

UCAS

PROJECT NEXT GENERATION

INTERNATIONAL
STUDENTS: EARLY
DRIVERS AND
STUDY PATHWAYS





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Young people are making pivotal decisions about their futures earlier than ever. For international students aged 13-16, aspirations are taking shape years before formal applications begin, and they're guided by a range of influences, from social media to the firm encouragement of family: "You can be anything you want; we support you," shares a 15-year-old student from Turkey. But navigating options isn't simple, especially when over **79% are considering studying abroad** yet face substantial concerns, from **costs cited by nearly 30%** to uncertainties about the economic environment, particularly among students from India who compare the UK's economic situation with that of other study destinations.

In this context, the UK stands out as a preferred destination for **54% of surveyed students**, valued for its quality of education and career potential, but intense competition with countries like the USA and emerging study destinations means that UK providers must refine their approach to attract and retain these students. This report equips education providers with the insights to understand these young decision-makers—who overwhelmingly prioritise passion over profit—with **60% selecting subjects that interest them most** and **58% choosing careers they genuinely care about**. By understanding these motivations, influencers, and country-specific nuances, institutions can engage these students early, addressing their ambitions and concerns and providing the clarity they seek.





Key findings:

Our research highlights trends that offer a nuanced understanding of this young international audience, illustrating what matters most to them when considering education and careers:

1. Passion over Profit

For international students, alignment with personal interests is the top priority when choosing subjects and careers. **60% select subjects that interest them, 56% seek enjoyment in their studies, and 55% are motivated by career paths that resonate personally.** This cohort shows a strong preference for engagement and personal fulfilment over financial incentives.

2. Influencers Matter, but Autonomy is Rising

While family and teachers remain key influencers, particularly for students from India and China, **57% of students feel confident following their own interests and skills.** As they approach age 15, social media becomes a critical resource, signalling a shift toward independent research and decision-making.

3. The UK as a Top Destination, but Challenges Persist

With **54% of respondents identifying the UK as an attractive study destination,** the UK's reputation for quality education and career prospects remains strong. However, **27% of students cite costs as a significant barrier.** Preferences and perceptions vary by country:

- **India (63%) and China (60%)** regard the UK highly for its educational reputation and career prospects.

- **Turkey (55%)** values the UK's opportunities for both academic growth and personal development.
- **France and the USA** reflect more mixed views, with cultural appeal resonating more strongly for students from the USA, while cost concerns are more prominent among French students.

As other destinations like the USA gain appeal, UK institutions must address financial concerns and clearly articulate the unique cultural, academic, and career benefits of studying in the UK.

4. Digital Platforms are Crucial to Engagement

Social media, particularly video-first platforms such as YouTube and TikTok, plays a vital role. **Nearly all students use at least one social media platform for university research,** with YouTube ranked as the top source. Preferences vary by country; for instance, **47% of Indian students rely on social media for university advice, compared to only 20% in France.** This underscores the need for targeted strategies that cater to regional preferences.

5. Cultural Nuances Require Tailored Messaging

Students' educational preferences are shaped by regional and cultural factors. In East China, for instance, **45% of students express an interest in IT,** while in South Central China, **engineering is the preferred field.** Additionally, French students show lower confidence in their future plans, while Indian students are notably confident and proactive. Tailored messaging that reflects these cultural and regional nuances will better engage and attract diverse groups.

| INTRODUCTION

With easier access to more information, young people are thinking about their futures earlier than ever. By the time they start engaging with institutions, they have often already made crucial decisions about their next steps and are well along the path toward making their final choices.

So, how do you reach and engage them before they reach this point?

Pre-16 audiences are notoriously difficult to engage, particularly when cultural and regional differences come into play. Making sure young people have access to comprehensive, clear information that resonates with their personal ambitions is the reason we've compiled this report. UCAS, in its role as the national admissions service, connects the world to UK higher education, supporting more than **700,000 applicants each year from 190 countries and territories around the world.**

- ▶ **1 in 5 UCAS applicants are from overseas**
- ▶ **1.2 million international applicants since 2014**
- ▶ **A network of over 3,000 international registered centres**
- ▶ **18 million unique web page views from outside the UK each year**

As a marketing, recruitment, or admissions professional, you already bring substantial insights into international strategies and markets. However, this research is designed to support and enhance your understanding of how younger audiences view their study and career options. Inside, you'll discover who these students are, what they need, when they need it, and how they make decisions on key topics such as university choice. Critically, we also trace how these requirements evolve across age groups to illustrate the shifting motivations and influences that define their journeys.

Des Cutchey

Head of International



Methodology

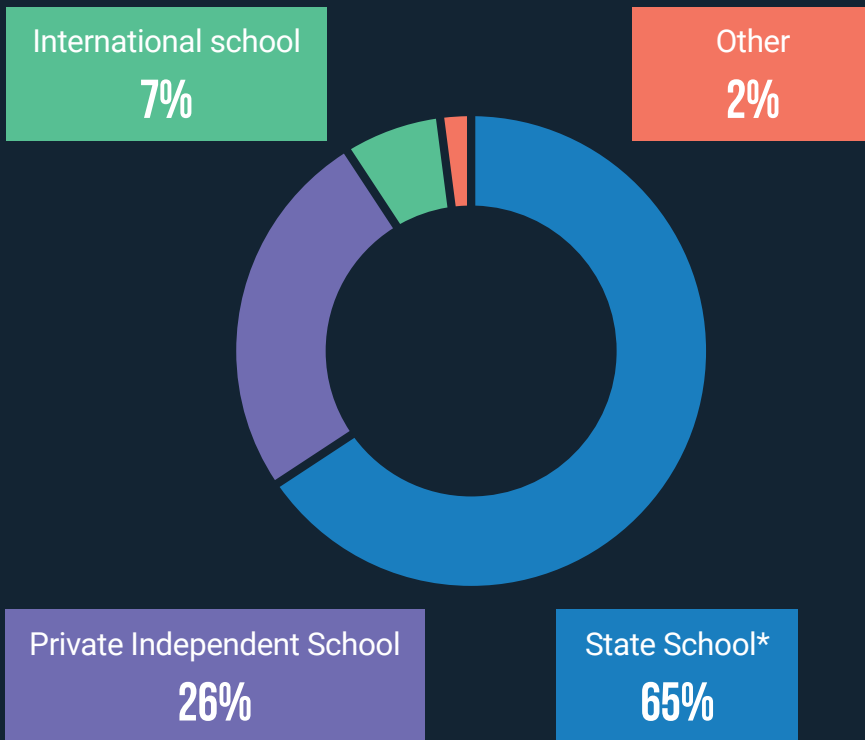
IN MAY 2024, WE BEGAN A BESPOKE SURVEY RESEARCH PROJECT WITH INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AGED 13 - 16.

Engaging with 2,035 young people - evenly split across China, France, India, Turkey, and the USA - we set out to answer two big questions:

1. What are students aged 13 - 16 planning for the future, and what drives/helps them to make these choices?
2. How do they choose particular pathways, subjects, careers, or professions?

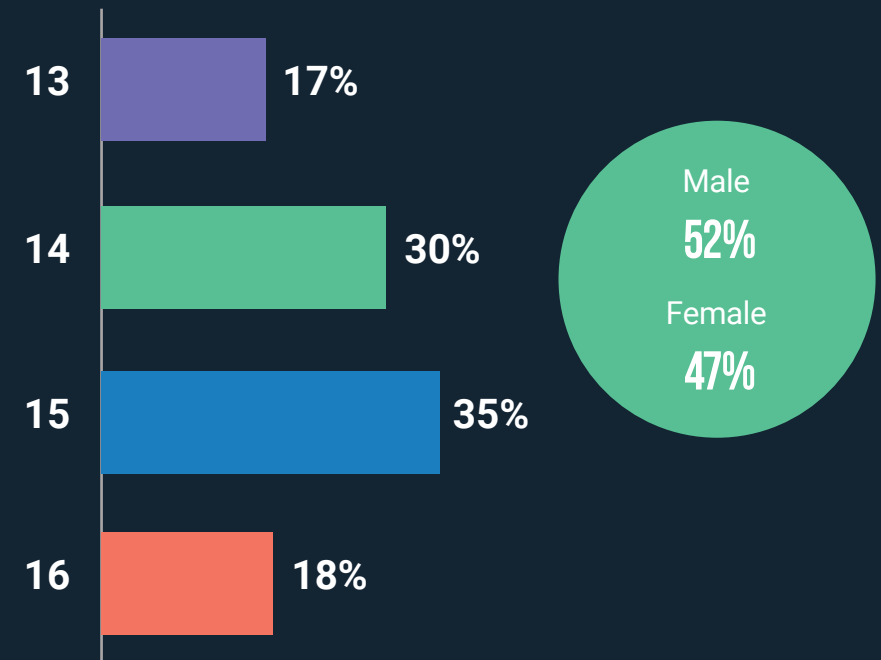


School Type



*State school (e.g. lower or upper secondary junior college public school)

Age



▶ **State schools** are defined as a school funded by the government, covering the national curriculum of the country the school is based in.)

▶ **International schools** are defined as those covering the curriculum of a different country to the one the school is based in.)

▶ **Private or independent schools** are defined as those not funded by the government, which charge fees for tuition.)

▶ **Other** responses included **Montessori, Charter, and homeschooling.**

It is important to note that the survey sample was skewed towards those who would consider attending university in the future, though some without intent to pursue further education were included to assess university push factors and other subgroup differences.

Students broadly have some idea of what they would like to do at all stages of study/life

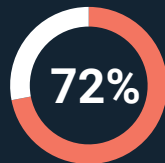
Age Profiles

13

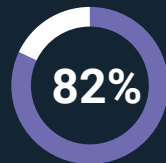
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15

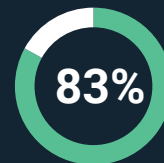
16



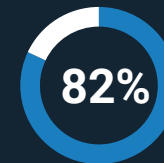
...have at least some idea of what they'd like to study at school after the age of 16



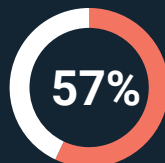
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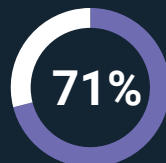
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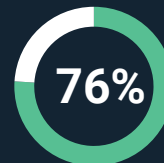
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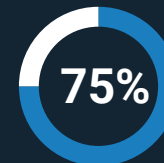
...have thought about their future study plans in at least a fair amount of detail



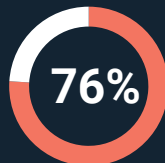
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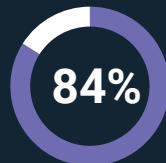
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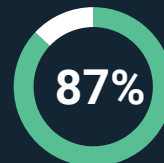
...have thought about their future study plans in at least a fair amount of detail



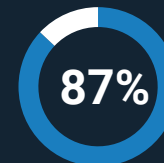
*...have already begun researching further study options to at least some extent



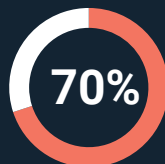
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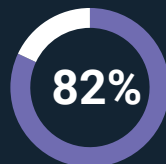
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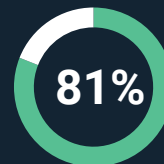
*...have already begun researching further study options to at least some extent



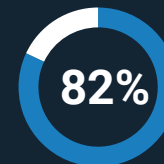
...have at least some idea of what they'd like to do in their future career



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...have at least some idea of what they'd like to do in their future career

*% of those who are likely to attend university in the future

CHAPTER 1 - THE FUTURE: FEELINGS AND CONFIDENCE

With an optimistic outlook and a strong link between subjects and careers, these are young people driven by following their passions first – over what makes the most money.

Led by their hearts & guided by their heads

How young people are putting passions before profits

The glass is half-full, for those considering study outside their home country.

Chinese and Indian prospective students are especially optimistic thinkers, with **over 90% feeling positive about both the present and the future**. In the USA, it's in the mid eighties too, still higher than your average UK teenager.

Overall, 85% of students feel positively about their current situations and outlook. From the qualitative side of our research, we know that this is a group of young people who embrace the present whilst being optimistic about the future – holding onto and living in the moment and focussing on what makes them happy.

They comment on the importance of their instincts and of focussing on current strengths and passions – a laissez-faire, 'what will be will be' approach to life. **Enjoyment and happiness are their chief drivers.**



"TRUST
YOUR
INSTINCTS"

Female, France, 13

"JUST DO SOMETHING THAT YOU ENJOY
AND MAKES YOU HAPPY BECAUSE THEN
IT WON'T FEEL LIKE WORK AT ALL."

Student, USA, 15

"MY PARENTS TOLD
ME YOU CAN BE ANYTHING
YOU WANT, WE SUPPORT YOU."

Student, Turkey, 15



China



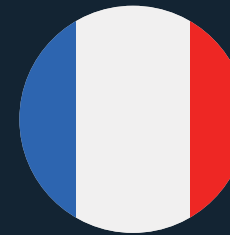
India



United States



Turkey



France



United Kingdom

Positive re:
Present

95%

91%

84%

73%

81%

81%*

Positive re:
Future

96%

96%

89%

74%

72%

82%*

However, it would be wrong to suggest that there's no long-term thinking to their approach. There is a very strong correlation between study intentions and future career plans.

Perhaps this is because there is a growing economy in the sectors that most serve today's youth – for example, the proclivity towards computing and gaming. Or perhaps it's these teenagers having their fingers on the pulse and knowing which way the wind is blowing.

At all levels and ages, **students look to follow their passions and interests first of all.** IT and Engineering are the two most popular sectors for most, with international and private school students showing more interest in Accounting and Business.

This marries up with our application data too – what we see from 13-year-olds in this research, we also see in 17 and 18-year-olds applying to university. In 2024, the top three subjects for international students are Business and Management, Social Sciences, and Engineering and Technology – with Computing close behind.

TOP SUBJECTS CONSIDERED AFTER THE AGE OF 16



Computing / computer science (27%)



Engineering (17%)



Computer gaming and design (16%)

TOP SUBJECTS CONSIDERED FOR UNIVERSITY



Computing / computer science (30%)



Engineering (19%)



Computer gaming and design (16%)

TOP SECTORS FOR FUTURE CAREERS



Information Technology / IT (29%)



Engineering (17%)



Healthcare (13%)

**While not in the top 3, Biological sciences & Subjects allied to medicine are considered by 10% for A-levels / Baccalaureate and 12% for university*

P10b What subject(s) would you consider studying at school after the age of 16 (e.g. when you do A-levels, Baccalaureate, etc)?

Base: Those who have an idea of what they want to study (1,916)

S50 What subject(s) would you consider studying at university? Base: Those who are likely to apply to university (1,696)

P20b Which of the following best describes the sector(s) in which you'd like to work in the future? Base: Those who have thought about their career plans (1,904)



More students are listening to their heart. When choosing a subject for university, they want it to be something they're **interested** in (60%), something they'll **enjoy** studying (56%), or that will help them pursue a career they're **passionate** about (55%). And when it comes to their job, unsurprisingly, the same sentiments ring true – 58% are led by wanting a role that fundamentally **interests** them.

Across all ages and countries, there is an incredibly strong link between subjects and careers – underpinned by this instinctive desire to do what they enjoy and then trust the process.

But there are subtle differences between nationalities, which should be an important consideration when communicating with students:



Chinese students are the **most likely** to have at least some idea about what they'd like to study in the future.



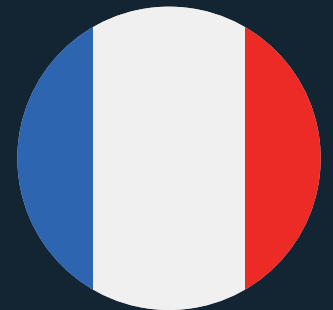
Indian students are the **most certain** about their future career, and most have begun researching study options.








American students are the **least likely** to have begun researching their further study options.



Turkish students are **most likely** to be certain about their future study plans.



And the French students are the **least certain** about their future study and career plans.

Country	Top 3 university subject choices	Top 3 sectors
	<p>33% – Computing / Computer Science</p> <p>21% – Subjects allied to medicine</p> <p>20% – Accounting & Finance</p>	<p>39% – Information Technology / IT</p> <p>16% – Communications / Information</p> <p>14% – Healthcare</p>
	<p>39% – Computing / Computer Science</p> <p>26% – Engineering</p> <p>24% – Business & Management / Accounting & Finance</p>	<p>43% – Information Technology / IT</p> <p>25% – Engineering</p> <p>18% – Accounting</p>
	<p>21% – Computing / Computer Science</p> <p>17% – Computer gaming and design</p> <p>17% – Engineering</p>	<p>19% – Information Technology / IT</p> <p>14% – Engineering</p> <p>13% – Healthcare</p>
	<p>36% – Computing / Computer Science</p> <p>31% – Engineering</p> <p>20% – Computer gaming and design</p>	<p>30% – Information Technology / IT</p> <p>26% – Engineering</p> <p>14% – Healthcare</p>
	<p>14% – Subjects allied to medicine</p> <p>13% – Computing / Computer Science</p> <p>12% – Business & Management</p>	<p>15% – Healthcare</p> <p>11% – Information Technology / IT</p> <p>8% – Engineering</p>

S50. What subject(s) would you consider studying at university? Base: Those who are likely to apply to university (1,696); China (376), India (369), USA (327), Turkey (381), France (243).

P20b. Which of the following best describes the sector(s) in which you'd like to work in the future? Base: Those with some idea of their career plans (1,904); China (384), India (383), USA (373), Turkey (411), France (353).

It's important to be granular in populous countries like India and China, where differences between regions can be vast. For example, **45% of students from East China say they'd like to work in IT in the future**, while those in **South Central China would prefer a career in Engineering**. In **India, students from the more western regions are significantly more likely to express an interest in Computer Gaming and Design (31%) and Marketing (20%)** than those elsewhere in the country.

Recommendations - The Future: Feelings and Confidence

1. **Empower young people to follow their dreams** - This is an optimistic, live-in-the-moment, trust-in-the-process group of young people. Lean into this with your messaging – with bright, positive comms that support their passionate approach and showcase how this mindset fits into life on your campus.
2. **Tailor the type of content by nation** - Recognise the subtle differences in motivations, priorities, and preparedness among students from different countries. For example, Indian students are most certain about their future career, but American students are unlikely to have even started researching – so you'll need both top and bottom-of-the-funnel communications strategies.
3. **Don't forget to account for intra-country differences** - For large countries like India and China, there are considerable differences in career interests based on the region a student lives in. One size does not fit all, so bear this in mind when geotargeting or visiting cities in these markets



CHAPTER 2 - INFORMATION, INSPIRATION, AND INFLUENCE

When looking for support, students often look to family and teachers as key sources of advice. Priorities centre on what type or level of education they need, as well as which careers are available to them and how they can get started.

Digital research, analogue reassurance

The role of influencers in more informed decision-making

In each and every cycle, the internet plays a greater role in the search for support.

It's accessible, it's effective, and with the explosion of AI, it's now pretty much instant. But one thing it can never truly provide is objective advice from a place of vested interest. **That's where influencers come in.**

No, not the on-screen influencers from TikTok, we're talking about real people who are present and offering advice in a young person's life. With experience, opinion, and care – they play a crucial role in making sure that young people can make more informed decisions. **And it's the two closest influencer groups that have the biggest impacts – family members, like parents, and school staff, like teachers.**

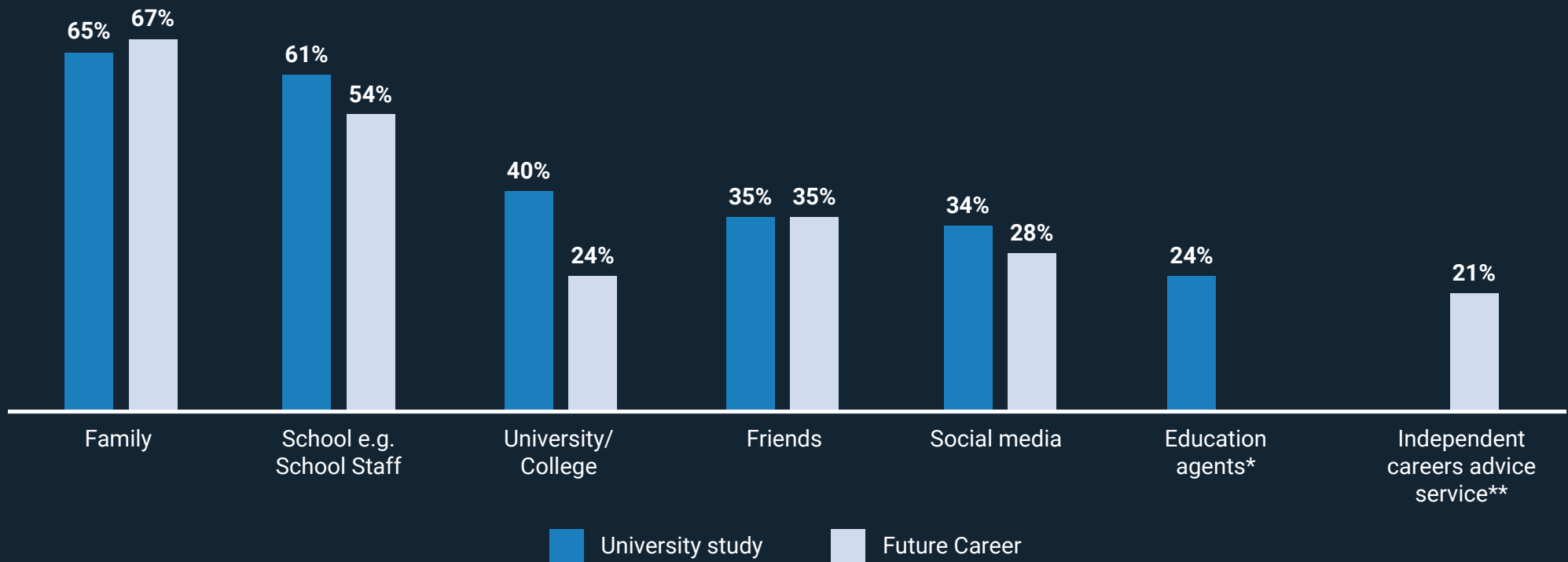


For the students of China, India, Turkey, France, and the USA – parents and teachers are the **key sources** of advice regarding both **further study** and **future careers**.

Familial support comes with some of the expected parental politics too, as just under half (47%) of students admit that they feel the pressure when seeking advice. This is especially strong for students in India and China.

Regardless, more than half of all international students (57%) are confident in pursuing their interest and skills – rather than planning out the future, like their parents may prefer them to.

Sources used for advice on university and future careers



S70b Where do you look for advice on university study? Base: Those who have begun researching universities to some extent (1,646)

P60 Where do you go for advice on your future career? Base: Total (2,035)

As students reach 15 years old, they are beginning to turn towards social media for their research – as well as direct contact with university and college materials. At 16 years old, as they start to think outside the orbit of their school, they rely less on school staff. **Parental influence remains steady and important throughout:**

"MY FATHER TOLD ME: WORK IN A PROFESSION WHICH HELPS YOU GROW, NOT YOUR MONEY."

Student, India, 15

"IT'S A JOB YOU'LL DO WITH LOVE, STUDIES ARE HARD BUT DON'T FORGET WHY YOU DREAM OF BECOMING A PAEDIATRICIAN. I BELIEVE IN YOU AND YOU WILL SUCCEED - MY GRANDPA."

Student, France



International school and private school students also utilise other sources like agents, careers services, and social media more than their state school counterparts.

Agents and careers services are **most used in India, where agent-organised international study fairs are commonplace.** French students are also likely to look to similar resources, because they're more prone to feeling not listened to by their teachers (only 47% feel that they are) and believe that their teachers don't help them understand how their learning relates to their future careers.

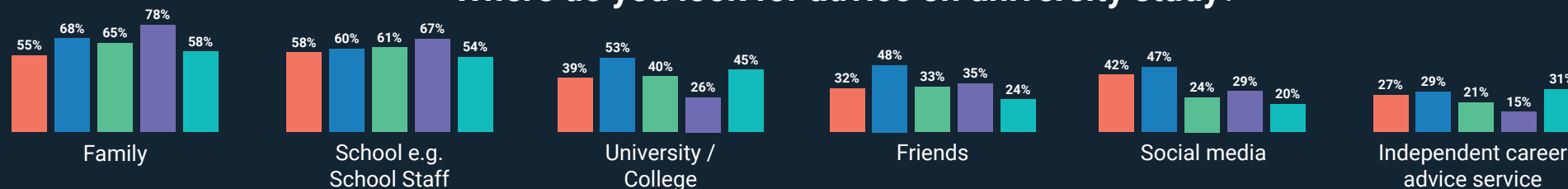
In China and India, social media is crucial in the student search for advice. In some places, it's used more than twice as much – 47% of Indian students

rely on social media for university advice, compared to just 20% of French students. In China, the propensity to turn towards social media may be a replacement support service for parental advice: just 51% of Chinese students get family advice and guidance with their career compared to 74% of Turkish students.

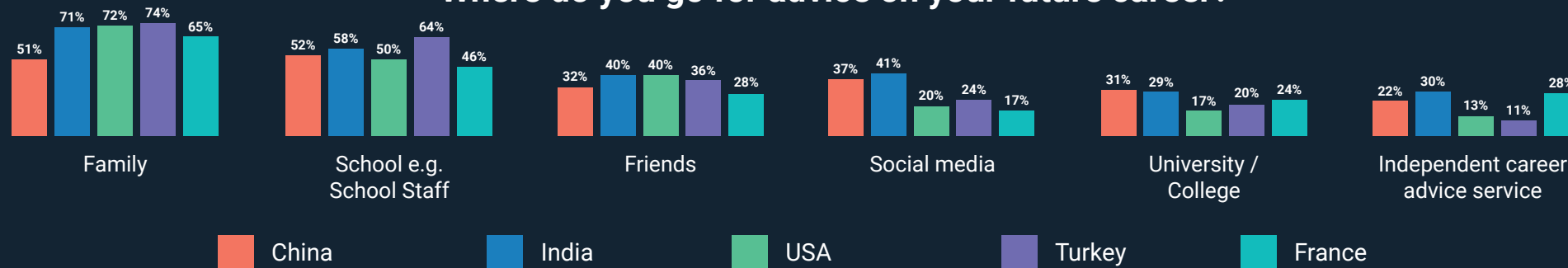
Turkish students tend to rely heavily on family as their primary source of advice and guidance for their choices related to education and career paths.

In contrast, students in the United States have a more varied support network. While they also frequently turn to family, American students are just as likely to seek advice from family, teachers and even their friends.

Where do you look for advice on university study?



Where do you go for advice on your future career?



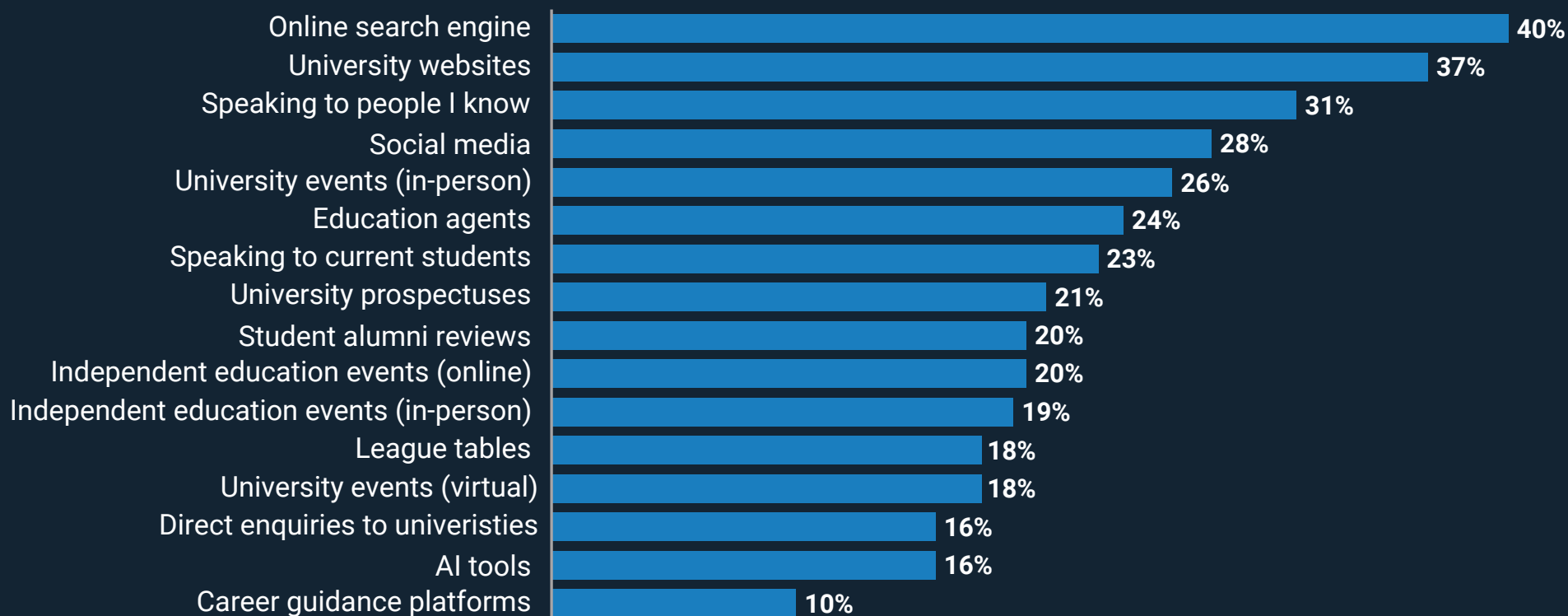
S70b Where do you look for advice on university study? Base: Those who have begun researching universities to some extent (1,646); 13-year-olds (268), 14-year-olds (503), 15-year-olds (606), 16-year-olds (269)

P60 Where do you go for advice on your future career? Base: Total (2,035); China (410), India (400), USA (400), Turkey (425), France: (400).

At the broadest grouping, when profiling preferences for researching potential universities, we see an **overwhelming tendency towards online sources**. Naturally – given that they’re looking for overseas information. Nevertheless, there are important distinctions in the **types** of online sources.

For example, direct use of university websites is almost as popular as using search engines – showing a strong desire across all ages to go straight to source. On the flip side, the 28% using social media may well be looking for more peer-led content, where the conversation is controlled by personal experiences rather than university-led messaging.

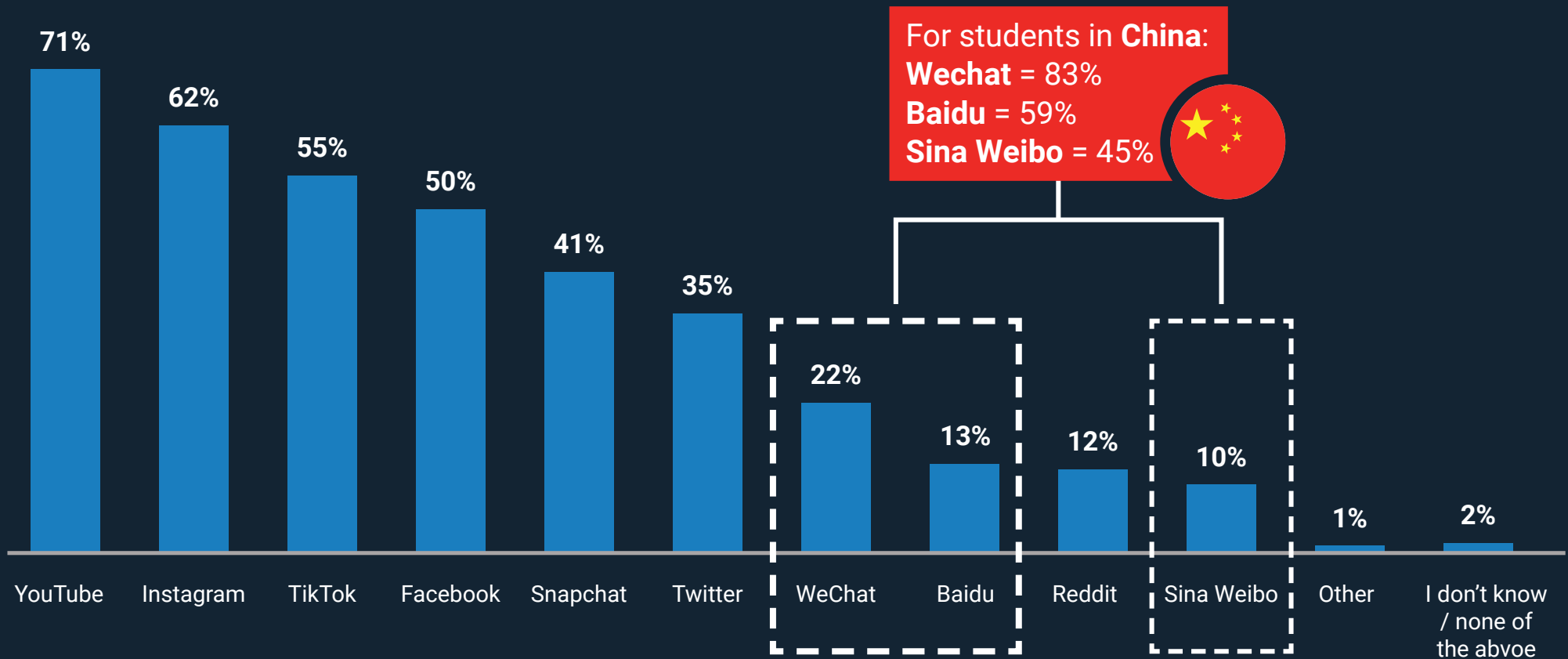
Which of the following information sources have you used / do you think you’d be most likely to use to research different potential universities?



S80. Which of the following information sources have you used / do you think you’d be most likely to use to research different potential universities? Base: Those who are likely to attend university in the future (1,696)

Nearly all students in our study use at least one social media channel for their research, **and preference is heavily weighted towards platforms which prioritise video** – with YouTube comfortably ahead of the pack.

Which of the following social media channels do you use?



M10. Which of the following social media channels do you use? Base: Total (2,035)

There are some very important nuances and distinctions:

▶ State school students are way more likely to use **TikTok** (61%), compared to private school students (41%).

▶ Private school students favour **YouTube** (79%) and **Instagram** (71%), whereas international school students are the highest users of **Twitter/X** (44%) – especially compared to state school students (33%).

▶ **Twitter/X** is more popular in India and Turkey compared to the USA and France.

▶ In China, students predominantly use **WeChat**, followed closely by **Baidu** and **Douyin** (the China-specific version of TikTok.)

▶ **Facebook's** popularity decreases after the age of 16, and Instagram's rises.

▶ In most countries, more than half of the respondents use **TikTok**.

▶ There are regional variations in social media usage, with South India showing less prominent use of social media sites overall.

▶ In the US, Northeast students use more channels than their Midwest counterparts.



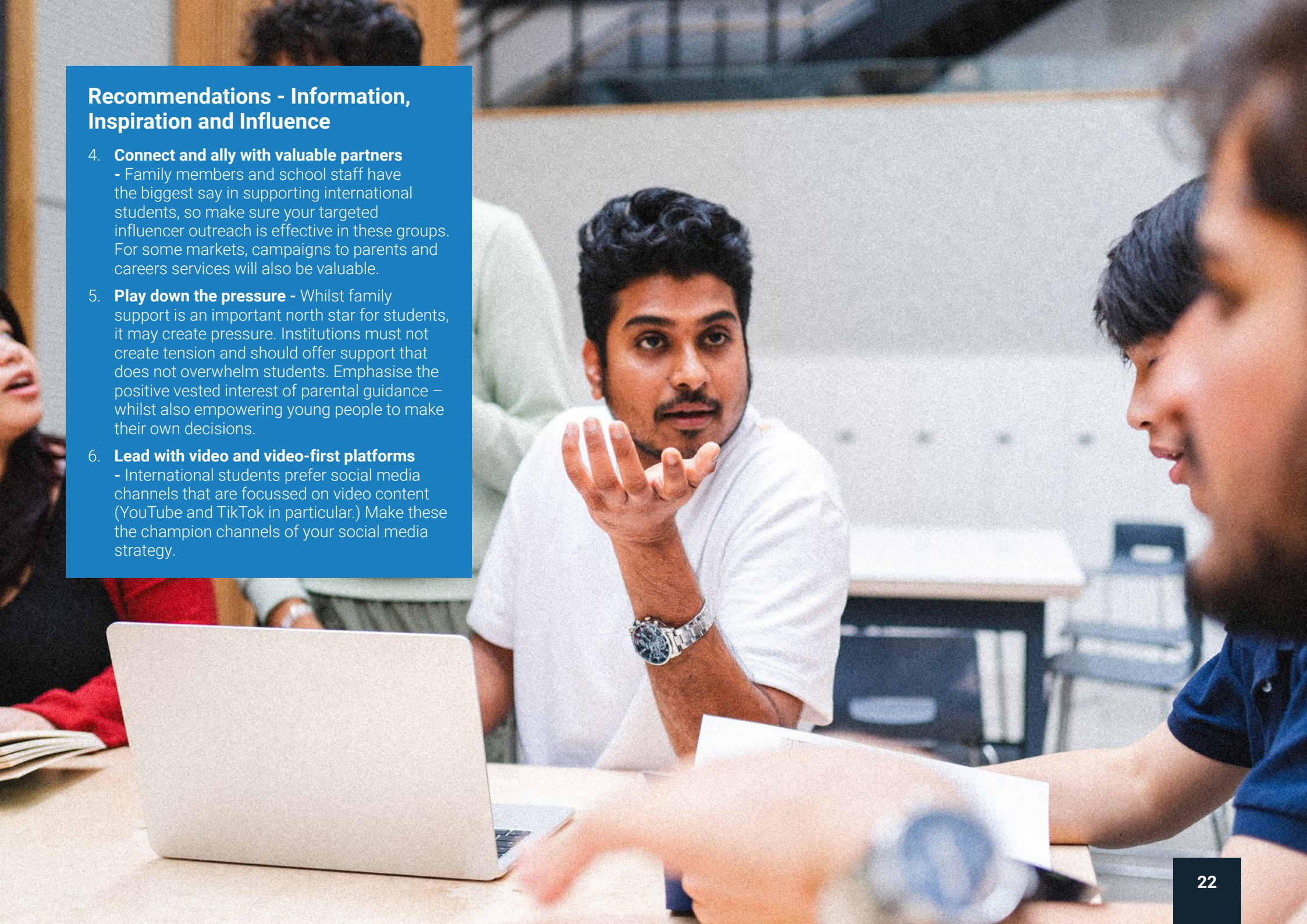
WeChat is a Chinese super-app that combines messaging, social networking, mobile payments, and other services – offering a more comprehensive experience compared to Western social media channels that often focus on specific functions.

Social Media & Censorship

When choosing platforms for international student recruitment, always check local censorship. The list of which channels can be accessed in which countries change often and will affect popularity and usage data.

Recommendations - Information, Inspiration and Influence

- 4. Connect and ally with valuable partners**
 - Family members and school staff have the biggest say in supporting international students, so make sure your targeted influencer outreach is effective in these groups. For some markets, campaigns to parents and careers services will also be valuable.
- 5. Play down the pressure** - Whilst family support is an important north star for students, it may create pressure. Institutions must not create tension and should offer support that does not overwhelm students. Emphasise the positive vested interest of parental guidance – whilst also empowering young people to make their own decisions.
- 6. Lead with video and video-first platforms**
 - International students prefer social media channels that are focussed on video content (YouTube and TikTok in particular.) Make these the champion channels of your social media strategy.



CHAPTER 3 - EARLY INTENTIONS OF FUTURE STUDIES

Most who are likely to attend university have begun research to some extent. University rankings, styles of learning and facilities are key considerations in students' university choice.

What motivates and matters most?

How tomorrow's students are making their university decisions

As a blanket rule for all five countries profiled, **big plans are being made at young ages.**

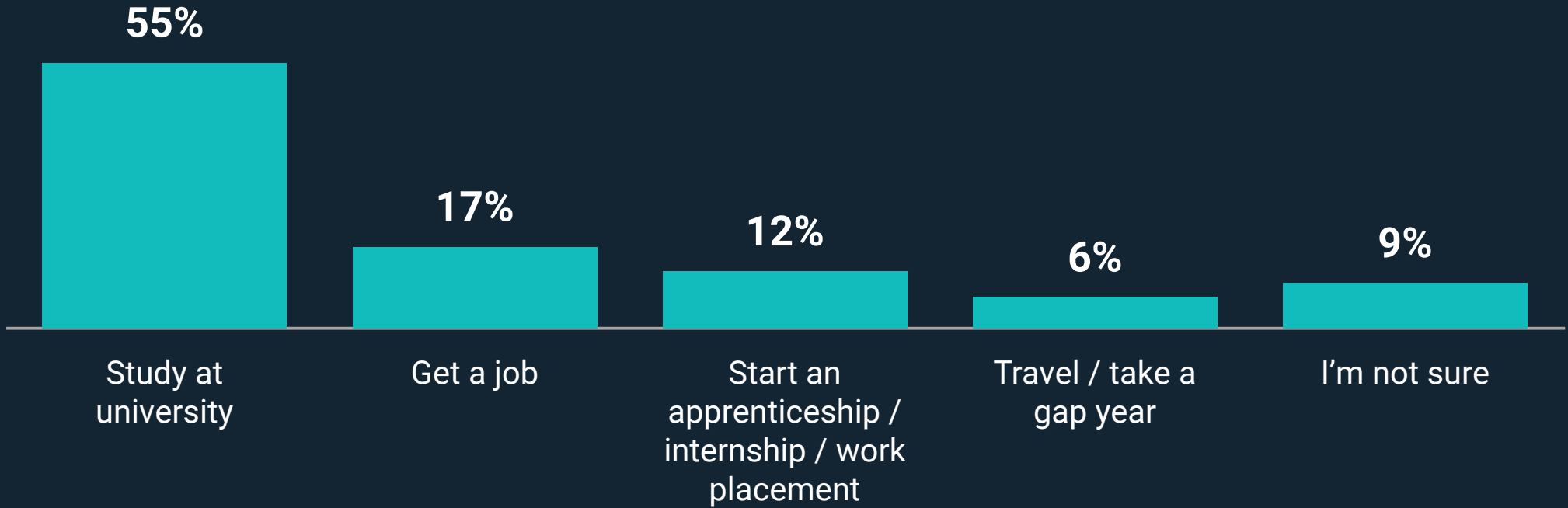
Over half of all students (55%) surveyed intend to apply to university immediately after school, and 83% expect to apply at some point in the future.

Indian students are the most likely to go straight to university after school, whereas Chinese and French students are more likely to get a job.

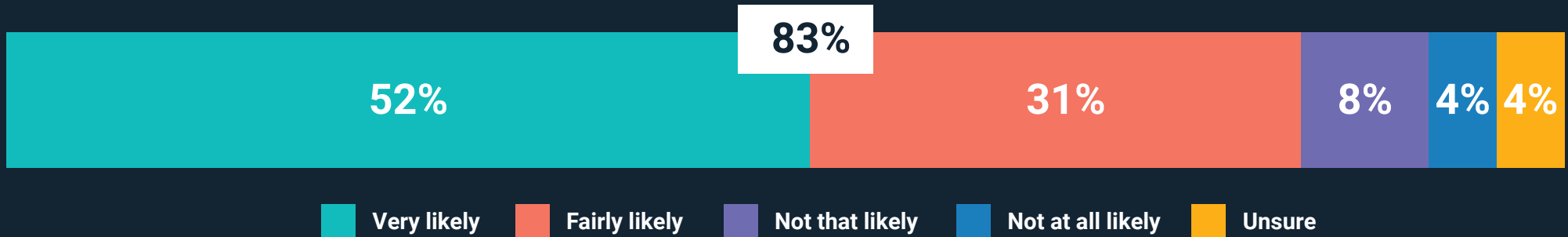
Private school students are also much more likely to apply for university immediately after school.



What are your plans immediately after finishing school?



To what extent, if at all, do you think it is likely that you will apply to university in the future?



S05 What are your plans immediately after finishing school? Base: Total (2,035) S20 To what extent, if at all, do you think it is likely that you will apply to university in the future? Base: Total (2,035) *The survey sample was skewed towards those who would consider attending university in the future, though some without intent to pursue further education were included to assess university push factors and other subgroup differences.






The reasons for wanting to go to university are diverse, though primarily centred around a **desire for quality education** (47%) and the **pursuit of passion** (38%.)

The necessity of a degree to enable a certain career is, perhaps surprisingly, not as strong a driver for international students. More important is the benefits to personal growth and maturity, which may correlate with the whole concept of moving abroad at a young age.

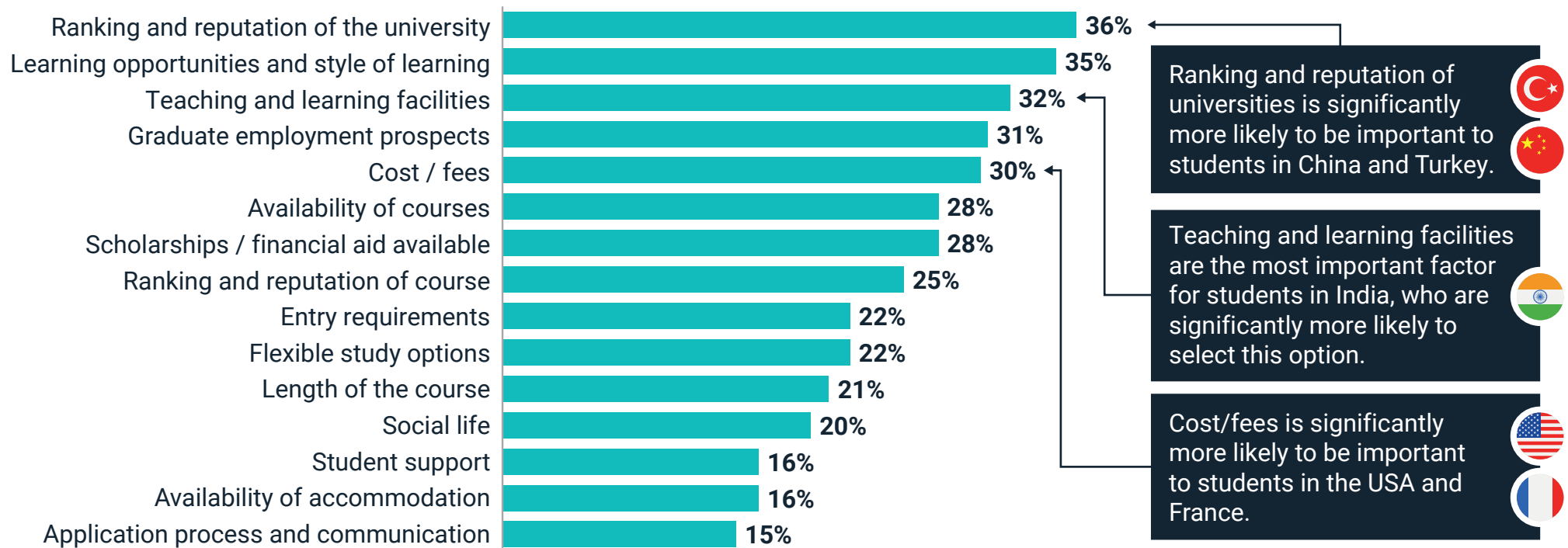
What are your main reasons for wanting to go to university?



S30. What are your main reasons for wanting to go to university? Base: Those who are likely to attend university in the future (1,696)

Country					
The main reason for going to university:	Becoming well-educated	To grow & mature in myself	Pursuing a subject passion	To enter a particular profession	Pursuing a subject passion
The main factor in choosing a university:	Ranking and reputation	Teaching and learning	Cost and fees	Ranking and reputation	Cost and fees

What is important to you when choosing a university?



S85. What is important to you when choosing a university? (Select up to 5) Base: Those who are likely to attend university in the future (1,696)



Whilst ranking and reputation is the most important overall, it's crucial for 15-year-olds – 40% consider it important, compared to less than a third of 13-year-olds. The younger group are more likely to see cost and entry requirements as important – more existential considerations – which raises some interesting questions:

DO YOUNGER WOULD-BE STUDENTS GO THROUGH A PROGRESSION OF QUESTIONS TO SELF-QUALIFY FOR UNIVERSITY, BEFORE LATER GETTING MORE SELECTIVE WITH THINGS LIKE RANKING, REPUTATION, AND OPPORTUNITY?

DOES THIS CHALLENGE THE 'I'VE ALWAYS KNOWN I'D GO TO UNI' MINDSET? COULD YOUR INPUT AT THE RIGHT TIME CREATE NEW POTENTIAL STUDENTS, FROM A GROUP THAT WOULDN'T HAVE GONE OTHERWISE?

As for those with other plans:

For the reasons cited by those not planning on university, it's a belief that they **wouldn't do well** (28%), that it **wouldn't fit their future life and career plans** (23%), and the **financial cost** (23%).

40% of those who are unlikely to apply to university have little to no idea of what they would like to do in their future career (compared to 15% of those with university plans). This group is also less likely to have ever gotten advice about their future career – which raises yet another important question:

ARE THESE SELF-LIMITING BELIEFS THE REASON FOR NOT APPLYING TO UNIVERSITY, OR IS IT THAT THEY JUST HAVEN'T DONE THE THINKING YET? IF THEY HAD A BETTER IDEA OF THEIR FUTURE, WOULD UNIVERSITY FACTOR INTO THEIR PLANS?

Recommendations - Early Intentions of Future Studies

7. **Highlight the unique experience** - This is an audience bound for university, with 83% likely to apply at some point. They understand the value of a degree, so don't waste resources on extolling its virtues. Instead, market the lifestyle factors or what makes your campus and offer unique.
8. **But note that motivations vary massively** - Chinese students are interested in the quality of the education, whereas Indian students go to university for the self-development. These are incredibly different priorities and principles that should guide your geo-targeted conversion comms.
9. **And don't get caught out by generalisations** - Follow the data and ignore any preconceptions. E.g. price sensitivity isn't tied to the perceived affluence of a given nation. Fees are much more important to American and French students than any other nationality – so always refer to the research.



CHAPTER 4 - CHOOSING WHERE TO STUDY

There is considerable interest in studying abroad. Receiving a high-quality education and enhancing future career opportunities are key drivers for this with the UK remaining one of the most popular study destinations.

The push and pull of the UK experience

A dive into what attracts international students to UK universities

Studying overseas is an ambition for almost all ages and nations profiled, but there are equally big barriers.

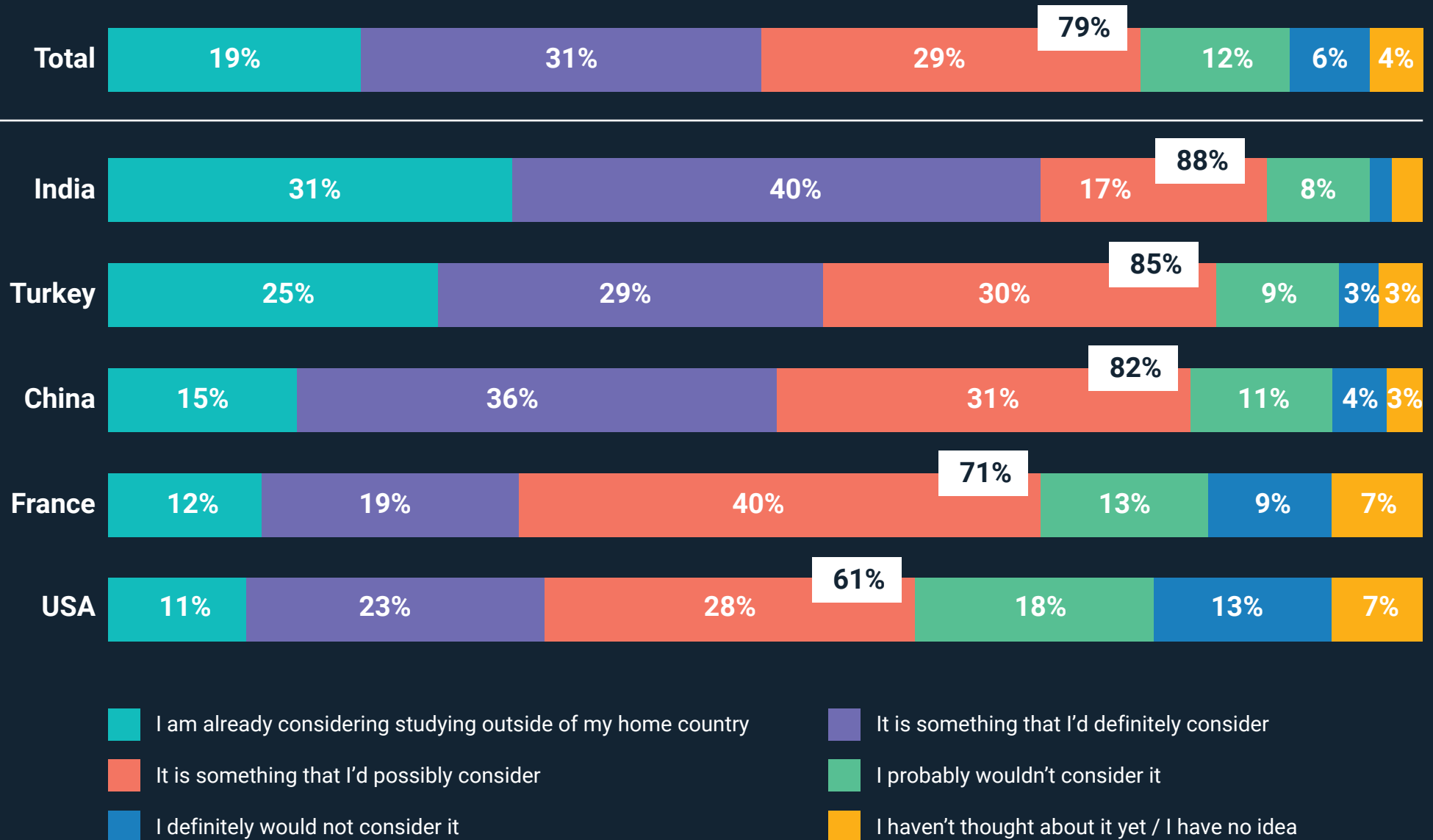
79% of young people in China, India, Turkey, France, and the USA are considering studying abroad – mainly for the following reasons:

- ▶ **To experience a high quality of education**
- ▶ **To benefit from career opportunities**
- ▶ **To gain both life and language experience.**

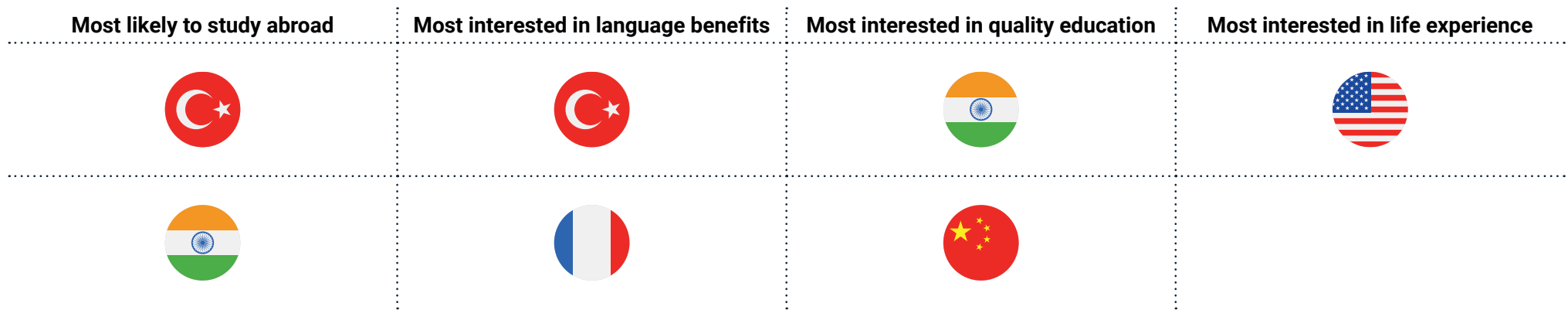
But cost is the major obstacle, for almost 30%. There is similar trepidation around language barriers – and an unsettling lack of knowledge about the experience of studying abroad.



Is studying at university outside of your home country something that you might consider?



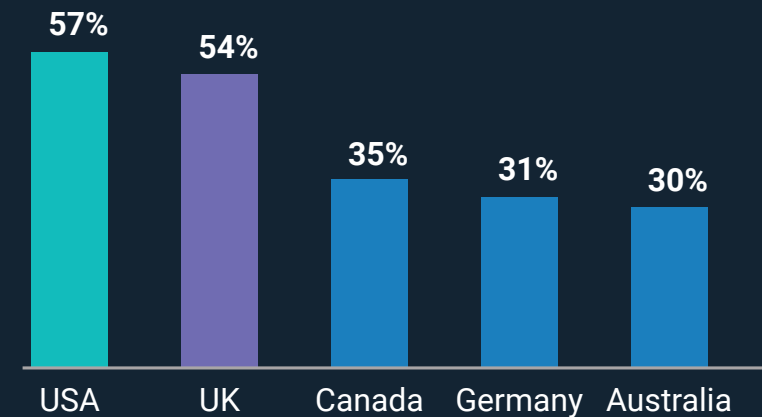
S90. Is studying at a university outside of your home country something that you might consider? Base: Those who are likely to attend university in the future (1,696)



What is the most important to you in picking the country where you may study abroad?



Which, if any, of the following countries would you strongly consider as a potential study abroad location?



S125. What is most important to you in picking the country where you may study abroad? Base: Those who would consider studying abroad (1,332)

The UK (54%) is second only to the USA (57%) in popularity, with Canada, Germany, and Australia firmly behind. It's no surprise, then, that the financial cost of overseas study is such a prominent concern – 27% view it as the most important factor of all. And when the most popular destinations are also the countries with high costs of living, it's an understandable hesitation.

The UK is a popular destination for respondents in **India (63%)** and **China (60%)**. The USA is also most appealing to students in India (70%), but followed instead by France (56%), and Turkey (55%). Overall, respondents express positive views about studying in the UK, praising its reputation and education quality.

"BEST UNIVERSITIES, WORLD CLASS TEACHERS, AND BEST PROFESSIONAL SERVICES AVAILABLE THERE."

Student, India, 15

"HORIZON-OPENING, NETWORKING, AND QUALITY EDUCATION."

Student, Turkey, 14

How perception of the UK differs by domicile



China

Commonly, students in China choose to describe the UK in terms of its **'learning environment'**. There is an appreciation for the **diverse and vibrant culture** in the country, as well as the **high quality and reputation of its institutions**.



India

The **reputation of UK universities** and the **quality of teaching and facilities** are key in attracting students in India. The **prestige associated with studying in the UK** is seen as a way to **enhance career prospects**.



USA

The **harmonious nature of the cultures** is something that students in the USA like, negating the impact of things like language barriers. The UK is often talked about in terms of the **total experience** instead of solely about study.



Turkey

The **quality of the education** is often noted by students in Turkey, despite being slightly more likely to note its high cost. Furthermore, opportunities for **personal development**, both **academically** and with **language skills** are often noted.



France

While broadly positive, there is little unique about what students in France believe studying in the UK would be like. As with most other countries, the **standard of education in the UK** is something often picked up on.



The information that's important and influential to overseas students changes over time. For example, younger students are more interested in the quality of UK institutions. As they get older, the cultural and career benefits of a UK education matter more.

And whatever age, there are some understandably universal questions that they want answers to:

**"WHAT I
WOULD GET
OUT OF IT IN
THE LONG
TERM AND
HOW MUCH
IT WOULD
COST."**

Student, USA, 15

**"LEARN
ABOUT THE
ADVANTAGES OF
STUDY ABROAD
PROGRAMS AND
WHICH COUNTRY
AND UNIVERSITY
IS RIGHT FOR ME"**

Student, China, 13

**"I WOULD
LIKE TO
KNOW HOW
FOREIGN
STUDENTS
ARE
TREATED
THERE."**

Student, India, 15

**"I'D LIKE TO
KNOW ABOUT
THE PATH OF
OTHER FRENCH
STUDENTS WHO
SUCCESSFULLY
STUDIED
ABROAD"**

Student, France, 13

**"TO INVESTIGATE
WHETHER
STUDYING
ABROAD WILL
BE USEFUL
TO FIND A
JOB AFTER
GRADUATION."**

Student, Turkey, 14

Recommendations - Choosing Where to Study

- 10. Perception of UK education is a double-edged sword -** The UK remains the most attractive option for overseas studies, even with fees and living costs being the biggest concern for international students. To marry these up, you need to provide clear and concise information on how much things cost, what support is available, and how previous overseas students have excelled.
- 11. UK education still needs to be sold alongside your offer -** Awareness of the advantages of the British experience are high but focused on major cities, and global competition is stronger than ever. Localise your content and make your campus and city stand out by highlighting what makes your university unique.
- 12. Tailor your information by age -** The younger the student, the more the statistics matter – like how well your university performs across a range of metrics. The older they get, the more mature their needs – like career prospects and cultural benefits.



| FINAL THOUGHTS

As young people make decisions about their futures at increasingly early ages, connecting with them in meaningful ways requires a more nuanced approach. It's essential to consider not only the cultural and country-specific differences of your audience but also to build relationships at times when students are still developing their interests and exploring possibilities. And with **vast markets like China and India, where habits and preferences can vary significantly by region**, using intelligent, relevant, and current data is invaluable for tailoring outreach effectively.

Despite regional differences, some trends hold true across the board:

- ▶ This optimistic generation prioritises their passions, with many trusting their interests to guide their futures.
- ▶ Family and school staff are influential, as they remain the most trusted in-person advisors.
- ▶ Social media plays a vital role, particularly video platforms, which are increasingly important as students get older.
- ▶ The UK continues to be one of the most attractive destinations for overseas study.

UK institutions are well-positioned to appeal to students from around the world by emphasising the quality, reputation, and career opportunities of a UK education. However, as competition grows, especially from universities in students' home countries, UK providers must ensure that their unique offerings are clearly communicated to stand out in a rapidly shifting global market.

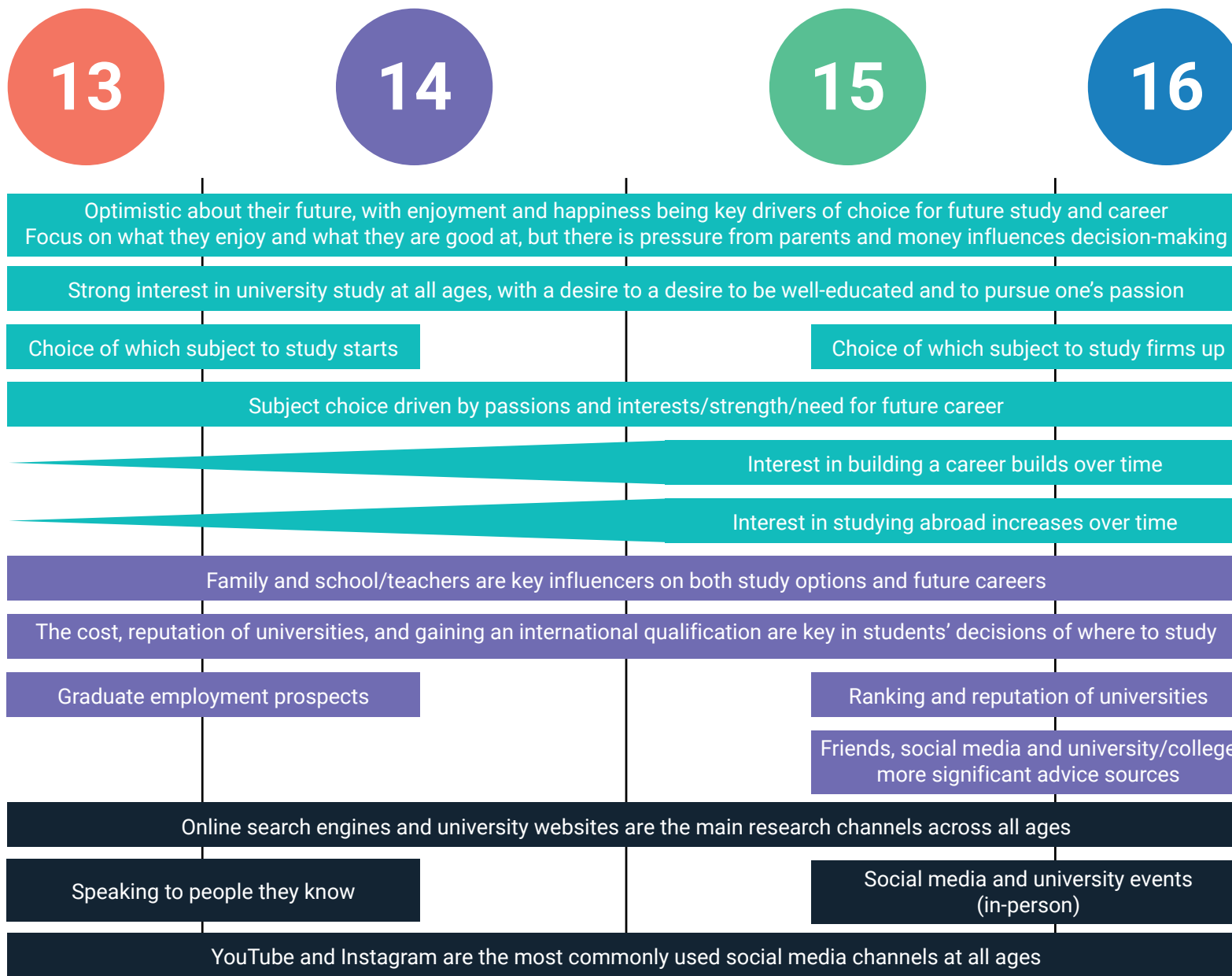


SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS AND STUDENT JOURNEY TIMELINE

<p>1. Empower young people to follow their dreams</p> <p>This is an optimistic, live-in-the-moment, trust-in-the-process group of young people. Lean into this with your messaging – with bright, positive comms that support their passionate approach and showcase how this mindset fits into life on your campus.</p>	<p>2. Tailor the type of content by nation</p> <p>Recognise the subtle differences in motivations, priorities, and preparedness among students from different countries. For example, Indian students are most certain about their future career, but American students are unlikely to have even started researching – so you'll need both top and bottom-of-the-funnel communications strategies.</p>	<p>3. Don't forget to account for intra-country differences</p> <p>For large countries like India and China, there are considerable differences in career interests based on the region a student lives in. One size does not fit all, so bear this in mind when geotargeting or visiting cities in these markets</p>
<p>4. Connect and ally with valuable partners</p> <p>Family members and school staff have the biggest say in supporting international students, so make sure your targeted influencer outreach is effective in these groups. For some markets, campaigns to parents and careers services will also be valuable.</p>	<p>5. Play down the pressure</p> <p>Whilst family support is an important north star for students, it may create pressure. Institutions must not create tension and should offer support that does not overwhelm students. Emphasise the positive vested interest of parental guidance – whilst also empowering young people to make their own decisions.</p>	<p>6. Lead with video and video-first platforms.</p> <p>International students prefer social media channels that are focussed on video content (YouTube and TikTok in particular.) Make these the champion channels of your social media strategy.</p>
<p>7. Highlight the unique experience.</p> <p>This is an audience bound for university, with 83% likely to apply at some point. They understand the value of a degree, so don't waste resources on extolling its virtues. Instead, market the lifestyle factors or what makes your campus and offer unique.</p>	<p>8. But note that motivations vary massively.</p> <p>Chinese students are interested in the quality of the education, whereas Indian students go to university for the self-development. These are incredibly different priorities and principles that should guide your geo-targeted conversion comms.</p>	<p>9. And don't get caught out by generalisations.</p> <p>Follow the data and ignore any preconceptions. E.g. price sensitivity isn't tied to the perceived affluence of a given nation. Fees are much more important to American and French students than any other nationality – so always refer to the research.</p>
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To provide a clearer understanding of how international students' decision-making evolves, the following timeline outlines key milestones in their journey, from early aspirations to final university choices.

Age Profiles



WHAT NEXT?

This report builds on previous UCAS research reports on the experiences and influencers of international students who choose to come to the UK. To find out how to make your university the most attractive option for overseas students, you can access our previous reports below:

Global Insights: What are the experiences of Chinese students in the UK?

Where Next? What influences the choices international students make?

Where Next? The experience of international students connecting to UK higher education

If you'd like to discuss the findings from this report, or explore ways to use these insights to strengthen your institution's strategy, please get in touch:

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