

New survey reinforces career goals a primary motivation for study abroad - ICEF Monitor - Market intelligence for international student recruitment

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Short on time? Here are the highlights:

- *A new survey of 43,000 prospective international students echoes findings from other recent student surveys that employability and career goals are a key motivation for study abroad*
- *The survey notes, however, a growing openness to alternative forms of education beyond university degrees as well as willingness to stay home to study if the quality of domestic programmes improves*
- *The accompanying study report observes fierce competition for students in a relatively small number of markets, mainly in Asia, and calls for a more diversified – and evidence-based – approach to recruitment*

A new Hobsons report, [Creating a Sustainable International Education Sector: A Manifesto for Intelligence-Led Marketing and Recruitment of International Students](#), examines international students' perceptions of higher education models, their motivations for study abroad, and their use of social media to research and apply to universities.

The research for the report was conducted among 43,919 student prospects representing 208 nationalities living in 175 different countries. The majority (61%) of students were intending to study at the post-graduate level, while 35% were aiming for undergraduate study. A fraction of students (4%) were looking at foundation programmes, English-language programmes, or vocational programmes. Almost half the students were from Asia (46%), while the rest came from Africa (20%), Europe (15%), North America (12%), and Oceania (7%).

This is the fourth year Hobsons has conducted such a large-scale survey among prospective students.

The report's key takeaways are that:

- There is currently fierce competition for students located in a handful of markets. Hobsons calls this a “key market” strategy that “sees the majority of universities spend their international marketing budgets competing against each other in core markets in South Asia, Southeast Asia, China, and Europe, leaving vast territories and student segments under-served.” Hobsons advocates for a more diversified market approach.
- Relying on “gut feelings” in international student marketing is increasingly inadvisable. Instead, collecting data on students to inform marketing and to remain connected with what students want – from initial interest to graduation and beyond – is required to implement an intelligent internationalisation strategy.
- Students remain convinced that university represents the best way to prepare for their careers, but they are highly aware of – and could potentially be dissuaded from pursuing university because of – the costs of obtaining a degree.
- The availability of post-study work opportunities in a destination country matters to many international students, and the employment outcomes associated with a field of study are highly influential to students' decisions about what they will study.

Now we'll look at the top-level research findings from the report.

What motivates students to study abroad

The vast majority of students pursue their studies on the basis of what interests them (89%), and many make a firm connection between what – and where – they will study and their career prospects. Four in ten (40%) said they would go where there is high demand for employees, and 38% would choose based on expected high earnings associated with the industry their degree prepares them for.

A couple of years ago, *ICEF Monitor* reported on another Hobsons report, [Beyond the data: Influencing international student decision making](#). A major finding of that report was that graduate outcomes are a key factor in international students' decision-making, and we advised then that:

“Students are pursuing a degree not only for the sake of an education, but also for the sake of the rest of their lives. Show how your programmes are benefitting your graduates.”

That advice stands today.

Similarly, the [QS World Grad School Tour Applicant Survey 2015](#) revealed a trend over the past six years toward a greater emphasis on employment outcomes for post-graduate applicants, whether the student has a specific career goal in mind or just “a more general sense of the need to become as ‘employable’ as possible.” In short, as Hobsons notes, students are expecting a return on investment from their studies, one that relies on “the tight association between obtaining a university qualification and favourable employment outcomes.”

The costs of obtaining a degree weigh heavy on many students

More than four in ten (43%) of students told Hobsons “they would consider not attending university if the cost was too high.”

That said, 81% of students agreed that university is “the best way to prepare for their careers.” The allure of degree programmes is thus alive and well ... for now. For now, because two other research findings point to an international higher education industry ripe for disruption:

- 25% of the surveyed prospective students would consider not attending university if there was a better way of getting an education;
- 42% would prefer to stay in their home country if the quality of education was similar.

As *ICEF Monitor* has been reporting on for some time, now, several major traditional source countries are [working hard to increase their attractiveness to students](#) – both domestic and in many cases, international. For example:

- China hosted nearly 380,000 foreign students in 2014 but has a target to attract 500,000 by 2020;
- Japan is aiming for a target of 300,000 students in 2020;
- Malaysia wants to reach a foreign enrolment of 250,000 by 2025;

Regarding the idea of students opting for “a better way of getting an education” than attending university (again, an interesting proposition for 25% of the prospective students surveyed), the past few years have witnessed a surge in the discussion around – and provision of – “[alternative credentials](#)” (e.g., certificates of shorter duration than degree programmes). The trend arises as a result of two of the themes revealed by the current Hobsons' report: (1) students' cost-consciousness, and (b) their increasing demand that education be career- and/or skills-centred.

Hobsons states that “universities must ... focus on producing work-ready graduates, linking programmes to local

industries and actively demonstrating to students and employers the value that comes from their degrees” in order to be able to compete with disruptive emerging models. According to Dr Michelle Weise, a leading expert on disruptive innovation in higher education, they would do well to not only *compete* with emerging models but also to *integrate* them into teaching approaches.

Hobsons, for its part, sees an opportunity for universities to invest in technology to improve students’ experiences and outcomes:

“The potential for immersive technologies such as consumer virtual reality devices and ubiquitous broadband connectivity is one example of how savvy entrants could create an education user experience that far outstrips current online (and indeed ‘bricks and mortar’) learning models, simply by leveraging technologies that are becoming available to core education demographics for other purposes (in this case, entertainment and gaming). A combination of technologies allowing new types of teaching and learning at a lower cost, if connected to qualifications and student outcomes in the right way, would be a powerful threat to the status quo.”

Post-study work rights and immigration policies key to competition

The new Hobsons’ research finds that “migration is an important part of the international education plan for 47% of students.” That’s almost half of prospective international students who are influenced by the visa and immigration policies of destination countries, and we can see these policies’ effects in the fluctuations in destination countries’ market share of international students when rules are changed. The most striking example of this recently is in [the UK](#), where the more restrictive immigration policies of the past couple of years are taking a toll on institutions’ ability to compete for international students.

Over one in three (32%) prospective students responding to the Hobsons survey indicated a desire to stay temporarily in a destination country on a post-study work visa, compared with 23% who planned to return immediately to their home countries after finishing their studies. A smaller but significant proportion (15%) said they wanted to migrate permanently to the destination country after finishing their studies.

Heavy student social media use presents great opportunities

The Hobsons’ research found that:

- 71% of prospective students use social media at some stage while researching universities;
- 50% of international students use social media to find information before making an enquiry;
- 26% use social media to help when making an application.

With so much student investment in social media, Hobsons’ argues that “a university’s social media strategy should offer not only another source of information for a prospective student, but a vital opportunity for universities to reach the student profiles they want.”

In all these respects, the 2016 Hobsons survey is a valuable addition to the growing base of student survey research available to international educators today. The scope of the survey and its methodology may vary from report to report, but all such research is an important window into the student perspective on study abroad, and so a necessary foundation for strategic planning and recruitment strategy for international programmes.