How can UK universities improve their strategies for tackling integration challenges among Chinese students?

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About the author

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Foreword

Uoffer Global

The integration of international students is a crucial factor in the success of higher education systems worldwide.

Chinese students, as highlighted in this report, currently represent over 25 per cent of the international student body in the UK (2021/22) and predict that Chinese student numbers will grow by potentially as much as 70 per cent by 2030.

There is no doubt that their presence brings immense cultural and economic value. However, this growing demographic also faces unique challenges, including language barriers, social clustering and difficulties navigating a foreign job market. Addressing these challenges requires thoughtful and policy-driven responses.

Focusing on what international students can gain from their experience in the UK is important. The true value of international education lies in how it shapes students into individuals who can adapt, learn and succeed in a rapidly changing world. Providing meaningful and tailored support ensures that students leave not only with academic achievements but also with lasting positive impressions of their time abroad. It is not just about acquiring a degree – it is about the holistic experience of learning, including the joy of mastering new skills, the satisfaction of solving real-world problems and the sense of belonging when connecting with like-minded peers. These are the experiences that contribute to lasting fulfilment and personal growth.

Understanding the unique needs of Chinese students is essential for delivering tailored and effective solutions. How can universities better assess the effectiveness and attractiveness of their current support services for Chinese students? More importantly, how can new insights be applied to maintain the appeal of institutions and ensure that Chinese students are fully supported throughout their academic journey?

One of the key aspects of this insightful report is its focus on the integration challenges faced by Chinese students, particularly regarding language barriers and employment struggles. Despite their academic qualifications,

many students encounter difficulties adapting to spoken English in academic and social settings. Similarly, the lack of clear and personalised career support often leaves them feeling unprepared for the job market in the UK. This report offers practical recommendations, such as enhancing admissions assessments and incorporating internships into academic programmes, which address these issues with actionable clarity.

In addition, we know that leveraging social media to actively engage students is essential in encouraging them to take ownership of their learning and living experiences. By sharing positive messages, we can help students build self-confidence, motivate them to enhance their language skills, improve their information-gathering abilities and develop effective communication strategies. This report also highlights the importance of such approaches in supporting student success.

As markets, student demands and policies shift rapidly, the need for the higher education sector to adapt to these evolving dynamics has never been greater. At UOffer Global, we have witnessed a growing demand for customised solutions that address the evolving needs of Chinese students studying abroad. We understand the unique challenges they face and also recognise their aspirations for personal growth and global success.

Collaboration between universities and the broader sector is essential to refining recruitment strategies and enhancing support systems, ensuring a more inclusive experience for international students. We know that balancing recruitment efforts with robust integration support is key to helping universities remain competitive in an increasingly globalised education market.

The report serves as a critical roadmap for addressing the challenges faced by Chinese students and ensuring their success. It calls for bold action, and we are proud to support this research and stand alongside institutions and policymakers committed to meaningful action. Together, through collaborative efforts and innovative strategies, we can create an inclusive and supportive environment where every student has the opportunity to thrive and succeed in higher education and beyond.

Executive summary

This paper is an overview of key integration challenges facing Chinese students at UK higher education institutions (HEIs). It responds to recent admissions diversification strategies launched by UK institutions as well as increasingly critical narratives surrounding Chinese students.

The independently researched report argues that students from China will continue to be an important group for the future of UK HEIs and should be treated as such. This means HEIs should do more to help Chinese students integrate into the UK while they study.

Key findings:

- **UK universities are highly reliant on Chinese students for financial stability, with Chinese international students paying £2.3 billion a year in fees.** But there is a risk that the UK will become less popular with students from China, with the number of Chinese applicants dropping by 4 per cent in 2022.

- **English language proficiency is lower among Chinese students than those from other developing economies like India and Malaysia.** IELTS (International English Language Testing System) scores do not always accurately reflect Chinese students' language competencies, particularly spoken English, since high scores can be attained through methodical and intensive drilling practice. Some Chinese applicants are spending more than £10,000 to pay for support with UCAS applications. English language proficiency is being further deprioritised by the Chinese Government.

- **There is a very uneven distribution of Chinese students across UK HEIs, with over 15,000 at some institutions and less than 10 at others.** This is one cause of acute social clustering, where students mostly socialise with others from China.

- **China's unique domestic digital ecosystem creates technological barriers for Chinese students moving to the UK, increasing ethnic clustering.** Chinese students studying in the UK rely heavily on Chinese

apps like WeChat and Little Red Book as communication platforms and sources of local information over Western apps like WhatsApp or Instagram.

- **International students would like more targeted career support from their universities: most (almost 80 per cent) have never received support.** Chinese students find it more difficult than international students from elsewhere to find employment. Students from China make up 22 per cent of all international students in the UK but just 10 per cent of graduate employees.
- **Some Chinese students feel like they are being treated as revenue sources rather than as valued members of the community.**

The paper recommends that institutions should:

- Implement more robust assessments for spoken English during admissions, such as AI-powered online interviews already used globally for job recruitment. Language support should be ongoing and more financially accessible, including free language classes and buddy systems, to improve Chinese students' communication skills and integration.
- Work with recruitment agents in China to rebalance the distribution of Chinese students across courses and campuses and offer accommodation support to encourage more diverse living arrangements and reduce social isolation.
- Provide targeted digital literacy training to help Chinese students navigate UK-specific platforms and apps, reducing their reliance on Chinese digital ecosystems and fostering better integration.
- Tailor career support services to the specific needs of Chinese students, including offering internships and practical work experience opportunities, to enhance their employability and overall experience in the UK.
- Further consider employment needs and skills when curating academic programmes which could embed work experience and internships within the course framework.

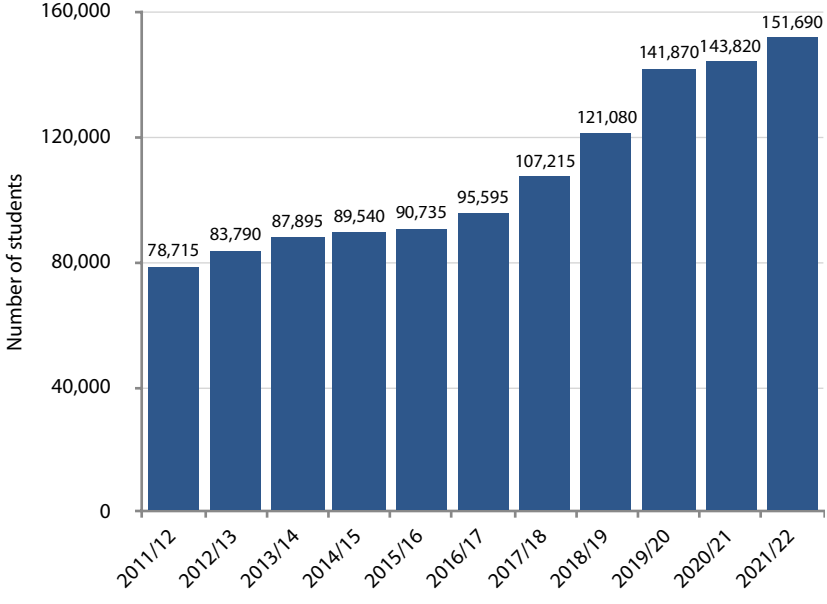
This paper takes a fresh look at the integration of students from mainland China studying at UK universities and focuses on issues which have viable solutions. Research engaged over 100 participants, most of whom were undergraduate and postgraduate students from across mainland China and who were undertaking a range of different courses at HEIs across the UK. Additionally, one-to-one interviews were conducted with sector experts in the UK and China and staff members of UK HEIs. This paper also draws on existing academic research as well as data provided by UK universities and think tanks.

The findings provide additional and constructive insights for universities to consider when developing strategies around recruitment and provision for international students. The paper includes recommendations and practical steps for addressing existing problems.

Introduction

There are currently over 154,000 Chinese students at UK higher education institutions (HEIs). As the largest ethnic group, they represent over 25 per cent of international students studying in Britain. The growth has been remarkable. In one decade, there has been an increase of over 70,000 students, from under 79,000 to over 150,000 (Figure 1).

Figure 1 The number of Chinese students at UK HEIs



Source: C Textor, Age Distribution in China 2012-2022, Statista, 2023

The stark increase has led to a disproportionate representation of Chinese students. Some universities, such as University College London (UCL) have as many as 15,000 Chinese students, representing over a quarter of the total student body. This has led to concerns among policymakers and sector leaders in the UK.[1] There is mounting pressure on HEIs to diversify their international student population away from the high concentration of Chinese students. According to the 2023

report *Diversification and Strengthening International Recruitment Practices* by Universities UK, 90 per cent of UK HEIs are already adopting diversification strategies, shifting their focus towards regions such as India, the United Arab Emirates and Africa.[2] At the same time, the UK Conservative Government's *International Education Strategy* announced its intention to raise the annual intake of international students to 600,000 by 2030, a target which was reached 10 years early.[3] This *Strategy* acknowledges the importance of international students, including Chinese students, to the UK's education sector and economy at large. Some sector experts predict that Chinese student numbers will grow by potentially as much as 70 per cent by 2030.[4]

Given one-fifth of UK universities' income comes from international student fees, £2.3 billion of which is paid by Chinese students, this prediction of increased numbers should come as welcome news.[5] However, this does not paint a full picture. While recruitment of Chinese students may continue to grow overall, this is expected to be mainly limited to the high-tariff institutions that already take high volumes of students. These institutions have established stable market positions in China through their rankings and China-specific admissions strategies. UCL, for example, has accounts on China's key digital communication platforms in order to engage with prospective students.[6]

However, some believe there is no guarantee that Chinese student numbers will continue to grow at all. Lower tariff universities are already experiencing a sharp drop in numbers. Founder of Beijing-based market intelligence company Venture Education Julian Fisher is not optimistic. 'We are probably seeing the apex', Fisher states: 'We will see applications for top universities continue to increase. The rest will drop off'.[7]

Fisher's words echo those of Maddalaine Ansell, Director Education at the British Council, who in 2022 warned 'we may be close to "peak China"'.[8] For many institutions where Chinese students make up a large proportion of each cohort, a sudden fall in admission numbers could be disastrous. Yet HEIs are turning their attention to diversification strategies and raising investment for recruitment from Southeast Asia and Africa. While

in principle diversification has potential benefits, it risks diluting efforts in China and potentially impacting the recruitment of Chinese students.

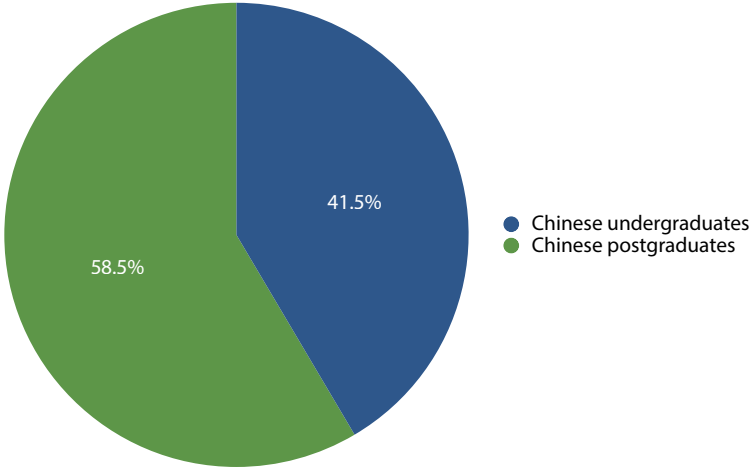
Recent data show a negative trend is already underway. In 2023, a UCAS report revealed that the number of Chinese applicants to study in the UK dropped for the first time in a decade. In 2022, applications from Chinese students dropped 4 per cent to 27,710 from 28,930.[9] In contrast, student numbers from Nigeria and India increased, evidence that the results of diversification were already visible. Since overall numbers of international students have not decreased, sector leaders such as the Chief Executive of London Higher, Dr Diana Beech, appear unconcerned, believing 'the impact on institutions will be minimal'.[10]

However, this overlooks the possibility that Chinese student numbers could see a steeper and faster fall. There are several reasons why this is a possibility.

First, the slowdown of China's economy could dampen families' willingness to send children overseas. Given the high costs of international education, particularly in the UK, parents may be more cautious or consider alternative international destinations. Education consultant Janet Illeva explains the UK now faces 'more competition from quality universities around the world'. At the same time, an even more threatening trend is unfolding: the value of undertaking more education is being called into question.[11] Faced with an increasingly competitive job market, Chinese graduates are keen to join the labour force earlier to gain relevant work experience or opt for the more secure civil service route.

For the first time in nine years, China saw the number of students applying for postgraduate studies fall by 8 per cent in 2024.[12] Since 2016, numbers have grown 16 per cent annually, however, recently their perceived value has diminished. Recent Chinese Government policy, which aims to increase the number of professional Master's programmes to represent two-thirds of all courses by 2025, reflects a growing emphasis on practical skills over academia.

Figure 2: Breakdown of Chinese students studying in the UK



Source: HESA, Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2022/23, 2024 https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/08-08-2024/sb269-higher-education-student-statistics

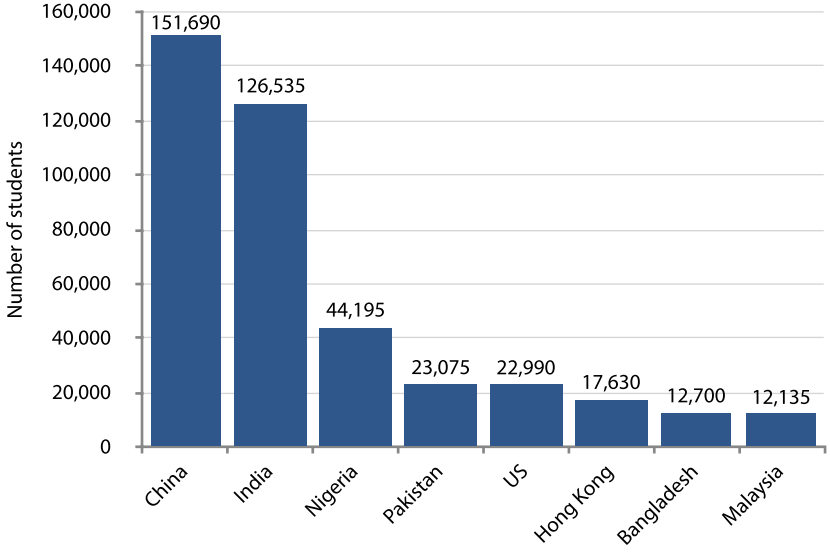
Given almost 60 per cent of Chinese students currently studying in the UK (see Figure 2) are postgraduate students who are thought to be responsible for 52 per cent of the Russell Group's tuition income, a reduced emphasis on postgraduate studies in China could have serious implications.[13]

Additionally, the Chinese Government's rhetoric around overseas study has changed. During the COVID-19 pandemic, overseas students were prevented from returning to China, causing many to be apart from their families for three years. More recently, recruitment trends among state-owned enterprises reveal less willingness to employ Chinese returnees with foreign degrees.[14] Whether or not the numbers are substantial, noise around changes in perception among Chinese recruiters and the government may put off prospective Chinese students considering studying overseas.

It would be a mistake for UK HEIs to be complacent about the enrolment numbers of Chinese students. The case of Australia, which suffered a 39 per cent drop in Chinese students between 2019 and 2022, should serve as a cautionary tale. If UK HEIs do not manage their recruitment of Chinese

students carefully, the number of Chinese applicants may drop sharply rather than gradually decline, leaving a hole that other countries do not fill. As Maddalaine Ansell points out, there 'are no other countries that offer the same volume of high-quality students as China'.[15] She warns that 'seeking to recruit international students from elsewhere will not provide an easy answer to financial sustainability'. As such, effort and investment in Chinese students should be ramped up rather than reduced. A fundamental part of this is putting resources behind enabling the smooth transition of Chinese students from China to the UK and supporting their integration once they have arrived.

Figure 3: Numbers of international students by country in 2022



Source: HESA, Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2021/22 – Where students come from and go to study

Chinese students continue to face integration challenges despite reports suggesting otherwise. Although the UCAS / Pearson report *Global Insights: What are the experiences of Chinese students in the UK?* reveals high levels of satisfaction, with 91 per cent 'likely to recommend the UK as a study destination', an over emphasis on this risks underplaying latent

dissatisfaction with students' individual courses, institutions and level of support.[16] When asked a series of statements about resources provided by their UK university, Chinese students expressed lower satisfaction with the support on offer to facilitate integration into the UK. Although 48 per cent still claim to receive sufficient support, when compared with other areas, students feel less satisfied.

Given the financial contribution of Chinese students to UK HEIs, particularly Russell Group universities, adequate provision of tailored services is a basic responsibility.[17] It is in the interests of universities to deepen the integration and enhance the social and academic contribution of Chinese students. This, in turn, facilitates a better campus experience for everyone. Furthermore, as Julian Fisher points out, many Chinese students coming to the UK to study are from affluent families and they go on to influence Chinese society across different fields.[18] In a 2021 HEPI blog, Michael Natzler predicted that the number of Chinese Communist Party elite with UK degrees is likely to grow: several are already in leadership positions.[19] A powerful Chinese alumni cohort has obvious benefits for a university's reputation and financial prospects.

It is therefore in the interest of UK HEIs to improve how connected their Chinese students feel during their time on campus. Unfortunately, all too often Chinese students feel the relationship between them and their host university is transactional. My research revealed that some Chinese students feel that UK HEIs see them as a revenue stream rather than important social and academic contributors to the university. Respondents lamented the lack of effort universities make to understand and support their community. This perception, combined with China's strained economy, could reduce the appeal of UK HEIs among Chinese students, who may choose to study elsewhere or to stay closer to their network in China.

Addressing the problem of integration is undeniably difficult for UK institutions, not least because of fundamental cultural differences and social norms between China and the UK. Previous research shows that Chinese students face particularly acute challenges when compared with other international students.[20] My survey results reveal only 20 per cent of Chinese students feel truly integrated in the UK.[21] Naturally, the students

themselves have a responsibility to deepen their own integration and engage more actively on campus. However, given high numbers of fee-paying Chinese students, HEIs need to work closely with students and faculty members to tackle this long-standing problem.

Integration challenge 1: Language barriers

The link between language competency and the ability to integrate into a foreign environment is indisputable. It enables international students to feel more at ease in their new setting and carries implications for how local students experience the university. The language proficiency of international students has implications for the whole campus and the university experience of all students and staff.

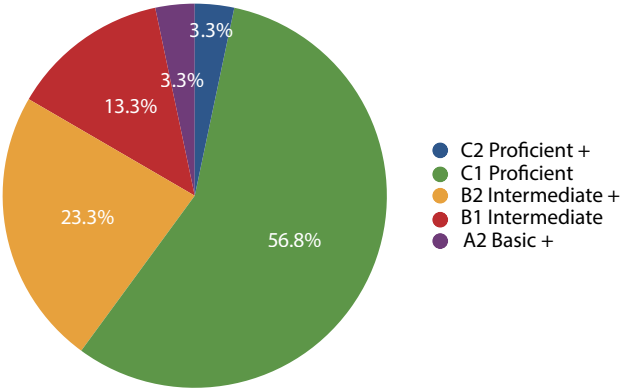
My interviews revealed an acute problem with language skills among Chinese students. While the challenge is common to all international students, Chinese students seem to have particular difficulties adapting to an English-speaking environment. This is reflected in research as well as relatively low IELTS scores, particularly in spoken English (see Figure 4).[22] IELTS, or the International English Language Testing System, is the main language assessment tool for international students applying to UK universities. Besides being a useful tool for comparing the English language abilities of Chinese students with other nationalities, it also provides a breakdown of abilities across speaking, writing, listening and reading, which this paper analyses in greater depth.

The specific language challenges facing Chinese students are largely a result of China's unique education context. In Chinese schools, students undergo rigorous training which is geared towards passing gruelling senior school examinations (known as *gao kao*). In the case of the English exam, the spoken element is negligible compared with reading and writing. Although attempts were made by the Chinese Government in 2012 to address the lack of speaking training provided by schools, measures 'received heavy resistance at the regional level and have not been implemented at the national level'.[23] The lack of policy support and rising pressure to deliver strong exam results mean schools have little motivation to provide speaking practice. Zizhao Guo from Shanghai shares his experience, explaining that 'Chinese instruction of English in schools focuses on examinations, so it wasn't helpful for improving spoken English'.[24]

The surveys I conducted with Chinese postgraduates at UK institutions revealed 31 per cent lacked confidence in English, particularly with speaking, and only 31 per cent claimed to speak fluently.[25] When asked

to self-assess, 30 per cent claimed they had only B1 or B2 (see Figure 4). According to Cambridge English assessment metrics, this translates to 'intermediate', lower than the official threshold required by HEIs. These findings are in keeping with previous research by Holliman and Spencer-Oatey, which highlights the 'language barrier[s]' facing Chinese students are widespread.[26]

Figure 4: Chinese students' self-evaluation of English language levels



Source: author's own data

Recent trends in China indicate that the instruction of English in schools is being further deprioritised. Official Party rhetoric explains the aim is to build greater national confidence, increasing children's cultural pride from an early age.[27] Western media have interpreted the move as evidence of growing anti-Western sentiment among policymakers.[28] Leading education institutions, such as Xi'an Jiaotong University, are removing English-language testing as a university entry requirement. *Times Higher Education* predicts that other institutions could follow suit.[29] This reduced emphasis on English language learning in China will likely negatively impact students' language capabilities.

Despite the number of hours spent in English class, systemic issues in China's education sector and language pedagogy have led to lower English standards than might be expected. This at first may not appear to pose a particular problem for UK universities, many of whom see high numbers

of successful applications from China. However, the problem lies in the fact that Chinese applicants can perform adequately on, and pass, English language tests despite poor levels of spoken English. This is concerning for UK universities absorbing thousands of Chinese students every year, many of whom have lower language proficiency than their IELTS results suggest, limiting how far they can integrate and thrive in the UK.

This raises two major questions: how can UK HEIs effectively assess Chinese students' language levels to ensure only those with suitable levels are admitted? And how can they support students to continue to improve once they have gained admission?

Although UK HEIs do attempt to filter out international students with low language proficiency through admission requirements, these measures are not always sufficient. This is largely due to the characteristics of China's education system as well as its burgeoning tutoring industry. Chinese students hoping to study abroad look for support beyond the school to help them prepare for these entrance tests. The tutoring and test preparation industry is highly developed in China. Despite the Chinese Government's crackdown on the sector in 2021, insider insights suggest this has not prevented market growth.[30] Forecasts reveal the English Language Training (ELT) market will expand by $70 billion (RMB 506 billion) from 2022 to 2026, with a compound annual growth rate forecast of 20 per cent.[31]

Even Chen, who went to an international school in China and therefore received far more exposure to the English language than most Chinese pupils, said she started going to extra classes at 15-years-old.[32] These classes, which covered examination and administrative support, helped her secure an offer at the University of the Arts London (UAL) to study Fashion Management. She described how she had one class every week for three years with New Oriental, China's largest ELT provider. According to her, most classmates received a lot more. Language classes form just one part of the support Chinese students receive when looking to study abroad.

According to Chen, students spend between 10,000 and 100,000RMB (the equivalent of around £1,050 to £10,500) on UCAS applications. Help can range from relatively light-touch advice around admission

and administrative support with visas and documents to application preparation and coursework. The latter involves heavy-handed intervention from agencies who essentially write students' personal statements for them. According to Zhubei, the co-founder of Venture Education (an education market intelligence group based in Beijing):

> *A lot of institutions provide shortcuts. Parents are in a rush and are looking for help with exam cramming. A lot of the time these kids aren't ready, they aren't conversationally prepared.*[33]

Despite the rigorous training Chinese students receive, the gaps are meaningful.

IELTS is widely seen as the preferred testing tool globally and is the top choice among Chinese students, 500,000 of whom sit it annually.[34] However, the test has systemic weaknesses and Dr Alison Standring, the Deputy Director of the Language Centre at the London School of Economics (LSE), explains:

> *Studying for IELTS can sometimes do a disservice to students ... and is not an authentic assessment of the way they are going to perform at university.*[35]

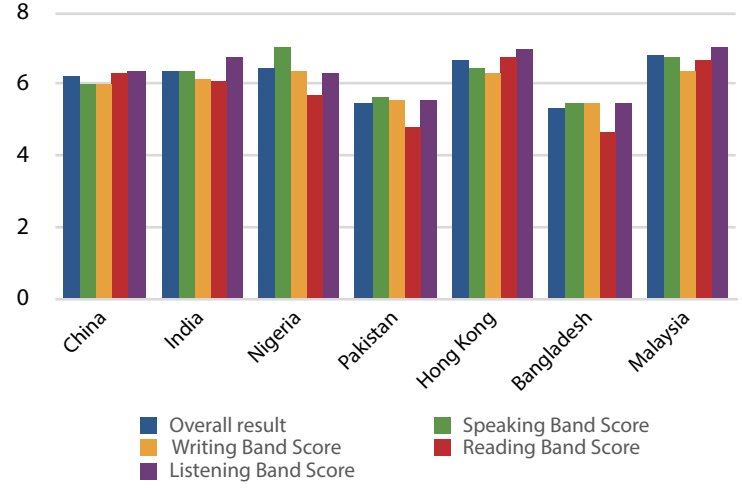
According to Jinying, a graduate of LSE, IELTS testing is preferred over other options as it is easier to prepare for. She described the IELTS exam as 'very general' only assessing 'basic language skills'.[36] According to her, the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE), which is the language assessment test used by US-based HEIs, was 'definitely more difficult than IELTS'. She explained that the 'vocabulary is so much more complicated'. The IELTS exam and the way it is taught by language centres in China are not enough to prepare students to flourish socially in the UK. Chen explains that when preparing for IELTS 'you are like a robot' drilling vocabulary and completing practice papers.

Jolleen, who went on to study at the University of Exeter, said the two years she spent preparing for IELTS were 'not effective'.[37] She explains the exam 'didn't prepare [her] for life in the UK'. The most important thing is 'to have conversation experience, and other skills like listening to podcasts or watching local films'. Despite two years and 60,000RMB (over £6,400) spent

learning IELTS, Jolleen only managed to achieve a 6 out of 9 in IELTS and had to re-sit the exam. According to her, when she arrived in the UK to start her postgraduate degree, her English was 'limited'.

Despite the extra help most Chinese students receive, their grades lag behind other developing economies. According to IELTS official data, the mean score for Chinese students is 6.3 (9 is full marks).[38] This shows a gap with other dominant international groups studying in the UK. Students from India, Nigeria, Hong Kong and Malaysia for instance all score higher (see Figure 5). Furthermore, data confirm that Chinese students' performance is noticeably weaker in writing and speaking (see Figure 6).

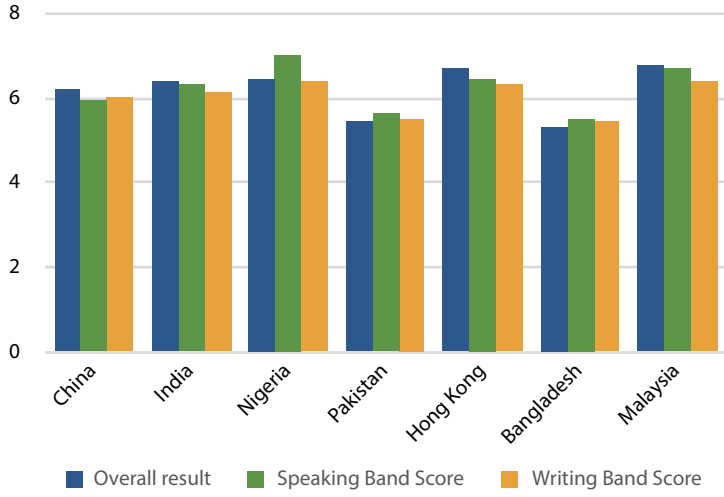
Figure 5: IELTS scores for the seven most populous non-native student groups at UK HEIs



Source: IELTS, Test statistics, 2024

Aside from students from Bangladesh and Pakistan, Chinese students have the lowest speaking scores, with an average of 6.1. This is significantly behind other country groups, such as Nigeria (7.1) and Malaysia (6.7). Arguably, when it comes to the skills needed to complete a degree in a foreign language, writing and speaking skills are crucial. Such weaknesses will have implications for whether Chinese students can thrive.

Figure 6: Highlights the disparity between Chinese students' scores in speaking and writing. Except for Bangladesh, Chinese students have the lowest speaking scores



Source: IELTS, Test Statistics, 2024

This all reveals how China's education environment and local attitudes to education contribute to the language challenges students face. However, it is also important to acknowledge that students are responsible for their own language improvement once they arrive in the UK. While HEI-provided resources, such as pre-arrival intensive language learning programmes (known as pre-sessionals), and extra-curricular language workshops help international students improve their English, it ultimately comes down to the students themselves. Dr Standring emphasised the agency of individuals in determining their own UK experience, reflecting 'it does depend on the students' who can choose whether to 'stick within their core language group'.

Although students are ultimately responsible for their own language progression, UK HEIs should reflect on their resource allocation and whether they are using the most targeted methods to improve language standards among international students. Although not all university

language services can be free of charge, offering a limited service was considered helpful among students, particularly those focusing on everyday spoken English. In the case of LSE, there is a blended approach of free and paid-for services which enables some support for everyone. Although pre-sessionals are an additional fee, the 1-1 consultations and study-skill sessions are included in overall tuition costs, enabling a targeted and personalised approach for individual students.

In terms of the assessment models, rather than advocating for a complete overhaul, this paper advocates for a review of current standards with investigations into other alternatives such as the GRE used in the US. According to Jolleen, the GRE is a more 'comprehensive' test. While UCAS has recently reviewed its admission assessments and included a 'new personal statement', arguably, these written tests still overlook language and communication ability.[39] The new personal statement risks catering to countries where international admissions services are heavily relied on and statement writing can be outsourced.

IELTS could be complemented by other assessment methods that focus on aspects of language considered fundamental for student integration. Several overseas HEIs, such as the University of Singapore, include short video interviews as a means of assessing the speaking abilities of students, while reducing the heavy burden on HEIs to schedule and conduct live interviews. Artificial Intelligence (AI), now used by 43 per cent of human resource professionals, offers potentially powerful tools for HEI admission teams.[40] Already in use by universities across the world, by combining Natural Language Processing (NLP) algorithms and facial recognition technologies, AI interview platforms provide an alternative way of effectively processing interviews which is time and potentially cost-efficient for institutions.[41] This would require additional research but could raise the bar of spoken English considerably among admitted students without a high human resource cost.

For universities with high intakes of Chinese students, adopting an assessment criteria strategy focusing on areas of concern such as speaking skills would benefit the whole campus.

Integration challenge 2: Ethnic clustering

Given there are currently over 150,000 Chinese students in the UK, almost 90,000 of whom are postgraduate students, it is unsurprising that many end up spending time with other Chinese students.[42] With a common language and culture, Chinese students understandably gravitate towards one another. However, the uneven distribution of Chinese students across campuses and subjects intensifies this inclination. Most Chinese students are concentrated across high-ranking UK universities. Conversely, low-tariff institutions are seeing shrinking recruitment numbers.

For Chen, who after UAL completed an MA in Marketing at the University of Warwick, 80 per cent of students on her programme were Chinese. She explained that even though her family and friends urged her not to make friends with just Chinese students, 'in reality, it depends on the course you choose'. When divided into coursework groups, she found herself with mainly Chinese students. Often they resorted to speaking Mandarin out of convenience. Chen's experience reveals an important characteristic of the Chinese student population in the UK: its uneven distribution.

Currently, the 'diversification' topic among UK policymakers and UK HEI leaders has a relatively narrow scope which obscures the true nature of the challenge and its possible solutions. When discussing diversifying the student body, the conversation should expand beyond ethnicity to address where and what international students study. Identifying which campuses and degree types are seeing high concentrations of one ethnicity changes the discussion around diversification and how it could be tackled. When looking at universities across the UK, only a handful have markedly high levels of Chinese students. The most obvious are UCL, Glasgow and Manchester. It follows that concerns around financial dependency on Chinese students are therefore relevant only to certain HEIs in the UK. For instance, 38 per cent of the University of Southampton's total fee income comes from Chinese students, in comparison with 12 per cent at the University of Oxford.[43]

UCL, which has the largest population of Chinese students, has over 15,000 Chinese students out of a total of 51,000.[44] This is followed by Glasgow and Manchester, both of which have over 9,000 Chinese students.[45] The

three universities with the highest number of Chinese students together represent almost 20 per cent of the population of Chinese students in the UK (28,935 students in total). In contrast, some less prestigious universities such as Wolverhampton and Falmouth have just 10 and five students from China respectively. Among particular degrees, clustering is even more apparent. According to a recent report from UCAS, Business degrees represent 26 per cent of all degrees undertaken by Chinese students, although this is a drop from 43 per cent 10-years earlier.[46] Among female applicants, Art and Design represents 15 per cent of degrees chosen.

The imbalance of where and what Chinese students are studying is in large part due to the agent network in China. According to Jinying, she chose her programme based on advice provided by her agent in China:

> *When I got there, I realised 60 per cent of my classmates were Chinese. Some of their English was really poor, so we ended up speaking in Chinese.*

The role of agencies plays a critical role in the courses Chinese students choose. Official and unofficial agencies promote courses that are more likely to admit Chinese students. This inevitably leads to students applying for the same course at the same university. According to a senior staff member at Doxa, a tutoring agency specialising in UK higher education admissions, 'Chinese students become quite reliant [on their agents] and the relationships are very personal'.[47] Their recommendations are often far more influential in decision making than official guidance provided by HEIs which Chinese students and parents can feel is hard to decipher.

Rather than perceiving high numbers of Chinese as the core problem, the discussion should be reframed in terms of the distribution of ethnic groups, leading to a new understanding of diversification and how it interacts with problems of integration. Rather than urging all universities to diversify, the question is around universities with higher concentrations managing overseas programme promotion and recruitment more effectively. Redistribution as a solution could be simpler than rewiring the university's international recruitment plans. Managing overseas recruitment agents more effectively is one option. Rather than leaving agents to decide which programmes to promote, universities should be more proactive in

communicating course subscription numbers with agents. By promoting less well-known programmes in China and highlighting which degrees are over-subscribed, universities could see a more balanced distribution.

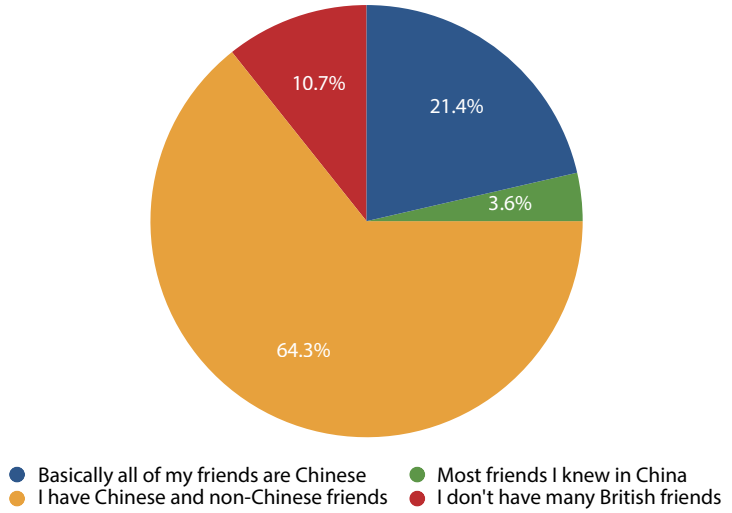
When discussing the problem of a high concentration of Chinese students in certain degrees with research participants, a narrative emerged: many students wanted to integrate better and have more diverse friendship groups but felt unable to do so. While my survey results revealed 20 per cent of respondents had exclusively Chinese friends (see Figure 7), interviews revealed many students wanted more local friends. Jolleen described how she had hoped to find British friends to improve her understanding of English and UK culture but the fact there were 10 Chinese students on her programme made it difficult to do so. Jolleen's interview also raised another reason behind social clustering: accommodation. While she found many opportunities to mingle with students from other countries when she was studying at Exeter and living in halls, she said the situation was completely different when she moved to London to complete the second half of her degree at the London Film School.

Accommodation is an important factor in how friendship groups develop. For Chinese students unable to stay in halls, the majority end up renting accommodation with other Chinese students. Jolleen, who lived with another Chinese student on her course, emphasised that although this was not her preference it was the most convenient and cheapest option. She explained that since she received no accommodation provision in London, she relied on personal networks and Chinese apps to help her. Chinese students often turn to Little Red Book (China's equivalent of Instagram) or the Taiwan-based platform '异乡好居' to source housing. The latter, which translates as 'living well in a different hometown', caters specifically to Chinese students and connects agents with clients directly. Yurou, a graduate of the University of Glasgow, found a five-person apartment through the platform and three of her flatmates were Chinese. She explained that not only were 90 per cent of the students living in the accommodation block Chinese, but the front-desk assistant was too. She described it as a 'supply chain' specifically targeting the expanding market of Chinese overseas students.

Sourcing accommodation is an area where respondents clearly state they want more support. While many participants 'do not expect personalised help' from their HEIs, those such as Joy coming to the UK for the first time explained 'it would be good if the university helped more with accommodation'.[48] The approach to accommodation taken by the University of Leeds, where social integration is emphasised, serves as a useful case study. The allocation of rooms at Ellerslie Global Residence is split evenly between domestic and international students. To encourage mixing between students they offer communal dinners and social events where country-specific activities are included. Feedback on the set-up has been extremely positive.[49]

Housing arrangements inevitably shape friendship groups and Chinese students living together reinforces the likelihood of social clustering. This is particularly true among students living in London, but it also applies to Chinese students in other cities where halls may not be an option, most typically postgraduate students completing one-year Master's degrees.

Figure 7: The ethnic diversity of friendship groups among Chinese students



Source: author's own data

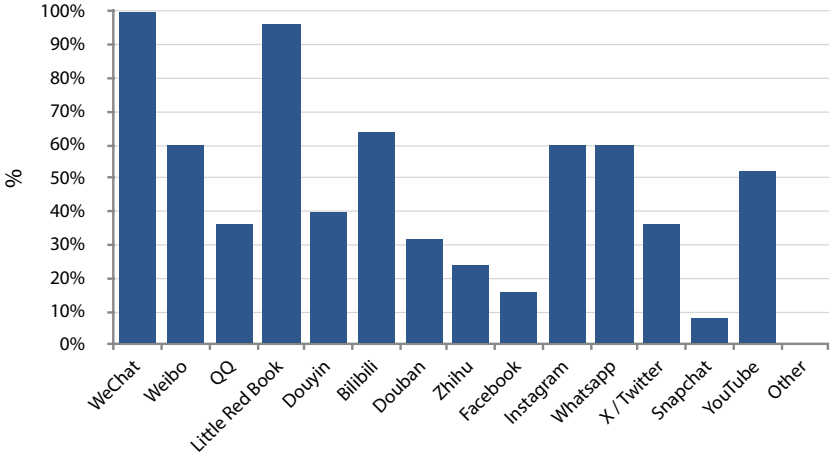
Integration challenge 3: Digital adapation

One of the most overlooked challenges facing international students are digital barriers. Chinese students face the daunting task of adapting to an entirely different digital ecosystem. Significant digital challenges intensify the possibility of student clustering. To better understand the challenges and why they are specific to Chinese students, it is important to grasp the domestic ecosystem they are familiar with.

With the exception perhaps of North Korea, China is one of the most digitally remote and self-sufficient countries in the world, having developed its own entirely independent ecosystem. The Great Firewall, introduced by the Party in 1998, prevents Chinese citizens from accessing most mainstream social media and applications available in the West. These are replaced by more comprehensive and advanced counterparts so widely used that they connect almost the entire population. WeChat (or *weixin* in Chinese), the most popular social platform, is used by over one billion Chinese people, representing over 80 per cent of the population.[50] With their own versions of everything from Uber to Instagram, Deliveroo to Google Maps, Chinese students arriving in the UK often for the first time are faced with a completely unfamiliar digital landscape. While students do adapt, interviews and surveys with them reveal both challenges around the use of apps used in the UK as well as a clear preference to continue using Chinese counterparts.

When asked about social media habits and preferences, Chinese students demonstrated a clear preference for Chinese social apps (see Figure 8). All respondents used WeChat and an additional 95 per cent used the Chinese equivalent of Instagram, Little Red Book. The next most widely used app was Chinese video platform Bilibili (67 per cent). In terms of non-Chinese apps used, WhatsApp, Instagram and YouTube were used most widely, with over 60 per cent using WhatsApp and Instagram and 52 per cent using YouTube, but they remained less popular than the three most popular Chinese apps. In the qualitative feedback, all respondents said they used WeChat every day, and when asked which platforms they used to communicate with family and friends, all survey respondents chose WeChat. In contrast, no respondents used non-Chinese apps to communicate with loved ones in China.

Figure 8: Responses to the question 'Which social media channels do you use?'



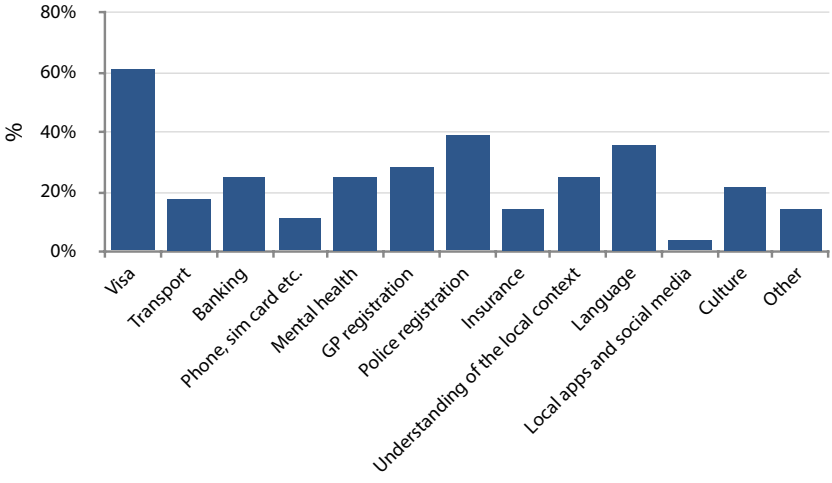
Source: author's data

This evidence shows how fundamental Chinese social platforms remain in students' lives when living abroad. Another important detail is that when communicating with fellow Chinese students at their UK institution, they continue to use WeChat rather than WhatsApp which they only use 'for foreign friends', according to University College London student Peter.[51] This creates a clear division between Chinese and non-Chinese social circles as well as information channels at HEIs, perpetuating 'clustering'.[52]

Aside from social media platforms, Chinese students rely on Chinese apps to find important information. When encountering a problem, or searching for local services, students turn to Chinese apps. Hailee, a postgraduate student at the University of Manchester, described Little Red Book as 'a great app, which offers all kinds of manuals related to UK life'. PhD student Ely Wang at the University of Cambridge explained that since Little Red Book targeted Chinese students 'of the same identity', it was able to solve common problems, such as sourcing medical advice, local GPs and accommodation. Usage extends beyond administrative support, as students find local events, restaurant recommendations and travel

tips through Little Red Book. Non-Chinese students do not participate in this information space inhabited by Chinese students, leading to the emergence of Chinese-dominant social spaces which further separate Chinese from non-Chinese students.

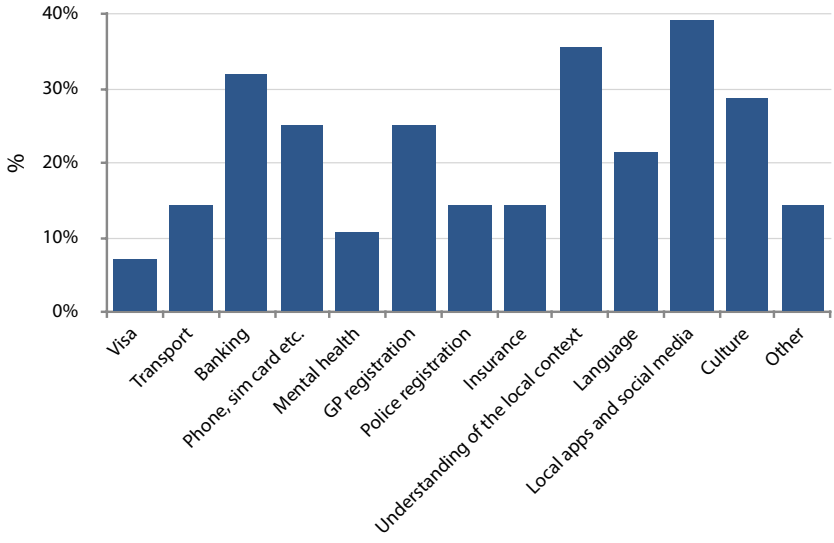
Figure 9: Support received by Chinese students before arriving in the UK



Source: author's own data

The digital obstacles Chinese students face are more acute than those of other international students because they have had less or no exposure to digital systems used in the West. Yet according to students, UK HEIs do not currently provide support in this area. Under 4 per cent of students said they had received support related to local apps or social media, despite almost 40 per cent stating they would like it. Digital support ranked highest in terms of what students wanted help with the most, clearly suggesting students feel underconfident using local technologies. Digital challenges restrict many facets of students' lives: their social circles, knowledge of the locality, access to important services – such as medical or housing – and their ability to find work. Acknowledging these obstacles and taking steps to facilitate smoother and earlier integration would provide better support to students.

Figure 10: 40 per cent of students stated they would like support using local apps, followed by 35 per cent who wanted help better understanding the local environment and activities



Source: author's own data

Integration challenge 4: Employment struggles

Data from 2019 revealed 73 per cent of Chinese students return to China after they graduate from UK institutions and recent data reveals numbers are growing.[53] A LinkedIn report analysing the top 10 overseas destinations shows that the number of Chinese returning home leapt from 32 per cent in 2022 to 84 per cent one year later.[54] Yet, research for this report showed a strong desire among Chinese postgraduate students to stay in the UK for a few years to gain international work experience. Peter stated, 'I want some overseas experience which will help when finding work in China'. He explained that he could 'develop his skills' in the UK before 'eventually returning to China or Asia'. This view was shared by most interviewees, who considered short-term work in the UK after graduating as a benefit. This is in keeping with the overall trend among international students. According to the 2021 HEPI report on employability support for international students (*Paying more for less?*), 71 per cent of international students wish to stay in the UK after they graduate.[55] Students' reasons for wanting to stay were diverse, ranging from the UK's relatively healthy work-life balance to the benefits of overseas work experience for their professional development.

When asked about finding work, students spoke about the difficulties they had experienced: 'For postgraduate students, it is incredibly hard to find work in the UK', Jolleen explained. 'You have just arrived in a new country, and basically need to start looking straight away'. It is particularly challenging for Master's students enrolled in programmes typically lasting just one year. The 2024 report by Universities UK on international graduate outcomes reveals 53 per cent of participants identified career support as an area for HEIs to improve.[56] While the UK government and students themselves can influence their likelihood of securing employment, HEIs play a key role in their provision of information, skills training and access. However, only 21 per cent of international students had ever used the careers service, and only 2 per cent attribute success in finding work to their university's services, suggesting issues exist around the visibility or quality of provision.[57] Among research participants for this report, Chen was one of the few who managed to find work, joining a marketing agency in London. She said it was hard to find suitable roles and that although many of her peers wanted to and tried to stay, most were unsuccessful.

For students who want to gain more from their UK experience being unable to find work after graduating can be frustrating. 'I wish the universities offered internships during the course programme', Master's student of Education at Bristol University Chen Da explained.[58] Chen, like many international students, gained no work experience while studying in the UK. The desire for more internship provision is particularly pronounced among Chinese students according to the Universities UK International (UUKi) / QS *International Graduate Outcomes 2024* report, which lists it as the top area for HEIs to improve.[59] This reflects key differences in education systems. Many academic courses at UK HEIs do not include internship opportunities or modules, whereas in China, internships are actively encouraged and in many cases compulsory. The 2021 HEPI report, *Paying more for less?*, found that 39 per cent of international students did not undertake any work during their time in UK higher education and 43 per cent claimed not to have any employability skills development as part of their course.

Hailee, a student of Sociology and Statistics at Manchester, spoke highly of the careers centre.[60] She had booked a resumé diagnosis, CV advice and interview practice. According to her, the 'resumé editor is a very good platform', which helped her improve her chances of finding work. Many UK HEIs offer careers services in some form, but Chinese students often do not know about these. This is in part due to the gap in information that exists because of the digital divide, where information about university services is missed due to a lack of familiarity with UK-based technologies. Among participants, Hailee's feedback was an exception: no other student I spoke with had engaged with their careers service centres. But my conversation with her reflected the positive difference services can make to student satisfaction levels.

Providing more short-term work experience or internship opportunities for international students by making them a core part of the HEI experience would be a mutual benefit to students, institutions and UK society. As Nick Hillman writes in the 2021 HEPI report, '[t]he success of many British businesses rests on the shoulders of former international students, as does the education system itself'. Chinese students would be exposed to more facets of British society, potentially forging stronger connections with the country. This could enhance their willingness to contribute more financially

and socially. Longer and more diverse engagement could significantly improve mutual understanding. The financial benefits are obvious. As the UUKi / QS *International Graduate Outcomes* report reflects, those who have remained in the UK through post-study work are most likely to work in education and healthcare or in small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs), making a vital contribution to UK society and driving UK economic growth.[61]

While Universities UK International's 2019 report claimed that international graduates from UK HEIs 'go on to have high career and life satisfaction', their follow up report in 2024 was less optimistic.[62] Unlike the 2019 report which emphasised high levels of satisfaction in the quality of education provided, the 2024 edition clearly differentiated educational experience from career satisfaction, outlining that 53 per cent of surveyed graduates feel more could be done in terms of careers support and professional placements. Research carried out by Mengwei Tu and Daniel Nehring confirms this assertion.[63] Tu states that Britain's 'current migration policy does not facilitate, but rather limits, overseas graduates' employment opportunities'. Tu recognises that the UK's stance on migration and the introduction of the 'hostile environment' framework (which aims to dissuade potential migrants and is still technically in place) has directly impacted international students' ability to find work. Data suggest challenges are more prominent among Chinese students.

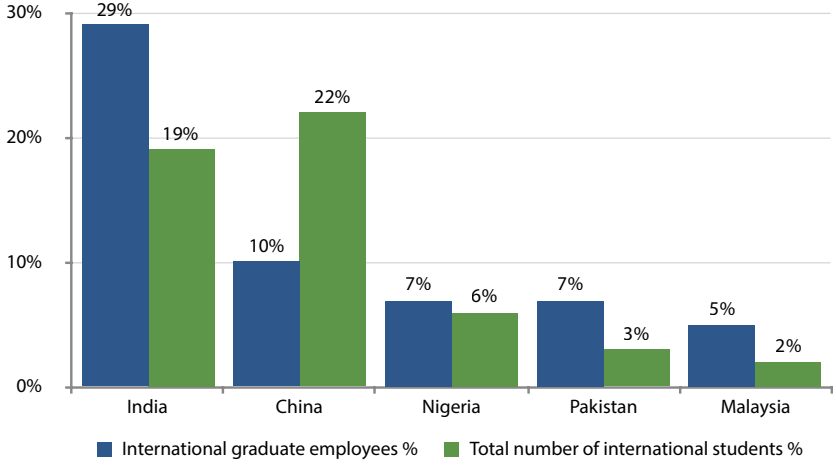
Although Chinese students represent the largest number of international students in the UK, the numbers that stay are significantly lower than Indian students.[64] According to those staying through the Graduate Route, 29 per cent are Indian, followed by 10 per cent of Chinese and 7 per cent of Nigerian students. Data also suggest that Chinese students who successfully find work take longer to do so. Out of the top five nationalities that stay in the UK, Chinese graduates are the slowest to do so, with only 60 per cent of Chinese Graduate visa holders finding work in the first month, versus the 86 per cent of Nigerians, 81 per cent of Pakistanis and 79 per cent of Indians. This reflects how Chinese students face greater difficulty securing work than other nationalities.

Reasons for this are a combination of previously discussed factors: language barriers, difficulties navigating the UK's digital ecosystem and the lack of local networks. As the IELTS scores show, the spoken language competencies of Nigerians, Pakistanis and Indians are all higher than

those of the Chinese (see Figure 11). Furthermore, whereas the latter three nationalities share the same digital ecosystem as the UK, meaning they are better equipped to source career opportunities independently, Chinese students face unfamiliar websites and applications. LinkedIn, for instance, is banned in China, meaning few Chinese students will have profiles on the main career development platform used in the West. The social clustering which is prominent among Chinese students limits the extent to which they expand their social networks in the UK, restricting their awareness levels of employment opportunities.

UK universities are not currently offering their international students, particularly Chinese students, enough or relevant careers support. This affects student satisfaction levels and may ultimately impact prospective students' willingness to come to the UK to study as they query whether it supports their professional futures. Evidence from HEPI's 2021 report on employability support shows higher satisfaction levels among students undertaking more practical degrees with employability skills embedded within. If given the chance to choose their university again, most undertaking practical programmes would.

Figure 11: Number of international students employed versus total population percentage by country



Source: Universities UK International, International Graduate Outcomes 2019

In 2023, the British Council made a specific appeal to enhance the support for Chinese students at UK HEIs. They noted an 'urgent need to strategically revise the employability skills being provided to Chinese overseas graduates in order to make them more competitive in the job market'.[65] Given how much Chinese students financially contribute to UK HEIs and the fact that students explicitly state they would like more support from their host institutions, this is an area where HEIs should focus more attention. The British Council offers clear guidance: to ensure 'the curriculum is more closely aligned with the practical demands of the Chinese labour market, enhancing digital literacy, and providing more suitable internships and career services for Chinese students'. Finding work for international students is vital in enhancing the value they add to the economy as well as the quality of their experience in the UK. It is in the interests of HEIs to improve provision and allocate more resources towards careers support.

Conclusions and recommendations

Language challenges

Key findings:

- Chinese language levels are lower than in other developing economies, particularly in spoken and written English.
- The hands-on role of China's tutoring agencies in overseas HEI applications masks the actual language levels of Chinese students.
- IELTS scores do not necessarily accurately reflect levels of Chinese students' language competencies, particularly spoken, since high scores can be attained through methodical and intensive drilling practice.
- The instruction of English in Chinese schools focuses on rote learning at the expense of improving spoken fluency.
- China's education policies reflect the further devaluation of the English language, which could mean proficiency in English reduces further in the coming years.

There are two key areas for addressing language challenges faced by Chinese students. The first is how to improve the assessment system for second language learners so it acknowledges the importance of students' communication abilities. The second explores how HEIs can provide in-house solutions to support students.

Reform of admission requirements

As highlighted, existing tools for assessing the language competency of Chinese students are not necessarily reliable indicators of students' actual abilities. Importantly, while IELTS arguably indicates a basic level of English is met, it does not accurately gauge spoken English, which is arguably the keystone for successful integration into the UK.

i) Admission requirements for spoken English

Discussions with students and experts reveal that few postgraduate courses include interviews as part of the admission process. This is an

effective and immediate way of gauging the language abilities of students. Since interviews can be very time-consuming and costly for institutions, universities such as the University of Singapore use video interviews, which are either pre-recorded or recorded live through a link. Singapore provides a link to students, who then have 10 minutes to complete an interview responding to one or two questions which appear in real time on the screen. Once completed, students upload the video.

This is an effective method, being a credible way of testing actual language levels, as it relies on students' ability to think on their feet in a foreign language and convey their ideas fluently, effectively enacting a seminar situation. With the evolution of AI technologies, this video interview format could be optimised, with AI filtering out students with very limited fluency, further reducing costs.

ii) Emphasising non-academic competencies

Zhubei observed that whereas the US admission system emphasises a broader set of skills and 'ask[s] for personality' as well as emphasising 'activities and interests', UK HEIs 'focus on academic interests'. According to Zhubei, this is a weakness which encourages a pervasive mindset among Chinese parents that academic performance is the priority, with soft skills being a 'nice add-on'. She explains, 'because soft skills aren't a requirement of UK universities, parents don't value it'.

UK HEIs could borrow from the US system where personal interests and evidence of broader skill sets are key facets of the application and personal statement. The forthcoming UCAS admission reforms for 2026 entry, with an emphasis on individuality and the 'unique journey' of students is a positive step, particularly asking students to explain their interest in their subject of choice as well as their experiences beyond education. However, these still take the traditional form of a personal statement, restricting it to an academic written form that students can rely on external organisations for help with.

HEI-provided language support

Some institutions, such as LSE and Loughborough, offer pre-university study courses for students who do not meet the language admission

requirements. These effectively replace the need to pass language tests like IELTS. The course, which in the case of Loughborough lasts between six and 11 weeks and costs up to £5,390, is offered to both undergraduate and postgraduate students. According to Zizhao Guo, 'the pre-sessional course was useful, particularly the academic writing because Chinese universities do not teach this'. Students must pass an exam at the end of the course to be enrolled at the university.

Pre-sessional courses are certainly one way of preparing students to integrate better, providing training which is more closely connected to the environment they will be moving into than the generalised language approach for exams like IELTS. However, the course is heavily focused on academic content as opposed to social or cultural content. Moreover, for many students, the cost of the course is prohibitively expensive and creates a barrier between those who are financially affluent and those who are not. It is a shortcut for students who do not meet the official UCAS language requirements and one which only the very wealthiest can afford.

Besides possible financial barriers, pre-sessionals are also very academically focused, teaching students how to survive in an academic context. However, according to Jolleen and Jinying, the biggest barrier they faced when moving to the UK was their lack of knowledge of popular culture. Having lived in China their whole lives and largely cut off from Western social media and streaming sites, they were unfamiliar with British culture and society.

One solution to this is the provision of free-language classes for second-language learners, such as the ones provided by the University of Exeter. Tailored to international students' levels and needs, the courses are an opportunity to improve students' language and cultural competencies. Jolleen spoke highly of Exeter's weekly classes, where she had the chance to practise speaking with native English speakers and learn practical skills like writing emails. Her only complaint was that when she switched to the London Film School to continue the Master's programme, this service was no longer offered. She wished there had been greater coordination and continuity between the universities.

Besides offering weekly free courses which cater to the needs of struggling international students, universities could adopt buddy schemes. Such schemes are already offered by HEIs such as Lancaster University and Birmingham City Business School, but could focus specifically on language and could act as a language exchange for local students interested in learning Mandarin.[66] This would see a two-way benefit where students learn from one another, engaging in cultural and linguistic exchanges. Peking University's Yenching Programme offers a language exchange programme to all foreign students who are paired with local students undertaking Education or Teaching-related degrees. In this way, local students get work experience, improving their exposure to teaching, and foreign students have a chance to improve their language levels with native speakers. This system of buddying, either framed as work experience for future teachers or a language exchange opportunity, brings benefits to all involved with minimum cost to the institution.

Solutions for ethnic clustering

Key findings:

- Social clustering is particularly acute among Chinese students.
- It is intensified by high concentrations of Chinese students studying the same degree course and attending the same university.
- There is a very uneven distribution of Chinese students across UK HEIs, with over 15,000 in some institutions and fewer than 10 in others.
- Many Chinese students hope to diversify their friendship groups but find it difficult due to the high number of Chinese students around them and difficulties finding accommodation with non-Chinese students.

Dialogue with agents in China

In terms of possible solutions, the most obvious one is for universities to engage more actively with representative agents in China, both official and unofficial. According to Julian Fisher, universities are now more hands-off with their approach to recruitment in China. According to him 'recruitment has just descended into agent management. Now the representatives

are nearly all Chinese'. Many universities lack awareness of how they are being represented in China. This can be resolved through an audit of an institution's China operations to understand the agency network better and the narrative that prospective Chinese students receive.

University admissions teams should work more closely with agents in China to gain more autonomy over their Chinese cohort and ensure the advice given to students is in line with the needs of the universities. There could be the additional benefit of promoting under-subscribed courses as well as flagging which subjects are over-subscribed.

Accommodation support

Jiani Zhou, a former Postgraduate Officer at the University of Bath's Students' Union, wrote that UK HEIs should support more with accommodation, to enable Chinese students to live in a more 'diverse household'.[67] In the case of Chinese students, support from HEIs is less a question of providing financial assistance, but rather expanding information access.

Much advice offered to international students regarding accommodation is confined to digital support.[68] Yet as previously mentioned, Chinese students face digital barriers when using Western technologies and continue to rely on Chinese apps such as WeChat, Little Red Book and 异乡好居.

UK universities should publish core advice on their China-relevant platforms such as WeChat or Little Red Book, either through their own accounts or working with their Chinese students to distribute information on appropriate channels.

A more impactful solution would be to adopt an approach similar to the University of Leeds, where the accommodation allocation is split fairly between domestic and international students and resources are allocated to host integration-focused social events.

Improving digital literacy

Key findings:

- China's unique domestic digital ecosystem creates technological barriers for Chinese students moving to the UK.

- Since Chinese students are unfamiliar with media platforms and apps used in the UK, they continue to rely on China's domestic apps, enhancing the likelihood of ethnic clustering.
- These barriers affect their social, cultural, lifestyle and employment opportunities.
- Most Chinese students would like more digital support from their institutions.

i) China-friendly digital courses or materials

It is clear that differences between the UK and Chinese digital ecosystem pose challenges for students. Providing tailored solutions for Chinese students in the form of online training or a handbook ahead of the programme related to suitable apps to download and use would be helpful.

ii) Involving Chinese students

An effective solution would be to create positions for students to support HEI marketing teams, which would serve as a bridging point between Chinese students and the relevant marketing bodies. Current Chinese students would be best placed to choose whether to utilise Chinese platforms to distribute key information or to redirect Chinese students towards UK-based channels. This is a cost-effective way for universities to expand their reach, both across campus and potentially in China, while also providing work opportunities for Chinese students, many of whom are actively looking for internships in the UK.

iii) Buddy system

A buddy system, like the ones adopted by HEIs such as Lancaster University and Birmingham City Business School, where a Chinese student is paired with a local student, could easily include a digital support element.[69] The local student who is more familiar with key channels and their usages could be a valuable guide.

iv) Increasing staff awareness

Students' digital barriers affect the work of most departments across the

campus, such as academic professors, admissions and marketing teams, the career centre, the alumni office and the mental health team. However, staff may well not be aware of the differences between China's digital ecosystem and therefore the unique challenges students face. Promoting a greater understanding of these differences through training and clearer signalling builds empathy as well as practical solutions.

v) Sharing best practices

UK HEIs employ a range of methods to engage both current and prospective Chinese students. UCL for instance has a dynamic presence across Chinese social media platforms, including WeChat and Weibo, which are signalled to prospective students through their website.[70] Sharing best practices around communication could be a cost-effective way of conducting research and lead to more innovative solutions.

Improving careers provision

Key findings:

- International students would like more careers support from their universities.
- Most international students (almost 80 per cent) have never used their careers service.
- Chinese students would particularly value internship opportunities as part of their degree programmes.
- The number of Chinese students who stay to work in the UK is dropping and data show they find it harder than other large ethnic groups, such as Indian students, to find work.
- Most international students want to stay in the UK after they graduate, but struggle to find work.
- Out of the five largest groups of international students, Chinese students take the longest time to find work following graduation.
- Student complaints were not directed at the quality of services but rather the visibility, levels of access and relevance of services provided by their HEI.

i) Student voices

International students should be consulted by HEI careers teams to understand better their needs and acknowledge differences between local and international students, as well as different ethnicities. By creating a specific Careers Officer role for international students, this would enable smoother communication between the service team and students.

ii) Tailored services

As an extension to the above, once international students have been consulted, HEIs could do more to differentiate their services to provide tailored facilities for diverse students. According to the 2021 HEPI report, *Paying more for less?*, international graduate students are the group with the highest expectations for tailored support, which are considerably higher than among EU students. This service does not need to be burdensome for institutions and could be as simple as including more diverse alumni speakers with backgrounds that reflect the international student body. During my research, graduate participants were asked if they would be willing to be external speakers in future at alumni or careers events. The response was unanimously positive. This could be a low-cost way of universities addressing the career needs of current students.

iii) Changes to course content

When creating programmes, academic staff should consider whether their courses provide sufficient practical opportunities. There are higher satisfaction levels among students undertaking more practical degrees with employability skills embedded within. Academic staff should consult their students to better align with their needs particularly in terms of providing internship or work opportunities.

iv) Better communication between teams

Better coordination and communication between departments, particularly the alumni, careers and academic teams, would improve the services provided. For instance, the alumni team could work more closely with the careers teams for guidance on speaker invitations. The academic teams should liaise with the careers department to understand what skills

should be addressed in their course content. The British Council emphasises the role that curricula changes could play in supporting Chinese students to find work, but this would depend heavily on effective coordination between HEIs' careers departments, academic departments and individual professors.[71]

Although many UK HEIs face major funding and resource allocation challenges, de-prioritising resources allocated to international students has potentially serious implications for recruitment numbers and the overall financial health of universities.

The above recommendations are relevant for leadership teams and individual departments operating in HEIs and hopefully provide some key thinking points that can inform and support strategic thinking and decision-making.

This paper poses two final questions to universities:

- Are you doing enough for your Chinese students to feel cared for and seen?
- Are you allocating enough resources into integration services to enable your Chinese students to thrive?

The voices of Chinese students are often overlooked when institutions are making decisions about their futures at UK HEIs. Jinying, now employed at HSBC in London, bravely spoke out during her interview:

> *I would appreciate it if universities showed genuine concern for [Chinese students]. I know it is difficult for universities to actually know what we need as Chinese people do not generally speak up and tend to follow rules. But I wish [universities] would be willing to make some genuine effort to understand the special characteristics of the Chinese.*

Her appeal for more understanding and empathy is an important one and deserves to be taken up by institutions benefitting from the financial and academic contributions of Chinese students.

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