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### **Rising popularity of creative arts among Chinese students can help maintain UK's competitive global position**

UK universities should take advantage of Chinese students' rising interest in creative arts degrees to remain competitive on the world stage, a new report has found.

China is the UK's largest undergraduate (UG) global market, accounting for one in every four international acceptances via UCAS.

UCAS's [new report](#), published in partnership with Pearson, has shown a shift in the most popular subjects among students from China choosing to study in the UK.

Business has topped the list for the past 10 years, making up 26% of UG acceptances through UCAS in 2023 – declining from 43% in 2013. At the same time, interest in creative arts and design subjects have more than doubled, going from 4% of UCAS acceptances in 2013 to 11% this year – making it the fourth most popular UG subject.

To remain competitive in the global market, the report has highlighted how UK higher education (HE) should take greater confidence beyond business courses and proactively promote more subjects to students from China, such as creative arts and social sciences, mathematical sciences and engineering.

Current recruitment is also highly concentrated around London and at high-tariff institutions, with scope for UK HE to broaden its appeal across different regions and universities and colleges.

It comes at a time of increasing competition from established and emerging destination countries such as Australia, USA, Canada, Japan, and China itself.

New UCAS end of cycle data for 2023 shows a decline in the number of students applying at undergraduate level from China for the first time since 2014, 33,195 compared to 33,660 in 2022 (-1%), while acceptances were down to 17,400 from 18,500 last year (-6%) for the first time since 2015.

#### **Other key findings include:**

- Nine in 10 (91%) Chinese students would recommend the UK as a study destination.

- Chinese students consider several study destinations in parallel – 63% of UG applicants applied or planned to apply to another country alongside the UK and China, including the top study destinations of the USA (40%), Canada (39%) and Australia (27%).
- Reputation (62%), quality of education (60%), and cultural experiences (46%) are the main reasons why students from China choose to study in the UK.
- In 2023, 76% of Chinese UG acceptances through UCAS were to high tariff universities or colleges, while three regions (London, Yorkshire and the Humber, and the North West) accounted for more than half of Chinese acceptances (57%).
- More than a third (35%) of UG students from China applying through UCAS are placed at universities or colleges in London – most likely due to the concentration of institutions in the region as well as the global reputation and draw of the capital. This compares to less than 1% in Northern Ireland, 1% in Wales and 2% in the East of England.
- Almost three in four Chinese students enrolled in a UK UG degree are considering a postgraduate (PG) degree in the UK. Finding a job in the UK (43%) or in China (34%) are also popular options.
- Nine in 10 (91%) of surveyed students declared an English qualification when applying to study in the UK.

**Sander Kristel, UCAS Chief Executive (Interim), said:**

“I’m delighted that our new report offers UCAS’ first global insight focused on the experience of Chinese undergraduate students in the UK. Our findings show that students from China hold our universities and colleges in high regard with the majority viewing the UK as a positive, or very positive, place to study due to its world-class reputation and quality of education.

“The UK has a flourishing creative arts sector with world-leading TV and film, fashion, design and music industries so it’s encouraging to see growing numbers of Chinese students motivated to study in the UK due to the value of our vibrant arts and culture. This presents a significant opportunity for universities and colleges to promote the unique offering of our creative courses.

“However, our report emphasises that sustained growth in the Chinese market is not guaranteed – with global economic uncertainty and competition the backdrop of an increasingly dynamic landscape. In this context, the sector must collectively work together to remain competitive in this global market but do so in a manner that promotes sustainability and diversity, with a balanced distribution of Chinese students, to help maintain the UK’s position as one of the most attractive study destinations on the international stage.”

**Gio Giovannelli, President of Pearson, English Language Learning, said:**

“This new report clearly shows that the UK retains its position as the leading destination for Chinese students. This is no surprise – whether for the love of learning, the quality of the education on offer or to boost their future employment prospects.

“Proficiency in the English language is an essential component of a positive student experience in the UK, reflected in the finding that more than 90% of Chinese students have an English qualification. This helps students settle quickly, build connections and friends in their local communities and make the most of their time in the UK. The broad geographical spread of Chinese students throughout the UK is also interesting – I’m sure many leave having learned lots of regional British phrases and words.

“We are delighted to partner with UCAS on this report – one of many ways in which we are working together to support those studying in the UK. We will use these findings to find even better ways to help students from all countries gain the language skills they will need to thrive during any period of study in the UK, and of course, to help the UK maintain role as a top-quality study destination for any international student.”

**Ula Tang-Plowman, BUILA Executive Member, Chair of China regional interest group, and Director of International Recruitment, Central University of Lancashire, said:**

“This UCAS report comes at a pivotal moment for those of us with a keen focus on the Chinese. This comprehensive analysis reveals the evolving trends and preferences of Chinese undergraduate students, marking a significant shift in their academic interests. Understanding these changes is crucial for us in the higher education sector, especially in light of the challenges and transformations we've witnessed post-pandemic.

“I see this report as one of the key tools in reshaping our engagement strategies with the Chinese market. It is essential that we adapt to these emerging trends and leverage them to maintain the UK's position in global education. By embracing a truly multi-layered and strategic approach that leverages all elements of UK's educational excellence, we can ensure a sustainable and impactful presence in this crucial market, keeping the UK ahead of the race.”

**Chenxing Sang, Secretary General, BOSSA said:**

“We’re delighted to have contributed insights to this report from UCAS, indicating trends in appetite for UK study across China. Amidst global economic challenges, Chinese families are increasingly price-conscious, with Transnational Education (TNE) programs gaining popularity, especially at the undergraduate level.

“The report also considers the geographical spread of students and how some provinces and municipalities hold greater potential than others for growth - such as Guangdong, which is not only the most populous province but has been a long-time hub of interest in the UK. At BOSSA, we see the UK being the top destination for Chinese students for the foreseeable future.”

Read the full report here: [\*Global insights: What are the experiences of Chinese students in the UK?\*](#)

**ENDS**

**UCAS Press Office**

07880488795

[communications@ucas.ac.uk](mailto:communications@ucas.ac.uk) (monitored regularly)

@ucas\_corporate

**UCAS**

UCAS, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, is an independent charity, and the UK's shared admissions service for higher education.

Our services support young people making post-18 choices, as well as mature learners, by providing information, advice, and guidance to inspire and facilitate educational progression to university, college, or an apprenticeship.

We manage almost three million applications, from around 700,000 people each year, for full-time undergraduate courses at over 380 universities and colleges across the UK.

We also provide a wide range of research, consultancy and advisory services to schools, colleges, careers services, professional bodies, and employers, including apprenticeships.

We're a successful and fast-growing organisation, which helps hundreds of thousands of people every year.

We're committed to delivering a first-class service to all our customers — they're at the heart of everything we do.

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## **BUILA**

The British Universities' International Liaison Association (BUILA) is a UK-wide, membership-led organisation supporting the work and professional interests of staff working in international recruitment and liaison at UK higher educational institutions.

BUILA currently has a membership of 144 UK higher education institutions and there are over 2,000 international recruitment professionals working at those institutions who utilise the BUILA resources. BUILA's activities are focused on the needs of members, identified through feedback and consultation, and delivered by its team and Executive Committee.

For more information, contact [members@buila.ac.uk](mailto:members@buila.ac.uk)

## **BOSSA**

We are China's leading association for the study abroad service industry since 2004. The Beijing Overseas Study Service Association & China Alliance (BOSSA & COSSA) is a nonprofit, government-supported organisation. BOSSA began in Beijing, and COSSA was formed later to encompass agencies outside of Beijing.

Membership is comprised of accredited Chinese international education agencies (both private and public companies) and certified individual counselors who consult or provide services for Chinese students to study abroad.