

Jīnglì 经历

Re-thinking the Chinese student experience.



Executive Summary

Everything you're about to read began with one simple question:

'What is it really like to be a Chinese student in the UK?'

The exploration that followed was done with a completely open mind and with little knowledge or expectation of what we would find. We hadn't anticipated how much we would be surprised, disappointed, and at times uplifted by what we found, and how determined we would become to help make that Chinese student experience better.



It all started from our filming work at Campuslife. As we regularly film at university campuses and accommodation sites across the UK, we quickly build up an overview of what's going on in the sector as a whole, able to see trends and issues repeated from campus to campus.

Everywhere we went, we found that Chinese students represented a huge chunk of the international student demographic. We'd hear how some accommodation sites had 95% Chinese student occupancy. We'd see some lectures finish and find that the majority of students streaming out of the lecture halls were Chinese. Everywhere we went, we'd see large groups of Chinese students on university campuses.

But we felt that something wasn't quite right. The large groups of Chinese students we saw were always by themselves, never integrating with other nationalities. We'd hear from staff how they had difficulties

in communicating with Chinese students or how Chinese students would keep wellbeing issues to themselves until seeking support at a very late stage. In the student flats we'd regularly visit, there was always a feeling that Chinese students were very separate from the rest of the flat's social group.

Why was this? It couldn't be down to language issues alone, as after all, English is the second (or third) language for many international students. Other international students come from cultures equally as diverse and as different as Chinese culture too, so this couldn't be solely to blame either.

Over the course of several years, we visited universities in China, spoke with hundreds of Chinese students, joined WeChat groups to observe discussions of Chinese student life, went through hours and hours of footage showing life at university in China and generally immersed ourselves in Chinese student culture.



Only 42% of respondents in our survey described their university experience as offering 'very good' value for money

We spent time with Chinese students, mapping out the journey they had been on and examining every stage in minute detail, understanding the experience from their point of view. It was an incredibly eye opening experience and one which Chinese students were very eager to share with us.

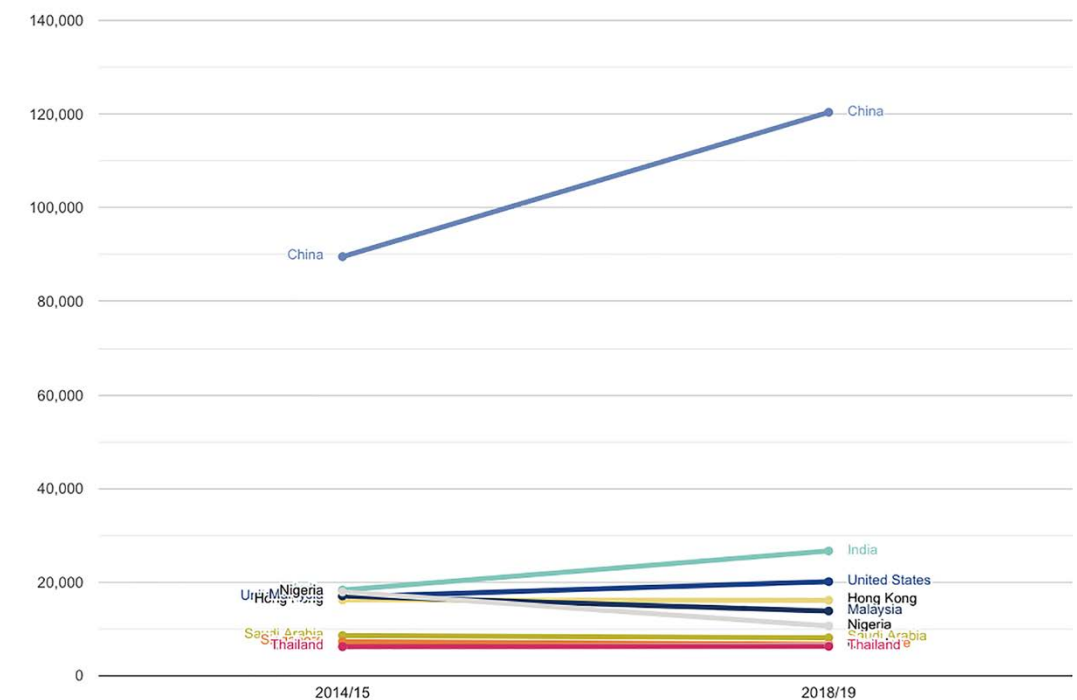
After multiple focus groups and having run one the largest survey's of Chinese students in the UK, we found one overriding theme: that the Chinese student experience in the UK desperately needs to be improved. The issues of isolation, lack of social cohesion and difficulties in communication that Chinese students encounter are all symptoms of the way they are recruited and inducted into life in the UK.

On the surface, there doesn't appear to be a problem. Chinese student applications are now at an all time high, with over 120,000 Chinese students enrolled in 2018/19. A massive 32% of all non-UK domiciled first year students in the 18/19 academic year are from China¹.

Clearly, the UK appears to be an attractive option for Chinese students wishing to study abroad. But once we look behind these rising application figures and into the process of selecting, applying and arriving at a UK university and the actual student experience during their time here, we find issues.

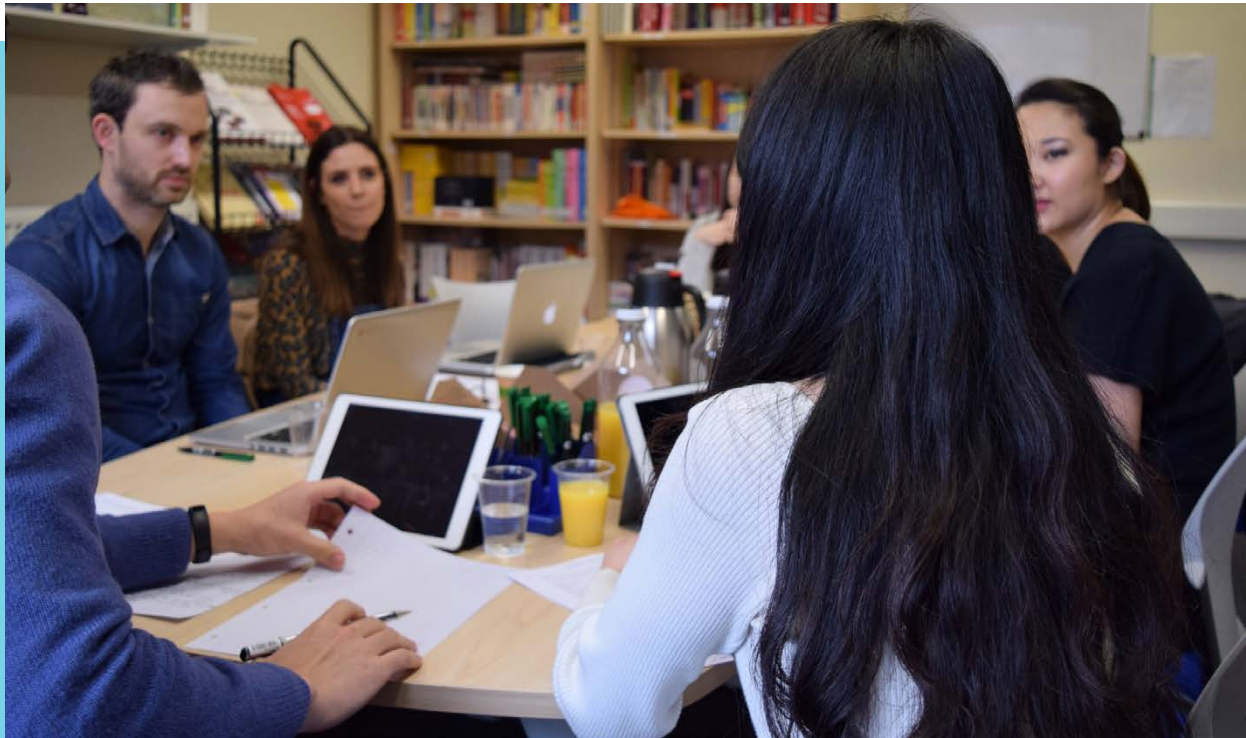
From our research, we've found that most Chinese students view their UK university experience as poor value for money, with less than half of respondents in our survey (42%) describing it as offering 'very good' value for money. This is also having an impact on peer recommendation, with only 29% saying they would 'definitely' recommend their university to others.

For a sector that relies so heavily on international students' financial input, these are worrying findings, and there are various factors causing Chinese students to reach this evaluation of their time in UK Higher Education.



1 HESA Student Data 2020 <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from> - Accessed 13/2/20
 2 <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from>
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METHODOLOGY



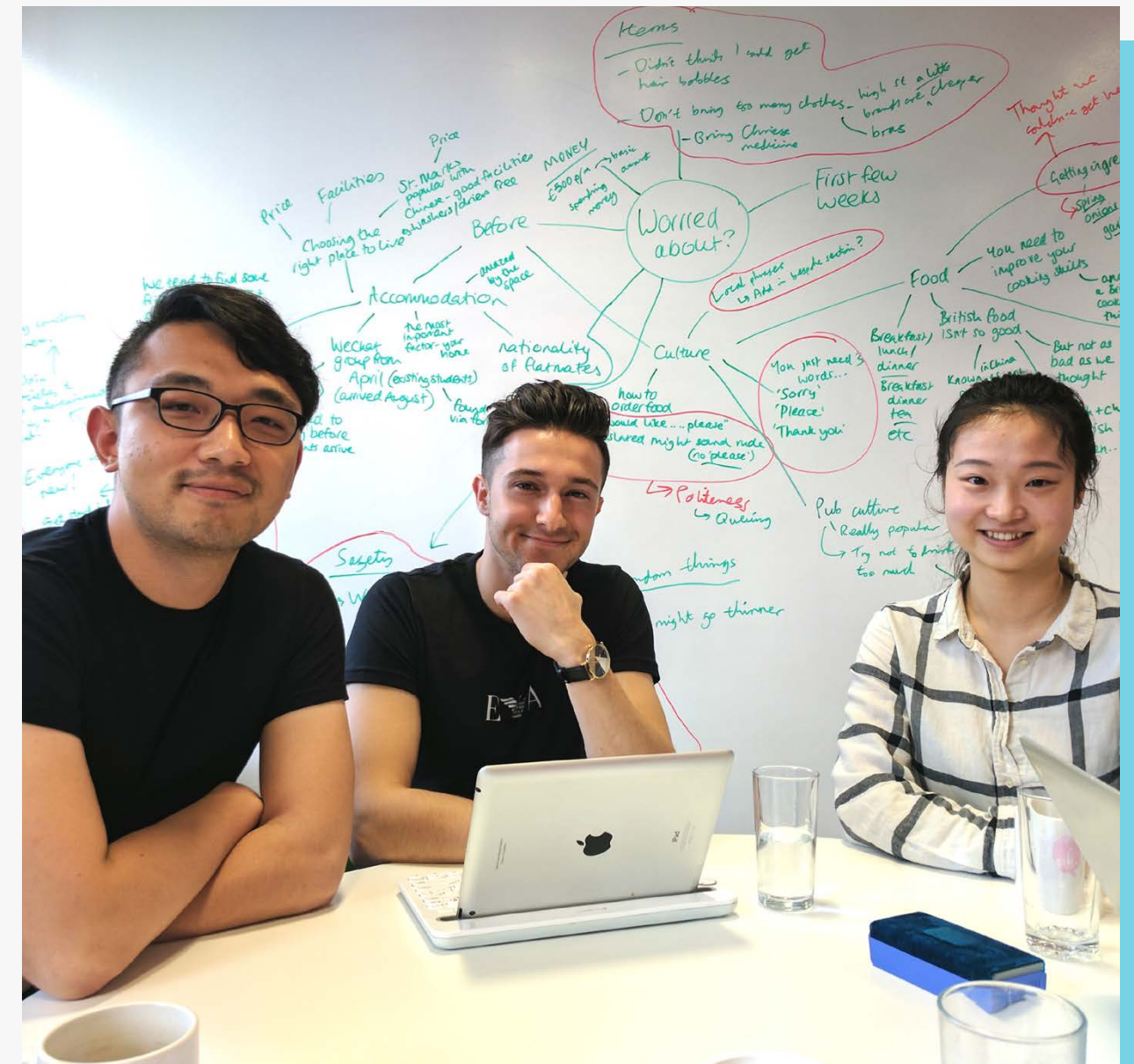
Our work started in 2017 when we carried out desk research analysing existing resources on the Chinese student experience and journey along with research on Chinese student numbers in the UK and the impact of international students in general studying. At this point, we wanted to find out what research already existed on the Chinese student experience in the UK and although we found some statistical data on the numbers of students coming to the UK, there wasn't anything that covered the breadth of their whole journey and in any amount of interesting detail.

To find out more and fill this gap in knowledge, we ran **5 focus groups over the course of two academic years, working with 79 different Chinese students** from across China.

We started with a **small focus group of 6 students on 2nd March 2017 at the Confucius Institute at the University of Leeds**. During this session, we explored student attitudes to the following topics:

- Living and studying in the UK
- Media habits
- Socialising and relationships

On 26 April 2017, we held focus group #2, this time with 2 Chinese students and a UK domiciled student who spoke Mandarin and who had extensive knowledge of living and studying in China. During this focus group, we explored topics that Chinese students want to know about before coming to the UK and where they look online in China to find these issues. It was at this point that we started to see the gaps in information available online to students in China and started to realise that the process of selecting a university in the UK was a lot more difficult than it first seemed.





On **23 January 2018**, we held **focus group #3**. This was with **61 Chinese students**. During this focus group, we gathered further insight into topics such as:

- Motives for choosing to study in the UK
- Expectation vs Reality
- Cultural differences
- Communication between themselves and the university
- Social media use in China and in the UK
- Socialising with non-Chinese students
- Integration into British culture

From members of this group, we set up a WeChat group to act as an online panel to quickly get responses from polls and answers to questions.

At this point, we started to pick outkey themes during Chinese students' experience of living in the UK and explore these in more detail. We also co-produced several video diaries with Chinese students on topics Chinese students identified as being particularly important to them.

To produce these, we gave a student a camera and let them film a topic of their choice. We would collect the camera several days later, review the footage and then return to film a formal interview which explored issues they mentioned in their own vlog footage. We then created Chinese student vlogs which articulated these topics, links to which can be found throughout some of the other reports.



On **21 February 2018**, we held **focus group #4** with **9 students** and looked in depth at Chinese social media use and how they used this to choose their university in the UK. We were able to define key platforms that Chinese students used to find information online and realised that very few UK universities had a presence on these platforms.



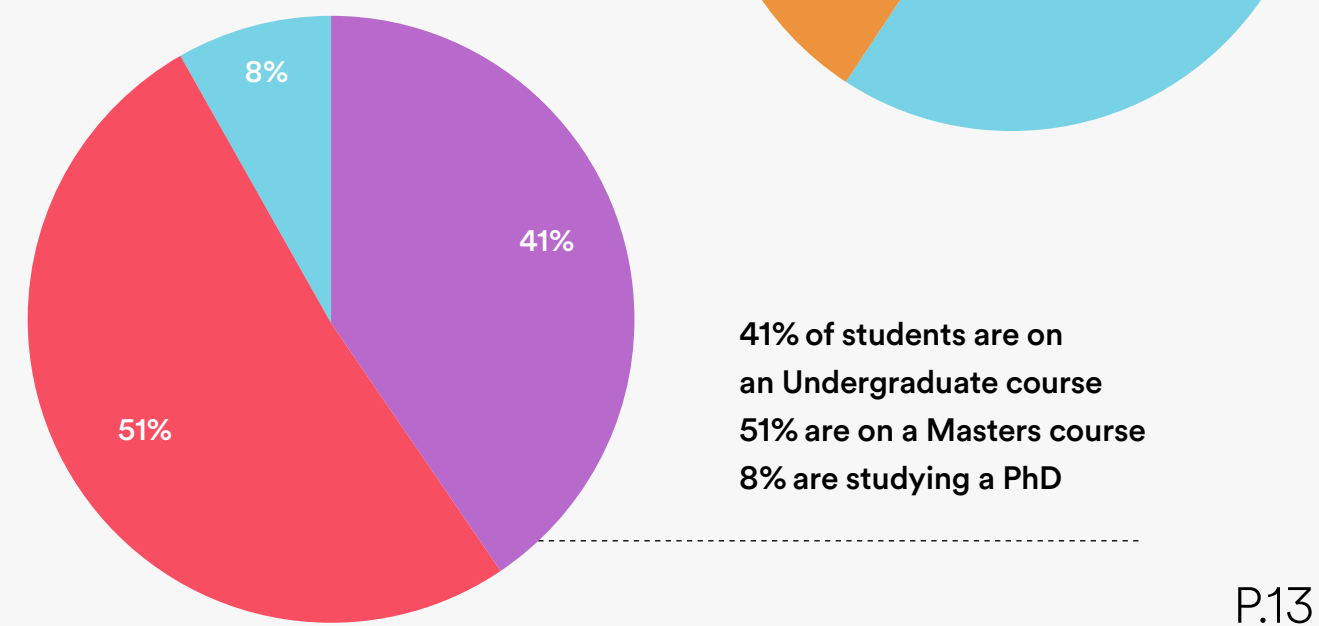
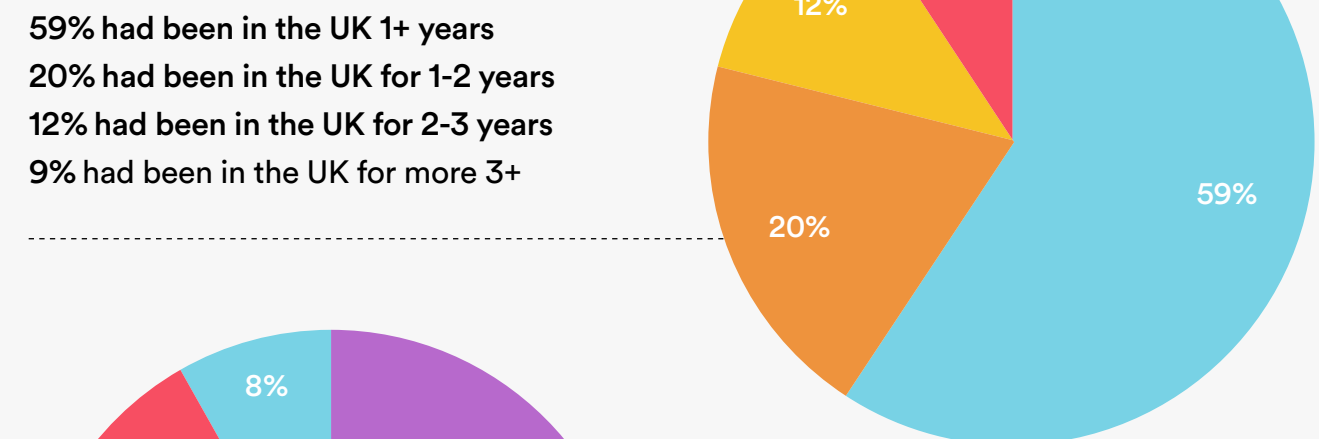
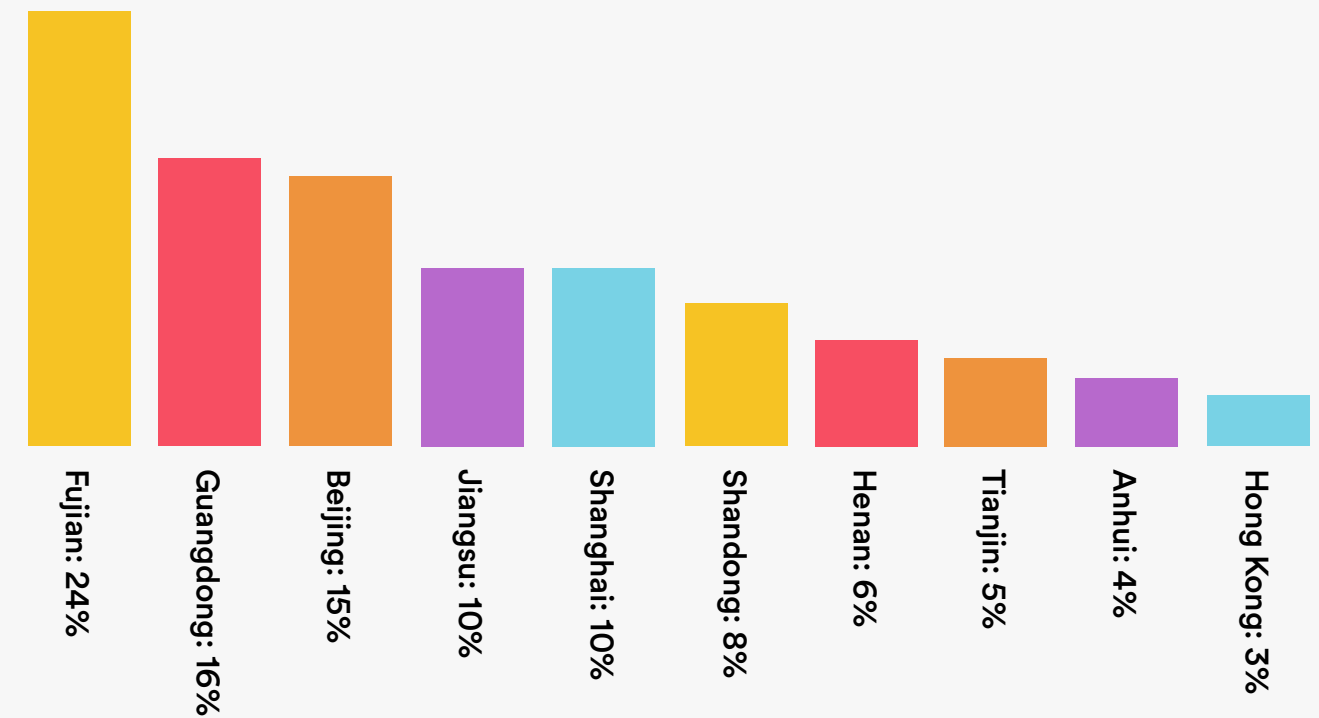
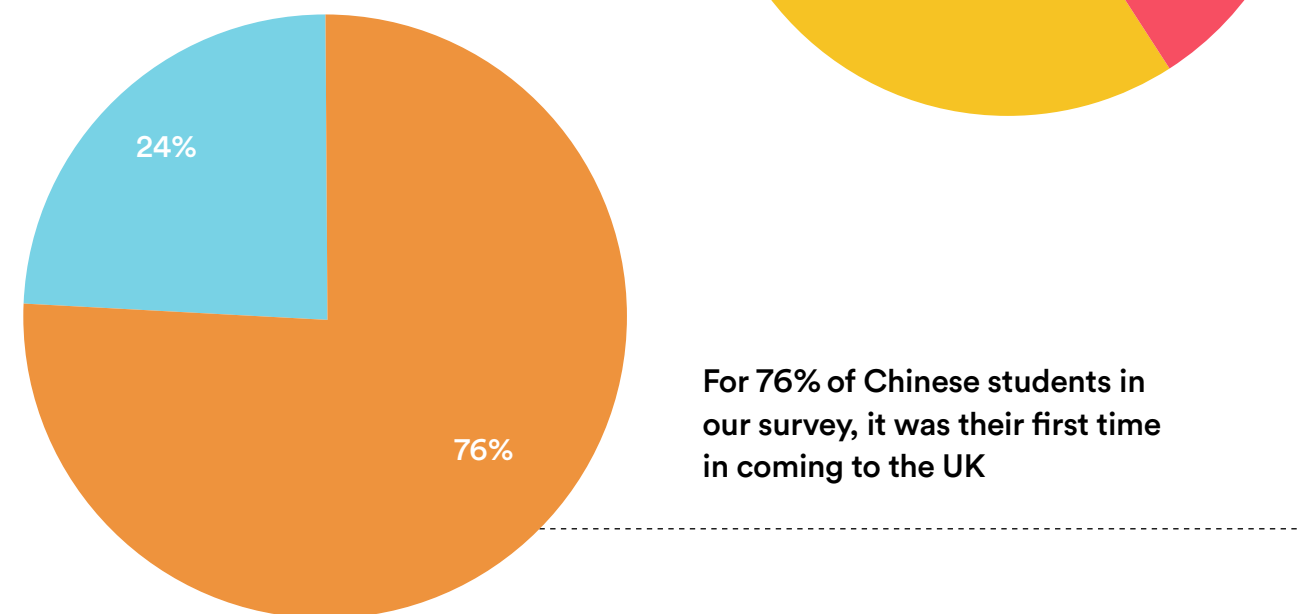
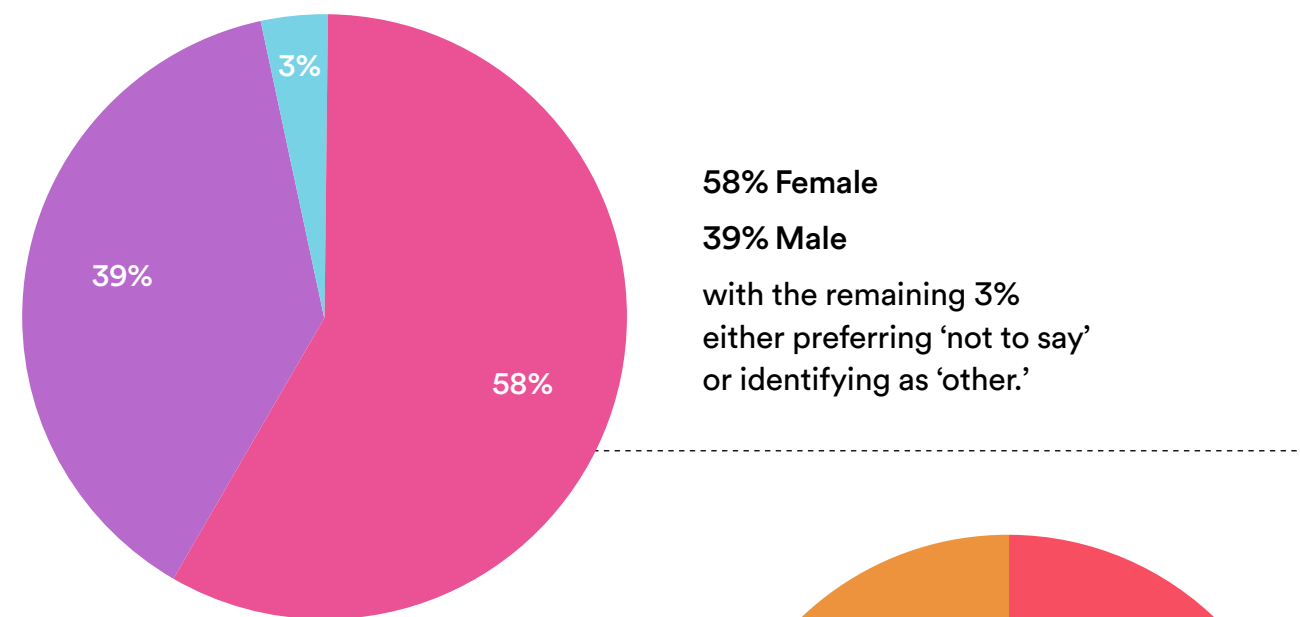
Our **fifth** and **final** focus group took place on **11th October 2018**, with **4 students**.

This lasted 6 hours and went through the entire student journey from choosing a UK university to arrival, and decisions on graduation and beyond.

By this point, we had identified clear themes that were issues during the Chinese student journey, covering everything from the application process right through to the arrival and every day life experience on campus.

Finally, we wanted to explore what this journey was like from the point of view of a Chinese student currently in China. In June 2018, we sourced a student called Biyao who was at a university in China and who was about to leave the country for the very first time and travel to the UK to study for a Masters degree. We arranged for her to film her life on campus in China, her thoughts before leaving and her experience of moving to the UK and how this experience matched her expectations. You'll be able to see these videos of her life in China in some of our other reports.

In **October 2019**, we then ran an online survey in Mandarin, shared through WeChat groups throughout the UK to collect quantitative data. We gathered data from 2,148 respondents.



THE WAY CHINESE STUDENTS ARE RECRUITED NEEDS TO BE IMPROVED



See our [‘Attracting Chinese Students’](#) report to find out how the application process for Chinese students can be improved.

Through our extensive qualitative and quantitative research, we found that the process of choosing a UK university for Chinese students is long, expensive and frustrating, with students and their parents facing substantial issues around finding relevant, useful information in order to make what is going to be one of the biggest and most expensive decisions of their lives.

Education agents have considerable influence, and potentially more power than their role as brokers should allow, effectively deciding what information to provide to students, parents and Higher Education institutions in the UK and what to hold back. Some agents are very professional, but we found too many instances of agents benefiting financially from the lack of useful, authoritative information online in China.

Our research found that only 24% of Chinese students described their agent as ‘very’ reliable, a figure that is shockingly low considering the substantial financial investment students and UK institutions make for their services.

Due to China’s firewall, the vast majority of information universities put online is either blocked in China or loads incredibly slowly, resulting in very little authoritative information readily available on China’s internet.

Anything on Western social media is blocked and university websites hosted on western servers can typically take from 30 seconds to several minutes to load in China, if at all. Even when they do load, most of the content is in English and therefore difficult for parents (who exert considerable influence on Chinese students’ choice of institution) to understand.

And although most UK universities have presences on the Chinese platforms WeChat and Weibo, we’ve found that often the content delivered on these channels is either not relevant or helpful, and frequently shows very little understanding of the Chinese student demographic or the information that these students actually want to know.

This scarcity of official information from their prospective UK university ultimately leaves Chinese students and their parents relying heavily on agent recommendations as they are the only ones (as they see it) with the answers they are looking for.



Only 24% of Chinese students described their agent as ‘very’ reliable.

CHINESE STUDENTS ARE UNDERPREPARED FOR LIFE IN THE UK

On arrival into the UK, Chinese students face a series of hurdles that effectively force them into self-contained peer groups for support. Those that take pre-session courses find themselves exploring and understanding life in the UK with other Chinese students, often before the rest of the home and other international students arrive.

This initial welcome to university life almost acts as a 'false start,' as Chinese students then don't feel the need to integrate with the 'official' Welcome week that takes place as they've already been there for a substantial amount of time. However, we've found that due to language difficulties, there's a high chance that Chinese students miss out on the important signposting for university support services and then don't know where to get help at a later date.

Our ['Engaging with Chinese students'](#) report examines in detail the issues Chinese students face and how institutions can help provide a better experience.

Chinese students regularly experience issues with British culture, making friends, managing money, finding support on campus and huge differences in academic expectation; all of which greatly affects their overall success and the student experience at their chosen university.

This leads to social isolation, academic failure and overall dissatisfaction with their experience. The issue of value for money raised before is particularly pertinent when you compare fees between home and Chinese students. Chinese students pay up to four times the amount that home students pay, yet receive far less support in their transition from their home country into UK university life.



COMPETITION FROM OTHER COUNTRIES IS ALSO INCREASING



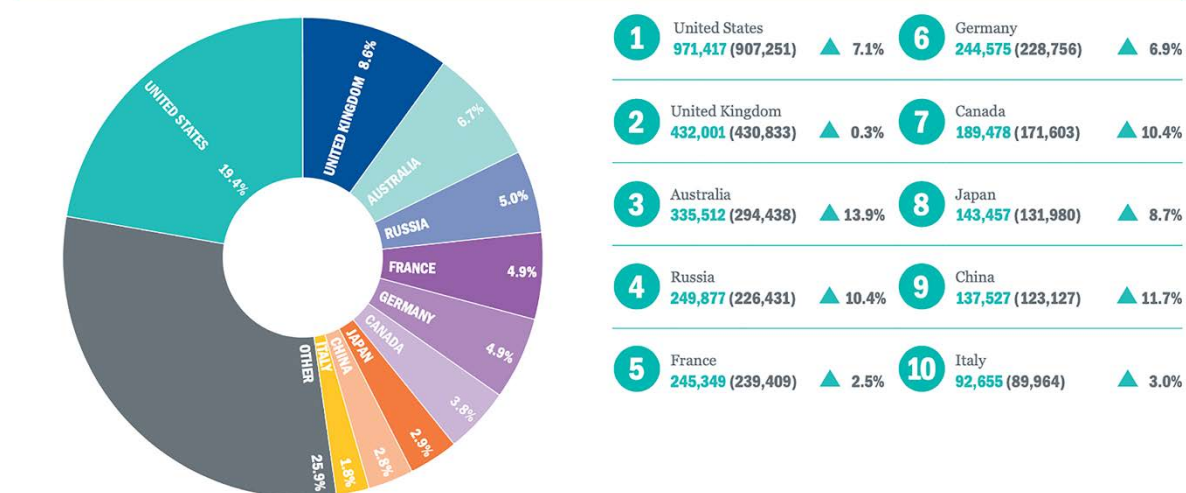
If knowing the challenges that this unique demographic are going through isn't enough to warrant changes to their experience, then it's also worth considering the increased competition from other countries to attract this highly sought after market.

International students (and particularly non-EU students) generate a huge amount of income to the UK. Every non-EU student generates an estimated £102,000 to the UK economy and costs the UK an estimated £7,000 to host them, meaning the financial benefit of hosting them is 14.8 times greater than the cost³. In fact, it's estimated that every 11 non-EU students (the vast majority of which are Chinese) contribute £1 million to the UK economy⁴.

As such, countries are realising the financial value that hosting international students brings and are increasing competition to attract them. Since 2015, Australia has seen a 13.9% increase in international student enrolment compared to the UK's 0.3% growth⁵.

³ The costs and benefits of international students by Parliamentary constituency HEPI / KAPLAN report Jan 2018, pages 6-8
⁴ The costs and benefits of international students by Parliamentary constituency HEPI / KAPLAN report Jan 2018, pages 8

FIGURE 1: TOP 10 HOST COUNTRIES FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS 2016 AND PERCENTAGE CHANGE SINCE 2015



Data Source: OECD (2018)
 Note: The total number of UK students recorded by the OECD differs from the total recorded by HESA, and used elsewhere in this report.

Meanwhile Canada is increasing their international student numbers at a dramatic rate. According to the Centre For Global Higher Education's research findings,

*"Canada had just one third of the UK's 'rest of world' international student enrolment in 2011 but had reached nearly half of the UK level in 2015, and the Canadian enrolment from the rest of the world increased by another 10.6 per cent in 2016 while the UK's enrolment was falling. Canada has a target of 450,000 international students, nearly all of whom will come from the rest of the world."*⁶

In fact, Australia, Canada, Germany, Ireland and New Zealand have all had targets for recruiting international students for several years⁷ with the UK announcing in March 2019 a hugely positive target for attracting 600,000 international students by 2030⁸.

⁵ International Facts and Figures 2019 Universities UK International report, page 5
⁶ Centre for Global Higher Education Research: The UK in the global student market: Second place for how much longer? page 5
⁷ All Party Parliamentary Group for International Students Inquiry Report, page 16
⁸ International Education Strategy: Global Potential, Global Growth, page 4

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE TO IMPROVE THE CHINESE STUDENT EXPERIENCE?



Faced with a combination of increasing competition from other countries to attract Chinese students, a declining Chinese student-aged population, a current process of choosing and applying for a UK university that is unnecessarily difficult and a university experience that doesn't match expectation, it's clear that universities need to change the way they attract, recruit and, most importantly, engage with Chinese students.

UK universities need to stand out online in China as a destination that demonstrates a greater focus on the whole experience of living and studying in the UK, shining as much light on the cultural side of life in the UK as well as the academic side. Content needs to be created for parents, many of which are the key decision makers in the choice of a university and often those that invest the most financially and emotionally.

There also needs to be more emphasis on the role of the Chinese student voice online. Similar to the UK Gen Z demographic, potential Chinese students place far greater value in peer to peer recommendation and engagement than corporate university messaging. Chinese students are turning to online forums to find these voices, but often doubt the authenticity and accuracy of what's being presented to them as there are often no official university accounts present.

Finally, recruitment of Chinese students alone cannot be used as a measure of success. Time and time again through both our qualitative and quantitative research we have found that Chinese students often face difficulties once they've arrived in the UK and have started their studies. Continual engagement with Chinese students (as with any student) is vitally important to ensure they have the best experience while here in the UK.

But what makes this engagement even more important is the fact that Chinese students face significantly greater hurdles than both national and other international students in regards to their lack of access to important information online in China, their difference in academic expectation between the UK and China and their university experience beginning significantly earlier than other students. Chinese culture's vast peer recommendation network also means that a bad experience at one institution or accommodation can quickly travel vast distances online, influencing the choices of many other potential students who we know are turning to this kind of information in the decision making process.

Our 'Engaging with Chinese students' report details how this peer recommendation network influences a student's choice of institution.



Studying at a university abroad gives any student an incredible opportunity to experience a defining time in their life. Time in another country has the power to change the way you view the world, letting you see life, the culture and the people within it in a new way, and giving you a different perspective on your own culture.

What began life as a simple passion project has turned into a desire to help every Chinese student experience the very best that universities in the UK have to offer. The opportunity for thousands of Chinese students to leave the UK each year having had a better integration into UK life, having made more British friends and having developed a mutual understanding of each others' culture that can be built upon and strengthened for years to come is being missed: we must surely make the most of that opportunity.



OUR OVERALL FINDINGS

Parents are the most common reason Chinese students choose to study in the UK, with 87% of students saying they were 'quite to very influential'

However, 42% of students said they found 'very little to no' information online for their parents. (26% said they found 'a lot' of information for parents)

More Chinese students use online forums than university Chinese social media accounts to find information about their prospective UK university (39% vs 32%)

92% of Chinese students said it was 'quite to very' important to find reliable information on everyday life at their prospective institution

But finding this information is difficult, with only a quarter of students describing it as 'very easy' to find

57% of students used an agent to help them find information about their university, but 75% described them as 'quite' to 'not very' reliable

58% Chinese students use current Chinese students in the UK to find out what life is like at their prospective university

1 in 10 Chinese students describe themselves as 'a stranger in a strange place'

Only 29% Chinese students would 'definitely' recommend their university to others

21% said they were 'not very' to 'not at all' likely to stay in touch with their university

Using online forums and talking to current Chinese students in the UK are the most popular ways of finding out what life is like at a prospective university

91% of students said they would have found it 'quite to very' useful to see the lives of Chinese students at their prospective university online

21% of Chinese students said their experience of the UK was 'different' to what they expected

'Making friends with non-Chinese people' is the most common problem faced by Chinese students in the UK with only 2% saying they 'are happy not making friends'

40% of respondents said they had experienced academic issues during their time at university

38% of respondents said they had experienced issues with their accommodation

30% said they found it difficult to find support with social issues

Less than half of respondents (42%) described their UK university experience as offering 'very good' value for money



CONCLUSION

If you are involved with Chinese students in the UK in any way, we hope you have found this introduction to our research and recommendations on re-thinking the Chinese student experience enlightening. If you represent a university or an accommodation provider, and are responsible for recruiting Chinese students to your institution, educating or looking after them while they are with you, then the following reports on Understanding, Attracting, Preparing and Engaging with Chinese students will help you to do those things even better, by better understanding the cultural backgrounds, motivations, anxieties and expectations of Chinese students.

Most importantly, we hope that these insights help you to provide your Chinese students with a better experience of studying at your university, staying in your accommodation and of life in the UK generally. As we have seen, this particular group of international students is of huge importance and value to the UK economy and provides essential funding to many institutions; but powerful international competition to attract those students is increasing, and Chinese students are becoming ever more discerning in their study choices.

In this context, given the Chinese cultural reliance on reputation and recommendation, it's vital that Chinese students, having completed their studies and life in the UK, return to their home country ready to share fresh memories

of a positive experience: one that has met or exceeded their expectations, in which they felt welcome and engaged. If we get this right, we will be returning ambassadors for this experience, Key Opinion Leaders who will champion our education, our universities and our accommodation, into a culture that relies on, and is heavily influenced by, such peer recommendation and authority.

So we hope that this introduction and the following in depth reports can inspire a fresh look at the way we recruit and host our Chinese student guests. But this is just the beginning. Our intensive work with Chinese students over the past two years has helped us to develop specific tools to enable universities and accommodation providers to enhance the end-to-end experience they deliver for Chinese students.

From digital audits to align recruitment information with student (and parent) expectations, advising on the best way to deploy Chinese social media (which is rarely used to best effect), benchmarking attitudes and opinions among existing students, to activating peer recommendation to help recruit the next cohort of students, no one else has such expertise and insight into this unique demographic as the team at Campuslife.

To find out more, and for an independent bespoke review of your own Chinese student engagement, contact:

china@campuslife.co.uk

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Oliver Harrison
Director of Insight & Engagement

