
Social media analysis of the UK's prospective international students

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Executive Summary

This report presents the results of research into prospective international students' use of social media and attitudes towards UK study, covering seven key markets: Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Turkey, and Vietnam. Data collection covered a variety of platforms including X (formerly known as Twitter), TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, Reddit and a variety of blogs and discussion forums, as well as China-specific social media including Douyin, Sina Weibo, WeChat public accounts, Xiaohongshu and others. The data collection period was from March 2022 to May 2023.

Usage of different platforms varied from country to country – for example, while Facebook is seen as outdated in many countries, it is still popular in Nigeria and Vietnam. Students in Indonesia and Turkey are the most likely to use X, while Indian students have a relatively higher propensity to use forums and Reddit. Different student groups also used different platforms – in particular, undergraduate students were more likely to use short-video platforms like TikTok, Douyin and Instagram Reels, whereas traditional social media had a larger proportion of posts about postgraduate study.

Short-form video is increasing in popularity over time and often serves to raise awareness at the initial stage of the student journey, with topics such as student life and experiences being popular. This form of social media has a relatively higher level of user engagement compared to text and picture-based formats, showing its value in attracting students to the UK. On the other hand, research also showed the importance of private groups, with students in some markets often joining group chats on WhatsApp, WeChat or other networks to exchange information and discuss overseas study in more depth.

Social media conversations about overseas study involve a range of groups beyond students, with agents, current students and alumni all playing a crucial role. Agents are increasingly adopting short video platforms and many focus on gaining students' trust by creating useful and relatable content – in many cases based on their own recent experience as overseas students. This means that agents can influence not only their customers but also a wider group of prospective international students. The research identified growth in specialised agents that focus on specific countries or subject areas.

Research also found that a few key topics were common across social media discussion in all the profiled countries, including universities' academic reputation; career prospects; UK culture; student visa / post-study work policy; and affordability. Some of these were particularly common in specific countries – for example discussion of academic issues was more common among prospective students from East Asia, making up the largest share of discussion in China, Indonesia, and Vietnam; meanwhile discussion about the UK's post-study work policy was particularly common in Nigeria. While the study period ended before the official announcement of changes to the UK's student dependent visas and the review of the Graduate Route, analysis showed a growing volume of negative sentiment on this topic over the course of the data collection period as prospective students objected to criticism of student / graduate immigration from UK politicians.

This research is aimed to support UK higher education institutions in understanding the different social media platforms and user groups and refining their social media strategy. Institutions should tailor their content strategy to each platform's strengths and engage prospective students where they are most active and recognise the growing role of short-form video platforms in building awareness through engaging and authentic content. They should be aware of the differences between different types of influencers – in particular, tech-savvy agents vs student influencers vs alumni – and pay attention to the varying priorities of students from different parts of the world.

1. Introduction and methodology

Student attitudes towards international mobility and their favoured destinations, preferred programme types and social media habits are constantly changing. To keep abreast of these changes, the British Council commissioned research into social media posts on the topic of overseas or UK study from users in seven countries: Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Turkey, and Vietnam. The research builds on a pilot study produced by the British Council in 2022 involving review and analysis of the social media activity of the UK's prospective international students from six countries: China, India, Italy, Malaysia, Nigeria and the United Arab Emirates.¹

The research aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the discourses on social platforms, investigating prospective international students' key priorities and concerns; their key influencers; trends in their attitudes towards subject areas, course types, destination countries and institution profiles; and the most effective social media platforms and influencers to reach prospective international students in the different study countries. Analysis of social media posts was carried out by Behave.

Data sources for most of the target countries included Facebook, Instagram, X, TikTok, as well as blogs such as student blogs, WordPress and Wix; and discussion forums including Reddit, Student Room and Nairaland. In China, which has a separate social media ecosystem, sources also included Bilibili, Douyin,² Sina Weibo, WeChat public accounts, and Xiaohongshu (also known as RED or Little Red Book). Data from most platforms covered the period from March 2022 to March 2023, except for Instagram where data was tracked in real time from March to May 2023.

For most media sources, only posts with relevant keywords were analysed. However, for specific forums and Facebook groups focused on studying in the UK, all posts were analysed.

Information from social media listening was supplemented by data from Global Web Index, a large-scale study that looks at the attitudes and behaviours of online consumers worldwide. In addition to social listening, the project team conducted a detailed analysis of students' behaviour on various social media platforms. This includes understanding their preferred platforms, their activities on these channels, and even their behaviours on less visible platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram.

Prospective international students were identified as those who are looking to study outside their home country. The research gathered and analysed keywords related to studying in the UK, including secondary, undergraduate, and postgraduate levels, as well as student exchanges, in order to create a robust base of prospective international students across numerous study queries indicating their study levels and

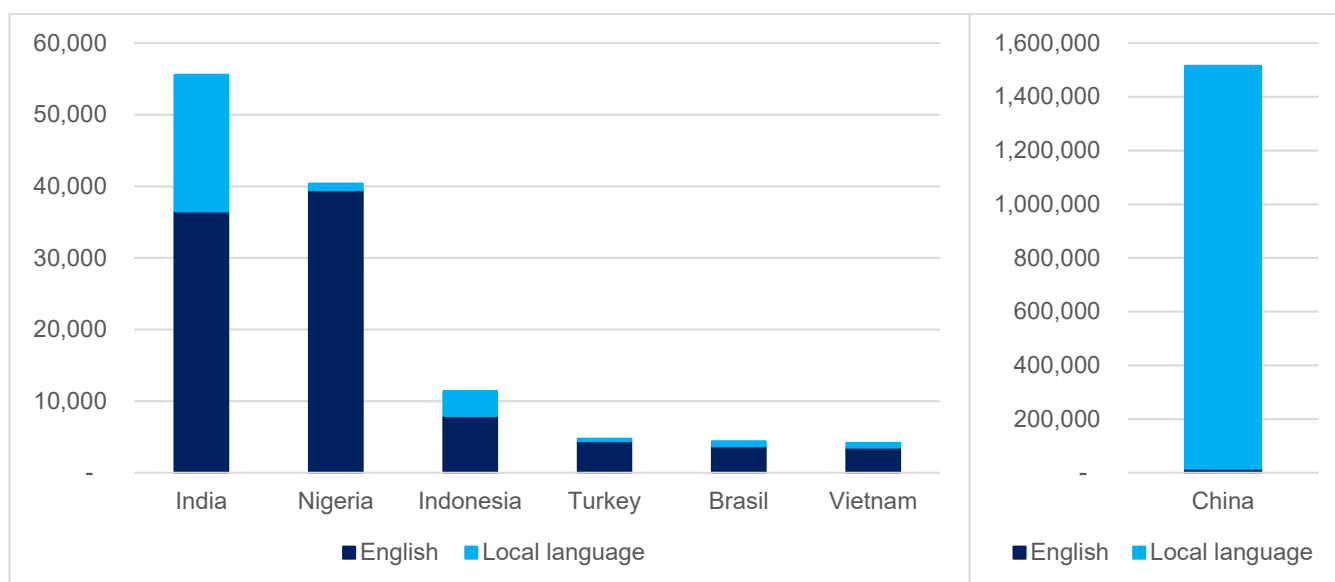
¹ Social media analysis of the UK's prospective international students, British Council, 2022. <https://opportunities-insight.britishcouncil.org/insights-blog/social-media-analysis-of-uk%E2%80%99s-prospective-international-students>

² Although Douyin is owned by the same company as Tiktok and is based on the same underlying technology, the two platforms are entirely separate in terms of content – posts on Douyin are not visible to Tiktok users and vice versa.

stage. Mentions of other countries, such as the US, Australia and China, were also examined to understand competition and key factors that drive or hinder student interest.

Research covered posts in both English and local languages (Chinese (Mandarin), Hausa, Hindi, Indonesian, Marathi, Portuguese, Vietnamese, and Yoruba). In most cases, prospective students predominantly use English when discussing studying in the UK, but local languages were also significant.

Figure 1: Social media posts analysed per country



Source: Analysis of social media posts

Over the period from March 2022 to May 2023, over 1.5 million posts on Chinese social media platforms were analysed, compared with just over 120,000 across the other six countries. Of the non-China countries, India accounted for the largest number of posts (55,600) and Vietnam the lowest number of posts (4,180). The share of posts in local languages was highest for India (34%) and Indonesia (31%) and lowest for China (1%) and Nigeria (2%).

Social and panel data was analysed through the lens of the BJ Fogg Behaviour Model, which states that for a behaviour to occur, motivation, ability, and triggers need to align.³ If any of these factors are missing, the behaviour is less likely to happen. In the context of studying abroad in the UK, motivation involves factors like career prospects, personal development and social pressure. Ability refers to factors such as academic preparedness, financial resources and language proficiency. Triggers can be things like application deadlines, personal milestones or peer influence.

³ BJ Fogg. 2009. A behavior model for persuasive design. In Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Persuasive Technology. Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, Article 40, 1–7.

<https://doi.org/10.1145/1541948.1541999>

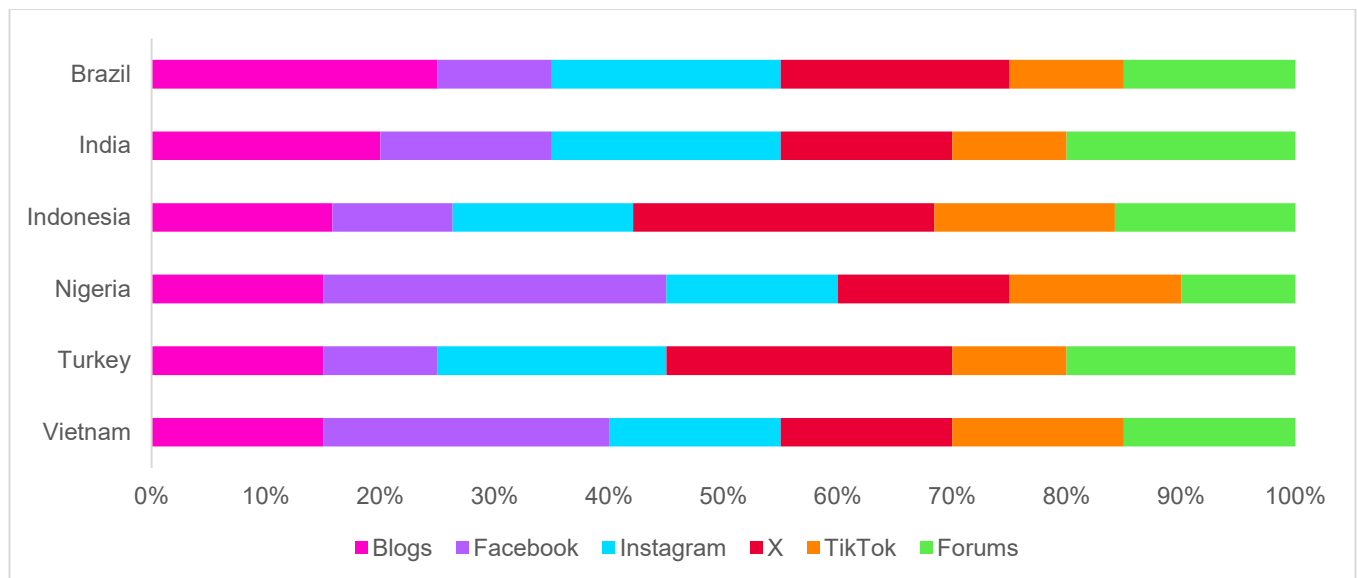
<https://opportunities-insight.britishcouncil.org/>

2. Social media platforms used by prospective international students

Prospective students now have a wealth of resources available across these platforms to help them in their journey of studying abroad. However, usage of different platforms varies significantly from country to country.

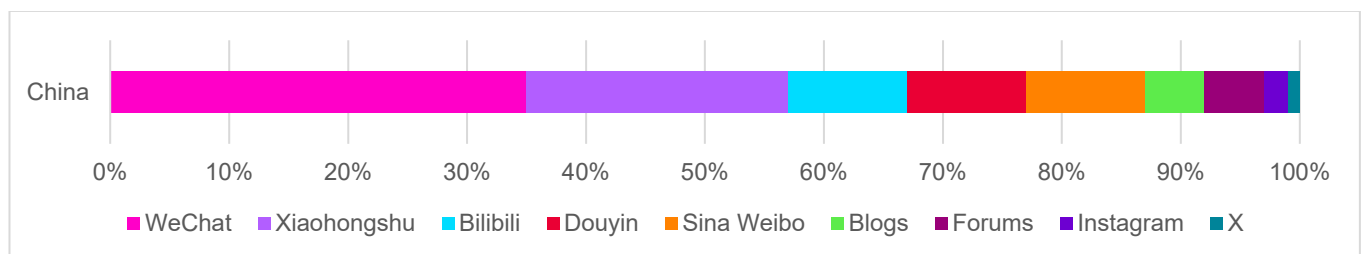
The figure below shows a breakdown of relevant social media posts. While differences in access to data across platforms, as well as in user behaviour, means that the overall proportions are not especially meaningful, the differences between countries are easy to see and reflect different patterns of engagement across the various source markets.

Figure 2: Relevant social media posts by country and platform (excluding China)



Source: Analysis of social media posts

Figure 3: Relevant social media posts by country and platform (China)



Source: Analysis of social media posts

Looking at the overall breakdown of analysed social media posts, the data shows that Instagram and TikTok have experienced the biggest rise within the past year in all markets outside of China (which has a different social media ecosystem), with more influencers than ever promoting educational opportunities <https://opportunities-insight.britishcouncil.org/>

on them. These influencers constituted of a range of professionals, agents, students, and alumni themselves, sharing insights about the admission process, an institution's rank and programmes, university life, academic experiences, and the culture of studying abroad.

Deeper investigation found that TikTok and Instagram's short-form video function Reels – along with Douyin in China – are becoming particularly persuasive due to increased exposure to authentic experiences and relatable content. Short, engaging video content is valued by prospective students for quick tips, experiences, and campus tours, and creates a high level of engagement (likes and comments). Short-form video content has had a disruptive effect on the social media landscape in recent years and the environment is predicted to continue to move in this direction.

One notable point about short-form videos in different markets is that TikTok is banned in India and the market generally uses Instagram Reels instead. However, TikTok is still extremely popular with current UK-based Indian students who regularly share their stories on the platform – including some with large numbers of followers.

The top keywords relating to study abroad from TikTok and Douyin are shown below. Most of these topics, are primarily awareness-driven (i.e., raising awareness of what studying in the UK entails).

Figure 4: Top keywords related to overseas study from TikTok and Douyin



Source: Analysis of social media posts

This shows that short-form video content often serves as the initial “awareness” stage of the AIDA marketing funnel (Awareness > Interest > Desire > Action), being commonly used at early stages of the student journey and acting as a catalyst for students’ interest. Topics such as student experiences, student life, alumni stories or other interesting video content help to create exposure and communicate the value of studying in the UK, as well as shedding light on what to do next.

Networks focusing on short-form video attract a diverse community of content creators, including current and prospective students as well as educators, scholars and professionals from various fields. Many educators and educational institutions have recognised the potential of TikTok as a platform for knowledge sharing. As a result, they have created dedicated channels or series where they cover complex topics, offer study advice, and address the specific priorities and concerns of prospective international students.

These specialised channels provide a deeper understanding of the real challenges and experiences faced by students and can serve as valuable resources during the decision-making process.

Short video content, which can sometimes appear quite celebratory or light-hearted, often acts as an entry point to more in-depth conversations, with a high level of user engagement in the comments section where viewers share personal experiences, seek advice, and further explore the topic. This interactive element can foster a sense of community and encourage users to delve deeper into educational discussions.

At later stages of the funnel, activity shifts towards other social platforms such as Informational Facebook pages and groups (Nigeria and Vietnam), Instagram informational advice pages / Q&As / links (Indonesia, Brazil, Turkey, India), and WeChat / Xiaohongshu (China).

While Facebook is seen as outdated in many countries, this is not the case across all the profiled regions. In particular, the platform continues to play a core role in the student exploration journey in Nigeria and Vietnam, with Facebook groups related to UK Study Abroad still driving interest and providing information in these markets.

In Vietnam in particular this is driven by regional groups for Vietnamese students in specific cities such as Birmingham, Manchester or Sheffield, which attract high engagement; Facebook is also used to share information about educational conferences shared and to communicate with alumni.

In Nigeria, agents appear to be highly active on Facebook and drive a high level of engagement. The study shows that their Facebook posts influence significantly more people than their activity on X, driving engagement through sharing articles and commenting among prospective students seeking trusted information. Facebook's popularity also applies generally to Nigerians seeking information on a variety of topics, including studying abroad in the UK, with pages such as "Information Nigeria" (3M+ likes) acting as daily information sources and large numbers of comments on pages and groups.

WhatsApp groups are also popular in Nigeria and are often promoted through comment sections on Facebook. While it is not possible to track private conversations and discussions in WhatsApp groups, these groups are frequently referenced and seem to be a prominent source of information for students considering studying in the UK.

More broadly, the "dark social" or "social to private" journey from public platforms to private discussion groups is common across all profiled countries. Prospective students join these groups to share advice on particular aspects of the student journey, such as studying for IELTS or applying for universities. In most of the regions covered by this research the most common platform for these groups is WhatsApp, but local app Zalo was the preferred platform in Vietnam while students in China join group chats on both WeChat and Xiaohongshu.

Beyond the application stage it is also common for students to join WeChat or WhatsApp groups to connect before arriving to the university to feel a sense of reassurance. This appears to be more common in China, India, Nigeria, and Indonesia, and for prospective undergraduate students as opposed to postgraduates.

Parents of younger students also take an active role in shaping their children’s education journey through joining dedicated groups on Facebook and other platforms.

While X posts receive lower engagement than video-based platforms it is still a relatively popular platform for students, particularly in Indonesia and Turkey. Third-party market research confirms that X is more popular among student-age users in these countries compared to their counterparts in other profiled regions. It is also widely used by alumni, and so used by prospective overseas students to follow these alumni or ask questions. In general X and its Chinese counterpart Weibo work better for storytelling than providing admission and application advice, as they don’t tend to grab attention in “student recruitment” terms but rather through organic, interesting stories which are shared and commented on.

Meanwhile, forums and discussion sites such as Reddit and The Student Room appear to be particularly popular among Indian students, who often use these platforms to seek reassurance around their choice of degree programmes and look for assurance that this will enable a path that aligns with society, community, and family pride. Unfiltered information on forums helps students to receive impartial opinions, which they increasingly seek in light of the large volume of sometimes-contradictory information and options students can find online. Agents and agencies are also common topics of discussion on these platforms.

In Nigeria the Nairaland forum is an important hub of discussion around UK study abroad, as well as countless other subjects. Discussion of studying in the UK is not only present in threads specifically about overseas study but is also attached to political discussion, with a lot of young people discussing the “Japa” (“run away”) movement over the data collection period; this movement encourages people to move abroad due to negative perceptions of Nigeria’s economic and social environment.

While some Chinese students are present on global social media platforms, the majority of prospective Chinese students overwhelmingly rely on a different set of social media platforms. WeChat was the network with the largest number of posts discussing UK study abroad, and the proportions above may understate the importance of WeChat as a lot of discussion takes place in private groups which are not visible to this analysis. Xiaohongshu (RED / Little Red Book), which is similar to Instagram, has the second largest volume of discussion, while Weibo – like its overseas equivalent X – is particularly popular among alumni. Similarly, short-form video app Douyin – which is based on the same technology as TikTok but is an entirely separate network in terms of content – achieves a high level of user engagement. Analysis found an increasing number of UK institutions using Chinese social networks, which are necessary to reach local students.

Social media analysis shows that prospective undergraduate students, who unsurprisingly tend to be younger than postgraduates, are often looking to social media for a holistic view of what studying at a certain university or in a specific country would be like. They are particularly interested in hearing about the experiences of current students. For instance, posts about day-to-day student life, campus tours and university event coverage can help them envision their life at a particular university. Platforms like

Instagram and TikTok, with their focus on visually engaging content and storytelling, are comparatively more popular among this group of prospective undergraduates.

Amongst the target countries, Chinese students are leading the way in creating content for prospective undergraduate students. Showcasing accommodation, vlogging videos, and sharing student experiences are some of the most frequent content on Chinese social media platforms.

In comparison, postgraduate students from all seven markets typically have more focused educational and career goals, and their use of social media reflects this. Therefore, postgraduate students often lean towards platforms that provide in-depth information such as forums. This is particularly true for India, which this study showed to be particularly reliant on forums.

However, while short video platforms are still more common among younger users, these platforms are also increasingly attracting older audiences by creating content and videos that are more digestible than information on traditional channels such as Facebook, and with the relevant influencers appearing to talk to a receptive audience of parents or older students.

3. Influencers reaching prospective international students through social media

Social media conversations about overseas study involve a range of groups beyond just individual students. Educational consultancies and agencies have long been known to play a crucial role as “traditional” influencers of student recruitment, facilitating overseas studies for students across the profiled markets, and are increasingly active in using social media. Current students also continue to post on social networks and can provide first-hand practical experience and tips to the next wave of potential overseas students, while successful alumni often have large social media followings and provide inspiration through success stories.

Tech-savvy agents are common across all profiled countries and are highly visible on social media. Historically a more traditional landscape, agencies that are experiencing growth and engagement online are typically those whose student ecosystem creates advice, traction (people sharing the post and creating subsequent bandwagon effects e.g. hashtags and trends) and journey visibility online through digital content. While many traditional agents are active on social media, the groups seeing the most engagement are those that specialise in short-form video such as TikTok, Douyin or Instagram Reels; in comparison agents using text-based social media such as X appear to see less traction.

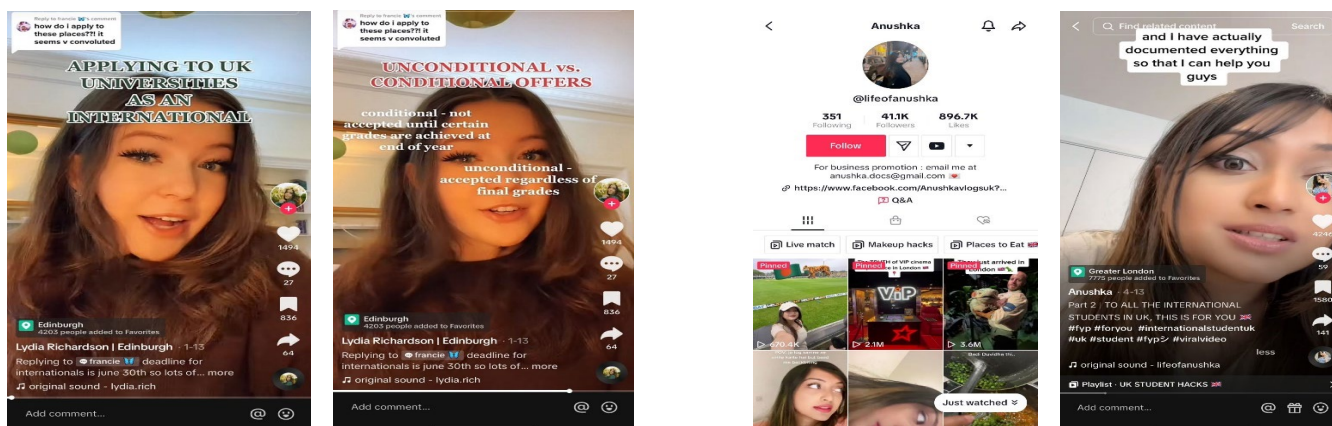
Agencies’ eventual aim is typically to encourage prospective students to follow up through other social media, websites, video calls or in-person meetings, in order to provide personalised guidance and earn money through commissions or service fees. However, they also provide a substantial amount of early-stage information on the application process through their public channels to a much broader audience, which means that agents can act as important influencers even for students that do not choose to use their services. Social media content produced by agents can also help to stimulate interest in study abroad options, helping to turn casual viewers into prospective international students.

There has been a noticeable and important growth in content from specialised agents, focusing on specific countries or subject areas (for example STEM courses, the tech sector or business-related fields). This content mirrors student behaviour, making it particularly attractive to students who are already focusing on these fields.

Social media discussions show that some prospective students, especially in India, are sceptical about agents’ motives and trustworthiness. This may be related to cases of Indian students deported from Canada due to falsified papers that hit the headlines over the data collection period; online discussions often blamed the agents for this situation. Many students discussed the value of agents, expressing their desire for impartial advice rather than agents who aimed only to earn as much commission as possible. Agents who provide transparent and impartial guidance online can help to overcome this suspicion and encourage students to engage directly with their services.

Many of these successful agents also have a personal background that appeals to prospective students, such as being recent alumni or even current students themselves. Content created by these “student agents” often centres on sharing advice and tips on various parts of the application or overseas study process, based on their personal experience.

Figure 5: Screenshots from videos produced by “student agents”



Source: TikTok

For example, the visuals above showcase current students providing advice on UCAS application as an international student, talking in depth about conditional and unconditional offers, and providing awareness on this topic to users in the target markets.

A similar group is influencers acting as ‘student ambassadors’ for organisations such as UniHomes, which has developed an approach to connect UK students with prospective students across the world via Instagram and TikTok. Again, these students provide content on diverse subjects including the student lifestyle, study tips, exam advice, discussions of employment and student finance, and the application / admissions journey. As with agents, this content is aimed to drive engagement with the sponsor but also helps to provide information to a broader group of potential students – primarily using and targeting undergraduate students, who appear to place more weight on community, based on their discussions on social media. Student ambassadors are also employed by universities themselves.

Student influencers more broadly – including those affiliated with institutions and independent individuals posting on their own social media accounts – serve as direct and trusted guidance to shed light on studying in the UK, reassuring about what is normal vs what is not normal, and representing a wide, accessible ecosystem of information online. However, student influencers can also be a double-edged phenomenon – analysis shows that although most current students and alumni positively encourage students to pursue a higher education path, some sway students not to pursue a degree, encourage them to choose non-UK destinations (notably Germany, based on that country’s tuition-fee programmes) or share other negative information about life and study in the UK.

In addition to the rise of different types of agents and the birth of the “higher education influencer”, there has also been a palpable rise in social media content created by influential alumni of HE institutions. These

include award-winning students, political figures, and trailblazers in particular sectors or initiatives. Their content is shared on social media and can reach hundreds of thousands of people.

Examples of alumni that created a lot of discussion of UK study over the data collection period include a Vietnamese mother who decided to study abroad and received the highest marks in her master's degree programme, an Indonesian activist and politician who discussed his experience of UK study on his X account which has over 900,000 followers, and a well-known Indonesian business figure who gave a public lecture at LSE.

In general, alumni are more likely to post to X or its Chinese counterpart Weibo rather than short video sites that are more common with students – although there are of course many exceptions in both directions.

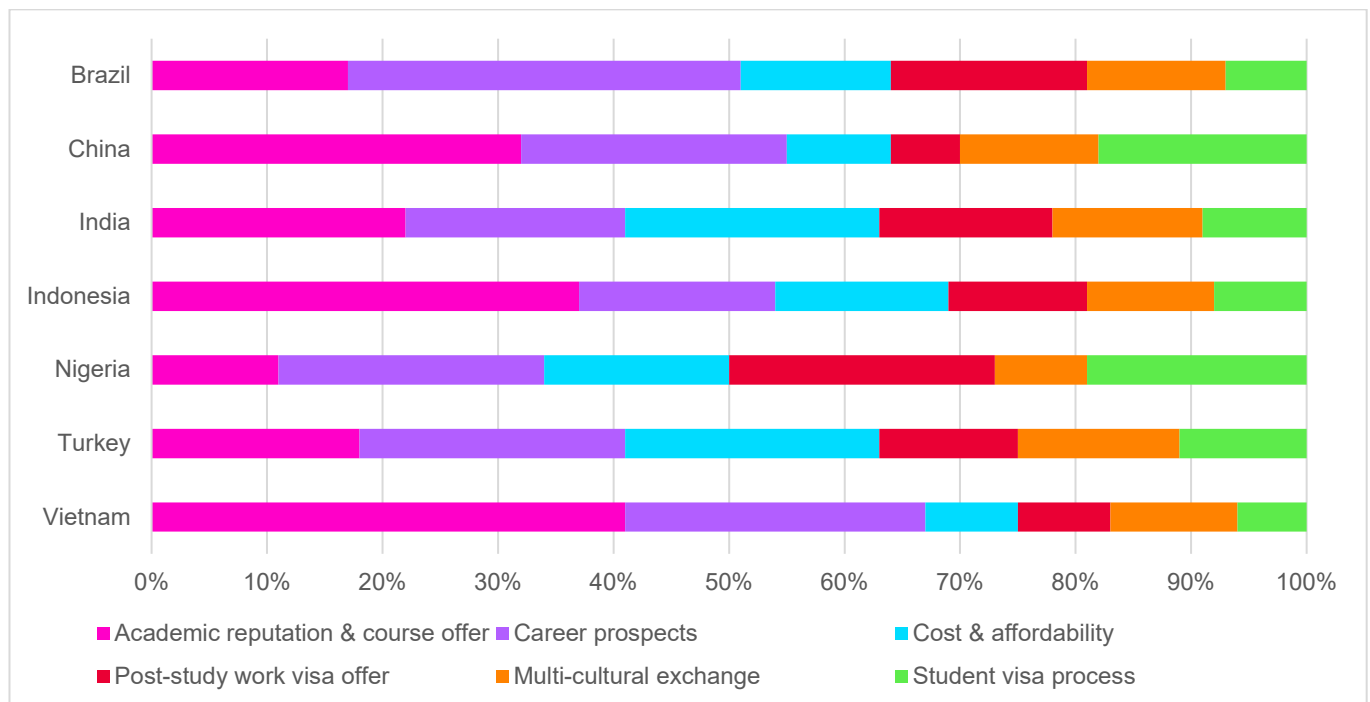
Associations and groups also account for a substantial amount of social media content about overseas study. These groups include associations of current students from key source countries, often focused on specific subjects, levels of study and/or universities or cities. Facebook groups for students in different UK cities are particularly popular for Vietnamese students and account for a lot of discussion, while in Brazil there is a lot of discussion through STEM societies and especially “Women in STEM” initiatives.

4. Common discussion themes

While social media discussions covered a broad range of themes, a number of topics emerged as ever-present across all markets. In particular, these themes include UK institutions' academic reputation and course offer; career prospects; UK culture; immigration policy (including both student visas and the UK's post-study work offer); and affordability & scholarships. The prominence of these topics is not a surprising result, as it aligns strongly with findings from previous research.

However, the prominence of each of these themes varies significantly from country to country – for example, this research showed that posts from East Asia had substantially more emphasis on academic reputation, while in Turkey and India there was relatively more discussion on affordability. The chart below shows the relative share of each of these topics across each of the profiled source countries over the data collection period (March 2022 to March 2023 for most data sources; March to May 2023 for Instagram).

Figure 6: Proportion of social media discourse by topic and country (selected topics only)



Source: Analysis of social media posts

Beyond the individual countries, there was also a notable divide between discussion topics in profiled markets with established student presence in the UK and strong awareness of UK study options (China, India and Nigeria) compared to those with a relatively new ecosystem around studying in the UK (Brazil, Indonesia, Turkey and Vietnam).

4.1. Academic reputation and prestige

The UK's prestigious universities and rich educational heritage were commonly mentioned by prospective international students over the data collection period. Analysis of social media posts confirmed previous research which has consistently found that the UK's universities are perceived as having high standards, rigorous academic programs, and world-class faculty. Positive sentiment for the UK's academic reputation echoed across the seven target countries, but there are distinct nuances and trends in each country reflecting varying attitudes towards UK study.

Academic quality is a major reason for students to choose the UK, particularly in the East Asian countries among our profiled markets. Academic factors made up the largest share of discussion in China, Indonesia and Vietnam, with students in each of these countries placing a lot of weight on UK universities' reputation and prestige.

Chinese students frequently talk about, and rely on, international university rankings in choosing their preferred international university. Beyond the university, social listening uncovers many discussions among Chinese students talking about the reputation of particular degree programmes, with a general preference for tried and tested courses and subject areas.

Meanwhile in Indonesia and Vietnam, the UK is considered the path less travelled in comparison to studying in Australia or the US. Yet this degree of separation is (perhaps paradoxically) contributing to interest in the UK from prospective students in these markets. The UK is seen as a distinctive and aspirational destination with a reputation for prestige and success.

In comparison to other groups, Indian students were more likely to discuss individual faculty members' reputations at different UK universities. While Nigerian students generally tend to enrol in less-selective institutions, social media analysis showed a noticeable increase in the desire to enrol in Russell Group institutions over the data collection period. Meanwhile students in Turkey tend to view the entirety of the UK educational system as prestigious, with familiarity being seen as more important than ranking.

Looking at subject areas, social media discussions seem to suggest that Brazilian students associate the UK with subjects in STEM and innovation, especially in the computer science field such as AI. There is also a lot of discussion about PhD research placements at top UK universities, perhaps linked with research budget cuts in Brazil. Meanwhile in Nigeria subject areas in health, biology, engineering and data science are frequently mentioned when seeking out information about prospective courses, and Indian students discussed a broad range of subjects such as science, engineering, computer science, and management.

As noted above, Chinese students appear to be driven by consensus, with many posts seeking reassurance about programmes that are too far "off-the-beaten-track". Meanwhile in Turkey a large proportion of conversation (twice that of any other market) came from secondary level students interested in language schools and summer camps in the UK.

Students also compare academic programmes at UK HEIs to competitors in other countries. Important topics of discussion include university quality and course duration – where the UK is generally seen as having an advantage – while other factors in their decision include distance, difficulty of staying for work or further study, and the ease of receiving student visas.

4.2. Career prospects

Building a career in the UK post-graduation is a key driver for prospective students from several markets. This is particularly true in Nigeria, where the “#japa” hashtag was extremely popular on social media over the data collection period – a concept referring to seeking better opportunities abroad. Over this period – which ended before changes to the UK’s dependent visa policy were announced in May 2023 – Nigerian social media users were overwhelmingly positive about working opportunities in the UK, seeing UK study as a pathway to better opportunities and believing that it will lead to enhanced career prospects and a brighter future.

Indian students also placed great weight on employability, and discussions of UK study or subject choice included lengthy questions about career opportunities and salary expectations after completing the degree. Indian students placed significant emphasis on the return on investment associated with their education and demand tangible proof that their chosen university and degree programme in the UK will pave the way for lucrative career opportunities. These opportunities were generally assumed to lie in the UK – there was very little discussion among Indian students about returning to India to find work.

Students in Indonesia are highly motivated by alumni stories and examples of influential people who have “made it” in the UK. Similarly, stories of influential alumni resonated heavily in Vietnam, and a Facebook post by the UK’s Deputy Ambassador in Vietnam about the UK’s role in boosting career prospects went viral with prospective international students there. However, students from Indonesia and Vietnam tend to see English language fluency as a core “career-specific” barrier when it comes to securing a job in the UK and are concerned that they won’t fit in culturally.

Chinese students showed relatively low interest in building a career in the UK, instead talking about applying their skills and knowledge to contribute to China’s development upon their return. Compared to social media users from other countries they are more likely to see educational achievement as a means of distinguishing themselves within Chinese society and making their parents proud.

Similarly, Turkish students have low interest in settling in the UK, preferring to return and build a career in Turkey, with family businesses frequently mentioned. This is a contrast to Turkish students considering Canada during the data collection period, who showed a strong interest in long-term settlement there. Brazilian students tended to see the UK as a good place to gain work experience, but typically intended to use this experience to stand out in the Brazilian labour market and ultimately to settle back home.

While Nigerian students had the highest level of discussion about staying in the UK, there were also a significant minority who were motivated to return to Nigeria. Discussion around this subject was particularly common among supporters of Peter Obi, a liberal politician who was popular among many educated young people over the data collection period – as part of his (ultimately unsuccessful) 2023 presidential campaign, Obi talked about the potential for “brain gain” if Nigerians who had studied overseas could be persuaded to return home and improve their country.

4.3. UK culture

UK universities are seen to offer a highly multicultural environment that fosters diversity and intercultural interactions. From literature to art, music and theatre, social media discussions showed that British culture is perceived to possess a wealth of artistic and intellectual treasures that make the UK a top destination for target market students.

Discussions among prospective students concentrated on different aspects of UK culture. Students from all markets generally wanted to embrace the experience of studying in the UK, while those from Indonesia and Vietnam in particular discussed British pop-culture icons, history and cultural heritage.

Nigerian and Indian students focused more on the perception of the UK as a land of opportunities welcoming students from all corners of the world. Nigerian students anticipated the chance to immerse themselves in a diverse environment, where they can interact with people from various cultures, broaden their perspectives, and gain valuable intercultural experiences, as well as becoming part of the UK’s own rich history and culture; the UK was also seen as a pathway to personal and professional growth with access to numerous opportunities for their future. Prospective students from India also had positive sentiment on opportunities in the UK, with a lot of discussion about the appointment of Rishi Sunak as Prime Minister.

Brazilian students were particularly drawn to the idea of studying in a multicultural environment in the UK, where they can interact with peers from diverse nationalities.

However, at the same time, cultural differences were also discussed across students from the various profiled sending countries. This was a particularly prominent topic of discussion in Turkey, where students felt that differences in teaching styles, educational systems and academic expectations, as well as social and lifestyle differences, could be difficult to adjust to.

In Indonesia and Vietnam, prospective international students talked about seeking out expatriate communities in the UK and other destination countries. This may contribute to the importance of associations and events among students from these countries, as discussed in Section 4 (Influencers). Similarly, a desire for a sense of community and familiarity is essential for prospective international students from Brazil.

Another high-profile theme in discussions about culture was safety – an area in which the UK was often favourably compared to the US. This was particularly true among prospective students from China and Indonesia, who expressed significant safety concerns about crime rates and risk of discrimination in the US. In China this was combined with worries about the political climate and a perceived hardening in attitude towards Chinese students in the US during the data collection period, with the UK being seen as a more welcoming destination by comparison. However, safety concerns in the UK were also discussed, with conversations about issues such as knife crime in London gaining traction.

4.4. Student visa and immigration policy

While student and post-study-work visas were an important topic of discussion overall, there was a lot of variation in the extent and sentiment of this discussion between prospective students in different countries.

Nigeria was the country with the highest proportion of conversation about this subject. Overall, 42 per cent of the social media posts categorised as being related to the common themes discussed in this section were on the subject of either student visa application processes or post-study work visas, far higher than any of the other markets analysed.

Data collection on most platforms ended in March 2023, before the official announcement of changes to the UK's student dependent visas, and as mentioned in previous sub-sections Nigerians' overall perceptions of the UK were positive. However, the sentiment of their comments about visa policy was heavily negative, with discussion of this topic growing substantially over the course of the data collection period.

In contrast to Nigerians, student visas did not stand out as a major concern for Indian students over this period, with little discussion about plans to change dependent visa rules.

Posts from Indonesian and Vietnamese students also showed generally positive sentiment on the UK's post-study work visa policy over the 2022-2023 period. Vietnamese students generally planned to use this to gain work experience before moving home, while Indonesians were also keen to gain work experience in the UK and potentially explore career prospects in the international job market. Discussion of this policy among Chinese students was very limited, with conversations about visas generally focusing on the student visa application process (frequently searching for step-by-step guides) and the potential for academic and personal growth during their studies rather than post-study work options.

Like Chinese students, social media discussion in Turkey has relatively little focus on visa issues and sentiment is generally neutral, indicating that there are no major worries or difficulties concerning the visa application process. Students' concerns about remaining in the UK are generally centred on practical concerns such as English fluency rather than immigration policy. Turkish students did show a relatively stronger focus on visitor visas for short-term secondary school-level study in contrast to other profiled countries.

Brazilian students have the lowest level of discussion of student visas, again showing that this was not a major issue for this group. However, post-study work visas did attract more discussion and overall positive sentiment, with these opportunities attracting more students to consider coming to the UK.

4.5. Affordability and scholarships

The cost of studying in the UK is a major concern across all profiled countries. UK tuition fees tend to be substantially higher than the cost of studying locally, which leads to a lot of social media discussion on the subject of affordability – generally with negative sentiment. In addition to tuition fees, the cost of living in the UK is also higher than in the profiled sending countries and this is also a common topic of conversation.

As many potential students find it difficult to afford to study in the UK, discussion of scholarships is common across several markets. Scholarships play a particularly large role in conversations in Turkey, with non-governmental organisations like the Turkish Education Foundation UK playing a key role in driving interest in postgraduate scholarship initiatives online.

Turkey saw a substantial rise in interest in scholarships over the data collection period, but it is far from the only country where a large number of posts talked about this subject. Students in Nigeria, India, Indonesia and Brazil all actively shared and discussed information about scholarship opportunities. There was also strong growth in discussion about scholarships (albeit from a lower base) in China, with the desire to make their parents proud and improve their family's circumstances being a common sentiment among these students.

Beyond scholarships, part-time jobs were also discussed as a way to fund overseas studies. One story that gained notable traction over the data collection period was a Vietnamese alumnus who worked a part-time job in the UK and subsequently founded and became the proprietor of three award-winning fine-dining restaurants in Hanoi.

Some prospective students also discussed taking out loans to fund their study in the UK. This is more common in India, where there was significant social media discussion about the repayment process and whether taking out loans is a viable option. Indian prospective international students often talk about the financial sacrifice of their families to enable them to study abroad and consequent pressure to perform. Chinese students also talked about loans, with conversations revolving around various types of loans, including student loans, personal loans, and emergency loans for international students, and organisations promoting these options, loan platforms and associated apps.

As described later in this report, financial aspects also play an important role in discussions of where to study. Nigerian students often described Canada as a more affordable option than the UK, while students in some other countries talked about the lower total cost of the UK's one-year master's programmes compared to longer courses elsewhere.

Among Brazilian social media users, students expressing concerns over affordability sometimes discussed choosing shorter programmes or exchange opportunities rather than full UK degree courses. Remote learning options, including courses delivered through platforms such as Coursera, were also recommended due to lower fees and the lack of any travel or accommodation costs.

4.6. English learning

Meeting the English language requirements is a critical part of the application process for prospective international students aiming to study at a UK university. This requirement can be seen as challenging, especially for those who have little or no exposure to the English language outside of their classrooms. As a result, many students feel the need to further improve their English proficiency, particularly in speaking and listening skills, before embarking on a degree in an English-speaking country such as the UK, and this is a common topic of discussion on social media.

Discussion on English language study is often linked to exams such as IELTS, which students from most countries must pass to enter a UK university. Amongst the seven countries, prospective students from Vietnam and Indonesia had the highest active intent in improving their English and preparing for IELTS, while discussion of IELTS study is also common in China and Brazil. In comparison the social media analysis detected relatively little discussion about IELTS study in Turkey despite students there wanting to improve their English skills.

Content creators and companies have jumped on the opportunity to provide an abundance of content, while there has been a rise in promotion of summer schools and remote language programmes. Current students and alumni, particularly in China, take to social media to share their experience and their say carries considerable weight, especially, amongst prospective students deciding on which university to apply to, how to study for English tests, and what language courses to enrol in prior to studying abroad.

There is also discussion of English language training in the context of summer and language schools at secondary level. This discussion is not just limited to prospective international students – instead, this is a broader conversation which also brings in students and parents who see this as a competitive advantage in a globalised world even if they do not plan to study overseas. There was widespread discussion of language summer schools on social media channels, highlighting parent's attitudes towards investing in their children. Discussion of early-age language training is also common with parents who see this as improving their child's chances.

One of the recurring themes related to language on social media is around social and cultural integration when studying in the UK. Chinese students often describe a "cultural shock" when arriving in the UK and describe their difficulties in making friends with non-Chinese students.

As English is a prominently spoken language in India, there was little discourse on social media about English language requirements and related topics among students from that country. However, in Nigeria

Singapore, Japan, France, Portugal and even Finland and Italy. Germany saw the most discussion in this group, as it was perceived as being more affordable than the UK and offering degrees in English while still having high-quality education and strong post-study opportunities. The country is especially popular amongst prospective Turkish students due to the existence of a large Turkish community in the country.

As discussed in the previous section, education quality is a top priority for prospective students and therefore a key decision factor when deciding on a destination country. The UK's strong academic reputation resonated as a top theme for students from all countries.

The UK is overwhelmingly seen as an expensive option, although studying in the US or Australia is also regarded as expensive, while Canada is often described as a cheaper alternative to UK study. The affordability of studying in Germany is seen as a strong advantage for students from Turkey and India as well as (to a lesser extent) those from other markets.

Geographical proximity to the home country is also an important deciding factor as it implies easier travel, similar time zones, and potentially a larger community from the home country. For this reason, Brazilian students often favour the United States and Canada, as well as other Latin American countries, while Australia is seen more favourably by students from Southeast Asia. Japan also plays a major role in Indonesian discussion for similar reasons. However, the UK's proximity to European countries was seen as an advantage by some students.

5. Concluding comments

The research has demonstrated the power and potential of social media analysis for achieving a better understanding of the key priorities and issues facing the UK's prospective international students, and how these vary across different countries.

The power of machine-based learning to harness information and insight from millions of social media conversations represents a new wave of research for the international education sector. Over the past three years the British Council has sought to expand the frontiers of our research competency in this space and has laid down a platform for others to learn from and build upon.

The research reveals a fascinating and dynamic social media landscape inhabited by the UK's prospective international students, the platforms they use, how this usage differs across countries, and the types of information that students are searching for – at undergraduate and postgraduate level. The research highlights the emergence of a range of social media influencers and content creators, including tech savvy agents, influential alumni, brand ambassadors and students themselves. The exponential rise and influence of short-form video and its positioning at the early stage of the information gathering journey is a key phenomenon for UK education institutions to understand and respond to. How this journey typically progresses through the Awareness, Interest, Desire, Action marketing funnel is also key, including the journey from public platforms to private discussion groups.

While the comments and views expressed by the target audience during the data collection period is hugely interesting, the key benefit of this research is a comprehensive mapping out of this social media ecosystem and how it is evolving – which is unique to the international education sector. UK education institutions seeking to reach their target student audiences around the world increasingly require a deep understanding of this virtual world and how to successfully navigate in it across countries, with China presenting a completely different social media environment than the other countries reviewed.

Going forward, it would be interesting to expand this type of analysis into other key recruitment markets for the UK, covering additional and newly emerging social media platforms, or delve into specific topics of interest, such as subject areas seeing growth in demand, sentiment towards recent or proposed policy changes, explore interest in summer schools or further education options in the UK or transnational education options outside the UK, or views and experiences around labour market outcomes for international graduates. UK education institutions can decide what research is most appropriate for their unique needs. This report has hopefully opened a door into a brave new world of research.