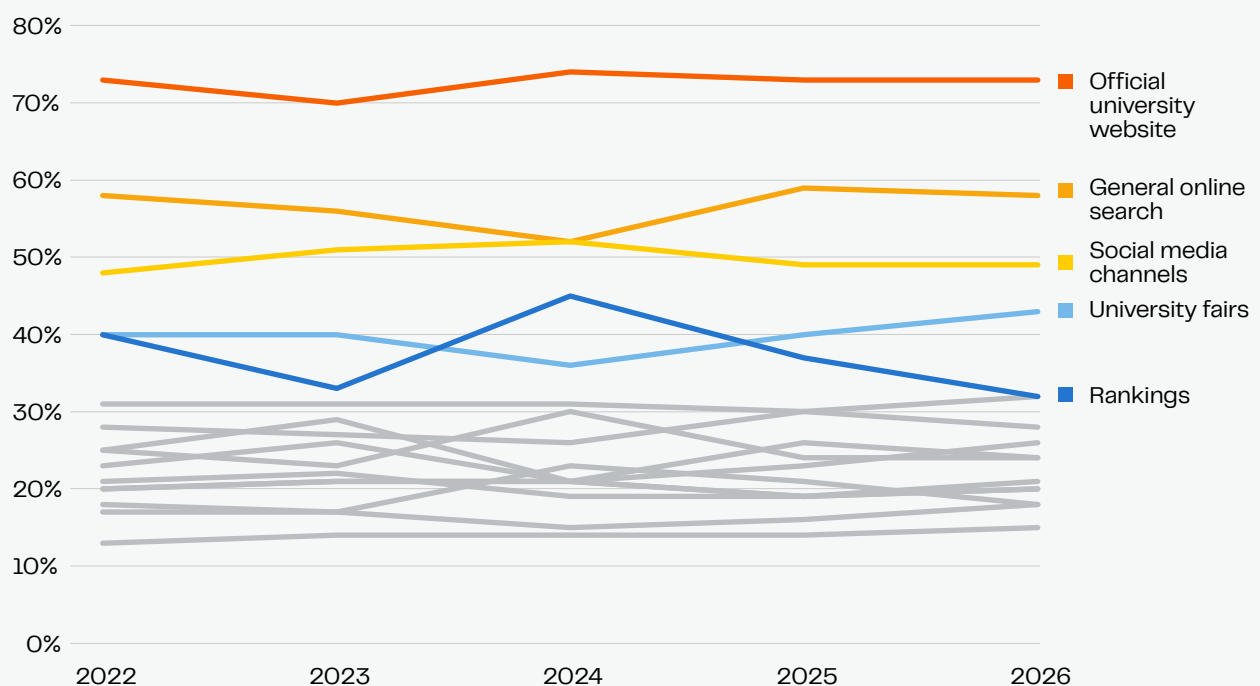
The sources inbound students use to find information about China

The information sources students use to explore Chinese institutions remain mostly stable. The official university website remains the dominant source, with the second and third most common sources being general online searches and social media respectively.

Since 2022, university fairs have become slightly more prominent (+3%).

Nearly a third still use rankings, but there has been a decline in usage since 2022. Rankings alone no longer guarantee strong recruitment from China.

Figure 9. China inbound mobility: Information sources



Source: QS International Student Survey

Key questions to consider:

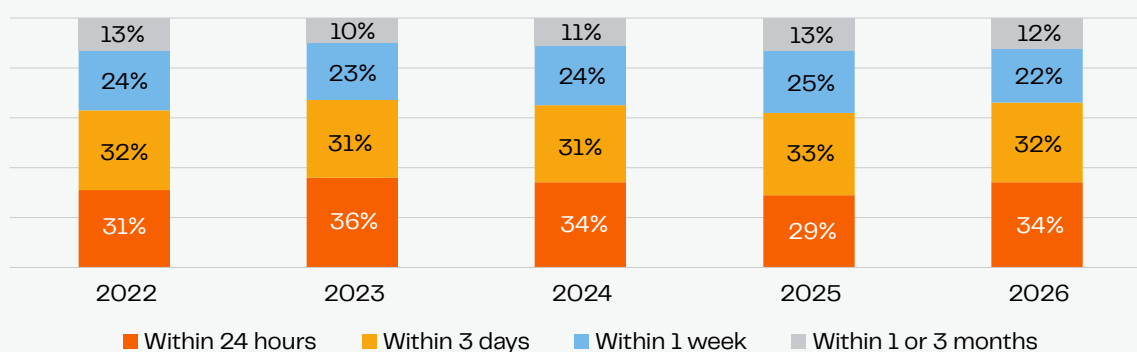
- Is your website localised to account for international students who may not speak Chinese?
- Is your international search engine optimisation and social media strategy effective?
- Are you using student and alumni voices effectively to build trust across the channels students rely on most?

Student conversion and communication

In 2026, 26% of China-bound students expect to know the outcome of their application within 24 hours, up from 20% in 2022. The share of students willing to wait a month for their

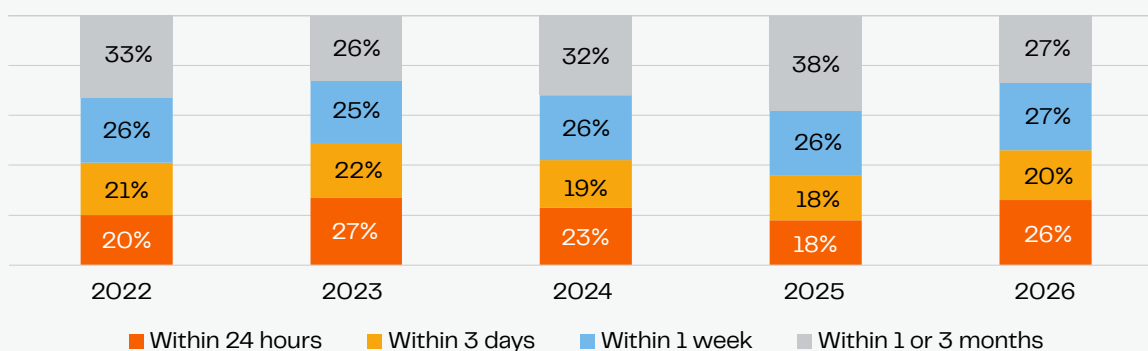
application outcome has dramatically dropped from 27% to 20% between 2025 and 2026. Together, this emphasises the importance of rapid responses to enquiries.

Figure 10. China inbound mobility: Expectation of time to receive a complete and personal enquiry response



Source: QS International Student Survey

Figure 11. China inbound mobility: Expectation of time to receive the outcome of their application



Source: QS International Student Survey

Key questions to consider:

- Are you meeting the expectations set by students, and delivering a personal response within three days?
- With increasing numbers of international students choosing to study in China through to 2030, how prepared are your systems to answer student enquiries quickly and efficiently?
- Which enquiry types should be prioritised for faster, more personalised follow-up to prevent high-intent students from losing momentum?

Methodology

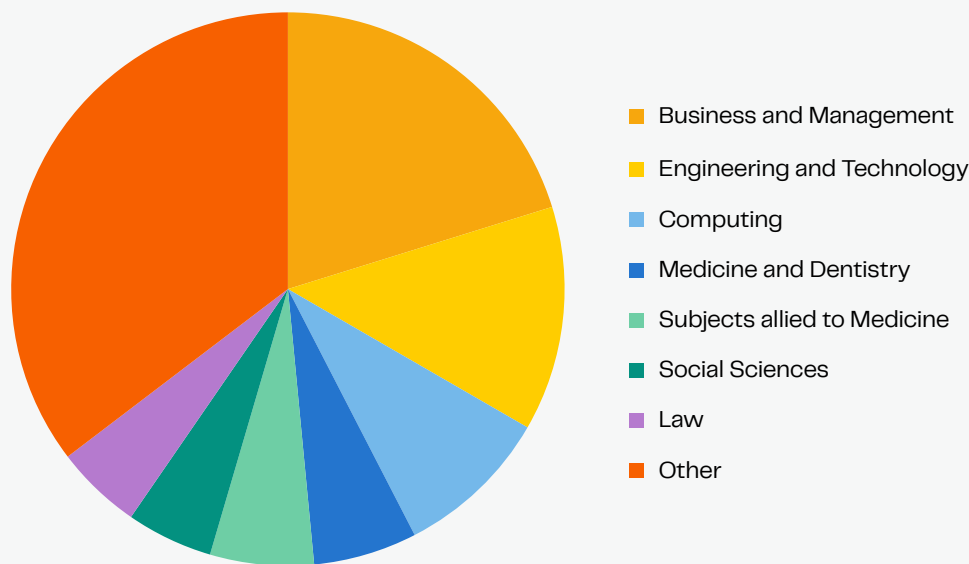
The QS International Student Survey offers an unparalleled view into pre-enrolled international students. The 2026 iteration draws on responses from over 42,115 students in 191 locations, and this report uses over 500,000 responses from the past five years.

The questions in the Survey are designed to enable higher education institutions to make sound decisions on recruitment and communication strategies. Now combined with Global Student Flows data, we offer a well-rounded view of where students are choosing to study, and how they make that decision. To understand what matters to students, we ask a wide range of questions about their pre-enrolment journey. We want to know what students prioritise when choosing a location, university and course, and we want to understand what they perceive as high quality teaching. We ask students how their family influence decision making, and we gather data on the social media and digital channels they use to find study information. The International Student Survey also benefits from its longevity – 2026 is our 14th edition. The consistency in our questioning allows us to see how students' answers change over time, and predict future trends and shifts. Its yearly format allows us to add new questions to get a snapshot of student perception.

The International Student Survey's robust methodology ensures we truly represent the perception of pre-enrolled international students. Respondents for the International Student Survey are collected in partnership with global universities. This year, we partnered with 82 universities globally, who were invited to share the Survey with their own prospective international students. Fieldwork for the Survey was conducted between 5 January and 6 April 2026, via Qualtrics, an online survey management platform. The Survey contains 50 unique questions, covering a range of topics relating to prospective student decision making, from their study background to their priorities, marketing communication preferences, through to their principal information sources, career aspirations, and post-study plans. The 2026 iteration of the Survey also contains questions on candidate perceptions of different locations as study destinations. Each institution who took part received a tailored benchmarking report detailing the results of their own prospective students.

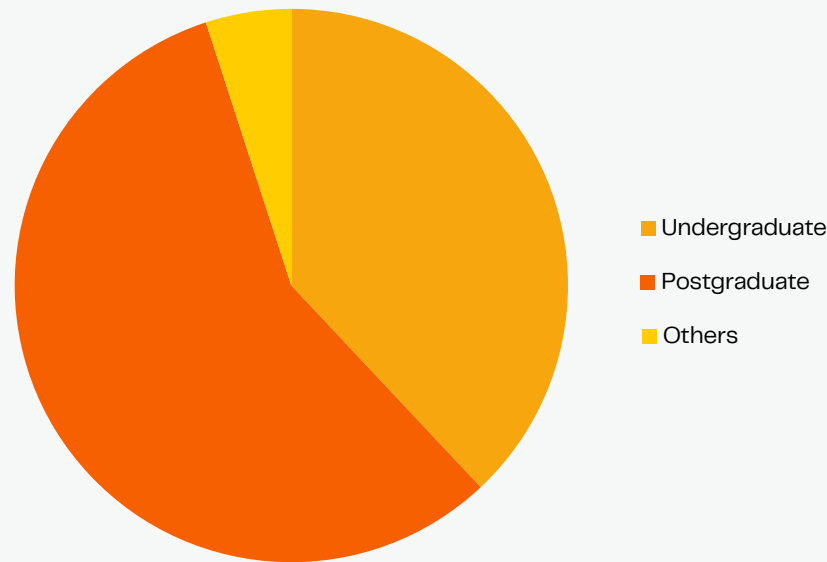
International Student Survey respondent demographics

Subject preference



Source: QS International Student Survey

Study level



Source: QS International Student Survey

QS, your higher education partner

In today's challenging times, universities are reviewing their strategies and preparing for a different future. We are the partner who can help.

With unrivalled data, global reach, and sector expertise, we have deep knowledge of higher education globally and how to drive performance, engagement, and growth.

For more than three decades, we've worked in partnership with thousands of universities across the globe.

We help to:

Transform complex data into clear, actionable intelligence

Connect universities with the right students through our platforms, data, and targeted engagement

Support innovation, new models, and market expansion for long-term institutional growth

Provide sector-leading analytics and insights to enable global benchmarking and performance improvement

Map in-demand skills needs to teaching, research, and employability for future workforce readiness

[**Explore more student recruitment insights**](#)

