



# Navigating New Horizons

Chinese perspectives  
on study abroad



# Navigating New Horizons: Chinese Perspectives on Study Abroad

## Introduction

In an age of globalization where cross-border connections are more vital than ever for international relations, economic growth and political stability, study abroad is viewed as a beacon of personal and professional opportunity by millions of students and their families worldwide. The pursuit of knowledge beyond borders isn't just about academic achievement; it's about crafting a future in a world where cross-cultural understanding and global perspectives are invaluable currency.

At the heart of international education lies China. With over a million students studying overseas each year<sup>1</sup>, China is the largest study abroad source market in the world. In recent years, however, the study abroad industry has faced some disruptions as a result of the global pandemic, challenging economic environments, political tensions and changes to student visa policies. Whilst many institutions and economies around the world benefit enormously from the financial boost from international students,<sup>2,3,4,5</sup> the choice of study destination lies ultimately with the students and their families themselves. So how have these recent changes impacted that decision?

This paper delves into the latest trends shaping Chinese students' study abroad intentions, looking at both push and pull factors in the decision-making process. By exploring these trends, we unlock insights for educators, institutions, and policymakers alike.

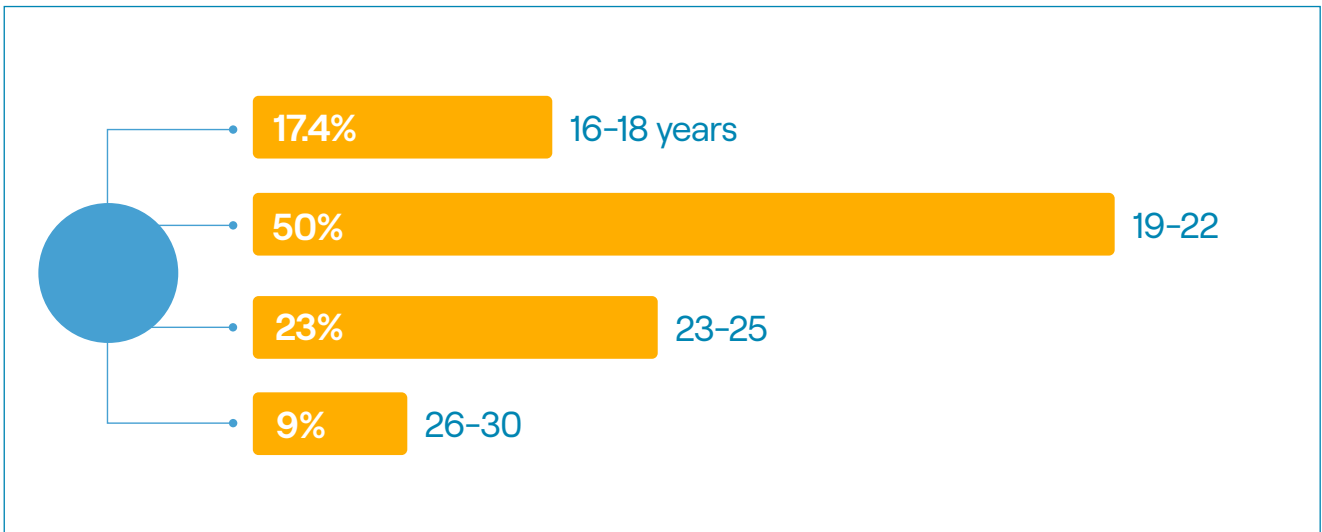


## Research: overview

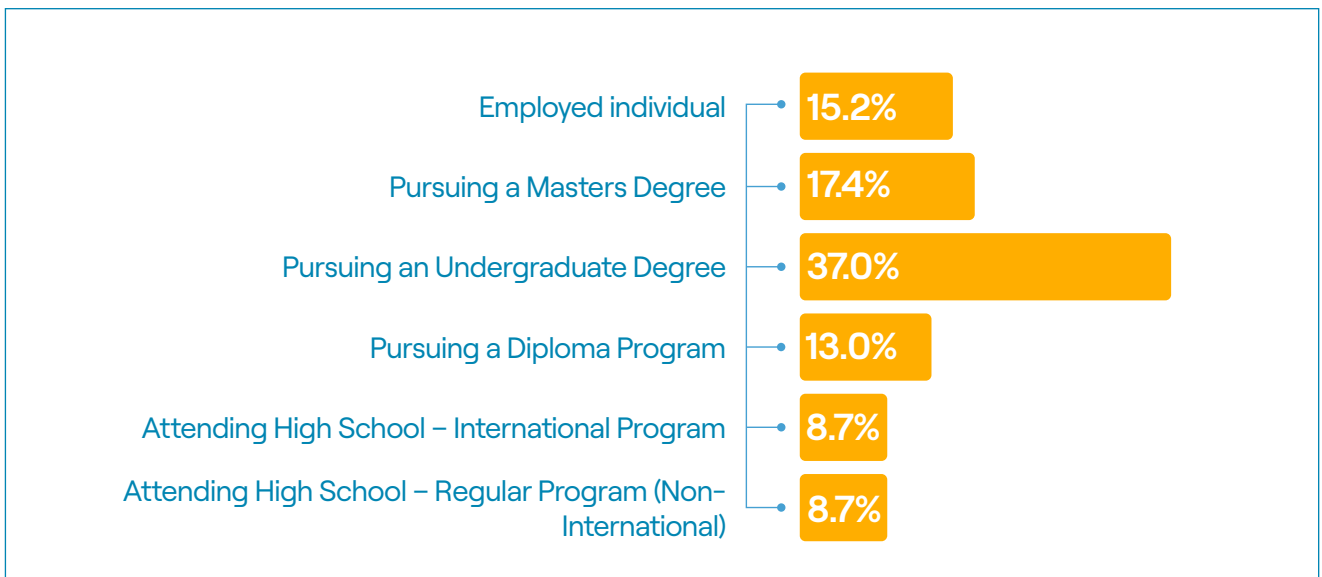
This latest research took the form of an online survey, carried out by Pearson in collaboration with Shanghai Newtrident between June 18 and July 1, 2024. The survey was conducted with a total of 920 respondents from 16 target cities in China. Respondents were all under the age of 30 and were either high school or university students looking to study abroad or employees already in the workforce who expressed an interest in studying overseas. Quotas were monitored to ensure an even representation of male and female participants.



**Table 1:** Survey respondents by city



**Table 2:** Survey respondents by age



**Table 3:** Survey respondents by education/employment status

	Type	Sample size
High School	Private regular program	80
	Private international program	80
Diploma Program	Private	50
	Public	70
Undergraduate	Private	120
	Public ordinary institution	80
	Public 985/211/Double First-Class institution	140
Master's Degree	Private	60
	Public ordinary institution	40
	Public 985/211/Double First-Class institution	60

Table 4: Survey respondents by type of school



Table 5: Willingness to study abroad

## Research: key findings

This research provides an up-to-date snapshot of the study abroad industry in China. It examines the willingness of Chinese students and employees to travel abroad to study, their chosen destination countries and courses, as well as the factors that contribute to the decision not to study overseas.

- Traditional study abroad destinations of the UK, the US, Canada and Australia remain dominant, with over two thirds of survey respondents listing one of the Big Four as their first choice
- New Asian destinations are cited as cheaper, safer and less culturally distant alternatives
- Academic excellence and experiencing new cultures remain key motivations for study abroad
- The visa process and regulations of destination countries, for both study and work, impact country choice
- Study abroad choices are influenced most by family, agents and friends. In an age of online education influencers, teachers remain more influential than their social media counterparts
- Key barriers to wanting to study abroad include financial burdens, cultural differences, and language proficiency
- Recognition by overseas universities is the top factor influencing the choice of proficiency test



“ The findings are largely consistent with the choices of our Chinese users: While the Big Four study destinations still dominate, emerging destinations are catching up, including the rise of inter-Asia mobility. It’s a novel trend that a larger part of Chinese students are also price sensitive and see international education as a means to better career opportunities. It is a strong sign that international education is becoming more ‘mainstream’ there. ”

**Edwin van Rest**

*CEO and Co-founder, Studyportals*

## Research Findings

### Desire to study abroad

Chinese students form the largest single group of international students studying abroad, with significant growth year on year until the lockdowns of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. Whilst we have not seen a return to the growth in the number of Chinese students studying abroad since the end of the pandemic (a number that was up 6% in 2019), steady growth has continued (+1.2% in 2022)<sup>6</sup> and is expected to continue on a similar trajectory.



“With the recent drop in international enrollment numbers felt across the sector, we have seen a drop in applications from all regions, including China. Although we hope for policy changes that will help to mitigate the reduction in international students moving forward, our department continues to work to find innovative ways to recruit students from across the globe and maintain Canada’s reputation as a leading destination for education.”

**Lisa DeCoste**

*Manager of International Admissions, Niagara College, Canada*

### Students

In our survey, 42.1% of students expressed a desire to study abroad. This figure was slightly higher for university students seeking postgraduate courses of study (43.1%) than for high school students (38.1%).

	Overall	High school	University
<b>Yes</b>	42.1%	38.1%	43.1%
<b>Unsure</b>	26.8%	34.4%	24.8%
<b>No</b>	31.2%	27.5%	32.1%
<b>Respondents</b>	780	160	620

**Table 6:** Plans to study abroad by institution type

	Male	Female
<b>Yes</b>	43.9%	40.3%
<b>Unsure</b>	24.7%	28.9%
<b>No</b>	31.4%	30.9%
<b>Respondents</b>	385	395

**Table 7:** Plans to study abroad by gender

	Shanghai	Beijing	Guangzhou	Hangzhou	Nanjing	Wuhan	Changsha	Chengdu	Qingdao	Xiamen	Hefei	Shijiazhuang	Harbin	Xian	Zhengzhou	Shenzhen
<b>Yes</b>	58.8%	56.9%	62.7%	55.8%	45.1%	47.1%	37.3%	41.2%	23.4%	39.1%	41.3%	21.7%	23.9%	23.9%	31.9%	55.3%
<b>Unsure</b>	23.5%	23.5%	13.7%	19.2%	33.3%	25.5%	23.5%	19.6%	38.3%	23.9%	19.6%	39.1%	37.0%	37.0%	29.8%	25.5%
<b>No</b>	17.6%	19.6%	23.5%	25.0%	21.6%	27.5%	39.2%	39.2%	38.3%	37.0%	39.1%	39.1%	39.1%	39.1%	38.3%	19.1%
<b>Respondents</b>	51	51	51	52	51	51	51	51	47	46	46	46	46	46	47	47

**Table 8:** Plans to study abroad by city

Among those students who expressed a desire to study abroad, grades and family income were key factors for both high school and university students.

	Overall	90-100	80-89	70-79	60-69	Below 60
<b>Yes</b>	38.1%	37.5%	46.4%	5.6%	31.3%	50.0%
<b>Unsure</b>	34.4%	42.5%	31.0%	38.9%	31.3%	0%
<b>No</b>	27.5%	20.0%	22.6%	55.6%	37.5%	50.0%
<b>Respondents</b>	160	40	84	18	16	2

**Table 9:** Plans of high school students to study abroad by grade

High school students from private institutions are more than twice as likely to express an interest in studying abroad compared to their peers from public schools.

	Below 300,000	300,000–600,000 (inclusive)	600,000–1,000,000 (inclusive)	Above 1,000,000
<b>Yes</b>	12.8%	40.6%	50.0%	60.0%
<b>Unsure</b>	12.8%	44.9%	40.6%	30.0%
<b>No</b>	74.4%	14.5%	9.4%	10.0%
<b>Respondents</b>	39	69	32	20

Table 10: Plans of high school students to study abroad by family income

	Private	Public
<b>Yes</b>	55.0%	21.3%
<b>Unsure</b>	33.8%	35.0%
<b>No</b>	11.3%	43.8%
<b>Respondents</b>	80	80

Table 11: Plans of high school students to study abroad by school type

	Regular course	International program
<b>Yes</b>	42.5%	33.8%
<b>Unsure</b>	28.8%	40.0%
<b>No</b>	28.8%	26.3%
<b>Respondents</b>	80	80

Table 12: Plans of high school students to study abroad by course type

	Overall	90-100	80-89	70-79	60-69	Below 60
<b>Yes</b>	43.1%	54.7%	42.7%	35.5%	37.5%	0%
<b>Unsure</b>	24.8%	16.8%	27.2%	22.4%	28.1%	0%
<b>No</b>	32.1%	28.4%	30.1%	42.1%	34.4%	0%
<b>Respondents</b>	620	95	386	107	32	0

Table 13: Plans of university students to study abroad by grades

	Below 300,000	300,000-600,000 (inclusive)	600,000-1,000,000 (inclusive)	Above 1,000,000
<b>Yes</b>	25.9%	47.1%	58.6%	55.6%
<b>Unsure</b>	9.4%	35.3%	31.6%	25.9%
<b>No</b>	64.4%	17.6%	9.8%	18.5%
<b>Respondents</b>	212	221	133	54

Table 14: Plans of university students to study abroad by family income

	211/985	Private university	Ordinary public university
<b>Yes</b>	63.5%	35.2%	31.1%
<b>Unsure</b>	7.0%	47.0%	16.8%
<b>No</b>	29.5%	17.8%	52.1%
<b>Respondents</b>	200	230	190

Table 15: Plans of university students to study abroad by institution type

	Science and Engineering	Business and Management	Humanities and History	Education	Social Sciences	Law	Medicine	Agriculture	Arts	Sports
<b>Yes</b>	51.4%	37.5%	38.3%	47.1%	33.3%	50.0%	51.5%	45.5%	32.0%	0%
<b>Unsure</b>	15.4%	34.8%	19.1%	31.4%	21.6%	15.8%	24.2%	18.2%	32.0%	60.0%
<b>No</b>	33.1%	27.7%	42.6%	21.6%	45.1%	34.2%	24.2%	36.4%	36.0%	40.0%
<b>Respondents</b>	175	184	47	51	51	38	33	11	25	5

Table 16: Plans of university students to study abroad by major

Those students with higher grades show more interest in studying overseas as do those from families with higher incomes. High school students from private institutions are more than twice as likely to express an interest in studying abroad compared to their peers from public schools. University students from elite 985/211/Double First universities<sup>7</sup> are much more likely to express a desire to study abroad compared with peers from private or non 985/211/Double First public universities.

### Working professionals

36.4% of working professionals express a desire to go abroad to study in the next two years. Of these, there is a direct correlation between income and the desire to resume studies abroad. Those employees earning between 600000 and 1 million CNY are almost three times as likely to respond positively to the idea of studying abroad than those earning under 300000 CNY.

Why is this? One factor that may be impacting this difference is the current job market in China. With unemployment running at over 5%, many college graduates are struggling to find employment. In 2020 (the last time figures for college graduates were released), 25.2% of college graduates were unemployed<sup>8</sup>. Faced with job uncertainty, those on lower incomes are less willing to leave a secure job and see little financial benefit in study abroad to boost job prospects on their return<sup>9</sup>.

**High unemployment is persuading many to upskill in order to differentiate themselves from other candidates or to find employment outside of China.**



	Overall	Below 300,000	300,000-600,000 (inclusive)	600,000-1,000,000 (inclusive)	Above 1,000,000
<b>Yes</b>	36.4%	22.6%	39.3%	66.7%	100.0%
<b>Unsure</b>	35.0%	37.1%	41.1%	14.3%	0%
<b>No</b>	28.6%	40.3%	19.5%	19.0%	0%
<b>Respondents</b>	140	62	56	21	1

Table 17: Plans of working professionals to study abroad by income

	Male	Female
<b>Yes</b>	34.7%	38.5%
<b>Unsure</b>	38.7%	30.8%
<b>No</b>	26.7%	30.8%
<b>Respondents</b>	75	65

Table 18: Plans of working professionals to study abroad by gender

## Motivations for going abroad

### Students

The search for a better education has traditionally been the top motivation for studying abroad, and whilst this remains one of the top three reasons, we see a variety of alternatives which reflect the current context in China.

Those students who fail to secure a place at a top-rank Chinese university often choose to seek opportunities abroad, rather than studying at a second- or third-tier domestic university.

A desire to improve employment prospects is the third most popular reason<sup>10</sup> and over a third cite preferential policies for returnees as another key motivation. By this, they are referring to the *hukou* system that limits internal migration of Chinese nationals from one region or city to another. Returning students from some of China's elite schools are able to access *hukou* status which brings with it with greater job prospects<sup>11</sup>.

43% of survey respondents cite the competitive nature of graduate and post-graduate studies in home universities as a reason to look abroad. In 2023, 12.9 million students took the university entrance exam (*gaokao*) but only 7% were successful<sup>12</sup>. Those students who fail to secure a place at a top-rank Chinese university often choose to seek opportunities abroad, rather than studying at a second- or third-tier domestic university whose degrees are not highly valued by employers.

## My Story

- Name: **Lee**
- Home city: **Xuchang**
- Destination country: **Malaysia**
- Course of study: **Masters in Statistics**



“

Studying abroad was not something that I thought about during my undergraduate studies, mainly because of the high costs involved. At that time, my plan was to pursue a graduate program in China. My goal was to take the Kaoyan (post-graduate exam) and secure a place at my dream school. However, after taking the exam three times without success, I started to rethink my future. I was still determined to attend graduate school and it was at that point that I started to think about graduate programs overseas. When it came to choosing a destination, cost was a significant factor as I am fully supporting myself without any financial help from my parents. I looked at graduate programs in Singapore, Hong Kong, the UK, and Australia, but ultimately, Malaysia was the most feasible option for me. Studying in one of those other countries would have required me to apply for loans, which would have been a substantial financial burden. My budget for studying abroad is between 150,000 and 200,000 CNY per year. This amount is manageable and I believe it is a worthwhile investment in my future. Navigating the application process on my own has been challenging, but it has also been empowering.

”

### Working professionals

For those already in the workforce, it is not surprising to see 3 out of the top 4 reasons for studying abroad being linked to securing a better job: intense domestic competition in the job market, facilitating future migration and securing better employment prospects. As noted above, high unemployment is persuading many to upskill in order to differentiate themselves from other candidates or to find employment outside of China. Indeed, our data suggests that the majority of working professionals are looking to study abroad as a first step to finding work in the destination country. Only 20% see the opportunity as being purely about study, after which they will return to China to re-enter the workforce.



Table 19: Motivations of working professionals to study abroad

**Those on lower incomes are more concerned about leaving their current position to enhance their CV when this comes with no guarantees of a better paid job on their return.**

## My Story

- Name: **Yushuo**
- Home city: **Hengshui**
- Destination country: **Australia**
- Course of study: **Masters in Digital Communication**



During my undergraduate years, I joined AIESEC (International Association of Students in Economics and Business), an NGO youth group, where I had the opportunity to meet individuals from various parts of the world. This experience inspired me to explore education opportunities abroad. Although I was offered a government apprenticeship in Tianjin after graduation, I didn't feel this route would help me realise my full potential and decided to further my education overseas.

When selecting a destination, I ruled out the United States because of cost. I had a fixed budget and was looking for a two-year program costing less than 500,000 CNY. In selecting a school and major, I prioritized the institution's support for learning, the structure of the curriculum, and the diversity of the faculty's backgrounds. I considered study in Europe but finally chose the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in Australia due to its reputation in the field of media. My chosen major allows me to integrate my engineering background with my interest in journalism and communication, enabling me to conduct interdisciplinary research. After completing my studies, my goal is to apply for PhD programs in Europe and subsequently seek employment and residency there.



## Reasons for not going abroad

### Students

Whilst hundreds of thousands of Chinese students decide to study abroad each year, the majority of the people who took our survey were not looking to travel overseas for study. Understanding their reasons helps complete the picture of China's international student mobility.

Lifestyle, language skills and finances are the top three barriers to study abroad for students. Other factors include perceived safety, unfriendly visa policies and an inability to adapt to foreign teaching methodologies.

Almost two-thirds of respondents feel differences in culture and lifestyle are too daunting, with a similar number citing poor language skills as a reason to remain in China. These two factors are clearly related, and those with higher proficiency skills in our survey express more of a desire to study abroad. Integrating into a very different culture and education system is challenging from social, linguistic and pedagogical perspectives<sup>13</sup>.

Also of concern is safety. Media reports of protests, demonstrations and unrest in traditional destination markets creates a perception that these countries are less safe than China or other Asian countries. In a recent survey, over a third of Chinese respondents felt it was not safe to travel to the US, whereas this figure was only 2% for Hong Kong SAR of China and 4% for Singapore<sup>14</sup>.

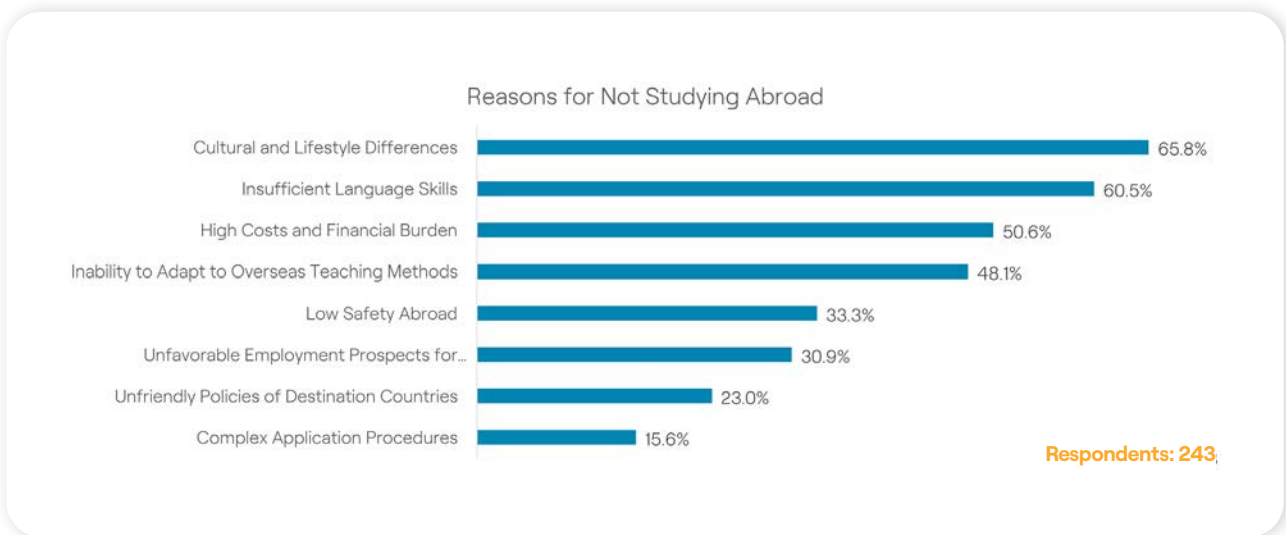


Table 20: Reasons of students for not studying abroad



“As a Chinese graduate who has benefitted from a study abroad period in the UK, many of the findings in this report resonate with my own experience and the factors that influenced my decision. As a faculty member in Australia, I see the impact of government policy on the choices being made by today’s generation of students. We need to recognize that it’s a big step moving to a different country and culture to study and it’s the responsibility of receiving countries and institutions to do all that they can to support this transition.”

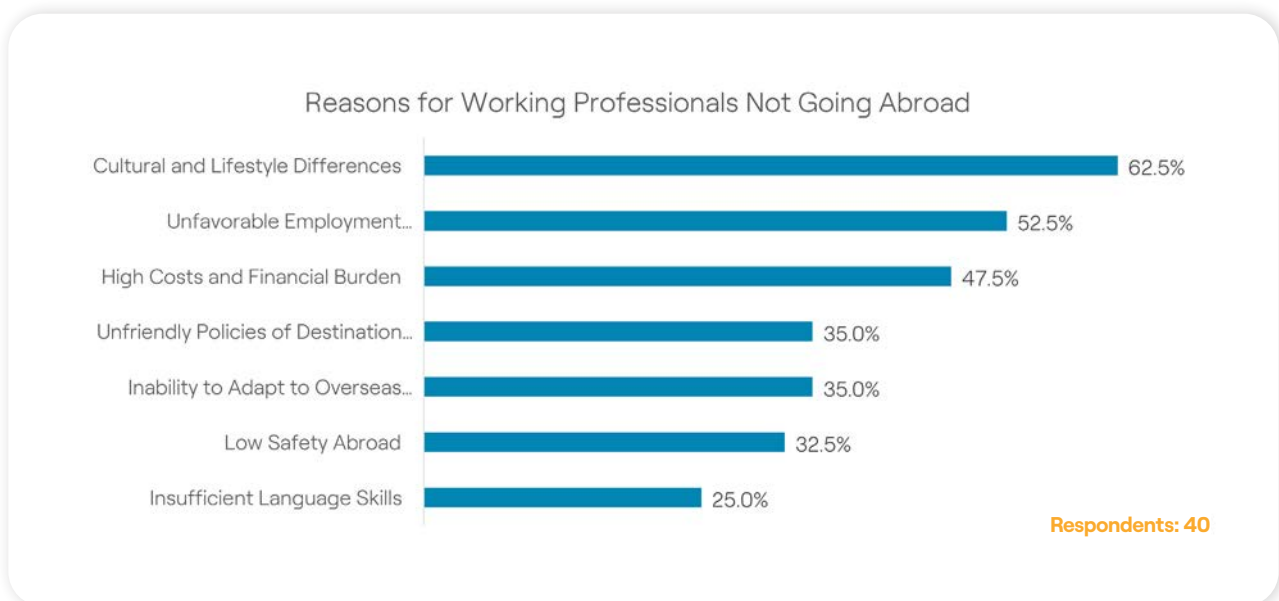
**Dr Jason Fan**

*Associate Professor in Language Assessment, University of Melbourne*

Family income and finances have a direct impact on the study abroad market, with many now looking more closely at the return on investment of a study abroad period.

### Working professionals

Similar reasons are given by working professionals for not travelling abroad for study albeit in a slightly different order of priority. For those not looking to work abroad, there is the concern of finding a better job that pays more on their return. As previously mentioned, those on lower incomes are more concerned about leaving their current position to enhance their CV when this comes with no guarantees of a better paid job on their return.



**Table 21:** Reasons of working professionals for not studying abroad

## Top destinations

Our survey reveals that the traditional destinations of the UK, the US, Australia and Canada – the Big Four – remain dominant for the time being, accounting for over two-thirds of respondents who expressed an interest in studying abroad. At the same time, some new countries, especially in Asia, are starting to compete for Chinese students.

Destination Country	Overall
United Kingdom	31.4%
United States	25.6%
Canada	9.9%
Australia	9.7%
Singapore	9.3%
Hong Kong (SAR of China)	7.4%
New Zealand	3.5%
Ireland	1.9%
Malaysia	0.8%
Macau (SAR of China)	0.5%
Respondents	637

**Table 22:** Preferred country or region for studying abroad

Each destination country has its own set of characteristics that makes it attractive to Chinese students. Our survey results highlight the following:

- 1. Academic Excellence:** It is no surprise that the quality of education tops the list of factors influencing the choice of destination. Students are drawn to countries with globally-recognized institutions but they are also looking at course duration<sup>15</sup>. A Master’s degree in the UK, for example, is typically one year, whereas this can be two years in other countries and up to three years at a Chinese university. As well as being a time factor, a shorter course also means less investment.

## My Story

- Name: **Yiran**
- Home city: **Hefei**
- Destination country: **UK**
- Course of study: **Masters in Visual Communication**



I have been thinking about studying abroad since my sophomore year. I studied Visual Communication but the competition for postgraduate study in this field is incredibly fierce, with only 4 places available for more than 100 applicants. When it comes to finding a job, it is relatively easy for visual communication majors to find work but the salaries are not high and the career development opportunities are limited. I therefore wanted to enhance my prospects by studying abroad. When it came to choosing a destination, the United Kingdom stood out to me. UK schools are renowned for their design programs, with prestigious institutions like the Royal College of Art and the University of Edinburgh leading the way. The rich cultural atmosphere in the UK also appealed to me, providing an inspiring environment for creative growth. Initially, I considered studying in the US, but my parents were concerned about safety and did not want to send me there. My budget for studying abroad is 800,000 CNY per year, a significant investment that I believe will pay off in the long run. After completing my studies, I plan to return to China to work at a university or pursue a PhD in Hong Kong. Regardless of where my journey takes me, I intend to return to China eventually as it is my home.



- 2. Future Prospects:** The potential for post-study work experience is a significant pull factor. Countries offering favorable visa policies for graduates are seeing increased interest. Many are thinking about life after education and the possibility of remaining in the destination country for work. Whilst traditional destinations are getting stricter on work visas, newer alternatives in Asia are making it easier for graduates to remain in the country after the end of their studies. In Singapore, for example, the government has recently relaxed the rules around gaining permanent residency and students no longer have to wait for two years after the end of their course of study to apply<sup>16</sup>. These options to stay in the destination country are all the more attractive as those graduates returning to China after studying abroad are finding it increasingly challenging to find well-paid employment.

- 3. Cultural Immersion and integration:** The chance to dive into a new culture and perfect English language skills in an immersive environment is a major attraction, although the integration into a new culture can also be challenging and is cited as one of the reasons why respondents do not want to go abroad. New players in Asia such as Singapore and Hong Kong SAR of China offer a potential middle-ground with their fusion of Western and Eastern cultures. Tense relationships between China and some destination countries have also led to falling numbers of students heading to these more traditional destinations<sup>17</sup>.

**Of the new Asian destinations, Singapore and Hong Kong SAR of China were the most popular, with Singapore as the top choice for working professionals.**

- 4. Financial Considerations:** While quality is paramount, students and their families are also weighing the costs of tuition and living expenses in their decisions. Since the turn of the century, there has been a huge rise in the number of middle-class in China, giving more families the opportunity to send their children to study overseas. More recently, however, the economic situation has become more challenging. Family income and finances have a direct impact on the study abroad market, with many now looking more closely at the return on investment of a study abroad period. Traditional destination countries require significant investment and as families weigh up the pros and cons of different options, local countries in Asia, such as Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong SAR of China<sup>18</sup>, are becoming increasingly attractive. These countries are closer to home and place less of a financial burden on the family.
- 5. China government initiatives:** In 2013, China launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to extend its influence on the world stage, establishing trade links between Asia, Africa and Europe. Education is a key part of this initiative, formalized in the 2016 Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative<sup>19</sup>. As well as promoting the teaching of Chinese around the world, the policy also promotes sending Chinese students abroad to study at foreign universities. As a result of the BRI, Chinese students now have a wider range of options from a diversified list of destination countries – such as France, Italy, Sweden and Germany in Europe, Malaysia and Thailand in Asia<sup>20,21</sup>. Many of these destination universities offer courses in English to attract students from a wider range of countries and some foreign universities have established branches in Asia (eg. University of Nottingham in Malaysia) meaning students can obtain a qualification from a British or American University, without travelling outside of the region.



“ This research reinforces the need for the US to do more to ensure that we remain attractive to international students from China and other countries. We must not be complacent. As we focus increasingly on diversity, equity and inclusion, the cost of studying in the US makes it challenging for many to afford to come to our universities, excluding all but those from the richest families. At NAFSA, we encourage the international education community to do everything in their power to remove as many barriers as possible to that might hinder the advancement of interested students. ”

### Dr Fanta Aw

*Executive Director and CEO, NAFSA*

## My Story

- Name: **Wenyuan**
- Home city: **Jinmen**
- Destination country: **Malaysia**
- Course of study: **Masters in Financial Management and Accounting**



“ My decision to study abroad was driven by the lack of development prospects in my current job. To advance in the workplace, I need to focus on management accounting, but I currently lack experience and relevant knowledge in this area. I therefore decided to study abroad to enhance my skills and increase my future job opportunities. In Wuhan, a bachelor’s degree alone is not sufficient to secure a good job. When selecting a destination, I chose Malaysia because it is possible to study there at a branch of a UK university with a high QS ranking. Although I considered other Malaysian universities, this particular one stood out because of its reputation and the opportunity it offers for exchange programs in the UK. My budget for studying abroad is approximately 250,000 CNY for two years, which rules out countries like the US and Australia. Studying in Malaysia is much more affordable. I believe this is a worthwhile investment in my future. After completing my studies, I am thinking of studying further in the UK or Singapore and working there for a few years. I am keen to explore various opportunities and experiences but, ultimately, I plan to return to China, as it is my home country. ”



“ At Bangor, we have seen a steady increase in applications from Chinese students since the pandemic but have not yet reached pre-Covid levels. I believe the visa application process for the UK is relatively straightforward and this helps to ensure that the UK remains attractive to international students. We are already implementing a number of the recommendations called out in this report, including a dedicated China Office that supports cultural integration as well as dedicated staff that provide visa support for applicants. ”

**Manman Jones**

*International Admissions Manager, Bangor University, UK*

- 6. Domestic competition:** A key push factor is the competitive nature of graduate and post-graduate studies in home universities. Those students who fail to secure a place at a top rank Chinese university are often forced to seek options abroad, rather than study at a second- or third-tier domestic university. Given the low acceptance rate at a home university, a large percentage of students from families with average incomes are looking abroad and looking for less expensive options. Once again, Asian universities are proving to be an attractive alternative.
- 7. Visa application process:** Streamlined visa processes and clear application procedures can make a country more attractive to international students. Canada and Australia have generally been viewed as having more favorable study policies for overseas students but this reputation may now be changing. Canada has recently placed a cap on the number of student visas being issued annually<sup>22</sup>, resulting in a fall of over 40% in the number issued to Chinese students in 2024 compared with the previous year<sup>23</sup>. In Australia, new regulations around student visas introduced in December 2023 has led to confusion in the market and a fall in visa applications (-7% for Chinese applicants)<sup>24</sup>. At the time of writing this report, the Labor government is trying to introduce the ESOS Amendment Bill which, if passed, will put caps on the number of international students being admitted to Australia by education provider, university campus and course of study<sup>25</sup>.

The top three influencers for test selection are family, agents and friends.

## The traditional destinations of the UK, the US, Australia and Canada – the Big Four – remain dominant for the time being.

Of the new Asian destinations, Singapore and Hong Kong SAR of China were the most popular, with Singapore as the top choice for working professionals. The top motivation for those choosing Singapore was the prospect of “future immigration” reflecting the easing of visa restrictions for the application of permanent residency. If we look at alternative choices of destination, Malaysia joins the list.

### Top courses of study

Business & Management and Science & Engineering are the two most popular courses of study, accounting for more than half of all responses. The other significant fields of study are the Arts (10.6%), Education (6.6%), Humanities (6.1%), Social Sciences (5.9%), Law (5.9%) and Medicine (5.4%).

Overall, university students and working professionals place Business & Management as their top choice, whilst high school students are looking at Arts programs. Law is favored mainly by working professionals.





“ Australian universities and education providers would do well to take note of the findings in this report and keep an eye on competitors in Malaysia and Singapore, where international student numbers from China are increasing year on year. Also of interest is the data around the home cities of those Chinese students looking to study abroad. Many Australian universities are looking to Tier 2 and 3 cities to expand their reach, but this report suggests that there is still potential in Tier 1 cities to sustain ongoing growth from China. Of key concern for NEAS and its members is the quality of provision for international students – and this goes beyond what happens in the classroom. Supporting international students when they arrive in Australia not only improves their experience and outcomes but sends a strong message to prospective students that they are welcome in our country. ”

**Adam Kilburn**  
CEO NEAS

	Overall
<b>Business and Management</b>	30.0%
<b>Engineering and Technology</b>	26.9%
<b>Arts</b>	10.6%
<b>Education</b>	6.6%
<b>Humanities and Social Sciences</b>	6.1%
<b>Social Sciences</b>	5.9%
<b>Law</b>	5.9%
<b>Medicine</b>	5.4%
<b>Sports</b>	1.8%
<b>Agriculture</b>	0.7%
<b>Respondents</b>	557

Table 23: Top study majors

	United Kingdom	Australia	Canada	United States	New Zealand	Ireland	Malaysia	Singapore	Hong Kong (SAR of China)	Macau (SAR of China)
<b>Business and Management</b>	32.4%	32.7%	21.2%	29.8%	28.6%	27.3%	0%	22.0%	41.2%	0%
<b>Engineering and Technology</b>	25.5%	41.8%	28.8%	29.8%	9.5%	9.1%	0%	22.0%	20.6%	0%
<b>Arts</b>	10.1%	7.3%	5.8%	10.9%	19.0%	18.2%	0%	17.1%	8.8%	100.0%
<b>Education</b>	7.4%	1.8%	3.8%	7.3%	23.8%	9.1%	0%	4.9%	2.9%	0%
<b>Humanities and Social Sciences</b>	4.8%	7.3%	5.8%	6.6%	9.5%	0%	0%	9.8%	2.9%	0%
<b>Social Sciences</b>	8.5%	5.5%	5.8%	2.0%	9.5%	9.1%	50.0%	2.4%	8.8%	0%
<b>Law</b>	5.9%	0%	13.5%	3.3%	0%	9.1%	50.0%	14.6%	5.9%	0%
<b>Medicine</b>	4.3%	1.8%	5.8%	7.9%	0%	18.2%	0%	4.9%	5.9%	0%
<b>Sports</b>	1.1%	1.8%	5.8%	2.0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	2.9%	0%
<b>Agriculture</b>	0%	0%	3.8%	0.7%	0%	0%	0%	2.4%	0%	0%
<b>Respondents</b>	188	55	52	151	21	11	2	41	34	1

Table 24: Top study majors by destination country

	Overall	High School	University	Employed
<b>Business and Management</b>	30.0%	26.7%	30.9%	30.0%
<b>Engineering and Technology</b>	26.9%	19.8%	29.5%	15.0%
<b>Arts</b>	10.6%	25.0%	7.1%	0%
<b>Education</b>	6.6%	4.3%	7.1%	10.0%
<b>Humanities and Social Sciences</b>	6.1%	8.6%	5.5%	5.0%
<b>Social Sciences</b>	5.9%	7.8%	5.5%	5.0%
<b>Law</b>	5.9%	3.4%	5.7%	25.0%
<b>Medicine</b>	5.4%	0.9%	6.7%	5.0%
<b>Sports</b>	1.8%	3.4%	1.4%	0%
<b>Agriculture</b>	0.7%	0%	0.7%	5.0%
<b>Respondents</b>	557	116	421	20

Table 25: Top study majors by education/employment status

## My Story

- Name: **Xiangrui**
- Home city: **Shaoyang**
- Destination country: **US**
- Course of study: **PhD in Civil Engineering**



As a recent graduate of civil engineering, I quickly realized that in a highly competitive job market, standing out among countless qualified candidates would require additional qualifications and international experience. When it came to choosing a destination country, I looked for somewhere with abundant job opportunities. The United Kingdom was not an option for me, as it lacks sufficient opportunities for someone with a background in traditional engineering. I decided on the US, as a destination that aligns with my career aspirations and offers good job prospects for the future. My budget for studying abroad is between 20,000 CNY and 30,000 CNY per year, which required me to be strategic in my choices. I navigated the application process for a PhD program on my own, as hiring an agent was prohibitively expensive. My choice of major is a natural progression from my undergraduate studies in civil engineering. I aim to deepen my expertise and enhance my employability in this field. The ultimate goal is to secure a job in the US after completing my studies. I believe that gaining international experience and advanced knowledge will significantly improve my career prospects.



## The Language of Global Education: English Proficiency Tests

As part of the study abroad journey, English proficiency tests play a critical role. The research reveals a high awareness of various English language tests among Chinese students. This awareness speaks to the competitive nature of the testing landscape and the proactive approach students are taking in their educational journeys. They are not just passively accepting the most well-known options; they are actively researching and considering alternatives that might better suit their needs and aspirations.

### Choosing a test: key influencers

The top three influencers for test selection are family, agents and friends. Family and agents are most influential with high school students whereas, unsurprisingly, working professionals are the group most likely to select a test without outside influence.

Whilst there has been an exponential growth in the number of online influencers in the educational field, our survey reveals that teachers continue to have a greater influence on test selection than their social media counterparts.

	Overall
Family	56.4%
Agency (Study abroad/Immigration agency)	45.4%
Classmates or friends	43.3%
School teachers	35.8%
Online influencers (e.g. Educational bloggers)	10.0%
Made the decision independently, without outside influence	3.5%
Respondents	637

Table 26: Top influencers for test selection

	Male	Female
Family	53.6%	59.1%
Agency (Study abroad/Immigration agency)	45.5%	45.3%
Classmates or friends	44.5%	42.1%
School teachers	34.5%	37.1%
Online influencers (e.g. Educational bloggers)	11.3%	8.8%
Made the decision independently, without outside influence	6.3%	0.6%
Respondents	319	318

Table 27: Top influencers for test selection by gender

	High School	University	Employed
Family	70.7%	53.9%	50.0%
Agency (Study abroad/Immigration agency)	52.6%	47.0%	30.0%
Classmates or friends	41.4%	44.4%	41.0%
School teachers	33.6%	37.5%	31.0%
Online influencers (e.g. Educational bloggers)	6.0%	10.7%	12.0%
Made the decision independently, without outside influence	0%	2.6%	11.0%
Respondents	116	421	100

Table 28: Top influencers for test selection by education/employment status

### Choosing a test: key considerations

When it comes to taking a high-stakes English proficiency test for study abroad, there are an increasing number of players available for Chinese students. Selection is based on a number of different criteria with recognition, ease of achieving a good score and availability of preparation materials topping the list.

	Overall
Recognized by many institutions in multiple countries	4.92%
Easier to achieve high scores	4.82%
Abundant preparation resources and courses	4.81%
Offers the option to retake individual sections	4.79%
Ability to retake the exam within a shorter time frame	4.72%
Reasonable exam fees	4.67%
Fair and unbiased scoring	4.57%
Fast results release	4.52%
Frequent exam dates	4.43%
Multiple exam centers	4.42%
High-quality exam services	4.18%
Short exam duration	4.13%
Respondents	637

Table 29: Influencing factors for test selection

	Male	Female
Recognized by many institutions in multiple countries	4.93%	4.91%
Easier to achieve high scores	4.83	4.82%
Abundant preparation resources and courses	4.79%	4.83%
Offers the option to retake individual sections	4.79%	4.79%
Ability to retake the exam within a shorter time frame	4.72%	4.72%
Reasonable exam fees	4.68%	4.65%
Fair and unbiased scoring	4.58%	4.57%
Fast results release	4.49%	4.55%
Frequent exam dates	4.40%	4.46%
Multiple exam centers	4.41%	4.42%
High-quality exam services	4.13%	4.23%
Short exam duration	4.14%	4.13%
Respondents	319	318

Table 30: Influencing factors for test selection by gender

	High School	University	Employed
Recognized by many institutions in multiple countries	4.97%	4.92%	4.89%
Easier to achieve high scores	4.86%	4.79%	4.88%
Abundant preparation resources and courses	4.78%	4.79%	4.95%
Offers the option to retake individual sections	4.81%	4.79%	4.78%
Ability to retake the exam within a shorter time frame	4.53%	4.76%	4.79%
Reasonable exam fees	4.71%	4.66%	4.65%
Fair and unbiased scoring	4.53%	4.58%	4.6%
Fast results release	4.41%	4.55%	4.51%
Frequent exam dates	4.35%	4.44%	4.45
Multiple exam centers	4.40%	4.43%	4.37%
High-quality exam services	4.11%	4.19%	4.24%
Short exam duration	4.08%	4.16%	4.08%
Respondents	116	421	100

Table 31: Influencing factors for test selection by education/employment status

## Key recommendations for universities

Whilst many factors influencing the choice of destination country and university are beyond the control of individual universities, there are clear takeaways from this research that point to action that could be taken to attract Chinese students.

- **Support cultural integration:** Our data shows that many Chinese students are concerned about integrating into a very different culture. Cultural and lifestyle differences are the top reason given by both students and working professionals for not wanting to study abroad. Potential actions to address these concerns range from the provision of accommodation that respects cultural norms to Chinese language support throughout the inquiry and application process. Once students are in situ, provide orientation and a program of cultural integration to provide information and advice on life in the destination country. Approaches to learning and teaching are also likely to be very different in the destination country, so support in navigating a western education system will also make an institution more appealing
- **Provide visa support:** The visa application process can be challenging and often leaves students feeling as if the destination country does not really welcome them. Unfriendly policies were given as a reason for not studying abroad by almost a quarter of students. Institutions can also guarantee that no fees will be charged until the visa has been issued.
- **Promote safety:** Around a third of survey respondents said they had safety concerns about studying abroad, fueled by stories in both traditional and social media. Institutions could do more to counter these with more positive stories of secure and friendly campuses and cities.
- **Carry out targeted marketing:** Our survey data provides valuable indicators of where the greatest desire for study abroad lies in China and where institutions might focus their marketing efforts: in T1 cities in the East of China (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Hangzhou, Nanjing), private high schools, private universities, 985/211/Double First-Class universities. The greatest appetite is for courses in Business & Management, Engineering & Science, Education, Medicine and Law.
- **Carry out peer marketing:** Family and friends consistently come out as the top influencers in the decision-making process. Consider ways in which you can leverage these players more in your marketing. For example, use Chinese students already at your institution in your messaging. They will bring a human element that prospective students will be able to relate to. Develop online programs which enable families to feel part of the university experience too, from their homes in China.
- **Provide financial support:** The financial burden of studying abroad excludes many from having this opportunity and pushes others to study closer to home. To attract more students from China, universities could offer more scholarships to remove this barrier.

## Conclusion: The evolving landscape of Chinese international education

The landscape of international education is ever-changing, influenced by a complex interplay of pull and push factors. For Chinese students, the traditional motivations of academic excellence and new cultural experiences are now impacted by the socio-economic and government policies both at home and abroad.

Faced with a competitive national higher education system and a challenging economic environment, the attraction of study abroad is somewhat tempered by the financial burden it places on families, visa restrictions and the uncertainty of securing a well-paid job on returning to China. This combination of factors is leading many to explore new possibilities nearer to home that offer cheaper options in a more familiar cultural setting.

The findings from this research suggest that traditional destinations should not become complacent. Whilst they remain the top choices at the moment, they may witness a decline in the numbers of Chinese students applying to their universities in the future due to cost and visa regulations. New alternative destinations are working hard to attract international students to their shores with lower fees and more favorable visa processes. The resulting impact on the economy of traditional destinations could be significant.

## What's next? How Pearson can help

As the world's largest learning company, Pearson is here to support test takers, educators and admissions officers to address some of the concerns raised in this research. We bring together English language learning, teaching and assessment expertise to create products to support students on their study abroad journey and resources to facilitate the setting of entry requirements by receiving institutions.

### Pearson Test of English (PTE) Academic

PTE Academic is a 2-hour computerized English proficiency test accepted by over 3700 universities and colleges around the world. It is also accepted by a number of governments for migration, including Australia, New Zealand and the UK and professional registration in the US.

PTE Academic is setting new standards in English language testing with a program of on-going research and development to ensure that trust in PTE scores remains secure, accurate and trusted.

#### Secure

Every PTE Academic test is protected by industry-leading security measures. We continuously test these measures, adapting them to counter emerging threats and adopting the latest technologies to ensure that our security is best in class.

### Accurate

Our results are precise. Our scoring systems combine responsible AI, trained by experts using thousands of test taker answers, with world-leading human assessors who routinely review scores. Together, they remove bias and minimize error.

### Trusted

Our tests can be trusted – which is why we’re the world’s fastest growing English language proficiency test. Chosen by governments, universities, and hundreds of thousands of test takers alike.

To find out more about PTE Academic, visit: [www.pearsonpte.com/accept-pte](http://www.pearsonpte.com/accept-pte)

## PTE Academic Preparation Materials

PTE Academic is supported by a wide range of free and paid-for official resources to ensure that test takers are confident and ready to take the test.

### Build all-round confidence with Smart Prep

Smart Prep brings all our free and paid-for preparation into one convenient place, so test takers can personalize their preparation to suit their individual needs.

- **Learn by skill** – dedicated preparation for each of the 4-skills: speaking, writing, listening and reading
- **All in one place** – easy for test takers to stay on track and access the official resources they need to be confident on test day
- **Free resources** – Smart Prep offers a wide selection of free materials including taster tests, videos, online courses and advice on different question types

### Our official prep resources

- **Practice tests** – scored in exactly the same way as the real test. Test takers can find out how they are likely to score in the real test, get feedback and then use this to inform progress and future preparation
- **Question Bank** – provides over 300 questions and model answers so that test takers can practice different question types and make sure they are confident on test day.
- **Official handbook** – contains everything test takers need to know about the test

All of these materials are available in money-saving packages or as stand-alone items. To find out more, visit: [www.pearsonpte.com/pte-academic/preparation](http://www.pearsonpte.com/pte-academic/preparation)

## Guide to setting entry requirements

A key consideration in the recruitment of international students is the level of English language proficiency required to be successful on a given program of study. Colleges and universities are responsible for setting their own entry requirements, but Pearson is here to support that process.

For more information on the support you can receive, visit us at: [Start accepting PTE | Pearson PTE](#)



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