Research Report 02

Not All International Students Are the Same:
Understanding Segments, Mapping Behavior

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Executive Summary

International students aiming to study abroad form a highly heterogeneous group. Differences in academic preparedness and financial resources translate into differences in what information students look for and where they look for it during their college search. By gaining a deeper understanding of how students differ in profile and behavior, higher education institutions can become more effective in their resource allocation and recruitment efforts. With that in mind, we have sought to segment prospective U.S.-bound international students by mapping their profiles according to differences in their information-seeking behavior.

The key findings highlighted below are based on the survey response of nearly 1,600 prospective international students from 115 countries, collected October 2011 through March 2012 by the Research & Advisory Services group at World Education Services.

NOT ALL INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS ARE THE SAME

According to the results of our survey, we grouped U.S.-bound international students into four broad segments based on their academic preparedness and financial resources:

- "Strivers": High academic preparedness; low financial resources (30% of all respondents).
- "Strugglers": Low academic preparedness; low financial resources (21%).
- "Explorers": Low academic preparedness; high financial resources (25%).
- "Highfliers": High academic preparedness; high financial resources (24%).

DIFFERENT STUDENTS USE DIFFERENT INFORMATION CHANNELS

- 88% of social media users from India visited U.S.-based social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) on a daily or weekly basis, compared to only 22% of Chinese social media users.
- Agent-using respondents tended to be affluent, but many of them (62%) were not fully prepared to tackle the academic challenges of a U.S. education.

DIFFERENT STUDENTS NEED DIFFERENT INFORMATION

- Approximately half of Chinese (55%) and Indian (46%) respondents rated post-graduation career prospects among their top three college-search information needs.
- 27% of all respondents from the Middle East ranked information about student services, including information about campus safety among their top three information needs.

The key take-away from this report is that not all international students are the same. Understanding differences in international student profiles can help higher education institutions prioritize their outreach strategies. For example, our study suggests that the use of recruitment agents might not be as widespread as previous research has indicated: only about one-sixth of all respondents reported to have used an agent. Debates about the use of agents and social media should be grounded in an understanding of which segments use those channels and whether the institution is interested in recruiting those segments.

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Introduction

The emphasis of international student recruitment has shifted over time; however, the core motivations still center on attracting talent, creating a more diverse student body, and, perhaps most importantly today, the infusion of additional tuition revenue.[1] The ongoing impact of the economic crisis and decreasing public funds for higher education is compelling many higher education institutions (HEIs) in the United States to recruit more international students in a shorter timeframe and within tighter budget constraints. A previous research report by WES Research & Advisory Services predicts a healthy growth in international student enrollment for U.S. colleges and universities, but also notes that institutions will have to compete hard for talented and self-funded students.[2] (Download the report from http://bit.ly/NdBPZI.)

Financial considerations in international recruiting have motivated many American HEIs to focus their efforts at the undergraduate level. This is because international undergraduates typically do not seek scholarships and therefore pay more out of pocket than international graduate students. Four-year undergraduate programs also create a longer revenue stream per student than the typical graduate-level program.

The University of California, Berkeley, for example, has increased its intake of international freshmen by 50% from Fall 2010 to Fall 2011, bringing in estimated additional revenue of $18 million over four years.[3] In the case of graduate recruitment, declining public funds are making it harder for institutions to offer financial assistance to top prospects in research programs while affluent international students are able to finance graduate studies irrespective of financial aid. The challenge for HEIs in the U.S., therefore, is to define target segments of prospective international students more precisely in order to optimize resource allocation and successfully achieve enrollment goals in terms of diversity and quality of the student body.

A market segmentation approach highlights patterns among diverse populations to help organizations understand and manage the conflicting needs of their customers.[4] **Segmentation offers information about the demographics and aspirations of potential customers, and shows how these characteristics are associated with certain patterns of behavior**.[5] In the context of student recruitment, market segmentation can help rationalize the diverse cultures and needs of the international student body based on backgrounds, values and educational goals. It also allows institutions to understand how differences in these characteristics impact the way applicants behave when choosing a college.[6]

The process of choosing a college typically involves three steps: predisposition to attend a HEI, information search, and choosing which college to attend.[7] Our study focuses on the second stage of the process: information search. The conceptual framework that we use (FIGURE 1) posits that prospective international students with different applicant profiles behave differently during the information search stage of choosing a suitable college: they need different kinds of information, use different channels to get that information and perceive the value the channel provides differently.

The profile of an applicant can be broken down into several dimensions, many of which have been found to influence the information-seeking behavior of international students.[8] These include demographics

(country of origin, socioeconomic status, age, etc); academic ability;[9] wealth; and applicant aspirations for the type of HEI desired.[10] The conceptual map below highlights academic preparedness and financial resources – our proxies for ability and socioeconomic status – as the key variables used in establishing applicant profiles.

FIGURE 1:
Conceptual Map of the Information-Seeking Behavior of International Students

APPLICANT PROFILE	INFORMATION SEARCH
Academic Preparedness	Information Need
	Usage of Information Channel
Financial Resources	Perception of Information Channel

The study was designed to answer the following questions:

- How do U.S.-bound international students differ in terms of their academic preparedness and financial resources? How do these two variables characterize each student segment?

- What information do international applicants need when researching colleges and universities? What channels do they use to get the information they need? How do they perceive the value of each information channel?

- How does international students' information-seeking behavior vary by profile?

Understanding the information-seeking behavior of international students is especially important in a recruiting era that has come to be defined by profound changes in the way students can be reached, informed, and enticed. The growing popularity of alternative recruitment channels, especially social media and agents, challenges the international recruiting profession to understand how applicants are using these new channels.

The following research report presents insights from an online survey of nearly 1,600 prospective international students from 115 countries. While most surveys query international students who have already begun their studies in the United States, our survey population is unique in that 61% of respondents were still in the information-search stage of the enrollment process at the time they participated in the survey. Respondents were invited to participate in the survey during their application process for WES credential evaluation, indicating a serious intent of studying in the United States.

The report is organized into four sections. The first section discusses the profiles of U.S.-bound international student segments. The next section outlines how information-seeking behavior varies by segments. A separate section is devoted to the information-seeking behavior of students from China and India. And, in the concluding section, recommendations for effective international recruitment are offered. All findings reported are statistically significant (p<=0.05).
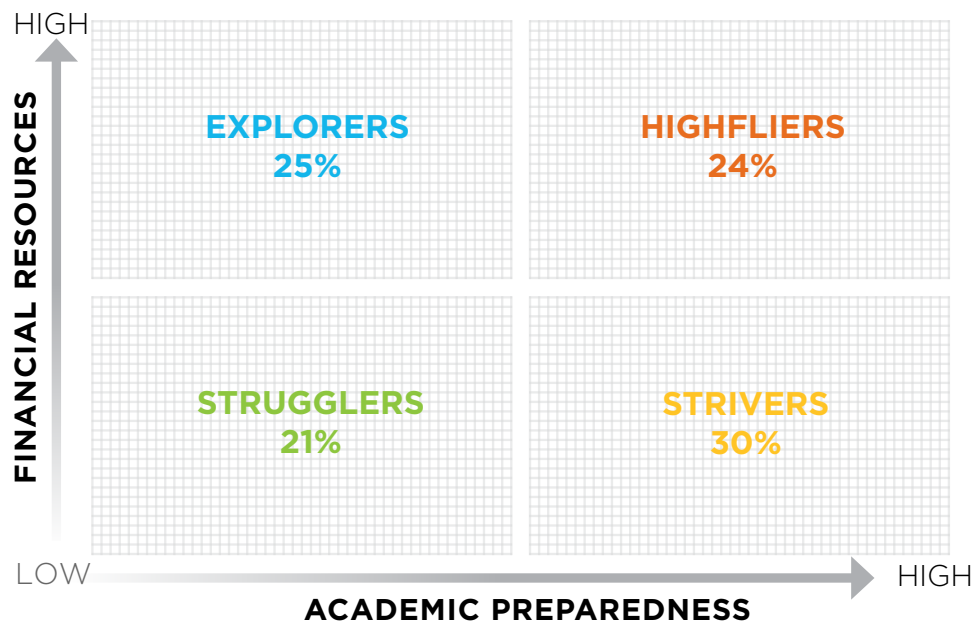
Profiles of U.S.–Bound International Student Segments

For the purposes of the study, we segmented the U.S.-bound international student population along two dimensions: academic preparedness and financial resources. We created an Academic Preparedness Index using English proficiency[11] and other criteria to categorize our survey respondents based on how well they were prepared academically to succeed in an American classroom. Similarly, we distinguished between individuals with high and low financial resources based on the mix of financial resources they expected to be available to them (see *Methods* for details.)

This kind of segment-based information is vital for HEIs that recruit globally, as it can help match the recruiting resources of the institution with the needs of international students for academic support and financial aid. Using the survey data on academic preparedness and financial resources, we established the following four segments of U.S.-bound international students (FIGURE 2):

STRIVERS: High academic preparedness; low financial resources (30% of all respondents).
STRUGGLERS: Low academic preparedness; low financial resources (21%).
EXPLORERS: Low academic preparedness; high financial resources (25%).
HIGHFLIERS: High academic preparedness; high financial resources (24%).

FIGURE 2: Segmentation of U.S.–bound international students

FINANCIAL RESOURCES

HIGH

EXPLORERS
25%

HIGHFLIERS
24%

STRUGGLERS
21%

STRIVERS
30%

LOW   HIGH

ACADEMIC PREPAREDNESS

STRIVERS are the largest segment of the overall U.S.-bound international student population. Almost two-thirds of this segment (63%) is employed full-time or part-time during the application process, presumably because they need to support themselves. Among all segments, they are the most likely to select information on financial aid opportunities among their top three information needs (45%). Financial challenges do not deter these academically prepared students from pursuing their dreams: 67% plan to attend a top-tier U.S. school.

STRUGGLERS make up about one-fifth of all U.S.-bound international students. They have limited financial resources and need additional preparation to do well in an American classroom: 40% of them plan to attend an ESL program in the future.[12] They are relatively less selective about where they obtain their education: only 33% of them selected information about a school's reputation among their top three information needs.

EXPLORERS are very keen on studying abroad but their interests are not exclusively academic. Compared to the other segments, they are the most interested in the personal and experiential aspects of studying in the United States: 19% of this segment reported that information on student services was in their top three information needs during the college search. "Explorers" are not fully prepared to tackle the academic challenges of the best American institutions: they are the most likely to plan to attend a second-tier institution (33%). They are also the most likely to use the services of an education agent (24%).

HIGHFLIERS are academically well prepared students who have the means to attend more expensive programs without expecting any financial aid from the school. They seek a U.S. higher education primarily for its prestige: almost half of the respondents in this segment (46%) reported that the school's reputation is among their top three information needs. "Highfliers," along with "Explorers," form the emerging segment driven by the expanding wealthy classes in countries like China and India.

TABLE 1: Differences in the Profile and Information-Seeking Behavior of International Student Segments

| %: SHARE OF SEGMENT	STRIVERS	STRUGGLERS	EXPLORERS	HIGHFLIERS
DEMOGRAPHICS				
Employed full-time or part-time at the time of application	**63%**	55%	46%	51%
ACADEMIC PREPAREDNESS				
Plans to attend an ESL program in the future	12%	**40%**	37%	14%
ASPIRATIONS				
Plans to attend a top-tier school	**67%**	59%	55%	60%
Plans to attend a second-tier school	22%	31%	**33%**	28%
INFORMATION NEEDS				
Reputation of school	37%	33%	41%	**46%**
Financial aid opportunities	**45%**	44%	17%	16%
Student services, including campus safety	10%	18%	**19%**	12%
USE OF INFORMATION CHANNEL				
Agent	9%	17%	**24%**	13%

Segment-based information highlights the potential trade-offs in recruiting international students. "Strivers" are academically highly prepared, but they may not enroll at a school unless they receive financial aid. "Explorers" and "Highfliers" have adequate financial resources, a boon for colleges and universities with exigent financial needs. However, "Highfliers" are attracted to a narrow circle of top-ranked institutions, which makes it difficult for lower ranked institutions to compete for them. "Explorers" and "Strugglers" are less selective about their college choice, but they require additional assistance both during the admissions process and once on campus, since their academic preparedness is low compared to the other two segments. Institutions must take a realistic stock taking of their ability to meet the diverse needs of their international student bodies, and especially with regards to the need for financial aid or academic assistance. A mismatch between institutional capacities and international student needs can harm the financial and reputational well-being of the institution.

The size of each segment varies by level of studies pursued. Among respondents who were applying to undergraduate programs, "Explorers" made up the largest share—35% for associate programs, 30% for bachelor's programs. "Strivers" made up 30% of respondents considering master's studies and 50% of respondents aiming for a doctoral program.

**The share of each prospective international student segment varies from region to region.** FIGURE 3 shows the share of international student segments in different geographic regions, based on our survey findings. The largest segment was "Strivers" in most regions, with the exception of the Middle East where "Explorers" made up 45% of all respondents.

FIGURE 3:
International Student Segments by Region
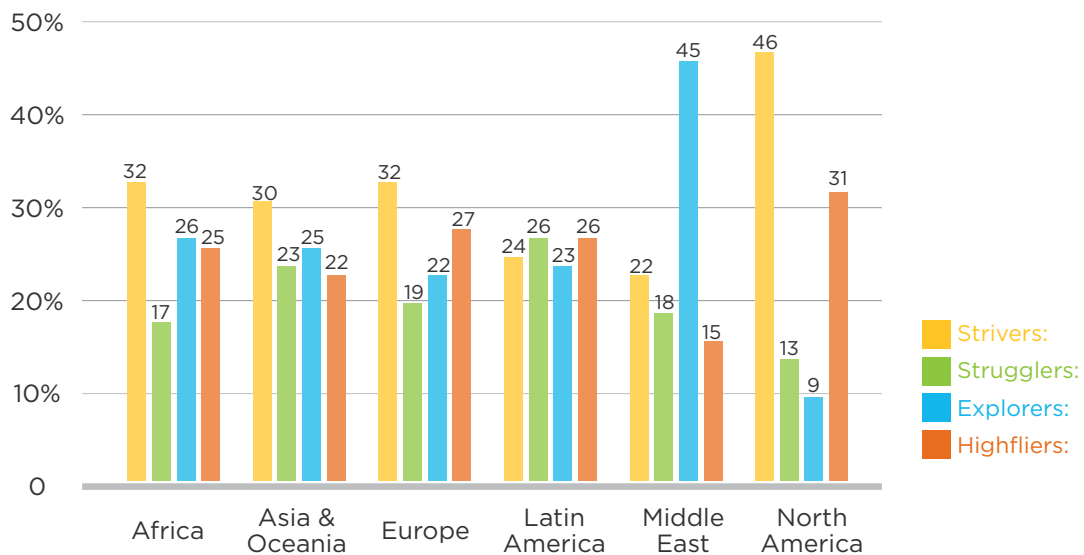
Regional averages, while useful in highlighting regional peculiarities, mask differences among countries within the same region. FIGURE 4 shows how the top three sending countries of U.S.-bound students differ markedly with regards to segment distribution, although they are all located in Asia.

FIGURE 4:
International Student Segments in Top 3 Sending Countries
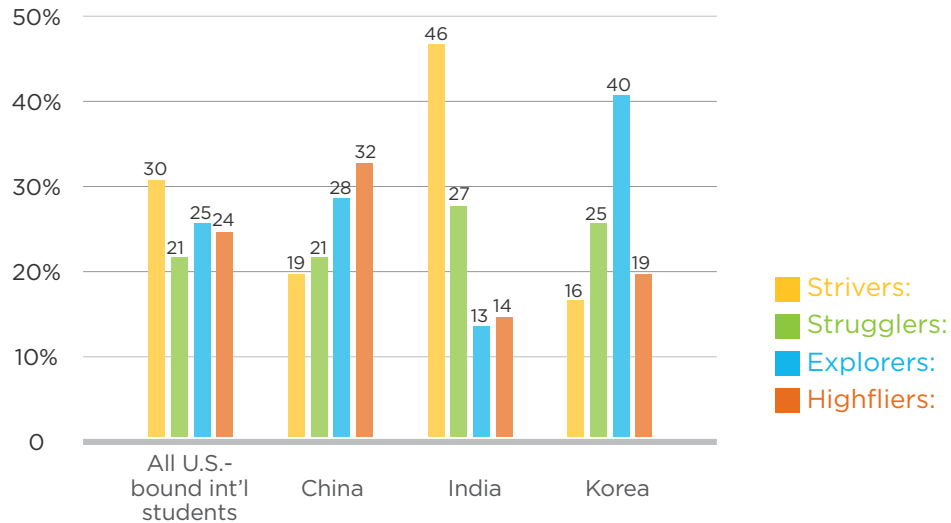
Information-Seeking Behavior of U.S.-Bound Students

The two most popular channels used by international students during their information search stage are institutional websites and personal networks (family & friends). On average, 90% of the survey respondents used institutional websites to obtain information, and 67% consulted their family and friends for the same purpose. Social media is an important emerging source of information for international students, with around one-third of respondents indicating that they had used this channel during their information search. The use of agents is not as widespread, with only one out of six respondents reported to have used this channel.

The popularity of information channels shows some variation by segments, especially for agents (TABLE 2). "Explorers" are substantially more likely to use agents (24%) than respondents in general (16%), indicating this segment's need for additional academic preparation and their ability to afford third-party services. Among all segments, "Strivers" are the most likely to use institutional websites (93%). There was no statistically significant difference in the use of institutionally managed social media site, indicating the channel's wide reach across segments.

TABLE 2:
Share of Respondents Who Used Each Information Channel; Overall and by Segments

OVERALL	STRIVERS	STRUGGLERS	EXPLORERS	HIGHFLIERS
INSTITUTIONAL WEBSITE				
90%	93%	90%	85%	92%
FAMILY & FRIENDS				
67%	68%	65%	70%	60%
SOCIAL MEDIA				
32%	30%	34%	35%	32%
EDUCATION FAIR				
31%	26%	32%	38%	29%
AGENT				
16%	9%	17%	24%	13%

The popularity of information channels varies by country, with the exception of institutional websites which are the single most popular source of information in the top three sending countries (FIGURE 5). Chinese respondents were more likely to use all available channels than their Indian and Korean peers. This suggests that HEIs must have an active presence on multiple platforms to maximize the effectiveness of their outreach efforts in China.

FIGURE 5:
Percentage of Respondents From Top 3 Sending Countries That Used Each Channel
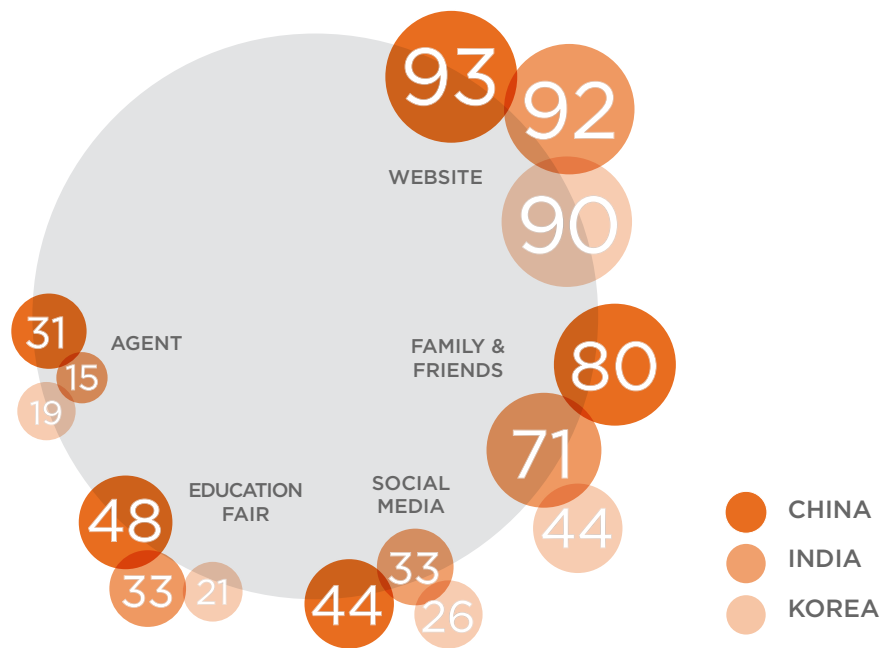
Social media is a recruitment channel with low barriers of engagement that is appropriate for reaching all international student segments, because its popularity does not vary greatly by segment. About one-third of all respondents in each of our four segments used institutional social media to aid their information search. Of these, more than half (56%) started following social media accounts managed by U.S. colleges or universities before they decided which institutions they would apply to, and an additional 37% started following institutional accounts before deciding which admissions offer to accept. These findings highlight the potential that skillfully managed social media accounts have for converting prospects.

International recruitment via social media can realize its full potential if institutional social media accounts are updated with current, relevant information and provide ample opportunities for interaction. Reflecting on their experiences with institutional social media, some respondents remarked that these accounts often do little more than re-direct applicants to the institution's main website. Others were critical of scarce information and slow updates. Those having a positive experience frequently mentioned the opportunity to connect and converse with staff, faculty and other students.

In addition to maintaining a relevant and interactive social media presence, HEIs need to find the most appropriate platforms for reaching out to target student segments. We found that only 22% of Chinese social media users log in to U.S.-based social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) on a daily or weekly basis, as opposed to 88% of Indian respondents. At the same time, 80% of Chinese social media users checked their accounts on Chinese social media platforms on a daily or weekly basis, while only 24% of Indian respondents did so. This underscores the importance of building a presence on local social media platforms for HEIs that want to recruit from China.

Our study suggests that agent use might not be as widespread as previous research has suggested: only about one-sixth of all respondents reported to have used an agent. Agents were found to assist applicants primarily at two stages of the admissions process: during university shortlisting (75% of agent-using respondents received assistance at this stage) and during application (77%). "Strugglers" were found to be particularly likely to use services such as essay, resume or personal statement editing. Seventy-two percent of "Strugglers" had their agents edit their written material (compared to 45% of "Highfliers") and 63% prepared for admissions interviews with the help of agents (only 34% of "Strivers" did so).

When asked about their experience with agents in an open-ended format, some respondents praised their agents for educating them about the application process; others were happy that the agent saved them time on background research. Negative experiences were also reported, such as the agent trying to steer the applicant away from schools that had more complex admissions requirements, charging exorbitant fees but providing little more than advice, or pushing schools that the applicant was not happy with.

> "College/university Twitters and Facebook pages are not very active and update slowly, but I can also get information from their students' activities online."
> —*22-year-old female, China*

> "Most of the social media managed by colleges/universities usually refer to their school websites when some specific information are requested which makes them more or less useless."
> — *29-year-old male, Nigeria*

> *"There is a lot of scope for improvement. Institutional social media accounts could be more interactive, like a chat room."*
> — *21-year-old male, India*

"My agent was very helpful in educating me on the application process, liaising with different institutions and preparing me for the SAT exams."
— *20-year-old male, Trinidad and Tobago*

"You have to do everything on your own. Agents will give advice only."
— *23-year-old female, India*

"Agents don't really know the features of different programs. They make you feel unconfident and try to persuade you to apply to a university which is easier to apply to."
— *25-year-old female, China*

Overall, agents have high barriers of engagement with prospective students as they charge substantial fees and they are less effective in reaching different student segments when compared to the reach of social media. We found that respondents whose academic preparedness was low were overrepresented among agent users: 40% of our agent-using respondents were "Explorers" and 22% were "Strugglers". HEIs considering the use of agents for international recruitment purposes should be aware that the typical agent-using student needs plenty of guidance and support not only during the application process, but also during their first semesters in the United States. Therefore, institutions must realistically assess their capacity to provide ample academic support - such as ESL and foundation courses - to international students with low levels of academic preparedness before they engage the services of third-party recruiters.

International student segments differ not only in terms of what channels they use during their information search but also in terms of the information they need. Availability of financial resources, for example, can dictate the information needs of prospective students. We found that "Strugglers" and "Strivers" were much more interested in information on financial aid opportunities than their affluent peers, as expected from their segmentation criteria. There were also statistical differences in information needs according to academic preparedness. "Strivers" and "Highfliers" were much less interested in student services than their less academically-oriented peers (See TABLE 1 for details).

FIGURE 6:
Top 3 Information Needs of U.S.-Bound International Students by Region of Origin
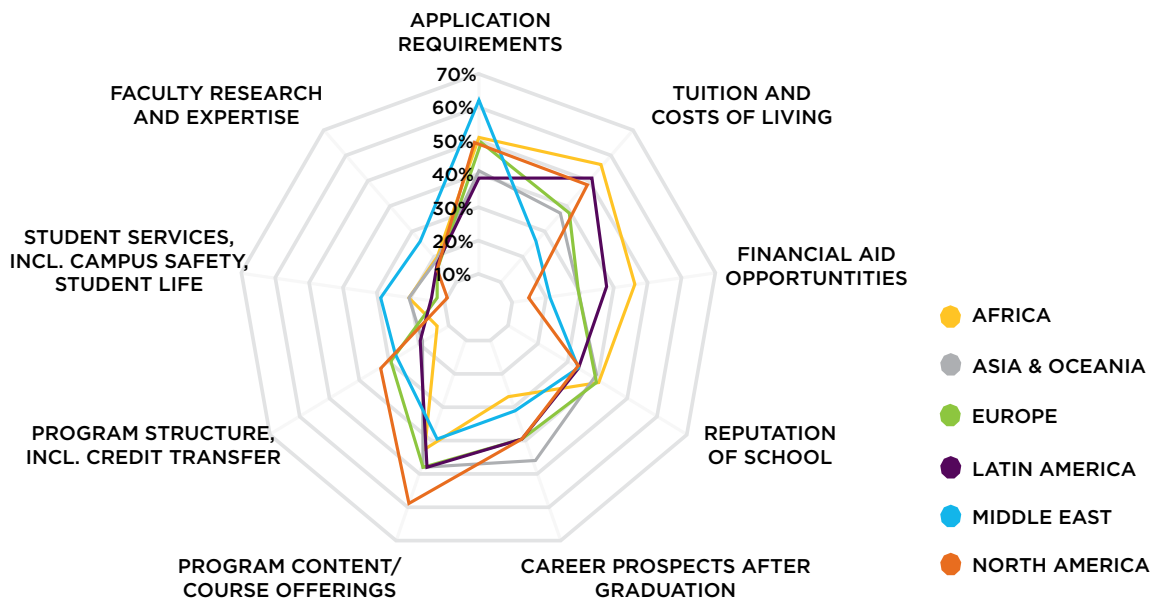
Information needs vary substantially depending on place of origin, which is in line with our finding that the distribution of segments varies by regions. FIGURE 6 shows the most popular information needs by region. Respondents from Africa were much more likely to be interested in information on financial aid opportunities than respondents from other regions (47% of respondents from Africa selected this information among their top three information needs). Respondents from the Middle East were the most likely to express interest in information about student services, including campus safety (27% selected this topic among their top three information needs). Among all regions, respondents from Asia & Oceania were the most likely to be interested in information on career prospects after graduation (44%). HEIs that recruit globally can cater to the different information needs of their applicants by offering links on their websites to pages with region-specific information.[13]

In the Spotlight: China and India

With more than 700,000 Chinese and Indian students enrolled in higher education institutions abroad, one in three of every globally mobile student is from these two countries. China surpassed India as the leading source country for the United States in 2009/10, while also witnessing massive growth at the undergraduate level. India is projected to experience similar patterns from 2015 onwards.[14]

Financial resources of prospective students are one of the major driving forces of outward mobility from China and India. This is reflected in our findings, with the U.S.-bound international student populations of the two largest Asian countries appearing to differ significantly by socioeconomic background. While 60% of Chinese respondents had adequate financial resources to afford an overseas education, only 27% of Indian respondents did so.

The finding that six out of 10 U.S.-bound Chinese respondents had high financial resources is in line with evidence from a recent consumer report that connected the increasing outbound mobility of Chinese students with expenditure patterns of the extremely wealthy. Reportedly, 85% of affluent Chinese – a total of 2,700,000 individuals with assets worth US$1 million or more – plan to send their children overseas for educational purposes.[15]

The higher socioeconomic status of Chinese applicants is also manifested in their previous overseas exposure: one out of four Chinese respondents applying to schools in the United States had lived, studied or worked abroad prior to their application. By contrast, only one out of 10 Indian respondents had previously spent time overseas. Patterns of employment status and financial independence from parents were also different between Chinese and Indian respondents.

TABLE 3:
Profile of Respondents from China and India

PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS	CHINA	INDIA
Segments	Highfliers (32%) Explorers (28%) Strugglers (21%) Strivers (19%)	Strivers (46%) Strugglers (27%) Highfliers (14%) Explorers (13%)
Lived, studied or worked abroad	26%	11%
In school at the time of application	71%	20%
Employed full-time or part time at application	35%	55%
Considers themselves financially independent	25%	41%
Top 3 information needed	• Career prospects after graduation (55%) • Reputation of school (47%) • Program content/ course offerings (46%)	• Career prospects after graduation (46%) • Tuition and costs of living (46%) • Program content course offerings (45%)

Differences in socioeconomic status between Chinese and Indian applicants result in different priorities regarding information needs (FIGURE 7). Obtaining information about tuition and living costs, as well as about financial aid opportunities was very important for respondents from India: 46% selected "tuition and living costs" and 38% selected "financial aid opportunities" among their top three information needs. Financial issues are clearly not as important for respondents from China, with only 22% ranking information on tuition and availability of financial aid among their top three information needs.

Attending a U.S. college or university is seen by both Chinese and Indian applicants as an investment for future high-paying jobs. This is reflected in their interest in information about career prospects after graduation – about half of Chinese (55%) and Indian (46%) respondents selected career prospects among their top three information needs. If American HEIs wish to maximize the effectiveness of their outreach to applicants from China or India, they should highlight the aspects of their programs that enhance their graduates' career prospects, such as internship opportunities or career counseling.

Information on program content and course offerings also ranked highly among the top three information needs of both Chinese and Indian respondents (46% and 45%, respectively). HEIs could appeal to applicants from these countries by highlighting unique course offerings and making information on program content more prominent on websites and other promotional material.

FIGURE 7:
Top 3 Information Needs of U.S.-Bound International Students from China and India
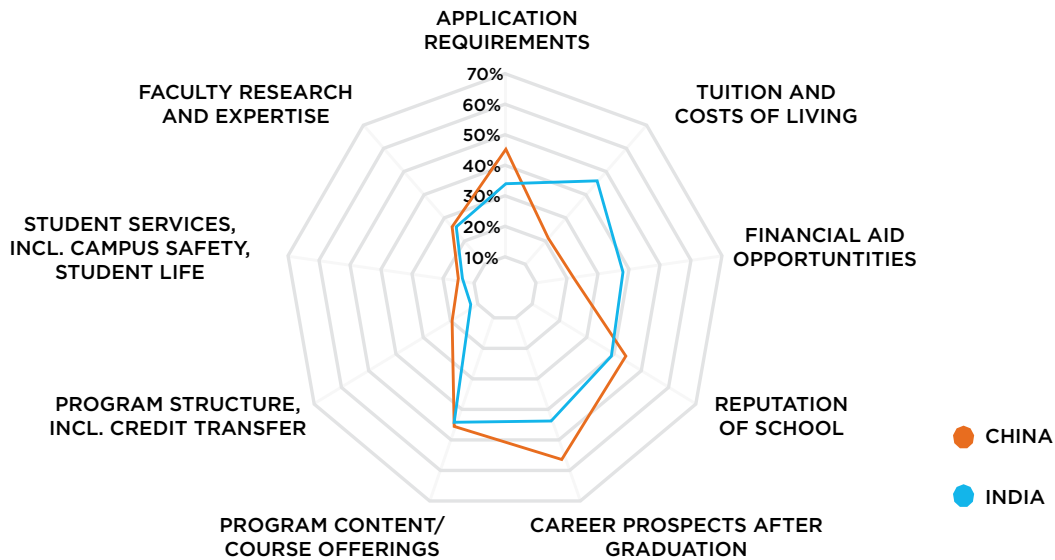
Recommendations and Conclusions

The financial and reputational stakes of international recruitment are getting higher. Competition for international students coupled with the complexity of navigating different markets and using new outreach channels is compelling higher education institutions to better understand the differences of their international applicants.

This study has addressed this institutional imperative by empirically defining international student segments in terms of their academic preparedness and financial resources, as well as by highlighting inter-regional and inter-country differences in international students' information-seeking behavior. Our findings and recommendations can help higher education institutions prioritize their outreach strategies and map their recruitment channels within target student groups.

While conclusions drawn from a segment-based analysis are inherently limited by the data and methods used, segmentation simplifies complex phenomena in a format that is intuitive, insightful, and actionable.

NOT ALL INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS ARE THE SAME

International recruitment targets need to be aligned with the institution's mission and based on a realistic account of its capacity to meet the needs of target student segments.

- "Strivers": High academic preparedness; low financial resources (30% of all respondents).
- "Strugglers": Low academic preparedness; low financial resources (21%).
- "Explorers": Low academic preparedness; high financial resources (25%).
- "Highfliers": High academic preparedness; high financial resources (24%).

DIFFERENT STUDENTS USE DIFFERENT INFORMATION CHANNELS

Debates about the use of agents and social media should be grounded in an understanding of which student segments use these channels and whether the institution is interested in recruiting those segments.

- 80% of Chinese social media users checked their accounts on Chinese social media platforms on a daily or weekly basis, but only 22% of them logged in to U.S.-based social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) on a daily or weekly basis. *Institutions wanting to recruit from China should seriously explore opportunities to maintain a presence on local social media platforms.*

- Agent-users tend to be affluent, but many of them (62%) are not fully prepared to tackle the academic challenges of an U.S. education. *Institutions that consider using the services of recruiting agents should be aware that students referred by agents will likely need additional academic support (e.g. ESL training programs) to succeed.*

DIFFERENT STUDENTS NEED DIFFERENT INFORMATION

Institutions can meet the information needs of international students more appropriately if they map recruitment channels with the information-seeking behavior of their target student segments.

- Around half of Chinese (55%) and Indian (46%) respondents selected "information about career prospects after graduation" among their top 3 information needs. *Institutions wanting to recruit from these countries should highlight those aspects of their programs that enhance their graduates' employment prospects, such as internship opportunities or career counseling.*

- More than one-fourth of all respondents from the Middle East (27%) ranked information about student services, including information about campus safety, among their top 3 information needs. This interest is far greater than in any other region. *Institutions interested in recruiting from the Middle East should put a great emphasis on student services and address safety concerns when reaching out to prospects from this region.*

The key take-away of this report is that not all international students are the same. Understanding the difference in international student profiles can help higher education institution prioritize their outreach strategies. Our study suggests that use of recruitment agents might not be as widespread as previous research indicated: only about one-sixth of all respondents reported to have used an agent. Debates about the use of agents and social media should be grounded in an understanding of which segments use the channels and whether the institution is interested in recruiting those segments.

Methods

The findings reported here are based on an online survey offered to applicants for foreign credential evaluation at World Education Services (www.wes.org), administered from October 2011 to March 2012. Only those WES applicants were invited to participate in the survey that resided outside the U.S. and had plans to study in the U.S. Their application for credential evaluation is a clear indicator of their interest to study in the United States. A total of more than 2,500 respondents started the survey, of which approximately 1,600 answered questions that allowed us to segment respondents according to their academic preparedness and financial resources.

ACADEMIC PREPAREDNESS

To assess the academic preparedness of our survey participants, we asked respondents whether they participated in ESL courses and admissions test (SAT, TOEFL, GRE) preparation courses, and also asked them to assess their own academic ability. Each respondent received an Academic Preparedness Index score based on their responses to these three questions, with responses to each question equally weighted. We divided respondents into two groups of approximately equal size and re-coded the group with higher scores as having high academic preparedness and the group with lower scores as having low academic preparedness.

FINANCIAL RESOURCES

To determine prospective international students' financial resources from the perspective of higher education institutions who wish to enroll them, we asked our survey participants about the types of financial resources they expected to be available to them when studying in the U.S. Respondents could choose multiple answers from a list that included personal savings, financial support from family or friends, loan, external grants or scholarships, and financial aid from college/university. We found that approximately half of all respondents expected to fund their studies in the U.S. solely by personal savings, support from family or friends, or external scholarships. As a result, we split respondents into two groups: those who expected to fund their studies solely by one of the three sources mentioned above were coded as high resource, and those who expected to fund their studies by a combination of various financial resources, including institutional financial aid were coded as low resource.

DATA LIMITATIONS

Missing data could have downwardly biased our survey findings related to agents, as 36% of participants dropped out of the survey when asked about their experience with agents. Perhaps they perceived agent-related questions to be sensitive. Other sources of potential bias include *sampling bias* (our survey participants were all WES applicants and as such not randomly sampled) and *self-selection bias* (the survey was conducted in English which might have discouraged applicants with low English proficiency from participating).

All findings reported in this research report are statistically significant ($p <= 0.05$).

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