

Chapter 16

International Students and Their Academic Experiences: Student Satisfaction, Student Success Challenges, and Promising Teaching Practices



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Abstract This chapter calls for rethinking education across borders by examining the North American international student academic experience with particular focus on enhancing student satisfaction and promising teaching practices, and increasing the faculty role in campus internationalization. To meet our goals of achieving diversity, inclusivity, and internationalization within an increasingly challenged political and socio-economic context, we must turn our attention to enhancing the international student academic experience. An important first step involves paying more attention to the international student success factors along with satisfaction of international students within the classroom and across the student experience. Additional institutional actions for enhancing the international student academic experience institutions are suggested.

Keywords International students · International student satisfaction · International student success · Promising teaching practices

Introduction

Whether you are a decision maker, faculty member, or a student affairs educator who is a citizen of the United States working in a domestic setting, a citizen of the United States working abroad in higher education, or an international working in the United States or around the world, your contribution to the internationalization conversation is essential. You have a perspective about the student experience that is fundamental to providing high quality and empowering education that embraces the increasingly internationalized world in which we and our students must be prepared to live (Roberts, 2015, p. 13).

The world of education abroad is changing. We have seen the election of an American president who has made international student mobility challenging within the context of the “Make America Great Again” campaign. The United Kingdom (UK), another leading destination for study abroad, adopted “Brexit” and will soon leave the European Union which will likely limit European student mobility in the UK.

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A human rights-related diplomatic feud led Saudi Arabia to withdraw its students from Canadian universities and colleges, resulting in most Saudi Arabian students leaving Canada. Situations like the above point to a challenging world for students seeking a post-secondary education abroad.

Colleges and universities in the U.S. and Canada are increasingly becoming ethno-culturally and linguistically diverse which is partially due to increasing enrollment of international students. Currently 1.4 million international students choose to study at Canadian and U.S. post-secondary educational institutions, which increased by 7.1% between 2015 and 2016 (Canadian Bureau of International Education, 2016; Institute of International Education, 2016).

This has led many institutions to adopt internationalization as an institutional priority. Knight (2004) identifies internationalization as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education” (p. 2). A 2017 American Council on Education survey of U.S. colleges and universities found that nearly three-quarters (72%) of responding institutions grew their internationalization efforts in recent years (Helms, Brajkovic, & Struthers, 2017). Top reasons included improving student preparedness for a global era, diversifying students, faculty and staff at the home campus, and becoming more attractive to prospective students at home and overseas. A 2014 Universities Canada survey reported that the pace of internationalization has accelerated at most (89%) in Canadian institutions.

Currently, internationalization focuses primarily on external areas, including education abroad and student exchange, recruiting international students, and institutional partnerships (Gaulee, 2018; Helms et al., 2017). Curriculum and faculty development are considered lower priorities. However, this is expected to change as more institutions are developing academic-related internationalization initiatives (e.g., international or global student learning outcomes, related general education requirements, foreign language requirements). Robin Helms, Director of the American Council on Education Center for Internationalization and Global Engagement, suggests that “We need to make sure that faculty are engaged in and central to internationalization efforts” (Redden, 2017).

Diversity and inclusion are increasingly seen as important institutional objectives. Most North American higher education leaders would agree that we have a responsibility to promote diversity and inclusion for all our students, including both domestic and international students. Kirwan (2016), Chancellor Emeritus of the University System of Maryland, identifies three key benefits: enriching learning experiences for all students, widening access to higher education to increase diversity of future global leaders, and increasing availability of fulfilling careers and high quality of life. To build inclusive campuses, we have the ethical responsibility to embrace cultural and linguistic diversity and to integrate it into all aspects of the student experience, including our classrooms.

Meeting the various global challenges that confront international students and student mobility require faculty to be more engaged in internationalization efforts by paying more attention to international student success factors along with satisfaction of international students within the classroom and across the student experience. An

important first step in assessing the international student academic experience is to ask international students about it. The next section delves into international student satisfaction with their learning experiences.

Student Satisfaction with Learning Experiences

The decision to study abroad in the future will likely be reliant on the perception of students regarding their anticipated student academic experience. Given the increasingly challenged political and socio-economic education abroad environment, the quality of the student learning experience will be closely monitored by students, their families, and sponsoring governments. In order for North American colleges and universities to continue to attract education abroad students, educational leaders will need to ensure that they are offering learning experiences that create value for students that include language and learning support, teaching and research excellence, experiential learning, and work experience opportunities.

Current satisfaction among international students studying at Canadian and U.S. colleges and universities is high. Garrett (2014), former North American director for i-graduate, a United Kingdom-based educational research company that tracks and benchmarks international student satisfaction, found that international student satisfaction and willingness to recommend the institution at both Canadian and American institutions was higher than the average reported by international students globally. High scores on another survey were also reported at Canadian institutions, with 90% of international students being either very satisfied or satisfied with their educational experience (Canadian Bureau of International Education, 2014).

One of the best measures of student satisfaction for international students studying at Canadian and U.S. institutions is the International Student Barometer (ISB), which is administered each autumn by i-graduate. The ISB tracks and compares the decision-making, expectations, perceptions, and intentions of international students from application to graduation in areas that include the application process, inquiry to acceptance, arrival and orientation, the learning experience, the living experience, support services, and propensity to recommend the institution to other international students. Results are benchmarked against competitor groups, and national and global indices. The 2016 ISB Wave included 159,959 students at 196 institutions in 17 countries, including 19,767 who attended U.S. and Canadian institutions (i-graduate International Insight, 2017). ISB findings (i-graduate International Insight, 2017) suggest that international students are largely satisfied with their academic experience at Canadian and American colleges and universities. Nearly nine of ten (89%) indicate that they are satisfied with the learning experience, which is slightly higher than non-North American institutions (87%) and the global index (87%).

i-graduate International Insight (2017) reported topics which American and Canadian international students scored higher than non-North American international students, in terms of student satisfaction, include: academics' English, assessment,

careers advice, course content, course organization, employability, good teachers, quality lectures, laboratories, language support, learning spaces, learning support, marking criteria, multicultural environment, online library, opportunities to teach, performance feedback, physical library, size of classes, technology, topic selection, virtual learning, and work experience. Topics where non-North American international students scored higher than American and Canadian international students include expert lecturers and managing research. American and Canadian international students and non-North American international students scored the same on research. Table 16.1 displays learning satisfaction of international students by country in which their institution is located.

International student perceptions of the learning experience varied by country of origin (i-graduate International Insight, 2017). Looking at the top countries of origin for Canada (China, India, South Korea, France, the U.S., and Nigeria) and the U.S. (China, India, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, and Canada), international students from France, China, India, Nigeria, and Canada had the highest satisfaction while those from Saudi Arabia, South Korea, and the U.S. had lower satisfaction levels. International student satisfaction was higher at four-year Canadian and American colleges and universities than two-year Canadian and American institutions or non-North American two-year institutions. Table 16.2 displays learning satisfaction of international students by leading countries of origin.

Little variance in international student satisfaction of the learning experience was found for gender (i-graduate International Insight, 2017). Some areas where differences were found include study level, program, study time, study stage, and age. Common topics cited by more than one student type include: careers advice, employability, language support, managing research, opportunities to teach, research, and work experience. These areas merit consideration for potential institutional improvement to enhance international student satisfaction. Table 16.3 displays low and high satisfaction where the difference is greater than 5%.

Satisfaction with the student experience often goes beyond those aspects that are easily measured. For many, the experiences rooted in engagement with other cultures and ways of knowing, becoming more open-minded regarding social issues and political topics, building relationships with others (e.g., students, faculty, staff, administrators) from other nationalities form some of the major takeaways of the study abroad experience. These need to be taken into account in any calculus involving the international student experience.

While international student satisfaction with their learning experiences is generally high, international students face various academic and non-academic challenges as they enter and move through the North American student experience. The next section will explore some of these challenges.

Table 16.1 Learning satisfaction by host country

	Host country				
	Canada	U.S.	Canada and U.S.	Non-North American countries	All countries
<i>Learning overall (%)</i>	89	90	89	87	87
<i>Topics</i>					
Academics' English (%)	94	95	94	92	92
Assessment (%)	91	92	92	88	89
Careers advice (%)	82	81	81	71	72
Course content (%)	90	91	90	89	89
Course organization (%)	88	91	90	84	85
Employability (%)	86	84	85	78	79
Expert lecturers (%)	93	94	93	94	94
Good teachers (%)	89	90	90	88	88
Laboratories (%)	92	92	92	91	91
Language support (%)	91	89	90	89	89
Learning spaces (%)	93	93	93	89	90
Learning support (%)	91	93	92	89	89
Managing research	NA	88%	88%	90%	89%
Marking criteria (%)	89	91	90	83	84
Multicultural (%)	92	88	91	90	90
Online library (%)	92	92	92	91	91
Opportunities to teach	NA	83%	81%	72%	73%
Performance feedback (%)	90	91	90	84	85
Physical library (%)	90	93	91	90	90
Quality lectures (%)	91	91	91	88	89

(continued)

Table 16.1 (continued)

	Host country				
	Canada	U.S.	Canada and U.S.	Non-North American countries	All countries
Research (%)	89	87	88	88	88
Technology (%)	91	94	92	91	91
The size of the classes (%)	91	90	91	89	89
Topic selection (%)	90	89	90	87	87
Virtual learning (%)	92	93	93	91	91
Work experience (%)	81	78	79	69	70

Note Adapted from i-graduate International Insight (2017). Reprinted with permission

Table 16.2 Learning satisfaction by country of origin

Country of origin	North American 2-year or community colleges	North American 4-year colleges or universities	All Canadian and U.S. institutions	Non-North American institutions	All institutions
Canada	NA	90%	90%	85%	86%
China (%)	92	92	92	90	91
France	NA	95	95	88	88
India (%)	92	92	92	90	91
Nigeria (%)	89	93	90	90	90
Saudi Arabia (%)	81	86	85	84	81
South Korea (%)	79	87	82	81	81
U.S. (%)	89	90	89	87	87

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International Student Success Challenges

The impact of various academic and non-academic challenges that international students face during their education abroad experience coupled with the increasingly challenged political and socio-economic climate may result in institutional challenges in maintaining or increasing its international student enrollments. While international students participate more in “effective educational practices” than

Table 16.3 Learning satisfaction by student type (more than 5% difference between low and high satisfaction levels)

Area	Topic	Low	High
Study level	Work experience	Foundation course (74%)	Other (82%)
	Multicultural	Foundation course (84%)	Undergraduate (92%)
	Language support	Foundation course (85%)	Other (92%)
Program	Employability	Subjects allied to medicine (89%)	Social studies (79%)
	Research	Language-literature (80%)	Eastern, Asiatic, African, American, and Australasian languages and literature (97%)
	Managing research	Mass communications and documentation (78%)	Historical and philosophical studies (100%)
	Assessment	Medicine/dentistry, social studies, creative arts/design (88%)	Eastern, Asiatic, African, American, and Australasian languages and literature (100%)
	Careers advice	Historical and philosophical studies (77%)	Tourism and hospitality (86%)
	Work experience	Joint honors or multisubject degree (60%)	Tourism and hospitality (88%)
Study time	Employability	Other (86%)	Student abroad (90%)
	Managing research	Other (86%)	Student exchange (95%)
	Opportunities to teach	Study abroad (63%)	Other (90%)
Study stage	Careers advice	Last year (77%)	First year/single year (84%)
	Opportunities to teach	Last year (75%)	First year/single year (86%)
Age	Course content	50 + (84%)	18–20 (94%)
	Employability	30–39 and 50 + (79%)	18–20 (89%)
	Quality lectures	50 + (80%)	Under 18 (95%)
	Good teachers	50 + (75%)	18–20 (92%)
	Expert lecturers	50 + (76%)	18–20 (95%)
	Research	50 + (84%)	Under 18 (93%)
	Managing research	19–20 (80%)	21–24 (90%)
	Learning support	50 + (78%)	Under 18 (94%)
	Careers advice	50 + (70%)	18–20 (86%)
	Language support	40–49 (82%)	50 + (96%)
	Work experience	50 + (68%)	18–20 (85%)
Opportunities to teach	18–20 (70%)	21–24 (92%)	

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Fig. 16.1 Factors influencing international student success



their American counterparts (Zhao, Kuh, & Carin, 2005), they report greater academic challenge, more interactions with instructors, more engagement in diversity-related activities, and greater gains in personal and social development, practical competence, and general education.

Several academic and non-academic factors have been identified as influencing the educational success of international students. Academic challenges include: language challenges, exclusion from group discussions, culture-related learning differences, academic support issues, and adjustment to a new educational system. International students also face a wide array of non-academic challenges. These challenges include cultural adjustment, social issues, and finances. Figure 16.1 shows the academic and non-academic factors that impact international student success. It is important for institutions to develop an institutional approach for addressing these challenges, rather than the common technique of assigning these duties to an overworked international student center.

Academic Challenges

Language barriers. Language barriers, especially oral communications in English, are perceived by international students as a major challenge (Zhang & Zhou, 2010). Language difficulties emerge from different accents, rate of speech, and pronunciation (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015). They result in international students putting in more hours than host students to complete reading, writing, and presentation

assignments (Brunton & Jeffrey, 2014; Cruikshank, Chen, & Warren, 2012; Wang & Byram, 2011). They also create a feeling of inequality in the classroom (Foster & Stapleton, 2012; Kim, Tatar, & Choi, 2014; Valdez, 2015). Many find it difficult to communicate with instructors and their peers in class. Some instructors doubt the ability of international students to complete course assignments, encourage international students to take developmental classes, and criticize international students' accents (Beoku-Betters, 2004). Lack of English proficiency is a barrier for successful participation in the host community (Liu, 2011).

Exclusion from group discussions. Most instructors employ some form of group work in their teaching, which requires students to have good written and verbal English skills. Students with low language proficiency are often unable to engage in group discussions or participate in class presentations even if they have topic knowledge (Yates & Thi QuynhTrang, 2012). This frequently results in international students sitting together and speaking their native language, which limits interaction with domestic students (Brunton & Jeffrey, 2014; Harrison & Peacock, 2010; Trahar & Hyland, 2011). This can lead to domestic students giving up on interaction with international students (Cruikshank et al., 2012).

Cultural-related learning differences. International students with different cultural experiences may perceive a learning environment differently, especially when compared with native students (Koul & Fisher, 2005). In North America, emphasis is placed on independent and critical thinking, problem-based learning, interpreting information, and developing and communicating knowledge. Many international students come from educational cultures where priority is given to memorizing, understanding, and reproducing information (Eaves, 2011; Elmgren & Henriksson, 2014; Kennedy, 2002; Tavakol & Dennick, 2010; Valiente, 2008). International students are more accustomed to listening and learning rather than speaking in class (Edwards & Tonkin, 1990).

Another challenge is moving from a teacher-centered educational system to student-centered education (Evans & Stevenson, 2011; Foster & Stapleton, 2012; Tian & Lowe, 2013; Valdez, 2015; Wang, 2012; Yates & Thi QuynhTrang, 2012). In teacher-centered classrooms, instructors are responsible for knowledge transfer and the student's learning style is passive, while in student-centered classrooms, students take an active role in the learning process. For example, moving from exam-oriented assessment to essay writing can be challenging (Khozaei, Naidu, Khozaei, & Salley, 2015; Sheridan, 2011) for international students since writing academic essays is new for many students (Janjua, Malik, & Rahman, 2011; Saravanamuthu & Yap, 2014).

Adjustment to a new educational system. Joining a new academic environment is difficult for international students. For many, they have experienced "large power distance school settings" where instructors are treated with respect and the education process is teacher-centered. In contrast, in North American institutions, teachers and students co-exist in an academic environment where they are more equally treated and the educational process is more student-centered (Hofstede, 1997). International students also report that education moves at a faster pace and instructors use teaching methods that require greater student participation (Zhai, 2002).

Academic integrity is often understood by international students differently from those educated in North America. This is partly related to low English language proficiency and differing cultural understandings of citation and referencing (Chien, 2014). For some students, rephrasing original text is a “disgraceful act” which shows a lack of respect for the author or researcher, and results in some students not fully citing original work.

Academic support issues. Many international students require academic support to be successful. Student services are designed to help students transition to and be successful in the North American academic culture. Some of the more common supports needed by international students include academic advising, academic integrity, learning resources (e.g., library, computer center), as well as verbal and written communication support. Increasingly, institutions are “reimaging and recasting” academic support services to make them “more responsive to this new breed of student’s academic, social, and emotional needs” (Fischer, 2011).

Non-academic Challenges

Cultural adjustment. Adjusting to a new culture is difficult. This is because it impacts nearly all aspects of student life, including living arrangements, community participation, socialization, communication, eating practices, and food consumption (Andrade, 2009). This can lead to culture shock. Zhang and Zhou (2010) identified culture shock as the top challenge for international students.

International students often do not bring family members with them to North America, and thus many experience more severe adjustment issues than domestic students who can travel home more frequently. Transition, while a concern for all students, is especially relevant for international students who have traveled from another part of the world to be part of their academic communities. As an example, approximately one-quarter of Mandarin-speaking students encounter adjustment issues (Chen, 2011).

International students face difficulties in their social life. For example, when international students participate in social events, they are faced with unfamiliar communication patterns, which can lead to awkwardness in social interaction.

Social Issues. International students perceive isolation and loneliness when they are studying in North America. Their ability to handle academic and social demands is strongly associated with social support (Fritz, Chin, & DeMarini, 2008; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Social support has been shown to reduce stress, promote positive health outcomes, and moderate the effects of stress on mental health symptoms (Rice et al., 2009). When having difficulties or psychological concerns, international students often lean on family and friends (Wu et al., 2015). They sometimes look to overcome their social challenges by taking an active role in student life, which can include joining student organizations, participating in campus activities, and broadening their social network (Wu et al., 2015).

International students are often impacted by the pressure of parents' expectations. These expectations include achieving English proficiency, completion of undergraduate or graduate study, financial support, and a future career (Wu et al., 2015).

Stereotypes and negative attitudes, some of which result in incidents of racism, are experienced by international students (Smith, & Demjanenko, 2011). Findings from one study (Charles-Toussaint & Crowson, 2010) found that American students believe that international students pose threats to their social status from anti-immigrant prejudice. This can lead to international students becoming marginalized in class or in social events.

Financial. International students are often overwhelmed by financial considerations. The main sources of dissatisfaction for international undergraduate students at U.S. institutions relate to finances (Choudaha & Schulmann, 2014). Key among their concerns is access to internships, affordability, and availability of scholarships and need-based financial aid followed by meal plans and housing quality. Another challenge faced by U.S.-based international students is limited access to work off-campus (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, n.d.). A 2009 survey conducted by the Canadian Bureau of International Education found one in five students calling for lowering tuition fees for international students and one in ten suggesting that institutions provide scholarships or bursaries for international students.

Promising Teaching Practices

One of the key ways to enhance faculty involvement in campus internationalization and increase student satisfaction and institutional enrollment health is to make use of promising teaching practices for teaching culturally and linguistically diverse international students. The traditional lecture is increasingly being replaced or complimented by more active-learning and differentiated instruction approaches; yet, few instructors have received formal training for intercultural learning or inclusive education (Paige & Goode, 2009).

An important element for teaching international students is creating an inclusive learning environment. Kinsella (1997) suggests using teaching practices that include providing increased contextual information and linguistic support, offering specific learning and study approaches, and having greater opportunities for classroom interaction and participation.

Another essential component for enhancing international academic success is putting culturally responsive teaching into practice in the classroom. Gay (2010) outlines four principles designed to help instructors bring culturally responsive teaching into their classrooms, including developing a cultural diversity knowledge base, designing culturally relevant curricula demonstrating cultural caring, building a learning community, and engaging in cross-cultural communication. She suggests that culturally relevant teaching is:

contingent on...seeing cultural differences as assets; creating caring learning communities where culturally different individuals and heritages are valued; using cultural knowledge of ethnically diverse cultures, families, and communities to guide curriculum development, classroom climates, instructional strategies, and relationships with students; challenging racial and cultural stereotypes, prejudices, racism, and other forms of intolerance, injustice, and oppression; being change agents for social justice and academic equity; mediating power imbalances in classrooms based on race, culture, ethnicity, and class; and accepting cultural responsiveness as endemic to educational effectiveness in all areas of learning for students from all ethnic groups (p. 31).

Differentiated instruction can be used to enhance the learning experience for international students. Traditionally, differentiated instruction is used to impact learning for students with varied learning readiness, personal interests, and culturally framed ways of knowing (Tomlinson, 2014). It seeks to maximize each learner's experience by adjusting instructional tasks by building on student strengths (Tomlinson, 1999). It is also helpful with the teaching of international students. One study (Martin-Beltran, Guzman, & Chen, 2017) found that instructors can use discourse differentiation to mediate learning opportunities among students with a wide range of language expertise. This can lead to fostering collective thinking to create a fertile context for language learning among students with diverse backgrounds.

Recently, Dimitrov and Haque (2016) developed a model for Intercultural Teaching Competence for instructors to use as a tool for reflection as they look to teach students from differing cultures. The model consists of 20 instructor competencies which are fit into three categories, including foundational skills, facilitation skills, and curriculum design skills. The model should be helpful to instructors who are looking to enhance the learning experience for international students.

The role of faculty goes beyond the classroom. For international graduate students, the academic experience is impacted by the academic supervisory relationship between faculty members and students (Curtin, Stewart, & Ostrove, 2013; Glass, Kociolek, Wongtrirat, Lynch, & Cong, 2015). They depend on their supervisors to learn about academic performance standards, research assistant duties, and for advice about their academic programs. Academic faculty members also support their graduate students when they provide post-graduate employment information and assist students with post-graduation employment (Nunes & Arthur, 2013).

There are many other promising teaching practices that are being used to enhance the learning experience of international students. These include practices that fall into these areas: academic support, active learning, assessment, assignment development, class preparation, communicating outside of the classroom, diversity and inclusion, expectation clarification, feedback, group work, language proficiency, lecture design and delivery, needs assessment, positive learning environments, specialized terminology, study techniques, verbal communications, and visual communications. When embraced by faculty, the use of promising teaching practices can lead to enhanced student satisfaction, higher student retention, and eventually more effective student recruitment.

Further Research

Further research is needed to establish the role of internationalization in helping institutions to achieve diversity and inclusion. We also need to expand the international student satisfaction research into the teaching and learning literature to establish which “effective” teaching methods are most closely associated with student satisfaction and student learning. Other areas meriting further research include:

- why students from some countries (e.g., Saudi Arabia and South Korea) have lower student satisfaction levels;
- why certain aspects of study level, program, study time, study stage, and age result in lower student satisfaction levels;
- why international students participate in more “effective educational practices” than their American counterparts;
- what techniques improve group work dynamics for international students;
- which academic and social support methods enhance transition to the North American learning environment;
- which practices minimize financial barriers on international student retention;
- what approaches work most effectively to limit racism experienced by international students; and
- which practices are most helpful for supporting international students through culture shock.

Conclusion

The education abroad landscape today differs greatly from the recent past and will likely evolve significantly in the near future. “Make America Great Again”, Brexit”, and the various challenges facing student mobility in Canada, Australia, and many other countries have created a need to rethink the way we engage in campus internationalization. We can no longer delegate internationalization those with a passionate interest in international education. Senior administration, faculty, and staff from across the institution will need to combine their efforts to ensure the international student experience remains strong and institutional international student enrollment health is maintained.

North American colleges and universities have demonstrated that they can enroll international students by developing strong student recruitment initiatives. However, to meet our goals of achieving diversity, inclusivity, and internationalization, we must turn our attention to enhancing the international student academic experience. This will require faculty to be more engaged in campus internationalization efforts. An important first step involves paying more attention to the international student success factors along with satisfaction of international students within the classroom and across the student experience.

Some other steps institutions could take to enhance the international student academic experience include:

- Assess and benchmark international student satisfaction with their in-class and out-of-class teaching and learning experiences;
- Identify the institution-specific international student success factors that are most relevant to students and develop strategies and interventions to minimize any factor(s) that may be negatively impacting student learning;
- Identify promising teaching practices that connect with high levels of student satisfaction and student learning; and
- Provide faculty with professional development that includes training for intercultural learning and inclusive teaching practices, differentiated instruction, and related teaching practices to enhance the learning experience of international students.

The outlook for increasing international student success at North America colleges and universities is high.

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