The State of Inclusivity in International Higher Education

An overview of how higher education is implementing inclusivity, featuring insights from students across Asia

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Introduction

Inclusive education should be defined by its reach; diverse student and faculty populations with open doors to mixed cultural, ethnic, social, and economic backgrounds. Crucially, such diversity is essential in universities, the alumni of which are likely to shape our politics, business sectors, and social advancement.

However, inclusive education is not just about diverse student and staff recruitment, it is also about the way an institution treats its students, the initiatives it undertakes to welcome and safeguard those in its care, the access to support services, as well as the inclusivity and diversity polices it adopts. This is particularly true for international students, who have often moved far from home and face a new environment and culture.

Asian students are a vital market for the global higher education sector, with their thirst for international education, cultural exchange, and new experiences. Therefore, understanding the thinking processes of these students is key to developing a robust international student recruitment strategy. As a result, we asked prospective students in Asia to define the meaning of inclusivity and to share their thoughts on a variety of topics that are likely to feed into a robust inclusivity and diversity policy.

QS is uniquely positioned to uncover the views of this key student market, with unparalleled access to undergraduate, master's, and PhD applicants worldwide. The research for this report was collected in three different countries and five cities during the QS World Grad School Tour 2019. This included Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Taipei, Shanghai, and Beijing, thus providing a broad overview of the perceptions, motivations, and ambitions in the region.

Data collected includes 20 focus groups, over 50 individual interviews, and over 300 survey responses. The report also includes insights from the 2019 *International Student Survey (ISS)*, which collected over 77,000 responses in 2019, 8,309 of which came from Asian applicants.

Under the 2019 ISS, the biggest proportion of Asian respondents seeking to study abroad were from China (2,951) and Indonesia (1,750), whilst Malaysia (965) and Taiwan (206) have more modest numbers.

This report will investigate the meaning of inclusivity to international Asian students, the importance and methods of integration between domestic and international students, the impact of racism and discrimination, alongside an exploration of access to clinical counsellors. The findings in this report can help aid the strategic planning of Chief Diversity Officers, for which inclusivity is a fundamental concept.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Location:

Jakarta

Kuala Lumpur

Taipei

Shanghai

Beijing

Participants:

300+
survey responses

20
focus groups

50+
individual interviews

Inclusivity in international higher education

Defining inclusivity is important because it allows the higher education sector to work towards a common understanding when building diversity initiatives.

At QS, we believe there is no more important person than an international student in the construction of this definition, so we asked prospective international students in Asia, one of the biggest outbound student markets, to define it themselves.

What we have found is a range of perspectives, which showcases how personal inclusivity as a concept can feel to people. The knowledge provided here can enable Chief Diversity Officers to develop insight-driven strategies and make the most of the perspectives of international students.

Defining inclusivity

There is no singular definition of inclusivity among international Asian students, however several common themes can be identified.

Some students define inclusivity as something that must be found within both academic and social spheres whilst at university, as Mohammed in Jakarta explains: *"The way I imagine it in my mind...I would have good grades and also be connected to the social life there, maybe take some part-time jobs or maybe even take part in the social community. I'd like to be engaged with my environment not only in an academic way. I think that would be inclusive for me."*

Freedom of thought and expression, alongside being able to contribute significantly to a discipline or field of research, often emerges as important to international students within the context of inclusivity, despite this being a seemingly separate issue.

Similarly, some students share that they want to be defined by their achievements, a feeling which appears to arise from concerns about being discriminated against based on xenophobic attitudes. Such a sentiment is expressed by prospective Master of International Relations student, Sahaf: *"For me, an inclusive environment at university is when I can define myself by what I've done and not where I'm from, because when people start asking where you're from some people stigmatize you. If I'm known for some research I've carried out, then maybe other students will invite me to join a project."*

Multiculturalism is indeed important to international students, who are often attracted to the international study experience in order to participate in cultural exchange whilst also building a global network.

A multicultural environment can also appear inclusive to international students, as prospective Master of Business student, Sever, shares: *"First of all, I think it would be helpful if there was a diverse student population, multicultural, that would definitely make me feel included. The second would be easily accessible services, so whenever you need something, there's always someone that is there to help you and answer your questions. That would definitely make me feel safe and secure that I have nothing to worry about, even if I mess up, I have someone that could help."*

Universities which have particularly strong international student ratios should promote this in recruitment messages to attract more students from abroad, as this could send the message that they offer an inclusive environment.

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>
> *- Mohammed, Jakarta* "

Equal opportunities

A number of students in Asia feel strongly that inclusivity is about equality, not just in the way that they are treated but also the opportunities they receive whilst studying.

This emerged quite frequently as a concept, suggesting there is some fear that being an international student means losing out to domestic students, as prospective mechanical engineering student, Adel in Kuala Lumpur, suggests: *"An inclusive environment at university would be an environment in which the university gives equal opportunities to all of the students, treating them all the same. If you can provide that, that's more than enough for me. If I get the same info, the same opportunities that every other student gets, be it local, international, or what not, that would be inclusive for me. It's things like internships where we don't get equal opportunity."*

Communicating the message that international students will be given opportunities for internships and work experience whilst studying is likely to be highly appealing to applicants from Asia, for which graduate employability is often a priority.

The idea that international students are treated differently is also raised by Prospective Master of English Literature student, Sarah, who claims: *"Sometimes with things like accommodation there are issues that can come up there in terms of communicating with staff, or communicating with the administrative bodies, about things like visa issues. Even in the bodies that are meant to support international students we often feel like we are second class students."*

It is crucial that the higher education sector actively works towards tackling the perception that international students will be treated differently to domestic students. If marketing messages address and challenge this idea, this is likely to appeal to some prospective international students who might have had negative experiences.

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> *- Adel, Kuala Lumpur*

Welcoming orientation week

The way in which international students are greeted upon arrival to their new university appears to be highly important to prospective students in Asia, and also tied to perceptions about inclusivity.

Students want to feel welcomed by their cohort, staff, and local community throughout their international study experience, but for many this is extremely important during welcoming week, where nerves are high.

This is expressed by prospective MBA student, Nashwan in Kuala Lumpur, whose definition of inclusivity is rooted in this notion: *"I think it all starts in the first week when they give you their orientation; how well they interact with you, how well they explain things, the tour they give, the talks, and introducing the university basically. I think the university should take a big role in it because the first impression is really important, it's how the university shows how welcoming it is. The focus should be on the orientation week."*

Engineering student Abdelrahman, also in Kuala Lumpur, agrees: *"I think it's very important when new students come, to designate some time to take them around the university. When I came to my current university, they dedicated only one week to know more about the place, about the university, about the buses and schedule."*

Universities which ensure welcome week is well organized and enjoyable for international students may improve perceptions about their student experience. This can also be communicated in marketing and branding messages as something international students can look forward to when they arrive. Abdelrahman also feels that the time and effort lecturers offer to students to make sure they are coping with their course demands is indicative of an inclusive university environment: *"Once I did bad in one of*

the subjects and my lecturer called me to ask if I was okay, or if it was her fault that I didn't do well. So, I think it's very important to ask the students their opinion and for the lecturers themselves to check in with you and make sure you're okay and receiving their teaching well."

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> *- Nashwan, Kuala Lumpur*

Integrating international and domestic students

Whilst domestic and international students are sometimes considered unwilling to mix socially, this can also be attributed to the existence of structural issues which make it difficult for both groups to integrate.

For instance, international students are often concentrated in the postgraduate student body, whilst domestic students tend to study predominantly at undergraduate level, thus making it difficult to meet and socialize. Moreover, student accommodation is sometimes to blame, with halls of residence placing international students together and domestic students in separate accommodation.

We asked prospective students in Asia to share their thoughts on this matter, in order to understand how much of a priority integration is to them as international students and within their concept of inclusivity.

Many students in Asia avidly express how important they feel this integration is between domestic and international students. As prospective international students, many of whom are already currently studying, they consider getting to know the domestic student population as a huge part of the international study experience itself.

Prospective Master of English Literature student, Ting, is currently an international student in Malaysia and agrees that this integration is crucial: *"If international students are more able to integrate with local students you not only have a better academic experience, you have a better experience in the country and you have more opportunities for everyone involved in terms of things like career, extracurriculars, all these kind of things."*

Prospective Master of Engineering student, Mohammed in Jakarta, agrees: *"I think they should integrate us because it would be beneficial for them to learn not only the culture from the other international students, but also engage in an education that's not being learned at university, international students could share their knowledge with the domestic students."*

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> *- Ting, Malaysia*

The consequences of segregation

The perception that domestic and international students do not integrate is widespread in Asia. Applicants in each of the five cities visited in Asia criticized an inherent lack of amalgamation, often attributing the blame to universities.

Prospective Master of Marketing student, Claire in Taipei, raises this issue: *"I do think it's really important because right now in my university it is really bad, we don't really talk to international students and we rarely take the same courses with them and we don't even know them. The only way to know them, because you can't expect it from your program, is if you have to partner with the international students."*

Abdelrahman shares a similar view, but from the perspective of an international student: *"We are trying to have more interaction with the local students. I was in a group last semester, a lab group, and I actually suffered with them not wanting to interact with me. I complained to the lecturer and he helped me. We have this small gap between international and local, as much as we want to know more about their culture and we want to know more about them, they always put this distance between us."*

Some students feel that integrating domestic and international students can help to combat experiences of discrimination, which might arise from a segregated student body, as prospective Master of International Relations student, Sahaf in Jakarta, shares: *"It's important for the international student and the domestic student to unite because I think it will decrease cases of discrimination and segregation between the international and the domestic students. There won't be any collision between the two of them. I think it's very important because in a university, or even in the public, we need to celebrate each other. If the goal, to unite both these students, is not there it will be hard for them to merge and work with each other."*

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How can universities encourage integration?

Research has consistently shown that integration significantly improves the international student experience for a variety of reasons, including student wellbeing, student satisfaction, retention rates, student achievement/learning gain, alongside the development of global attributes and global citizenship perspectives.

As such, integrating domestic and international students should be part of a robust inclusivity and diversity policy, alongside the construction of a valuable student experience that can aid in recruitment and retention rates.

Indeed, student satisfaction has increasingly become a concern of HE, with growing awareness that students are reporting low satisfaction levels. In this environment, it is important to ask students themselves how they feel universities should merge both groups, as the student perspective can aid in the development of an insight-driven integration strategy.

A culture of integration

A number of prospective students in Asia feel that one way to integrate domestic and international students is to promote group work, through research projects and the encouragement of social media interactivity.

This view is offered by prospective Master of Dual Science student, Mahal in Jakarta: *"I think it is a good idea to combine the two different students. The best way is by holding research-based projects, or some open group discussions, or even creating a WhatsApp group talking about any related discussion. Those two groups of students have different perspectives, so I think it will be beneficial for the discipline and for them as well."*

Prospective engineering student and president of his international student union, Aseel in Kuala Lumpur, believes a culture of integration should exist as soon as students arrive at university: *"The interaction of the local and international students should be in the university policy, a culture of integration between the local and international, applying this concept from the very first day for the students and the university. In my opinion, it's a very good chance for us international students to interact with the local community, to get new experiences, and exchange cultures. But there are many challenges that will face both sides, including language, the society itself, sometimes even the politics."*

Creating a space for both groups to socialize is another remedy that emerged frequently among students in Asia, as prospective Master of International relations student, Sahaf in Jakarta, suggests: *"I think how to achieve this is by creating a space where the international and domestic students can meet up and catch up with each other. With extracurricular activities too, like sports."*

Whilst it is not solely the responsibility of institutions to integrate domestic and international students, there are several strategies that can be adopted to encourage integration. This can include maximizing arrival experiences with a wide variety of social activities, so that friendships can be built around shared hobbies.

Addressing structural issues around living arrangements, study groups, and intercultural teamwork, as well as social spaces designed for interaction, can also have a huge impact. Integration should also be actively promoted by universities as a route to experience personal growth and cultural exchange.

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Tackling social exclusion and discrimination

One of the concerns for international students, who are starting a life in a new country with a new culture and political environment, can be the fear of social exclusion and discrimination whilst studying.

In inflammatory political climates, which may develop following instability caused by a new government, far-right violence, or a terrorist event, the treatment from the local community can also be a concern.

Unfortunately, this may not be just a concern. A number of international students, in some of the most popular host markets, have reported experiences of racism and targeted discrimination.

Moreover, concerns about an inflammatory political climate can dissuade students from popular study destinations. Thus, it is crucial that universities respond to these concerns, promote transparent diversity and anti-discrimination policies, and reassure students that they offer a welcoming environment. We spoke to students about how these fears might manifest for them, in order to develop targeted insights and a platform to make their voices heard.
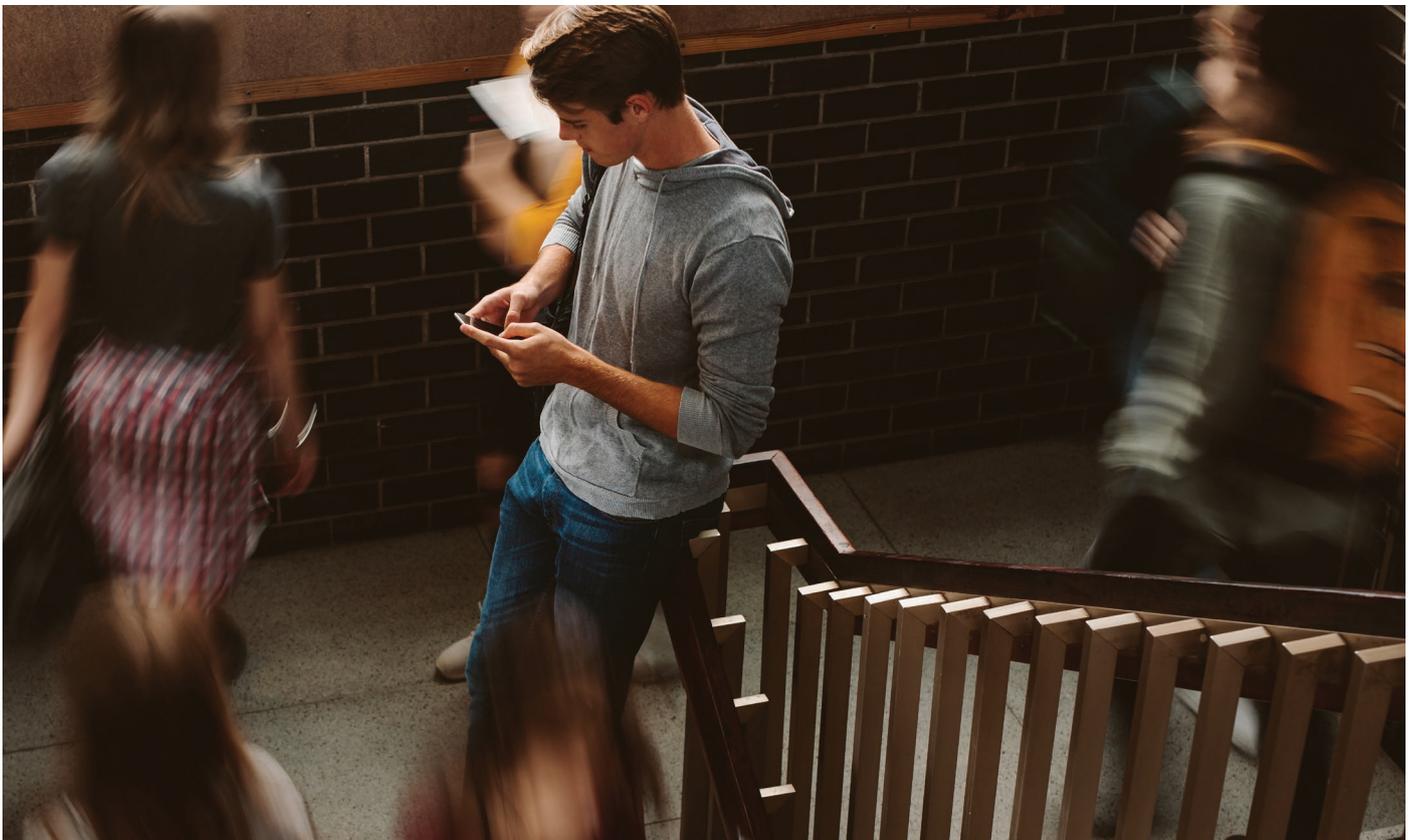
Racism and xenophobia

Racism is a complex issue, and when placed in the context of higher education it can arouse fears from a variety of different perspectives.

A number of students in Asia feel that racism is most likely to occur within the local community and this can cause deep anxiety for people who have intrinsic ideas about attitudes towards their ethnicity or cultural background.

This is demonstrated in the words of prospective Master of Environmental Studies student, Ifeanyi, in Kuala Lumpur: *"I'm most worried about people outside because lecturers should be educated professionals, they might be doing it indirectly not directly."* Similarly, rising concerns about the threat of Islamophobia and far-right violence can cause distress among international Muslim students and even dissuade them from particular countries.

This is evident in the perspective of prospective Master of Engineering student, Mohammed, in Jakarta: *"The social environment is one of my factors; how I will be treated if I live in that country? I fear Islamophobia because I'm Muslim. It's concerning, I need to be more selective about the countries that have this specific issue because there are certain areas in Europe where the rate of Islamophobia is increasing. I search the news and the internet, ask my lecturers, and if the rate of Islamophobia is high... I don't want to go there."*

Our research in Asia strongly suggests that if there have been instances of anti-Muslim attacks, which have made headlines in the media, this can be extremely damaging to a study destination's reputation.

There is also a perception that international students will not receive equal treatment from professors or equal opportunities in terms of internships, social activities, and university projects. As a result, it is crucial that universities work together to send the message that they are welcoming and have strict policies on any forms of discrimination. This should also include LGBTQ students, as evidence of a strong LGBTQ presence and student society, as well as support networks, can be highly appealing.

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> *- Ifeanyi, Kuala Lumpur*

What universities should be doing, according to international students

Transparent policy and discrimination initiatives should be available to international students in the attraction stages, as this can make a university look appealing, as prospective Master of Business student Bernah, in Jakarta, points out: *"I guess when choosing a university, I will be looking at their website to see if there are any seminars or events that the university creates to overcome the discrimination problem."*

A number of students mentioned it would also be worthwhile to celebrate multiculturalism by hosting events which reflect the diversity of the student population. This is suggested by prospective Master of Management student Jonathan, in Taipei: *"I think universities can help by hosting some activities in addition to Western festivals. They shouldn't just celebrate Christmas and Halloween, they can also have Chinese traditional new year, and also some Eastern festivals, to help students know more about other cultures and also to build a platform to know more about each other."*

Some students suggested launching campaigns as early as orientation week, like Ifeanyi: *"During orientation, there should be a program organized by the universities to educate the locals because, with international students, racism does occur. Another thing is let there be a penalty or a fine issued to someone if they behave racist, let there be equality in everything. I would encourage universities to have a seminar or a program that will bring people together, so that we can achieve one goal; we should not differentiate by color."*

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> *- Ifeanyi, Kuala Lumpur*

Support services

Most students we spoke to in Asia highlighted the importance of access to support from clinical counselors at university, especially for international students who are adjusting to a new place.

Prospective Master of International Relations student Sahaf, in Jakarta, shares why access to clinical counselors is important: *"I think it's important because I will need to settle in with a new environment in the university, that won't happen instantly, and I might need some professional help. Most of us are alone, most of us are without our families, and there's so many transitions that we must deal with all at once, and I think that the students themselves don't know how to cope."*

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> *- Sahaf, Jakarta*

International students require tailored support

Some students feel that during their experiences of university so far, there have been barriers to support services like counselling.

Such an issue is raised by prospective Master of English Literature student, Sarah, in Kuala Lumpur: *"I think there are services but not a lot of people know about it and this is applicable to both local and international students. So, they may not know about it, they may have their own cultural obstacles, they may not be up for the experience, or they may not recognize that it could be an experience that would help them. In my experience, counselors can face difficulties when treating international students. They may not be equipped, sometimes there may be language issues, and sometimes they may not understand."*

Sarah calls for greater communication and transparency about counseling, as often students are not aware that it is offered as a service where they study, she argues: *"Services like this must be made more apparent by publicizing it more as soon as you arrive and also making it more a part of the university culture, by having it on show with clear direction about where to go."*

Sarah, alongside a number of other students we spoke to in Asia, made the point that international students have very specific needs when it comes to mental health, and support services should be tailored to accommodate this: *"If you talk about international students having different mental health needs, then there's nothing geared for international students. So, it makes it difficult. I imagine if an international student is looking for services like that and if they see one of the posters, I'm sure the first question they would think is can I even go, would it be provided in my language?"*

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Universities should invest in communicating the availability of support services and developing tailored messages for international students, emphasizing that support is offered for the specific needs and issues they might face as students living in a new country.

Universal language

> ❝
> *I think for all the international students it's a big problem because often the English language is not our first language. It's a global language. I've heard of students going to other countries for exchange programs and even though the program is in English they are struggling as not all the lecturers have skills in speaking English, so it's so difficult for them. So, even when they're in English, it can affect our academic achievement.*
>
> *- Towfiq, Kuala Lumpur*
> ❞

With recent reports that some countries are reducing the number of English-taught programs available, the issue of a universal language has become a growing debate. This also emerged in discussions with international students in Asia, some of whom feel that even within English-taught programs difficulties can arise.

This is evident in the words of Prospective Master of Engineering student Towfiq, in Kuala Lumpur: *"I think for all the international students it's a big problem because often the English language is not our first language. It's a global language. I've heard of students going to other countries for exchange programs and even though the program is in English they are struggling as not all the lecturers have skills in speaking English, so it's so difficult for them. So, even when they're in English, it can affect our academic achievement."*

Prospective Master of Chemistry student, Deepalakshmi, agrees with Towfiq, sharing that she has had negative experiences of English-taught programs in countries where English is not the native language: *"For me, language is one form where you get to have a discussion, a form of inclusiveness. I have experienced lecturers and students switching back to speaking their language because I'm the only international student in the class, it's not that they do it on purpose, it's that they forget that I am there in the class."*

The reduction of English-taught programs can cause anxiety for international students in Asia, many of whom possess English as a second language. Moreover, there are widespread concerns that there is a language barrier within English-taught programs.

Prospective students should be reassured that this will not be an issue in countries where English is not the first language. Universities should promote the steps they are taking to address this issue and reassure prospective students in marketing materials and communications.

Key findings

Inclusivity has different meanings for international students

- Freedom of thought and expression, alongside being able to contribute significantly to a discipline or field of research, often emerges as important to international students within the context of inclusivity, despite this being a seemingly separate issue.

- It is crucial that the higher education sector actively works towards tackling the perception that international students will be treated differently to domestic students. If marketing messages address and challenge this idea, this is likely to appeal to some prospective international students who might have had negative experiences.

- Orientation week is highly important to prospective students in Asia and may be tied to their perceptions about inclusivity. Universities which ensure welcome week is well organized and enjoyable for international students may improve perceptions about their student experience. This can also be communicated in marketing and branding messages as something international students can look forward to when they arrive.

Prospective students in Asia strongly emphasize the importance and benefits of integration

- The perception that domestic and international students do not integrate is widespread in Asia. Applicants in each of the five cities visited in Asia criticized an inherent lack of amalgamation, often attributing the blame to universities. Students feel that integrating domestic and international students can help to combat experiences of discrimination.

- Whilst it is not solely the responsibility of institutions to integrate domestic and international students, there are several strategies that can be adopted to encourage integration. This can include maximizing arrival experiences with a wide variety of social activities, so that friendships can be built around shared hobbies.

- Addressing structural issues around living arrangements, study groups, and intercultural teamwork, as well as social spaces designed for interaction, can also have a huge impact. Integration should also be actively promoted by universities as a route to experience personal growth and cultural exchange.

Key findings

Actively tackling social exclusion and discrimination can improve reputation

- Concerns about an inflammatory political climate can dissuade students from popular study destinations. Thus, it is crucial that universities respond to these concerns, promote transparent diversity and anti-discrimination policies, and reassure students that they offer a welcoming environment.

- There is also a perception that international students will not receive equal treatment from professors or equal opportunities in terms of internships, social activities, and university projects. As a result, it is important that universities work together to send the message that they are welcoming and have strict policies on any forms of discrimination.

- Universities should invest in communicating the availability of support services and developing tailored messages for international students, emphasizing that support is offered for the specific needs and issues they might face as students living in a new country.

- The reduction of English-taught programs can cause anxiety for international students in Asia, many of whom possess English as a second language. There are also widespread concerns that there is a language barrier within English-taught programs. Universities should promote the steps they are taking to address this issue and reassure prospective students in marketing materials and communications.

About QS

With offices around the world, QS is a global market leader for the research and understanding of international and domestic students. Each year we deal with hundreds of thousands of students globally, giving us a unique insight into the student recruitment market. Our research, strategy, enquiry, admissions, and enrollment services mean we have hands-on experience of the obstacles and opportunities within specific countries and regions, helping clients mitigate risk, benefit from our existing relationships, and build sustainable recruitment strategies in an increasingly complex marketplace.

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If you'd like to discover more insights from the QS 2019 International Student Survey, download your free copy of the report today: www.internationalstudentsurvey.com/2019