

Market Intelligence

Building the West to East Pipeline

As the world becomes more globalized, graduate management education (GME) students increasingly seek programs not just in their own country, but across the world. Candidates find that pursuing a graduate business degree is not just about gaining advanced business knowledge, but also about broadening their understanding of different cultures and ways of doing business.

Traditionally, the top global GME destinations of choice have been the United States and Western Europe. With GME students largely concentrated in these two regions, and these destinations enjoying ongoing prestige, it is becoming increasingly difficult for business schools in Asia to attract students—particularly from the West—to study in the East.

However, universities in Asia are on the rise and increasingly represented in reputable global education rankings. In 2016, institutions in Asia accounted for 26 percent of universities on the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings. In 2021, this rose to 32 percent.¹ As universities in Asia increase their global reputation, they are also looking to increase the proportion of international students in their business programs.



¹World Economic Forum (2021) What the rise of Asian universities means for the world. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/07/asian-universities-on-the-rise-education-rankings-learning/>

So far, efforts to attract international students to business schools in Asia have been successful. The Graduate Management Admission Council's (GMAC™) 2021 Application Trends Survey showed that 53 percent of 2021 applications to Asia-Pacific schools were from international applicants, a rise of 18 percent compared to 2017.

Despite the proportional increase in international applications to Asian business schools, the fact remains that global events over the last two years have slowed that progress. Further analysis from GMAC shows that the number of unique Western citizens and/or residents sending GMAT scores to schools in Asia declined from 1,262 in 2018 to 1,027 in 2022 (**Figure 1**).² This trend is also clear among Western citizens sending GMAT scores to Asian business schools (**Figure 2**).

Attracting international students to business schools is never straightforward, but becomes even more complex when bridging the gap between the West and the East. GME applicant goals and preferences vary among Western candidates, while the logistics of attracting students to study a program halfway around the world present their own challenges.

“The two biggest difficulties we face are related to mindset and logistics,” explains Steven Ji, director of MBA marketing, admissions, and financial aid at China Europe International Business School (CEIBS) in Shanghai.

“To leave the West to pursue an MBA in Asia requires a certain mindset. Logistically, this is challenging because high-potential young professionals that hit these criteria are not all located in the same place. We have to be creative to reach them, rely on the inspiring stories from our Western alums who have made it here, and offer multiple

ways to engage with CEIBS from, sometimes, thousands of miles away.”

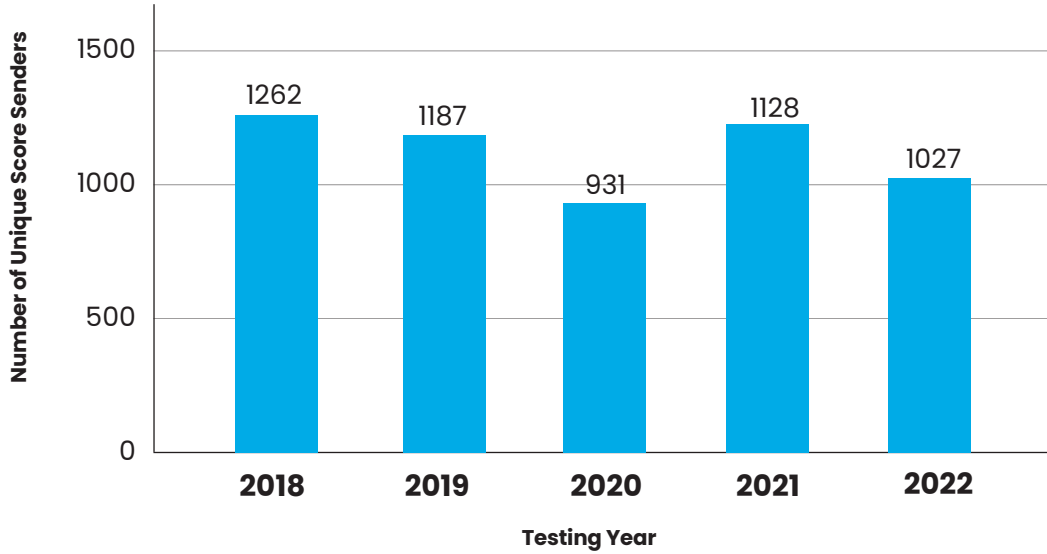
As a result, to create successful recruitment strategies and reach these students, it is vital that business schools in Asia have an in-depth understanding of Western students in particular. This research brief draws upon unique GMAC research data, particularly GMAT score-sending data and the Prospective Students Survey (PSS), along with expert insights, to provide recruitment teams at Asian business schools and universities with up-to-date knowledge of the students they are looking to recruit.

As Ji recommends, this data is vital when utilized as the “bedrock” of business school marketing strategies, as a way to understand applicants and ensure that programs and marketing materials are relevant to the students they want to attract.



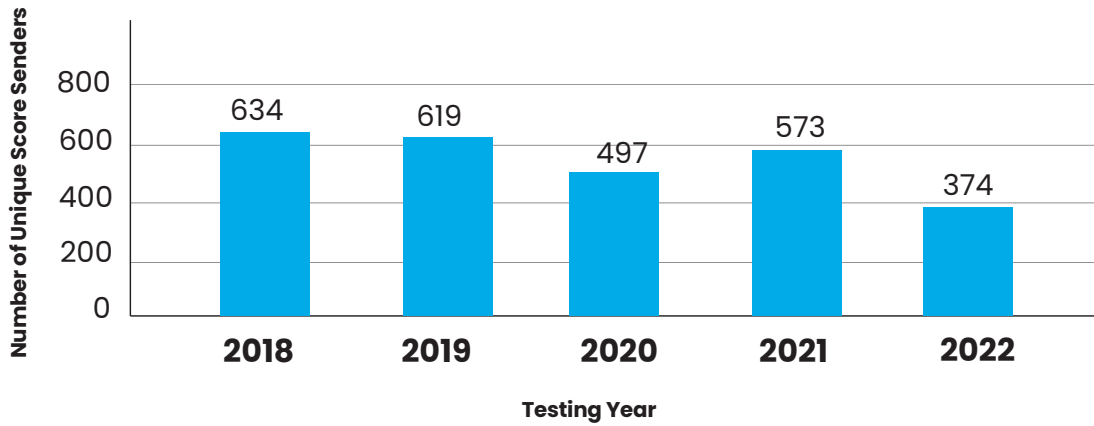
²Graduate Management Admission Council. (2018–2022). GMAT testing data.

Figure 1: Unique Western Citizens and/or Residents Sending GMAT Scores to Asia, TY2018-TY2022



Source: Graduate Management Admission Council. (2018-2022). GMAT testing data.

Figure 2: Unique Western Citizens Sending GMAT Scores to Asia, TY2018-TY2022



Source: Graduate Management Admission Council. (2018-2022). GMAT testing data.

What does the average Western GME candidate interested in or applying to business schools in Asia look like?

GMAC data can shed light on the types of Western applicants interested in business schools in Asia—in particular, the ages and undergraduate majors of these students. This information is particularly vital when communicating with potential applicants, whether through direct channels or more broadly in marketing campaigns.

For this research brief, GMAT score-sending data has been broken down into both Western citizens and/or residents, and Western citizens only. When the data refers to Western citizens only, it is important to note that these students are applying from residences across the globe. For example, only 32 percent of Western citizens were residents in Western Europe at the time of the survey. An additional 19 percent were residents in the United States, 19 percent were based in East and Southeast Asia, and 12 percent in Canada.

Firstly, when it comes to the average ages of Western citizens and/or residents sending GMAT scores to Asian business schools, it is largely younger applicants interested in studying in the East. Forty percent of unique Western score senders in 2022 were under the age of 22, while 28 percent were between the ages of 25 and 30 (**Figure 3**).

This sheds further light on the average education level of Western citizens and residents who are interested in studying in Asia. As displayed in program preferences, many students who wish to study in Asia are interested in Business master's programs as opposed to an MBA.

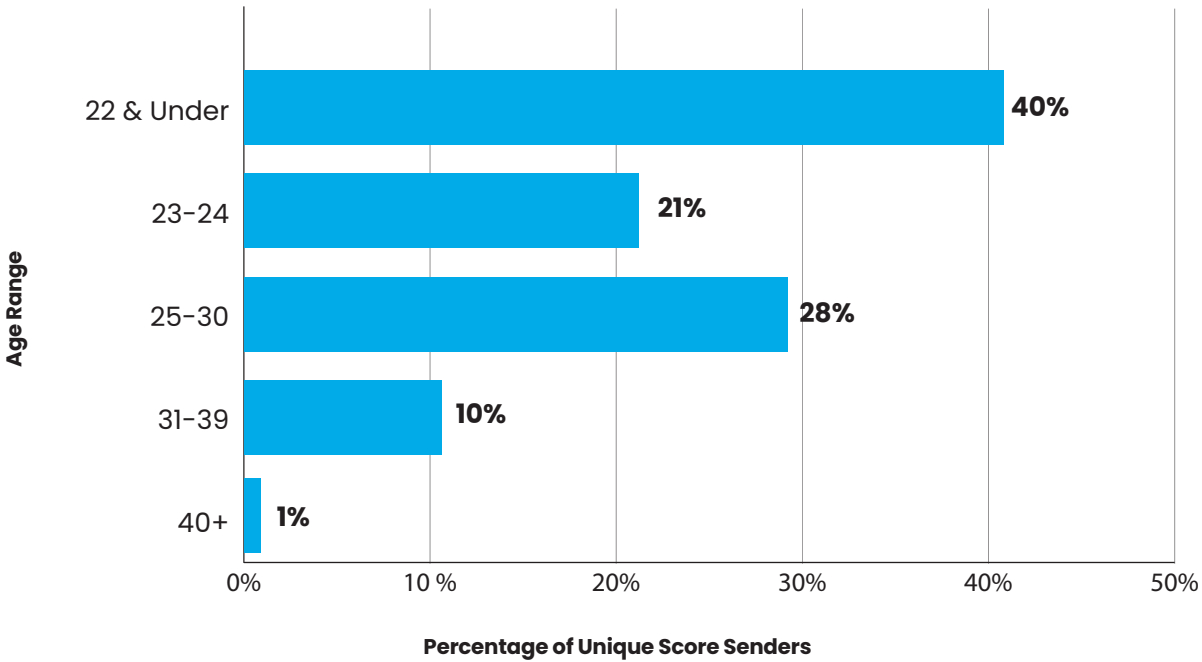
However, there are some interesting differences when considering solely Western citizens. These applicants tend to be slightly older—39 percent of unique score senders in 2022 were aged 25-30 (**Figure 4**). We can surmise, then, that Western citizens are more likely than Western residents to be applying to an MBA program.

Overall, only a very small proportion of applicants sending GMAT scores to Asian schools are over the age of 30—just 10 percent of Western citizens and/or residents and 16 percent of Western citizens.

This age trend is also significant among Western citizens and/or residents whose preferred study destination is Asia (**Figure 5**). These are prospective students who may or may not have already taken the GMAT, but responded to GMAC's 2021 Prospective Students Survey with their preferences for GME location.

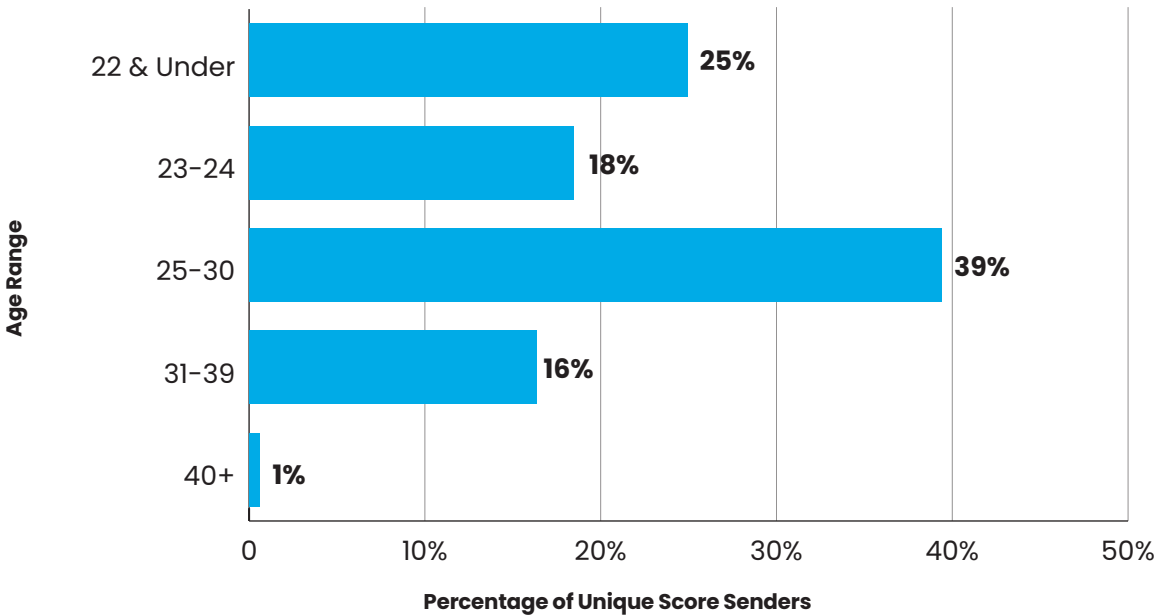
Among these candidates, 30 percent are aged 22 or younger, with just 19 percent aged over 30. A significant number of candidates are also aged between 25-30, suggesting a similar number of respondents are thinking about both Business master's and more advanced MBA programs.

Figure 3: Age Range of Unique Western Citizens and/or Residents Sending GMAT Scores to Asia, 2022



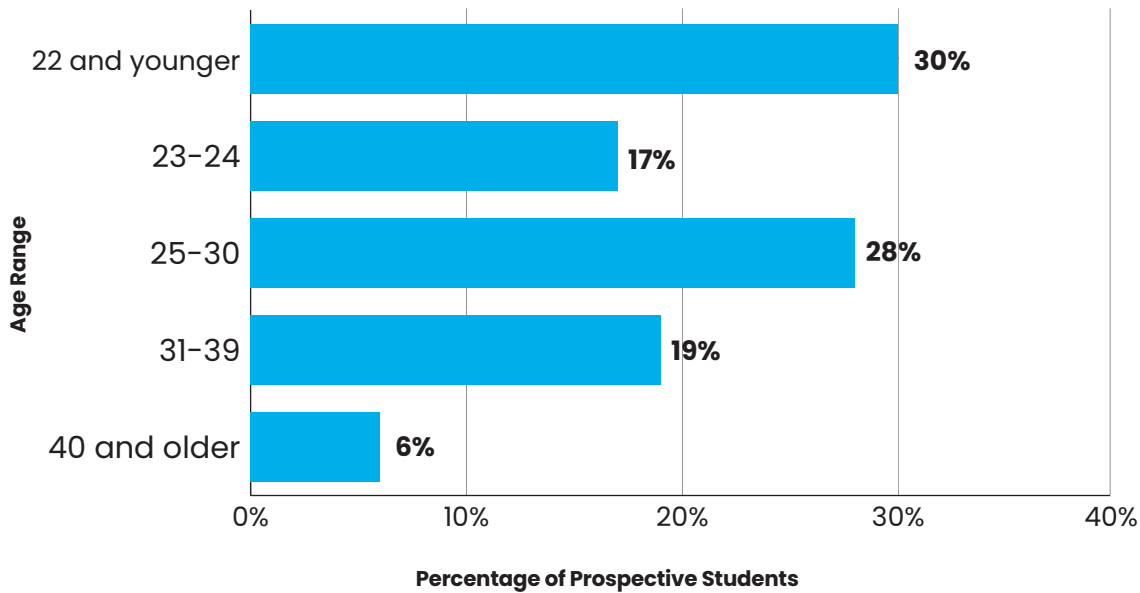
Source: Graduate Management Admission Council. (2022). GMAT testing data.

Figure 4: Age Range of Unique Western Citizens Sending GMAT Scores to Asia, 2022



Source: Graduate Management Admission Council. (2022). GMAT testing data.

Figure 5: Age Range of Western Citizens and/or Residents with Preferred Study Destination in Asia, 2021



Source: Graduate Management Admission Council. (2021). GMAC Prospective Students Survey.

Overwhelmingly, Western citizens and/or residents who have sent GMAT scores to schools in Asia studied business or commerce at undergraduate level, accounting for 36 percent of all unique score senders (**Figure 6**). The second-most popular undergraduate major was engineering, followed by economics.

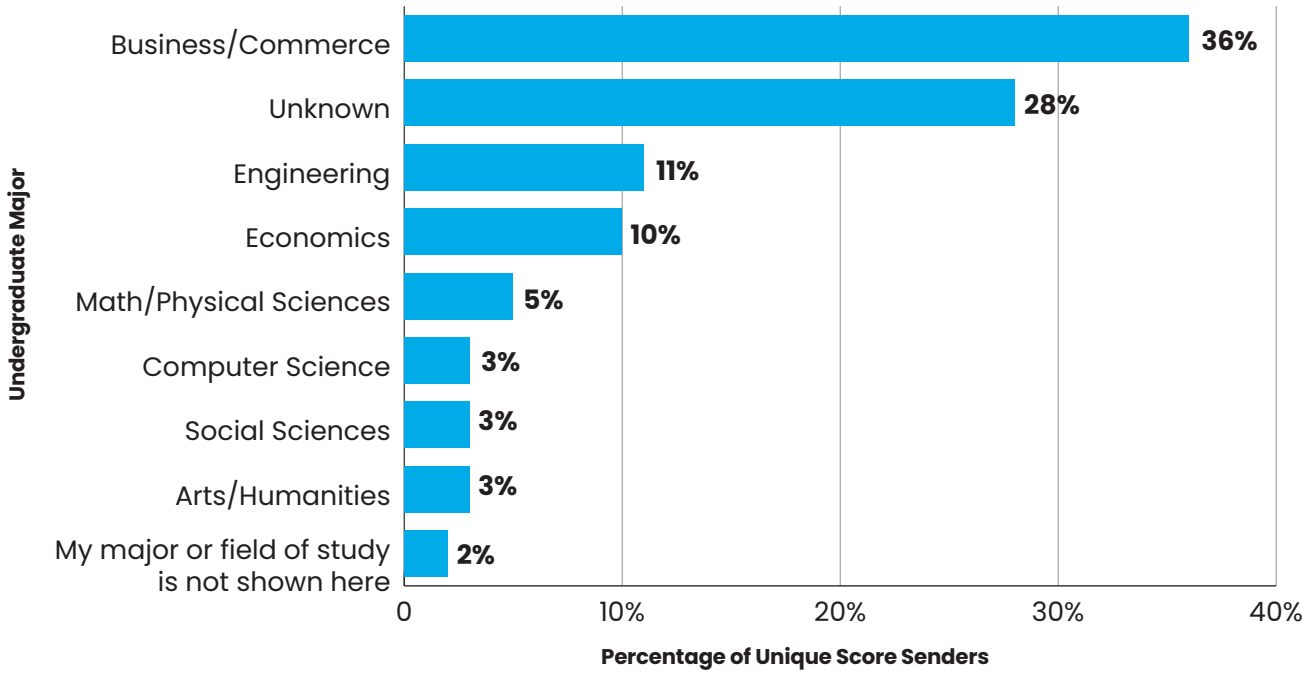
Consistent with GME applications more generally, very few Western applicants to business schools in Asia have a humanities or social science background. However, even within these categories, the academic background of Western students interested in studying in Asia has changed notably over the last five years.

In 2017, 12 percent of prospective Western students had an undergraduate major in arts or humanities—by 2021, this figure had dropped by 4 percent (**Figure 7**). The decline

in Western students with a social sciences undergraduate background interested in Asian business schools is even more dramatic. In 2017, 34 percent of students came from a social sciences major, compared with just 9 percent in 2021.

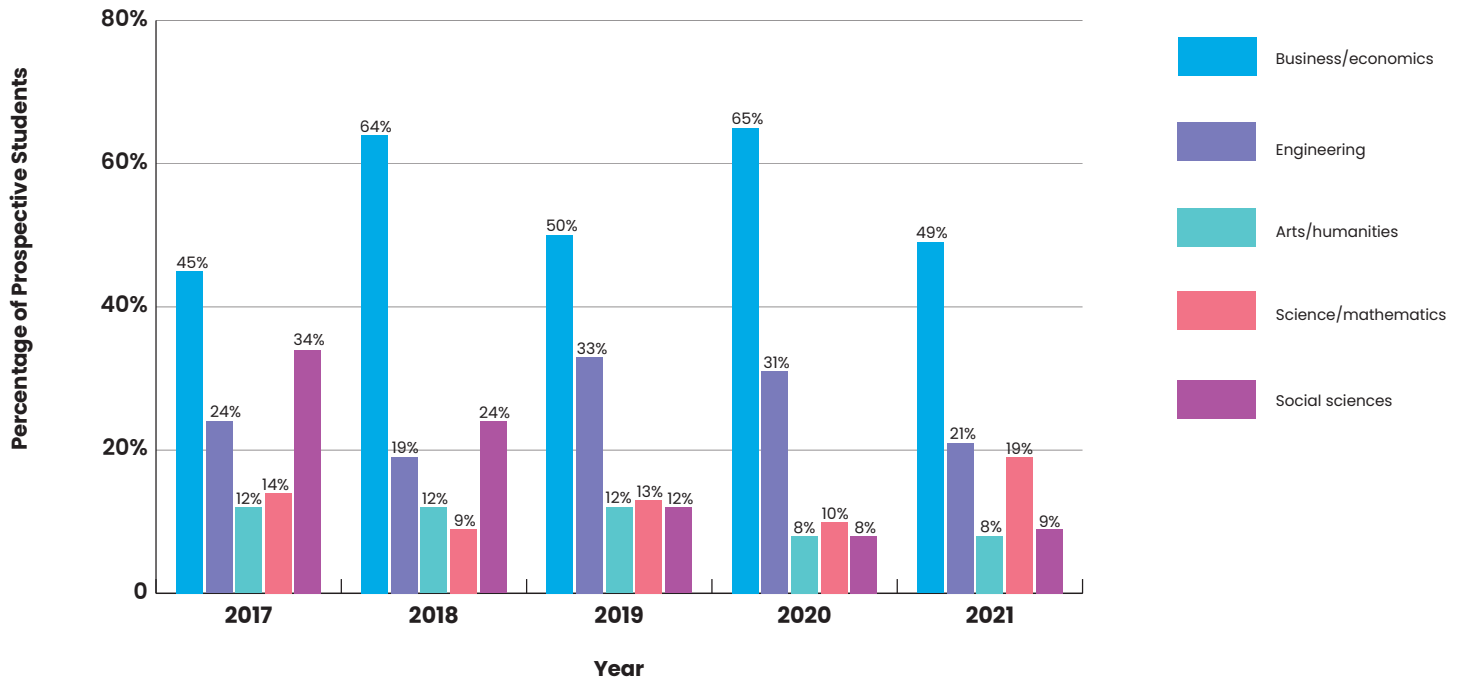
These shifts may reflect changing attitudes towards business education in general, or demonstrate that business school marketing efforts are neglecting students with these backgrounds. Either way, it is clear that Asian schools today must make a decision about the types of students and background knowledge they want on their programs, and adjust their marketing strategies accordingly.

Figure 6: Undergraduate Major Categories for Unique Western Citizens and/or Residents Sending GMAT Scores to Asia, 2022



Source: Graduate Management Admission Council. (2022). GMAT testing data.

Figure 7: Undergraduate Major Categories for Unique Western Citizens and/or Residents with Preferred Study Destination in Asia, 2017–2021



Source: Graduate Management Admission Council. (2017–2021). mba.com Prospective Students Survey.

Master of Finance programs are the most popular degree choice among Western citizens and/or residents who have sent GMAT scores to Asian schools

Twenty-seven percent of Western citizens and/or residents who sent GMAT scores to Asian business schools in 2022 sent them to a Master in Finance program (**Figure 8**). This overtook the traditional two-year MBA as the most popular program type for Western applicants for the first time in the last five years.

While the number of Western citizens and/or residents sending GMAT scores to Master in Finance programs reached a peak of 329 in 2021, overall, the total number of Western applicants choosing Master in Finance programs rose over 50 percent in the last five years, from 183 in 2018 to 280 in 2022 (**Figure 9**).

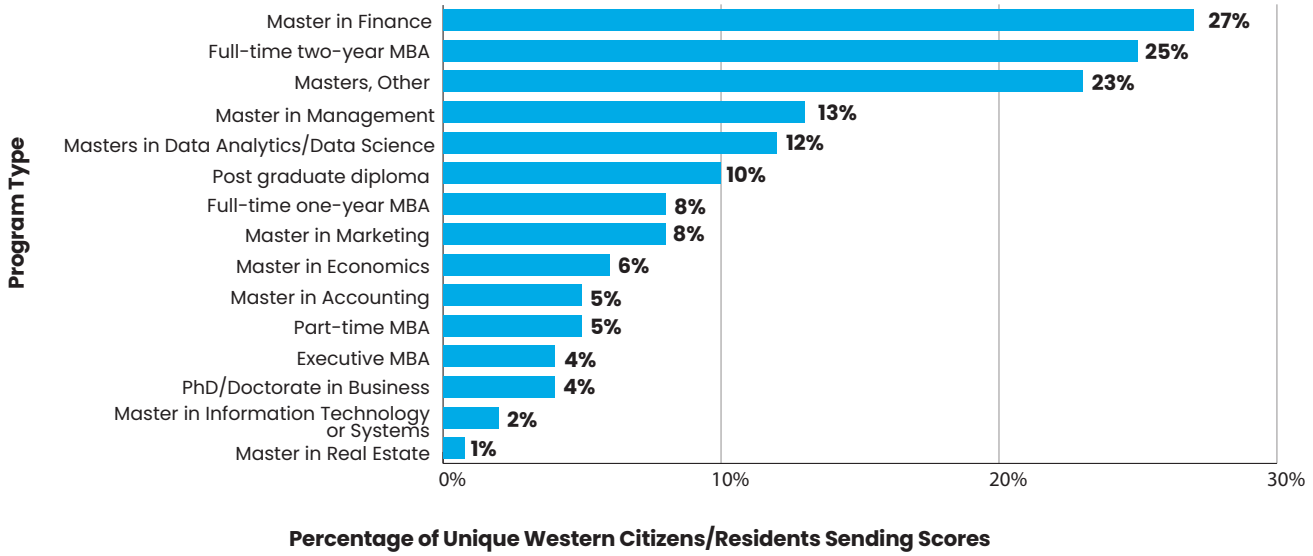
In fact, additional survey findings show that the full-time two-year MBA has experienced declining interest since 2018. Between 2018

and 2022, the number of Western citizens/residents sending GMAT scores to two-year MBA programs in Asia dropped from 514 to 252 (**Figure 10**). As previously mentioned, 2022 marks the first time in five years that the full-time two-year MBA has lost its title as the most popular program type among Western applicants to business schools in Asia.

Other Business master's programs have benefited from decreased interest in the full-time MBA program, though overall numbers of applicants for these programs are not as high as those for the Master in Finance. The number of Western citizens/residents sending GMAT scores to Master in Data Analytics programs rose by 80 percent between 2018 and 2022, and the number of unique GMAT scores sent to Master in Management programs in that period also rose by 76 percent (**Figure 10**).

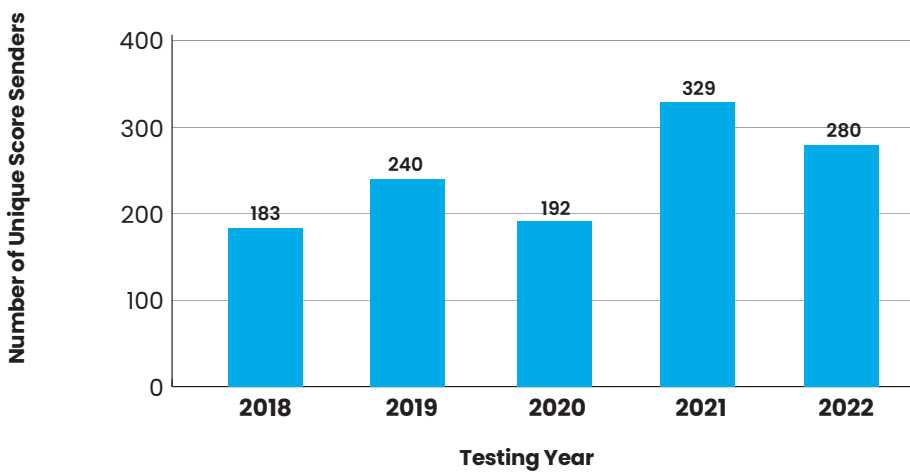


Figure 8: Preferred Program for Unique Western Citizens and/or Residents Sending GMAT Scores to Asia, 2022



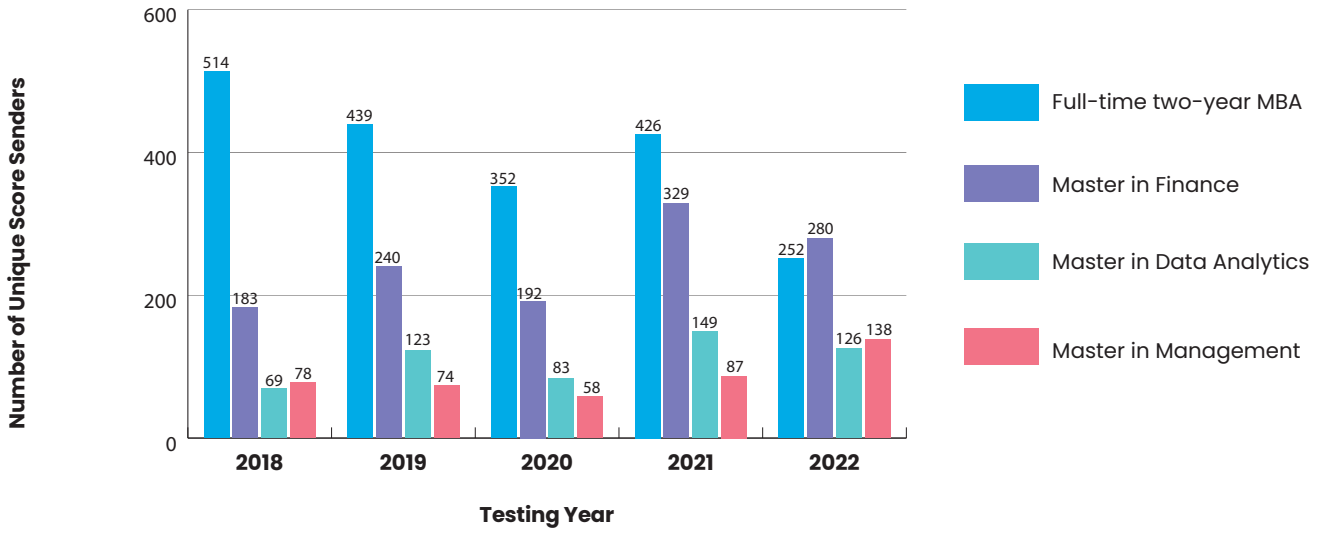
Source: Graduate Management Admission Council. (2022). GMAT testing data.

Figure 9: Unique Western Citizens and/or Residents Sending GMAT Scores to Master in Finance Programs in Asia, TY2018–TY2022



Source: Graduate Management Admission Council. (2022). GMAT testing data.

Figure 10: Program Types of Unique Western Citizens and/or Residents Sending GMAT Scores to Asia, TY2018–TY2022



Source: Graduate Management Admission Council. (2022). GMAT testing data.



China and Singapore remain the most popular destinations for Western applicants to Asian business schools

In 2022, China and Singapore were the most popular destinations for Western citizens who sent GMAT scores to business schools in Asia. In fact, an equal percentage (32%) of Western citizens who sent GMAT scores to Asia in 2022 sent them to schools in these two destinations (**Figure 11**). The next most popular region for Western citizens was Hong Kong, though just 20 percent of GMAT score senders opted for programs in this location.

Looking at five-year trends, it is also clear that Western citizens' destination preferences have changed over time. In 2018, Hong Kong was the most popular destination for Western citizen GMAT score senders, though the margin between Hong Kong, China, and Singapore was slim (**Figure 12**). Between 2018 and 2022, the number of Western citizens sending GMAT scores to Hong Kong fell by more than 60 percent.

Taking a closer look at the data, it is clear that this is demonstrative of a larger trend. Between 2018 and 2022, there has been a significant drop-off in the numbers of Western citizens sending GMAT scores to Asia. The most significant reduction occurred between 2021 and 2022. During this year, the number of Western students sending scores to China dropped by almost 50 percent and the number sending scores to Singapore dropped by just over 40 percent.

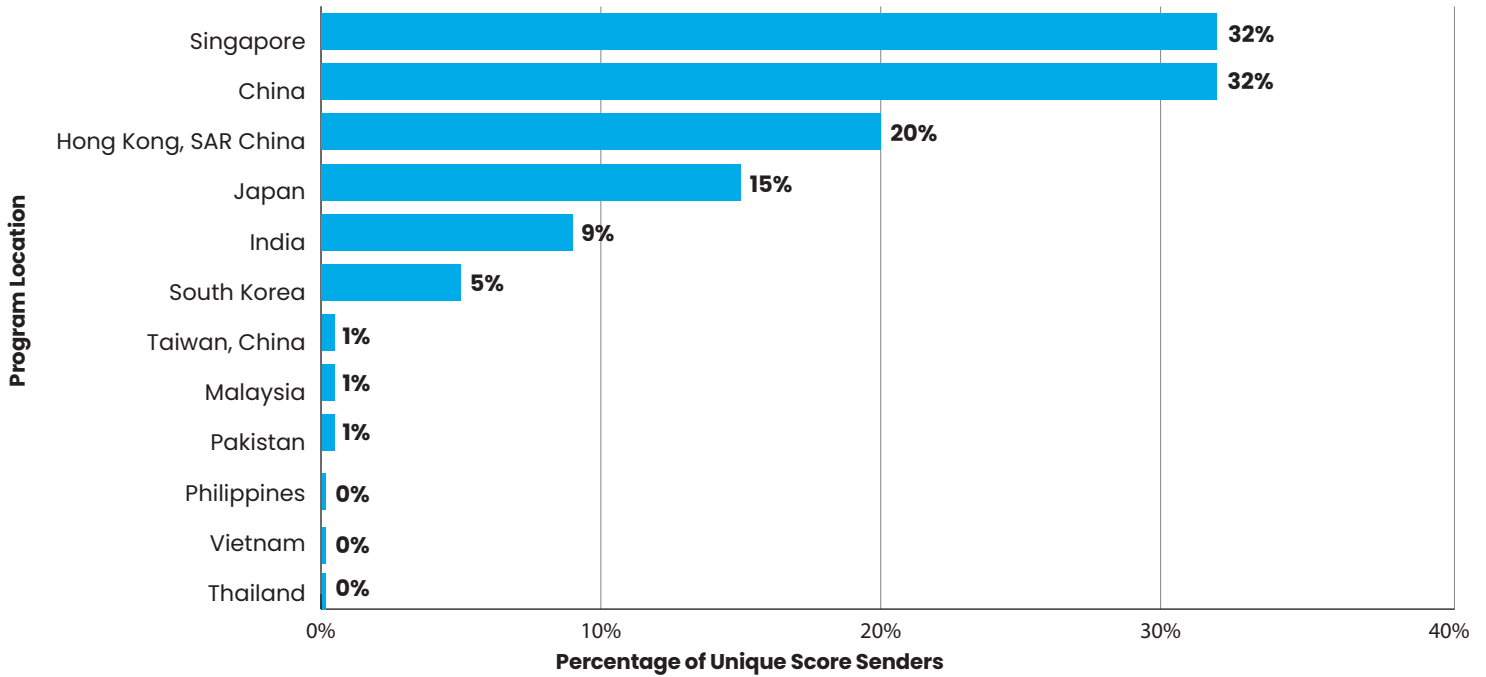
Exactly how much of this decrease can be attributed to the lingering effects the Covid-19 pandemic on international student mobility is difficult to say. Between 2020 and 2021, for example, when Covid-19 severely limited international student mobility, the number of GMAT scores sent to schools in Asia increased. This suggests that there may

be other reasons for the reduction in Western candidates applying to schools in Asia over the last year.

Nevertheless, the data also shows that the numbers of Western students sending GMAT scores to programs in Japan and South Korea has largely remained consistent over the last five years (**Figure 12**). This may suggest that business schools in these regions have not invested in increasing Western student numbers, or that students who want to study in these destinations will do so regardless of outside influences.

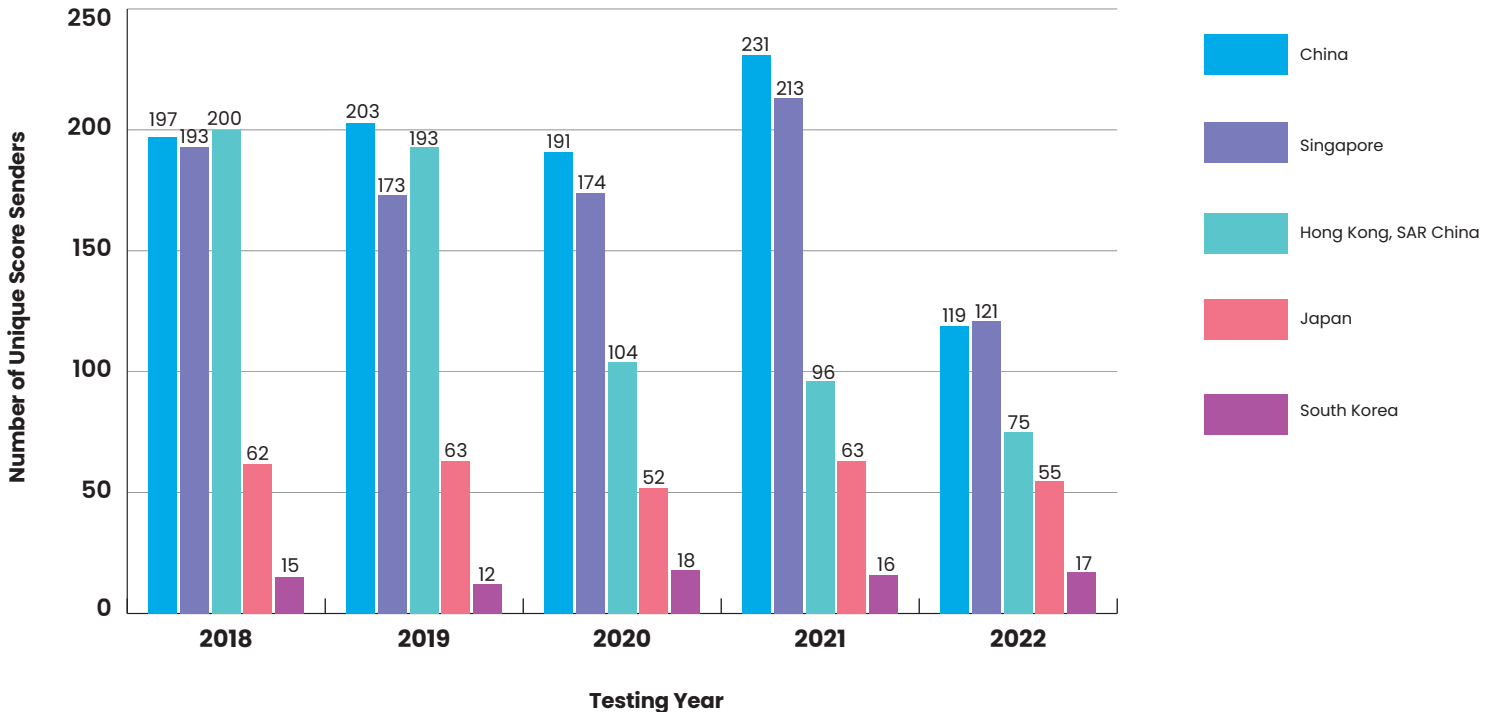


Figure 11: Program Location of Unique Western Citizens Sending GMAT Scores to Asia, 2022



Source: Graduate Management Admission Council. (2022). GMAT testing data

Figure 12: Program Location of Unique Western Citizens Sending GMAT Scores to Asia, TY2018–TY2022



Source: Graduate Management Admission Council. (2022). GMAT testing data.

Most Western students seeking business education in Asia come from a mid-level job

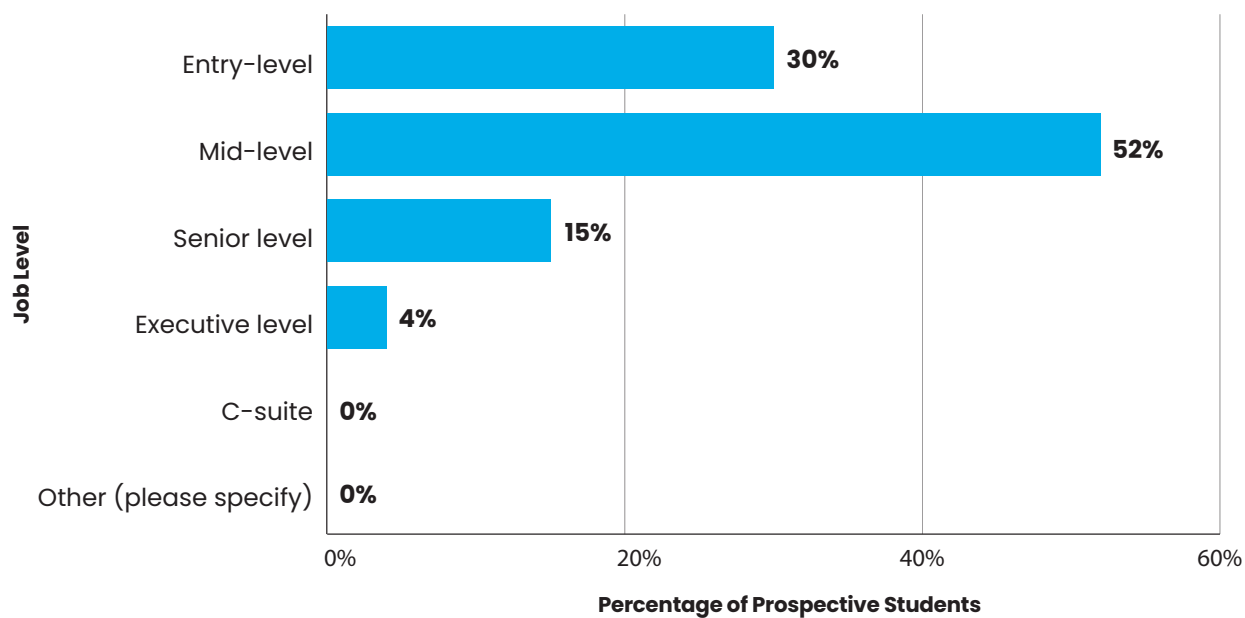
Data from GMAC's 2021 Prospective Students Survey shows that more than half of Western citizens or residents who say they prefer to study in Asia come from a mid-level job; that is, they may already have a few years of work experience, but aren't in senior-level positions yet. Just 15 percent of those interested in studying in Asia have already reached a senior-level position, and 30 percent are still in entry-level roles (**Figure 13**).

The data on unique Western citizens sending GMAT scores to Asian business schools also follows this trend. Among these applicants, most have less than a year (39%) or between one to three years of work experience (32%). Less than a quarter of Western

citizens applying to business schools in Asia have between four- and nine-years' work experience, and just 4 percent have more than 10 years of experience.

This makes sense when looking at data relating to popular program types for Western citizens applying in Asia; very few (4%) Western citizens or residents sent GMAT scores to an Executive MBA program, and even fewer applied to doctoral-level programs in the region. This suggests that Western GME candidates see study in Asia as an opportunity to enhance their education level early on in their careers, rather than a means to furthering their knowledge later down their career path.

Figure 13: Current Job Level of Western Citizens and/or Residents with Preferred Study Destination in Asia, 2021



Source: Graduate Management Admission Council. (2021). mba.com Prospective Students Survey.

Candidate Segmentation

The GME candidate segmentation study was devised to help provide GME stakeholders with insights into candidate motivations for pursuing graduate education. 5,900 individual applicants were included in the initial sample, representing 15 different countries and 11 languages.

Respondents were asked about their motivations to pursue a graduate management education and their motivations to apply to a specific school. With these responses, GMAC identified seven global candidate segments, each with specific goals and motivations. These were:

- *Respect Seekers: Pursuing GME to gain respect or prestige, choose schools based on location and personal recommendations*
- *Global Strivers: Seeking to develop expertise and gain international exposure, largely choose degrees or schools that are recognized by employers globally*
- *Balanced Careerists: Wish to increase salary or advance career with as little disruption as possible, generally choose schools that are convenient*
- *Career Revitalizers: Focused on career advancement and reinventing themselves, value business schools with innovative facilities and high-quality instructors*
- *Socio-Economic Climbers: Wish to improve their socio-economic status through GME and increase career stability, choose schools based on academic reputation*
- *Skill Upgraders: Motivated to improve their skillsets and become experts, influenced by personal recommendations and are interested in the school experience generally*
- *Impactful Innovators: Wish to improve their skills to have a social impact or pursue a specific business goal, value academic rankings highly*

Business schools can use the candidate segmentation framework to streamline marketing efforts by:

- 1.) Identifying which candidate segments currently make up the majority of their applicants.
- 2.) Calibrating their candidate mix by identifying the segments they wish to attract.
- 3.) Creating tailored messaging strategies that resonate with these particular candidate segments.

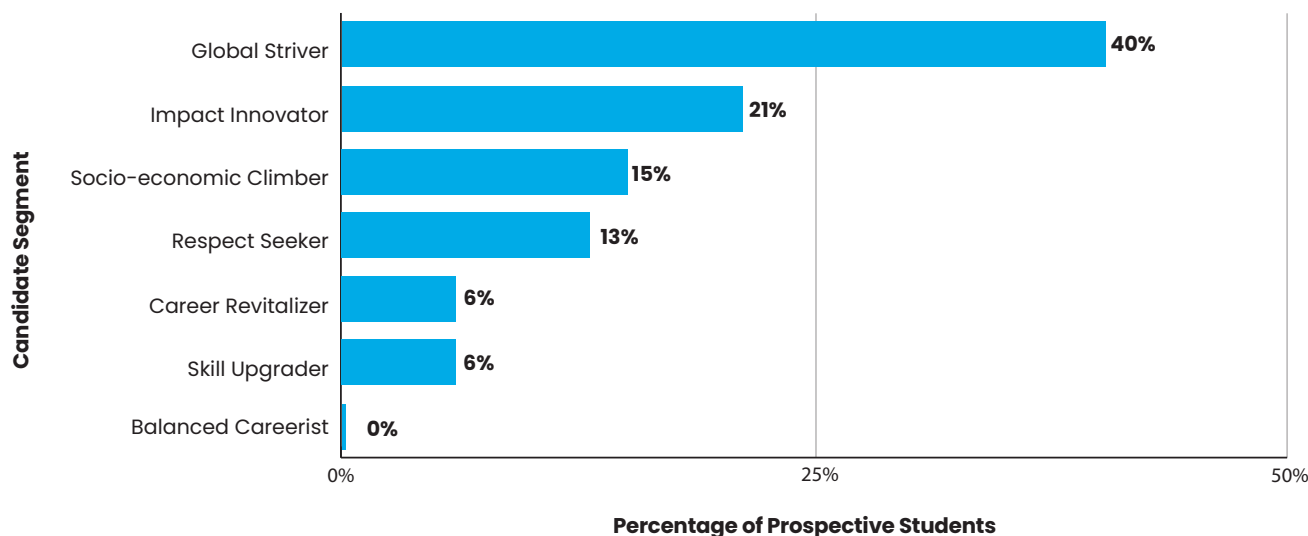
Data from GMAC’s 2021 Prospective Students Survey also outlines the candidate segments of Western citizens/residents who wish to study in Asia. This data is valuable for discovering the overall goals and priorities of Western applicants. The seven GME candidate segments were identified in 2016 through a separate GMAC global study in collaboration with IPSOS.³

According to the survey, 40 percent of Western citizens/residents with a preferred study destination in Asia belong to the Global Striver candidate segment (**Figure 14**). These applicants are typically interested in gaining international exposure, accessing employment opportunities in other countries, and improving their specific skills.⁴ Additionally, Global Strivers choose GME programs and schools that are typically recognized by global employers and are well-known internationally.

Following Global Striver, 21 percent of Western applicants who wish to study in Asia are Impact Innovators. For these candidates, improving management abilities and developing skills to have a social impact are among the most popular reasons for pursuing GME. They typically apply to schools or programs with a strong reputation.

GMAC data also identified specific challenges for each of these GME candidate segments, which are highly relevant for business schools in Asia wishing to attract Western candidates. In particular, Global Strivers typically find financing their business school education to be a major challenge, while Impact Innovators struggle with taking admissions exams.

Figure 14: Candidate Segments of Western Citizens and/or Residents with Preferred Study Destination in Asia, 2021



Source: Graduate Management Admission Council. (2021). mba.com Prospective Students Survey.

³<https://www.gmac.com/market-intelligence-and-research/market-research/global-gme-candidate-segmentation>

⁴https://www.gmac.com/-/media/files/gmac/research/admissions-and-application-trends/2016_meet-the-segments.pdf

According to Steven Ji, GMAC candidate data on Western candidates' current job levels is indicative of the scale of commitment required to make a move from the West to the East, both for business education and for jobs, as well as an imagined 'minimum' level of experience necessary to land a role in Asia.

"Typically, senior professionals with family responsibilities and mortgages may be more risk adverse when it comes to pursuing a move to Asia," he explains. "For younger professionals, they may well find it harder to land opportunities here given the competitive nature of local competition and language barriers."

"It could be argued that mid-career professionals provide the perfect balance; the sweet spot between having a developed skill that can be of immediate impact to a company and an eagerness to step out of their comfort zones."



Western students are increasingly interested in seeking work in Asia after GME

Additional data from the Prospective Students Survey outlines desired post-GME outcomes for Western citizens and/or residents who have an interest in studying in Asia. Crucially, many Western students who are already interested in studying in the region are also interested in remaining in Asia after graduation and seeking a full-time job.

Among Western students who already specified that Asia was their preferred study destination, 60 percent stated that they would also prefer to work in East and Southeast Asia after their degree. This is up from 41 percent in 2017, proof that not only is Asia perceived as a valuable place for GME study, but also a destination for postgraduate work. "It's an encouraging trend for sure, especially when we are seeing internationals apply who already have study or work experience in Asia," comments Steven Ji.

Almost half (45%) of prospective Western students with a preference for studying in Asia also wish to complete an internship as part of their program, while 26 percent say they would like to take part in a work project. Evidently, Western students see the professional value of studying in Asia and want to explore chances to work in the region not only after their program, but during their studies as well.

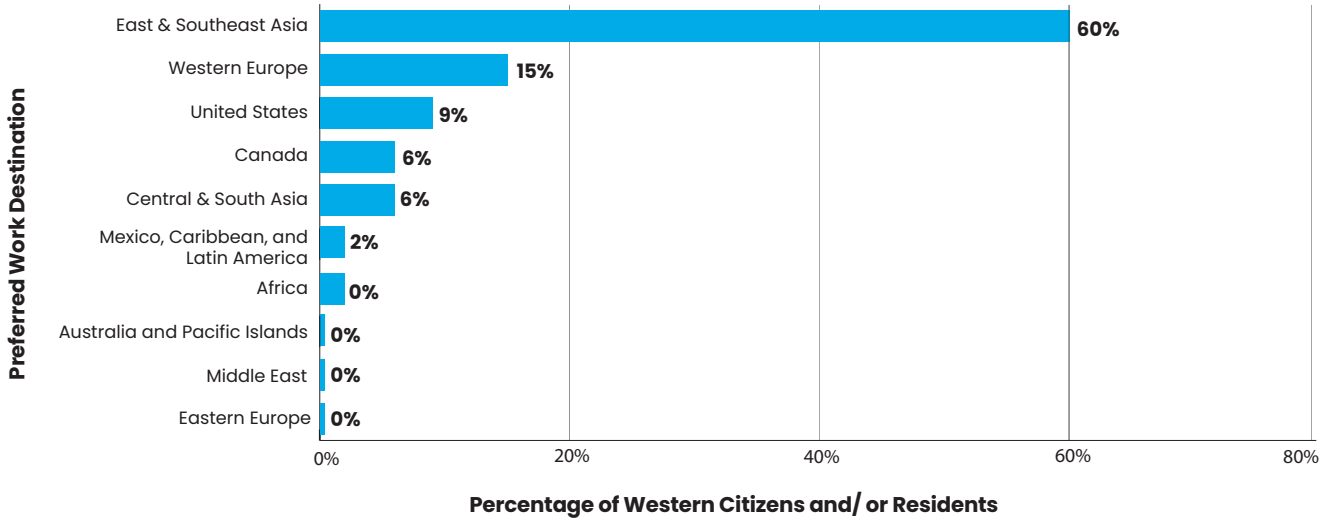
This increase in Western students seeking work in Asia goes hand in hand with promising hiring prospects for GME graduates in the region. According to GMAC's 2022 Corporate Recruiters Survey, 75 percent of companies in East and Southeast Asia are set to increase their hiring of business school talent in the next year. Additionally, 92 percent of corporate recruiters from East and Southeast Asia companies say they will hire MBA talent in the next year.

Business master's hiring is also promising; 92 percent of recruiters in the region say they plan on hiring Masters in Finance graduates and 97 percent plan to hire Masters in Management graduates. This exceeds global projected hiring for MiF (84%) and MiM (88%) graduates.

Ji predicts that these hiring figures send a strong message to Western applicants or those considering studying in Asia. "This is very powerful and attractive to young professionals in the West, who may be looking for a new direction after the upheaval of the pandemic in recent years," he explains.

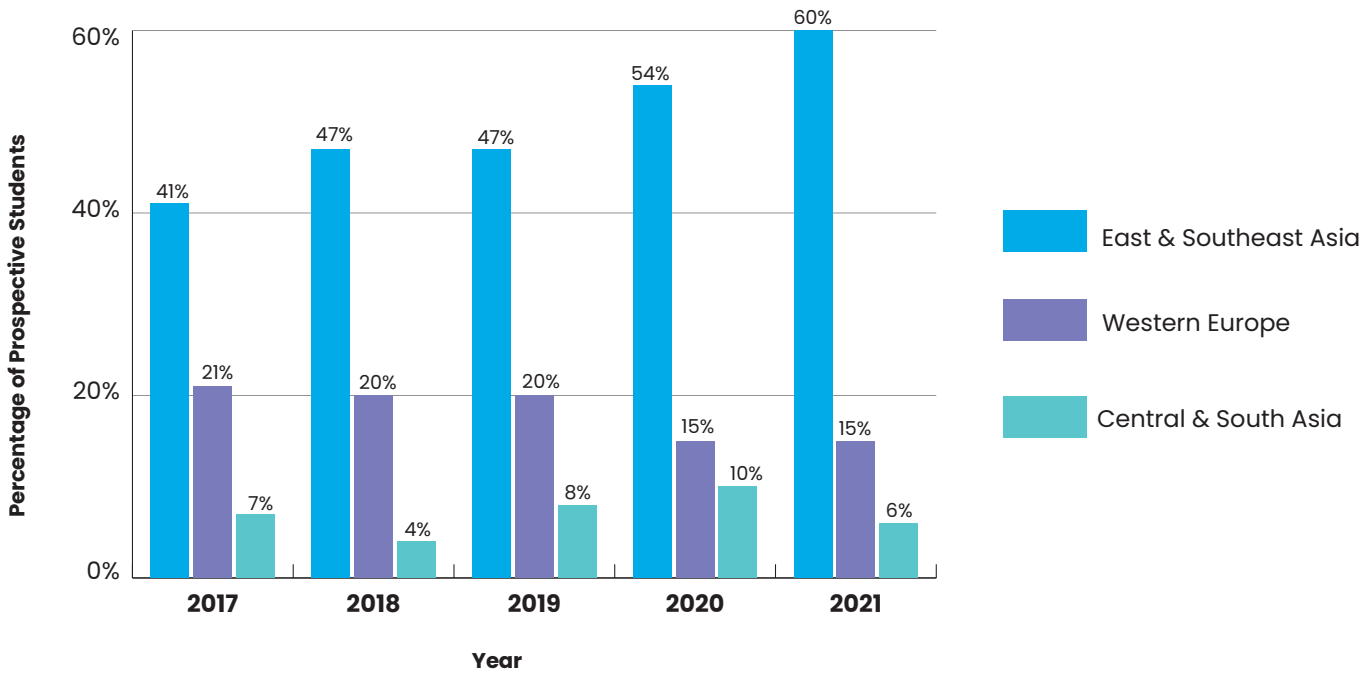
"Growth in Asia, particularly in emerging markets, is extremely powerful for us to attract MBA candidates. In real terms, growth means more opportunities for promotion, for driving projects and ultimately applying your MBA tool kit immediately instead of waiting your turn behind senior professionals at big corporates in the West."

Figure 15: Preferred Post-GME Work Destination for Western Citizens and/or Residents with Preferred Study Destination in Asia, 2021



Source: Graduate Management Admission Council. (2021). mba.com Prospective Students Survey.

Figure 16: Preferred Post-GME Work Destination for Western Citizens and/or Residents with Preferred Study Destination in Asia, 2017-2021



Source: Graduate Management Admission Council. (2021). mba.com Prospective Students Survey.

Target industries for Western applicants wishing to study in Asia follow global trends for GME applications. Consulting is the most popular industry, with 36 percent of Western applicants saying they wish to work in this field after their studies. Following consulting, other popular target industries for Western applicants include technology, investment banking, consumer products, and financial services.

Reviewing target industry data for Western applicants goes some way to explain study destination choices for these GME applicants. China's consulting industry, for example, showed particular resilience over the Covid-19 pandemic.⁵ Consulting is also the most popular career route of choice among all graduates in Singapore.⁶ The Big Threes strategy consulting firms command particular prestige in both destinations, and students wishing to follow this career path will inevitably find a wealth of opportunities in Asia.

Recommendations

Based on the insights outlined above, GMAC has devised three recommendations for business schools in Asia to improve Western student recruitment numbers.

1.) Zero in on specialized Business master's candidates.

It is clear that applicants already interested in studying in Asia are showing increased interest in Business master's programs. Business schools should capitalize on this trend with focused marketing campaigns for Business master's candidates, particularly those looking for Master of Finance and Master in Data Analytics programs.

2.) Emphasize how GME can be an opening to an exciting career in Asia.

Western applicants seeking GME in Asia are largely early-career applicants who seek opportunities in the region after their studies. As such, highlighting popular or prestigious career paths in Asia can help guide these students toward programs in the region.

3.) Expand opportunities for students to experience specific industries during their studies.

As well as being early-career applicants, Western students interested in studying in Asia are looking to gain work experience in popular sectors during their programs, whether through internships or study trips. Schools should expand opportunities for students to do so, and be sure to communicate these with applicants in marketing materials.

⁵ <https://reports.sourceglobalresearch.com/report/download/7958/extract/The-China-Consulting-Market-in-2021>

⁶ <https://www.consultancy.asia/news/3215/the-top-consulting-firms-in-singapore-for-graduates>

Conclusion

In order to successfully encourage Western students to make the leap to study in Asia, it is vital that institutions understand these applicants. This requires more than a basic look into demographic information about applicants or those interested in studying in Asia. Rather, it means fully understanding this audience's preferences both for general study and for studying in Asia specifically.

Steven Ji also points out that attracting Western students to programs in Asia does not start and end with business school marketing departments. Instead, it is established through a coherent strategy that links both the program and outreach efforts. "The entire program needs to adapt if we are to increase the international ratios," he asserts. "It impacts everything: from the dynamics of the class on day one of the program, right through to the career outlooks of the graduates."

As such, GMAC candidate data is the first of many steps toward increasing Western candidates' participation in GME courses in Asia. For recruitment efforts to be rewarded, schools should ensure that their degree programs, international outreach campaigns, alumni connections, and marketing materials all speak to Western students with a singular voice, addressing their unique priorities and career goals.

You can access research publications like GMAC's annual Prospective Students Survey and Application Trends Survey in the **gmac.com research library**.

Contact Information

For questions or comments regarding the data or analysis presented in this paper, please contact the GMAC Research Department at research@gmac.com.

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