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White Paper on Doctoral Study Abroad 2026

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Significance

As 2026 marks the inaugural year of the Chinese "15th Five-Year Plan," the core orientation of national study abroad policy has shifted from encouraging overseas study to precisely serving national strategic needs and cultivating reserve talent. According to the "2026 Guidelines for the Selection and Dispatch of State-funded Study Abroad Personnel" issued by the China Scholarship Council (CSC) (*Source: CSC, 2026*), the state continues to prioritize funding for doctoral students and joint training doctoral students to study abroad through channels such as the "State-funded Graduate Student Program for Building High-Level Universities". The program prioritizes supporting study abroad candidates to "renowned institutions, research institutes, laboratories, and other organizations in educationally and technologically advanced countries and regions," aiming to "cultivate a group of top-notch innovative talents with an international perspective, a thorough understanding of international rules, and the ability to participate in international affairs and competition" (*Source: CSC, 2026*).

From the perspective of overseas study trends, Chinese students' choices for doctoral studies exhibit significant characteristics of rationalization and diversification. Influenced by the international situation and the global economic environment, the United States is no longer the sole dominant destination, giving rise to a multi-polar landscape encompassing the United Kingdom, Hong Kong (China), and continental Europe. Notably, the Hong Kong region of China, leveraging its high-quality educational resources, safe environment, and talent attraction policies, has for the first time risen to become the second most popular study abroad destination. (*Sources: China Daily, 2026*) In terms of motivation, "gaining experience overseas first, then returning to China for development" has become the mainstream. In 2026, 42% of students plan to accumulate work experience abroad after graduation before returning to China at an opportune time. (*Sources:*) This indicates that contemporary doctoral students are more inclined to enhance their workplace bargaining power through overseas experience, pursuing pragmatic career development.

In this context, the research significance of pursuing an overseas doctoral degree has transcended mere "gilding" and evolved into a deep integration of personal academic aspirations with the national high-quality development strategy. For individuals, receiving rigorous scientific research training in top overseas laboratories (especially in engineering powerhouses like the US) is not only about obtaining high-level academic achievements but also about accumulating "invisible wealth," including cross-cultural communication skills, international academic network resources, and cutting-edge research perspectives. For the nation, these highly specialised doctoral graduates are valuable assets reserved for industrial upgrading and technological innovation. As a result, overseas doctoral study is becoming an increasingly important bridge linking China and the world, and a key component of the talent flow that supports domestic and international dual circulation, with long-term strategic significance.

1.2 Research Methodology

First, this study adopted a questionnaire-based research approach. The research team of REAL PhD designed a structured questionnaire targeting overseas doctoral students or students who are

applying for a PhD degree, utilising online self-administered questionnaires as the primary data collection method. The questionnaire design covered several dimensions, including demographic information (e.g., age and educational background), study abroad preparation paths (e.g., direct PhD admission, PhD after a master's degree, and PhD after professional work experience), preferred study destinations, application motivations, and influencing factors. The questionnaire was distributed through multiple targeted channels, covering domestic university students and overseas student communities, and 1044 valid samples were collected. After data processing, descriptive statistics and cross-tabulation analysis were used, focusing on identifying distribution patterns of doctoral study abroad behavior across different age groups and educational levels. The questionnaire survey provided quantitative evidence and empirical insights into the decision-making patterns of the surveyed participants.

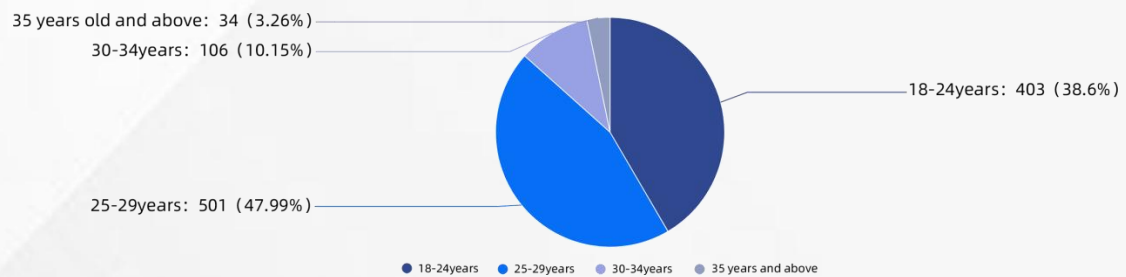
Second, to construct the research background and theoretical framework, this study adopted a literature review method, systematically examining relevant domestic and international literature on doctoral study abroad trends, applicant characteristics, admissions policies, and factors influencing doctoral study destination choices. It focused on referencing peer-reviewed studies published between 2021 and 2025, covering topics such as overseas doctoral training mechanisms, factors associated with doctoral application outcomes, and comparisons of doctoral admissions criteria across different countries. Through literature summarisation and comparative analysis, key factors influencing doctoral study abroad decisions were extracted. The literature review method effectively supplemented the research depth of empirical data, enhancing the academic rigor of this study.

1.3 Research Subjects

The survey subjects of this study primarily include prospective overseas doctoral students, current overseas doctoral candidates, and those who have already completed their overseas doctoral studies. The specific background information of participants is as follows:

Influencing Variable	Specific Variable Data	Percentage
Age Group	18–24 years old	38.6%
	25–29 years old	47.99%
	30–34 years old	10.15%
	35 years old and above	3.26%
Highest Educational Background	Undergraduate (currently studying)	15.52%
	Master's (currently studying)	38.98%
	Master's (graduated)	40.52%

	PhD (graduated)	1.82%
	Other	3.16%
Study Abroad Destination	United Kingdom	9.85%
	Australia	16.89%
	United States	7.99%
	Canada	2.11%
	Hong Kong (China)	29.73%
	Macau (China)	8.7%
	New Zealand	8.12%
	Singapore	7.54%
	Ireland	1.78%
	Malaysia	0.75%
	Europe (e.g., Germany, Netherlands, etc.)	5.92%
	Other	0.62%

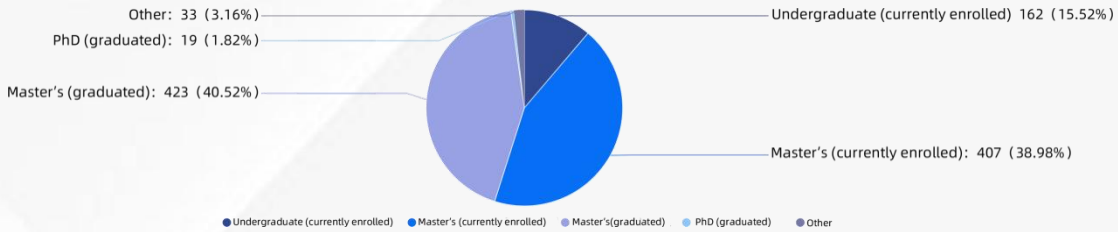


* Data source: REAL PhD Team 2026 Questionnaire Survey (N = 1044)

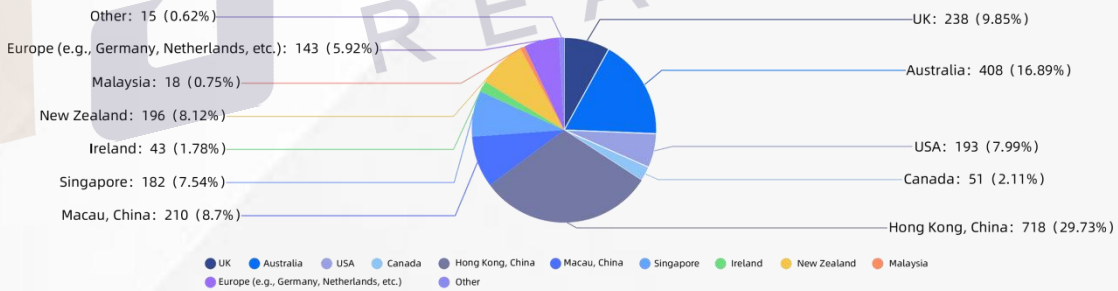
From the age group distribution, the 18–24 and 25–29 age groups together account for 86.59% (*Source: Data from REAL PhD*), making them the majority of overseas doctoral students. The 18–24 group is generally associated with direct PhD entry (e.g., bachelor-to-PhD programs) or early doctoral pursuit following undergraduate graduation. Respondents aged 25–29 were more likely to apply after one to three years of work experience or after completing a master's degree in China. This suggests that doctoral study abroad decisions are mostly concentrated in the continuous

education stage following undergraduate or Master's graduation.

Relatively speaking, doctoral students aged 30 and above accounted for a relatively small proportion of the sample. One possible explanation is that individuals in this age group may have entered a more established stage of their careers or taken on greater family responsibilities, making the opportunity costs of pursuing an overseas doctoral degree comparatively higher. In addition, some scholarship programs, including certain CSC-funded schemes, include explicit age eligibility requirements (less than 35 years old), which may reduce participation among older applicants. (*Source: CSC (China Scholarship Council)*)



From the perspective of educational background, respondents with a master's degree accounted for the largest proportion of the sample, indicating that pursuing a PhD after completing a master's degree remains a common pathway among prospective overseas doctoral applicants. Overseas doctoral programs (especially research-oriented ones) generally require applicants to demonstrate the ability to conduct independent research. The systematic research training received during the Master's stage (e.g., topic selection, experimentation, thesis writing) and the completed Master's thesis serve as key credentials for demonstrating research potential. In contrast, undergraduate graduates who lack solid research experience tend to have a comparatively lower success rate when applying directly for PhD programs.



In terms of destination choices, Hong Kong, China has emerged as the most preferred destination among respondents. Meanwhile, traditional study abroad countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States also account for significant shares.

Overall, the subjects of this study exhibit typical characteristics of being young, predominantly master's degree holders, and diverse in destination choices. Based on the comprehensive analysis, the data collected in this study offer a representative snapshot of Chinese overseas PhD students and provide a solid empirical foundation for this research.

Chapter 2 Macro Environment Analysis of Overseas Doctoral Study

2.1 Macro Context: Economic Environment and Work Issues

The current landscape of doctoral study abroad is being fundamentally reshaped by global and domestic forces, characterized by the core dynamics of intensifying global competition alongside escalating domestic demand.

Globally, the uneven recovery of the economy, the transformation of educational paradigms, and the restructuring of geopolitical relations are collectively reshaping the cost structures, talent mobility rules, and recruitment strategies of international doctoral education. Domestically, China's industrial upgrading has steadily expanded the demand for doctorate-holding professionals in both academic institutions and industries. Meanwhile, intensifying competition in higher education and the job market has forced a growing number of Master's graduates and early-career researchers to pursue overseas doctoral training as a strategic career pathway. These forces are driving doctoral study abroad from a narrow focus on gaining a degree toward a model of long-term capital investment, where opportunities and challenges coexist.

2.1.1 Global Context: Regional Divergence and Intensified Talent Competition

The global macro environment presents a distinct feature of intensified regional differentiation, national strategic games, and the reconstruction of international student mobility patterns. The three major variables of economic trends, educational reform, and geopolitics are intertwined, directly shaping the development direction, resource allocation, and competition landscape of global doctoral education. The competition for doctoral talent in various countries has risen to the national strategic level.

(1) Global Economy and Talent Mobility: Dual Differentiation in Costs and Flows

In 2026, the global economy continues to exhibit a trend of regional differentiation and slow recovery, which directly impacts doctoral study abroad through two primary channels: the cost of living and employment opportunities. These forces are driving a two-way talent flow pattern of retention in developed countries and diversion to emerging economies.

- **Developed countries: rising costs and strong talent retention.** To curb inflation, developed countries, including the US and the UK, have raised the financial requirements for international students. For example, the minimum maintenance funds requirement for international doctoral students in London, UK, increased from £1,483 per month (effective January 2025) to £1,529 per month (effective November 2025)—representing a 3.1% increase. The data come from a calculation: the stipulated monthly living cost was £1,483 in September 2024, which was updated to £1,529 in October 2025, representing a 3.1% increase in the 2025 updated figure compared with the 2024 benchmark. (*Source: UKCISA, UKCISA24*) Meanwhile, these countries have strengthened "talent retention" by expanding the quota of research positions. Notably, the UK's Graduate Route remains unchanged for doctoral graduates, who continue to receive three years of post-study work permission (*Source: UKCISA*). In the United States, the National Science Foundation (NSF) plays a central role in sustaining the research talent pipeline: its FY 2024 enacted budget stands at

\$9.06 billion, of which approximately 93% supports research, education, and related activities, reaching over 1,900 organizations and more than 350,000 researchers, entrepreneurs, students, and teachers annually (*Source: U.S. National Science Foundation, 2025*).

- **Emerging Economies: Low Cost and Strong Talent Diversion.** Emerging economies represented by Singapore, Malaysia, and Middle Eastern countries have created a strong "talent diversion" effect by increasing investment in scientific research and optimizing scholarship policies. For example, the Singapore A*STAR National Science Scholarship (PhD) provides full tuition coverage, a monthly stipend, and structured research training, offering a clear pathway for doctoral talent development. (*Source: A*STAR*) In Malaysia, the Malaysia International Scholarship (MIS) provides fully funded support for international students, including PhD candidates, covering tuition fees and providing a monthly living allowance. (*Source: Guidelines MIS 2026.pdf*) Middle Eastern countries, notably Saudi Arabia through its SDAIA scholarship programs, have targeted and attracted core doctoral talents in fields such as data and AI through competitive funding packages that exert a strong appeal to cost-conscious candidates. (*Source: SDAIA*)

(2) Educational Globalization and Talent Competition: From Academic Selection to National Game

The iteration of the education globalization model has propelled the form of doctoral training to upgrade to a full-chain competition system of "attraction - cultivation - retention". The global competition for doctoral talents has evolved from simple academic selection to direct competition for national strategic resources.

- **Innovation in Training Models:** The popularization of transnational joint training and the "micro-credential" system has made "online learning + offline research" the new normal for doctoral training. For example, the European Commission's EURAXESS-Researchers in Motion platform announced over 120 fully funded PhD positions across leading universities and research institutions. In parallel, the EU's Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) attracted 1,616 applications and will fund 141 doctoral programmes with a total of €617.18 million to train approximately 2,115 doctoral candidates. The selected projects involve international partnerships of 2,701 organisations across 61 countries. The programme encompasses Standard Doctoral Networks, Industrial Doctorates, and Joint Doctorates, reflecting the EU's broader commitment to international, interdisciplinary, and industry-academia collaboration in doctoral training. (*Source: EURAXESS, MSCA*)
- **Policy Dividend Intensifies:** Some countries have successively introduced policies to optimize full-chain support from attraction to retention. For example, the US extended the OPT visa duration for STEM doctoral students to 48 months (*Source: H.R. 9023, 118th Congress*); the United Kingdom provided a 3-year PSW work visa for doctoral graduates (*Source: GOVUK: Graduate Visa*) policy dividends have continuously strengthened their talent attractiveness, making global talent competition increasingly intense.

(3) Geopolitics and Student Source Reconfiguration: Combining Strictness with Lenience and Remodeling the Landscape

Geopolitical fragmentation has led to the "divergent strictness" of doctoral study abroad policies among countries, while the global doctoral student source structure has also undergone fundamental restructuring, and the rise of Emerging Markets is driving the transformation of institutional recruitment strategies toward diversification.

- **Policy Level: "Combining Leniency with Strictness."** On the tightening side, the US has cumulatively revoked over 8,000 student visas (mainly targeting STEM fields) (*Source: OpenAxo*). The United Kingdom has continuously strengthened the ATAS review for sensitive majors (*Source: (ATAS) guidance*). On the loosening side, Singapore has adopted a flexible approach to language requirements at the institutional level and offers family-friendly policies for international students, including Social Visit Pass sponsorship for spouses of full-time graduate research students (*Source: SBC Incorp*).
- **Student Source Level:** Traditional student source countries (such as China) are affected by the weakening of the demographic dividend, and the long-term scale of student sources faces pressure. Meanwhile, Southeast Asia and Africa are becoming core growth poles, with demand for overseas doctoral studies accelerating year by year. The rise of emerging student source markets is driving the doctoral recruitment strategies of global institutions to transform toward greater diversification. (*Source: The paper*)

2.1.2 Domestic Macroeconomic Environment: Demand-Driven and the Return of Value Rationality

The Chinese macro environment provides dual support of "demand-driven + channel supplementation" for doctoral study abroad. The shortage of high-end talents caused by industrial upgrading has laid the foundation for long-term value. The involvement of further education has driven the spillover of demand, and the rationalisation of study abroad decision-making and the improvement of supporting systems have further broadened the space for the doctoral study abroad market.

(1) Economic Transformation and Rational Investment: From "Face Consumption" to "Value Investment"

The rapid development of domestic strategic emerging industries has given rise to a large demand for doctoral talents, and the salary advantage of doctors with international research backgrounds is significant. Against this backdrop, the decision-making model of families sending their children abroad for studies is shifting from irrational "face consumption" to prudent "rational investment."

- **Demand Side: Rigid Gap in the Industry.** In strategic emerging industries such as domestic high-end manufacturing, the digital economy, and new energy, the total shortage of doctoral talents stands at approximately 200,000. The average wage for doctorate holders is about 40% higher than for master's degree holders, which provides a clear value outlet for doctoral students studying abroad. (*Source: ScienceNet, RIETI*)
- **Decision-making end: ROI-oriented.** Return on Investment (ROI) has become a core decision-making indicator for families when selecting overseas doctoral programs. Doctoral programs in destinations such as Singapore and Malaysia feature short study durations (3–4 years), total overseas study costs equivalent to only one-third to one-half of those in Europe and North America, and strong alignment with employment demands. These advantages cater to rational overseas education demands, leading to sustained rising market popularity. (*Sources: NTU Tuition Fee Information, Education Online*).

(2) Pressure to Advance Academically and Cognitive Iteration: From "Degree Gilding" to "Capacity Enhancement"

The spillover effect of domestic academic pressure has driven high-quality students to turn to overseas education, while the iterative evolution of Generation Z's perception of studying abroad

has propelled the core value of doctoral study abroad to shift from "degree gilding" to "ability enhancement."

- **Spillover of Academic Pressure:** The number of domestic postgraduate entrance exam applicants in 2026 dropped to 3.43 million, falling below the 3.5 million threshold. The highly competitive environment has prompted a large number of high-quality master's and doctoral candidates to turn to overseas applications, becoming the core source of incremental demand in the overseas doctoral study market. (Source: *China Graduate Admissions Information Network*, 2025)
- **Profound Cognitive Transformation:** As the main force of applicants, Generation Z has highly rational decision-making logic. They no longer blindly pursue university rankings but instead deeply weigh the professional research prospects, study abroad costs, and employment suitability. Studying abroad for a doctorate is positioned as a Critical Path to enhance academic capabilities and core competitiveness, rather than simply a "gilding" behavior, which lays a cognitive foundation for the long-term healthy development of the market

2.2 Employment Trends: Dividends and Barriers Coexist

The employment situation of the group of doctoral students studying abroad presents a core pattern of **"prominent domestic research orientation, coexistence of overseas opportunities and barriers."** The employment trend is driven by three core factors: **industry demand, policy orientation, and talent structure.** Overall employment competitiveness has undergone a profound transformation from relying on a "study-abroad background" to relying on "research capabilities and industrial transformation experience."

2.2.1 Domestic Employment: Strengthened Research Orientation and Evident Value Differentiation

The core of employment for domestic returnee doctoral students highlights a research orientation, forming a significant distinction from the groups of undergraduate and master's degree students who have studied abroad. The industry distribution is characterised by "leading in emerging fields and upgrading in traditional fields," while the weakening of the "returnee halo" and the reevaluation of value have become prominent trends.

(1) Industry and Salary Structure: Focus on Scientific Research and Polarisation

The domestic employment of returnee doctors is highly concentrated in scientific research-related fields, with industry distribution and salary levels showing distinct characteristics of differentiation and polarization.

- **Industry Landscape: "Emerging Sectors Lead, Traditional Sectors Upgrade".** In emerging sectors, biomedicine and artificial intelligence have become the core growth drivers. In the pharmaceutical manufacturing industry, technical R&D positions such as bioengineering/biopharmaceuticals (5.1%) and scientific researchers (2.7%) are among the top ten occupations recruiting returnees. The artificial intelligence industry attracts highly qualified returnees, with 84% of applicants for "AI Engineer" positions holding a master's degree and 38% being 2025 fresh graduates. In traditional sectors, finance and related fields

remain prominent, with finance, accounting, and law ranking among the top majors for returnees. The education sector also continues to absorb returnee talent. Overall, doctoral returnees account for 3.1% of all returning job-seeking overseas students, reflecting their status as a "scarce resource" in the high-end talent market. They are primarily employed in faculty positions at universities, research institutions, and R&D roles in cutting-edge fields such as biomedicine and artificial intelligence. (Source: *China Graduate Admissions Information Network, 2025*)

- **Salary Differentiation: Core Competencies Determine Premium.** Salary levels show a clear polarization by educational attainment. According to the report, doctoral returnees command an average monthly salary of 30,564 yuan, significantly higher than master's degree holders (17,028 yuan) and bachelor's degree holders (14,760 yuan). Doctoral positions are concentrated in research and cutting-edge technology R&D fields such as bioengineering and pharmaceutical R&D, reflecting the high value placed on top-tier research talent in the job market. (Sources: *Zhaopin, 2025 Report on Employment of Chinese Returnees*)

(2) Employment Pain Points and Value Reassessment: Fading Glory and Value Reassessment

The domestic employment satisfaction of returnee doctoral students is generally low, with "returns falling short of expectations" and "insufficient ability fit" being the core pain points. Multiple factors are causing the "halo of returnees" to fade, but their value in high-end scientific research fields remains irreplaceable.

- **Core Pain Points:** Data show that roughly half of returning doctoral students are satisfied with their current jobs. The main pain points are concentrated in "employment returns falling short of expectations" and "insufficient ability fit."
- **Value reassessment:** Affected by multiple factors, including rising overseas education expenses, expanded domestic doctoral training capacity, and a disconnect between industrial demands and fundamental research orientations, the incremental competitive edge brought by overseas academic credentials has weakened significantly. Nevertheless, evaluations of such value vary widely across industries. According to the Center for China and Globalization (CCG), for high-end research career tracks such as top-tier universities, research institutes, and core R&D departments of leading enterprises, a doctoral degree from world-renowned overseas institutions still serves as a vital entry threshold and core competitive advantage. (Source: *CCG, 2025*)

2.2.2 Overseas Employment: Policy Dividend Unleashed, Invisible Ceiling Still Exists

Overseas employment of returnee doctors, on the one hand, relies on the differentiated policies of various countries to gain development space, with highly concentrated employment fields and significant salary advantages; on the other hand, deep-seated pain points such as invisible ceilings, identity binding, and cultural adaptation continue to exist, and the dynamic adjustment of policies has become the core variable affecting their career planning.

(1) Differentiated policy landscape: Three major types, with both advantages and disadvantages coexisting

Employment and immigration policies targeting the doctoral population in various countries can be classified into three major types, which provide support for overseas employment of doctoral

students, but their uncertainty also poses challenges to long-term planning.

Immigration-oriented (Canada, Australia, New Zealand): Policies are significantly favourable, offering additional points for doctoral immigration applications and extended post-graduation work rights, among other incentives.

- **Research Absorption Type (US, United Kingdom):** Provides channels for doctoral students to enter core R&D positions, such as the 3-year STEM OPT in the US, the 3-year PSW work visa in the United Kingdom, and lower work visa salary thresholds. (*Source: UKVI Skilled Worker salary threshold; Important changes to the Skilled Worker route*)
- **Risks and Opportunities Coexist (US):** The H-1B visa policy is fraught with uncertainties, such as rising application fees and adjustments to the lottery mechanism. The dynamic changes in policy quotas across countries have all increased the difficulty of long-term overseas career planning for doctoral students (*Source: USCIS*).

(2) Employment Opportunities and Deep-seated Pain Points: The Three Big Mountains Under High Salaries

Overseas employment fields for doctoral degree holders are highly concentrated in technology, education, and scientific research. However, three deep-seated pain points have always constrained their long-term development:

- **Glass ceiling:** In corporate management promotions and university tenure evaluations, there is a significant disadvantage compared to local doctoral students.
- **Identity Binding:** Employment often relies on employer-bound identity permits such as OPT and work visas, which weakens salary bargaining power and career choice options.
- **Cultural Adaptation:** Language communication differences, workplace philosophy disagreements, etc., continue to impede career advancement and the upper limit of development.

2.2.3 Motivation Decoding: Three Major Factors Reshape the Employment Landscape

The changes in the employment trends of the group of overseas doctoral students are primarily driven by three factors: industry demand, policy orientation, and talent structure. These three factors interact with each other, promoting the transformation of the core of employment competitiveness from "overseas study background" to "core capabilities".

- **Industry demand-driven:** Domestic industrial upgrading and overseas industrial layout have jointly given rise to a massive demand for interdisciplinary and internationalised scientific research talents. For example, the shortage in the fields of biomedicine and AI reaches hundreds of thousands, which is the fundamental driving force behind the changing employment trends. (*Source: Life Science Nord*).
- **Policy Orientation Impact:** The dynamic adjustments of talent introduction policies across domestic regions and work visa and immigration policies in overseas countries jointly shape the employment flow of the doctoral group. Policy uncertainty has become a core variable in overseas employment planning.
- **Upgrading of Talent Structure:** Currently, STEM majors account for a large proportion of international doctoral students, and combined with the weakening of the "returnee aura," it has forced a shift in the core of the employment competitiveness of the doctoral group: from

simply relying on "overseas study background" to relying on "scientific research and innovation capabilities and industrial transformation experience," which has become the key for them to gain a foothold in the workplace (*Source: Sina Finance*).

2.3 Policy Orientation: The Dual Logic of Incentives and Constraints

The overseas and domestic doctoral study policies present a **core pattern of "parallel implementation of full-chain domestic support and tightened compliance, coexistence of differentiated overseas adjustments and dynamic risks."** Policy orientation is directly reshaping the market structure, group decision-making logic, and industry service models, driving the market to transform from "scale expansion" to "quality compliance."

2.3.1 Domestic Policy: Talent Recruitment Upgrade, with Standardization and Constraints Going Hand in Hand

Domestic policies focus on attracting high-end doctoral talent while strengthening overseas study certification and industry compliance management and control, forming a dual orientation of "talent attraction guarantee + regulatory constraints."

- **Talent Recruitment Upgrade:** Chinese first-tier and new first-tier cities have established a full-chain support system of "household registration + relocation subsidy + research start-up funds + entrepreneurship support," with a focus on national strategic sectors such as AI, new energy, and biomedicine. (*Source: China Briefing*)
- **Certification Specification:** According to the Chinese Service Center for Scholarly Exchange (CSCSE), the policy of not certifying remote teaching textbooks has been implemented, guiding doctoral overseas study to return to its academic essence. (*Source: Xinhuanet, covering policies released by the CSCSE*)
- **Educational Orientation:** Continuously increase the number of government-sponsored doctoral students (reaching around 6,600 in 2025) and guide the flow of doctoral students studying abroad to precisely align with national strategic needs. (*Source: Official website of the China Scholarship Council (CSC)*)

2.3.2 Overseas Policy: Differential Adjustment, Dynamic Risks Emerge

Overseas doctoral study policies exhibit the characteristics of "differentiated adaptation and dynamic adjustment," mainly divided into two major orientations: tightened control and relaxed convenience. Policy uncertainty has become a key variable influencing study abroad decisions.

- **Tightening Controls (US):** On December 23, 2025, DHS announced a final rule replacing the random H-1B lottery with a weighted selection process favoring higher-skilled and higher-paid workers, effective February 27, 2026. The annual H-1B cap remains at 85,000—65,000 under the regular cap and an additional 20,000 reserved for individuals holding master's or doctoral degrees from U.S. institutions. There is no separate quota for PhD holders. (*Source: USCIS*)
- **Relaxed and Convenient (United Kingdom):** From July 22, 2025, the general Skilled Worker salary threshold increased to £41,700, while the PhD-relevant threshold is £37,500

and the STEM PhD threshold is £33,400. The Graduate visa offers PhD graduates 3 years of post-study work (vs. 2 years for bachelor's/master's), though from January 1, 2027, the standard duration will reduce to 18 months, while the 3-year PhD provision remains unchanged. (Source: GOVUK; Morris Davidson)

- **Immigration Orientation (Canada, Australia):** Doctoral graduates receive significant policy preferences in provincial nominations and skilled immigration, but need to closely monitor the risks associated with annual quota adjustments.
- **Emerging High Ground (Germany, France, Ireland, and Malta):** Leveraging advantages such as tuition-free or low-cost education, generous scholarship schemes, and high cost-effectiveness, these countries are increasingly attractive destinations for doctoral studies. With strong research infrastructure, active internationalisation strategies, and favourable post-study work provisions, they offer competitive and diverse alternatives to traditional Anglophone destinations, steadily reshaping the global landscape of doctoral education. For example, Ireland exemplifies this trend through its structured doctoral framework and substantial government investment. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) oversees a national system that provides grant funding to institutions, supporting PhD stipends and research infrastructure. This is complemented by initiatives like the Government of Ireland International Education Scholarship (GOI-IES), which offers full tuition waivers to non-EU doctoral candidates, making the country a strategically attractive option for international researchers. (Source: Higher Education Authority, Ireland)

2.3.3 Policy Stacking Effect: Reshaping the Doctoral Overseas Study Market

Policy adjustments are reshaping the doctoral study abroad market from three core dimensions:

- **Pattern Reshaping:** The proportion of traditional destinations is slowly contracting, while the market share of high-cost-performance emerging destinations such as Germany, France, Ireland, and Malaysia is on the rise, officially forming a diversified pattern.
- **Rationalization of decision-making:** Policy adaptability, cost-effectiveness of studying abroad, and the alignment of majors with national strategies are gradually replacing the "sole focus on institutional rankings" as the core considerations in group decision-making.
- **Service Model Transformation:** The traditional service model of "pure application and admission" has been broken, with research background enhancement, policy interpretation, and career planning becoming core modules. Meanwhile, compliance has become the bottom line for industry survival, and leading institutions have significantly strengthened their competitive advantages by virtue of their full-chain service capabilities and compliance advantages.

2.4 Doctoral Degree Advancement Pathways: Multiple Choices and Adaptation Logic

Combining the differentiation characteristics of the macro environment with the core orientation of employment trends, the path of doctoral degree promotion has been formed as "**Overseas study, domestic further study, and public sector development.**" The three core tracks present the core characteristics of "path diversification, personalized selection, and adaptability as king."

The core logic of path selection should be **"fit their own development demands, refuse to blindly follow the trend."**

2.4.1 Overseas Education: Comprehensive Competence Decides Success, Structural Opportunities Emerge

The competition for overseas doctoral admissions is becoming increasingly fierce, presenting the dual characteristics of "qualitative changes in admission criteria and prominent structural opportunities". Comprehensive research ability has become the core competitiveness, while opportunities such as the expansion of emerging majors and increased scholarships provide differentiated choice space for applicants with different backgrounds.

(1) Qualitative change in admission criteria: The end of the sole focus on scores

By 2026, global doctoral admissions have completed the paradigm shift from "standardised thresholds" to "comprehensive ability assessment." Standardised scores are only basic screening criteria, while research fit, academic output, and comprehensive performance have become the core considerations for admission.

- **Differential performance:** Top US institutions place greater emphasis on the alignment of research directions and strong recommendation letters. UK G5 institutions have rigid requirements for GPA and IELTS scores and highly rely on research proposals (RP) and interview performance. Competition in Hong Kong, China, and Singapore has reached a fever pitch, with a notable proportion of admitted STEM students possessing research outputs, such as peer-reviewed publications or conference proceedings, from their Master's programmes.
- **Common Trend:** Most admissions officers ranked "the alignment of research experience with the application direction" as the top consideration, and standardised test scores are no longer the core competitiveness.

(2) Core Opportunities: Four Structural Breakthroughs

Despite intensifying competition, four major structural opportunities have emerged, providing applicants with diversified breakthrough paths:

- **Expansion of Emerging Majors:** Doctoral programs in interdisciplinary fields such as AI ethics, new energy materials, and ESG management continue to be added, reflecting a broader national trend of prioritising strategic emerging disciplines in higher education.
- **Scholarship Increase:** The French Eiffel Scholarship has been raised to 2,100 euros per month (*Source: The France Excellence Eiffel scholarship program*). Dutch position-based doctoral programs (paid employees with a monthly after-tax salary of 1,400–2,200 euros) are the most cost-effective in Europe (*Source: Jiaodong Online, 2025*).
- **High-cost-performance destination diversion:** Germany (tuition-free at most public universities, with strong industry integration), Malaysia (branch campuses of UK, US, and Australian universities, with significantly lower costs than main campuses), and Ireland (immigration-friendly policies, emerging European research hub) are effectively diverting students from traditional popular destinations.
- **Value Depressions of Research-based Programs:** Compared to taught master's programmes, research-based master's or PhD programmes generally offer greater scholarship availability and clearer pathways to doctoral studies, making them a strategic entry point for

students pursuing an academic career.

2.4.2 Domestic Further Education: The Halo of Returned Overseas Students and Localization Challenges

The number of returnees applying for domestic doctoral programs has increased significantly, with the core driving force being the adaptation of overseas backgrounds to the domestic market. The special policies for returnees at top-tier institutions and extremely low training costs have made it the preferred path for accumulating local resources and enhancing employment competitiveness.

- **Data and Motivation:** The number of doctoral students enrolled nationwide reached an amount of over 600,000 in 2024, representing an approximately 50% increase compared with more than 400,000 in 2020 (*Source: 2024 Statistical Communiqué, 2020 National Statistical Bulletin*). The core motivation lies in achieving the background superposition of "overseas academic vision + domestic industry adaptation" through domestic further education, thus addressing the pain point of "insufficient ability adaptation."
- **Policy and Value:** Top universities such as Tsinghua and Peking have established special channels for returnees from overseas (exempting written tests or language requirements), with special scholarships covering tuition fees and living expenses. Notably, the national government provides a basic living allowance for all full-time doctoral students (excluding those with fixed salaries): RMB 15,000 per year for those at central government-affiliated universities, and no less than RMB 13,000 per year for those at local universities (*Source: China Graduate Admissions Information Network*). This financial support, combined with the relatively low overall cost of the domestic doctoral stage, makes the "overseas Master's + domestic PhD" pathway highly attractive for families seeking a rational return on educational investment. Those with this background have significantly enhanced competitiveness in teaching positions at universities and R&D positions in enterprises. Combined with the relatively low cost of the domestic doctoral stage, this pathway highly meets the needs of families for rational investment.

2.4.3 Public Sector: Trend toward specialised positions, with the adaptability threshold raised

The demand for returnee doctors to enter the public sector continues to grow, with their advantages concentrated in high-end foreign-related positions and scientific research policy positions. However, obstacles such as insufficient professional fit are prominent, and they need to prepare for exams in advance and focus precisely.

- **Opportunities and Advantages:** In recent years, the proportion of returning doctoral students entering the public sector has increased significantly. Their competitive advantages are particularly pronounced in two types of positions: high-end foreign-related positions (such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Commerce, etc.) and scientific research policy positions (such as the Ministry of Science and Technology, the Chinese Academy of Sciences, etc.). These positions increasingly value international academic backgrounds, cross-cultural communication skills, and familiarity with global research governance.
- **Challenges and Responses:** The main obstacles include insufficient professional suitability, unfamiliarity with the domestic examination system, and differences in career development

expectations. To address these challenges, candidates should adopt a highly focused strategy: identify target positions early, prepare intensively for the competitive examinations, and accumulate relevant practical experience during their overseas studies to achieve a precise fit between returnee profiles and public sector needs.

2.4.4 Path Selection Strategy: Adaptation is better than blind following, and rationality prevails over popularity

Path selection should be based on one's own development plan, precisely match the core characteristics of each path, and avoid blindly chasing hotspots.

Dimension	Overseas PhD	Domestic PhD	Public Sector
Focus	Independent research, cross-cultural competence	Exam skills, local system fit	Policy understanding, execution
Cost	High (¥300k–600k/year); budget ¥100k–250k/year	Very low (≤¥15k/year)	Exam costs only
Career Fit	Global R&D & academia	Domestic academia & R&D	Foreign affairs & research roles
Ideal For	Global ambition, strong academics	Local focus, network building	Stability, specialized majors

(Source: compiled by the REAL PhD research team based on policy documents and industry data)

Strategic Recommendations:

- **For those inclined toward international development:** Seek out overseas programmes and scholarships that offer strong value for money, with particular attention to emerging interdisciplinary fields where funding and research opportunities are expanding.
- **For those inclined to focus on local development:** Make full use of the special channels for returnees from top domestic universities to accumulate local academic and professional networks while enhancing employability.
- **For those seeking career stability:** Begin familiarising yourself with the domestic public sector examination system 1–2 years in advance, and strategically target positions that value international academic backgrounds.
- **For those without a clear plan yet:** The "overseas+domestic" connection path can be used as a risk-hedging option, taking into account both international perspectives and local adaptability, to achieve a closed loop of the core logic of the full text.

2.5 Trends in the Overseas Doctoral Study Industry: From Scale Expansion to Value Deep Cultivation

In 2026, doctoral study abroad will face three major challenges: the industry itself, the study

abroad population, and the external environment. Meanwhile, destination diversification, major rationalisation, service upgrading, and industry compliance will become the core development trends.

The study abroad sector and its prospective students are currently navigating a complex array of challenges originating from three interconnected dimensions.

At the industry level, small and medium-sized agencies undermine trust through illegal commitments and uneven service quality, while polarised technology adoption and continuously rising costs further strain the sector's sustainability. For students and their families, these industry issues are compounded by extreme competition for doctoral admissions at top institutions, persistent financial burdens, and a marked increase in mental health challenges, with anxiety rates among international students rising noticeably over the past decade. Additionally, employment satisfaction among returnees remains low, and uncertainties in both domestic and international policies have intensified decision-making anxiety.

Compounding these individual pressures, the broader external environment offers little respite. The weak global economic recovery, exemplified by the cancellation of over 4,000 federal grant awards at more than 600 U.S. colleges and universities in the first half of 2025 alone, has forced some American universities to reduce or pause PhD admissions. This funding crunch not only tightens opportunities in the United States but also indirectly reshapes the global doctoral landscape, potentially diverting applicants to other destinations and intensifying the overall competition and uncertainty in the international education market. (Source: *Scientify RESEARCH*)

Prospects for Development Trends in 2026:

- **Destination diversification:** The proportion of traditional destinations such as Europe, the United States, Australia, Hong Kong, and Singapore will gradually decline, while the market share of emerging cost-effective destinations such as Germany, France, Ireland, and Malaysia will continue to rise.
- **Rationalization of major selection:** Applications for applied and interdisciplinary majors (AI, new energy, ESG, biomedicine) will see a sustained sharp surge. The proportion of applications for pure liberal arts and pure science majors will continue to shrink.
- **Service Model Upgrade:** Technology empowerment (AI school selection and intelligent application essays) and full-cycle companion services (covering pre-application, during application, post-application, and career planning) will become standard features of leading institutions, providing applicants with more accurate decision-making support.
- **Deepening of industry compliance:** The access standards for the overseas study service industry continue to rise, and data compliance costs have been incorporated into the normal operation of institutions. The industry will form a competitive landscape of "full-chain and brand-driven development of leading institutions, and differentiated and vertical deep cultivation of small and medium-sized institutions."

Chapter 3 The Triple Logic of Doctoral Study Abroad Choices

3.1 Policy Landscape: Global Game and China's Role

Currently, **global doctoral study abroad has formed an overall pattern of "agglomeration in core countries and complementary multi-directional flows."** Policies of various countries are all guided by three core principles: scientific research innovation, talent retention, and the integration of industry, academia, and research, presenting a development trend of "coexistence of differentiated competition and collaborative cooperation." As core destinations for study abroad, the US, the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia, and Canada rely on their respective scientific research advantages to establish distinctive and well-developed doctoral study abroad policies, focusing on different dimensions such as research priority, efficient cultivation, research freedom, innovation-driven development, and diversified cultivation, respectively. All countries continue to enhance their attractiveness to international doctoral talents through diversified funding support and convenient talent retention policies.

3.1.1 Global Policy Landscape: Overall Structure and Core Orientation

Combining the current development situation and policy practices of global doctoral study abroad, its overall pattern and core orientation can be summarised as "one core pattern, three common orientations, and one development trend."

In the overall landscape, the scale of global doctoral students has continued to expand, forming a pattern centered around countries with strong scientific research capabilities and characterised by complementary development among countries. The United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia, and Canada remain the primary destinations for international doctoral talent, benefiting from well-established research systems and substantial funding support. Meanwhile, as the OECD's Trends Shaping Education 2025 notes, shifting geopolitical dynamics are challenging international research collaboration, requiring a balance between research security and open scientific cooperation (*Source: OECD, 2025*). Unlike overseas study at the bachelor's and master's stages, doctoral overseas policies prioritise research value instead of merely credential upgrading or cultural immersion, and this constitutes the core positioning distinction of international doctoral study policies worldwide.

In terms of core orientation, global doctoral study abroad policies exhibit three common characteristics: First, they focus on scientific research innovation, deeply integrating doctoral training with national scientific research strategies and emphasizing the enhancement of doctoral students' original scientific research capabilities. Second, they strengthen talent attraction and retention by attracting international top doctoral talents through supporting policies such as visas, immigration, and employment and promoting their long-term service to the country's scientific research and industrial development. Third, they promote the integration of industry, academia, and research, generally encouraging doctoral students to participate in enterprise scientific research projects and interdisciplinary research topics, strengthening the transformation ability of scientific research results, and achieving precise alignment between doctoral training and the needs of scientific research and industry. This is also one of the core features that distinguish doctoral-level overseas study from undergraduate and master's-level study.

In terms of development trends, global doctoral study abroad policies exhibit the characteristics of coexistence of differentiated competition and collaborative cooperation. Developed countries, leveraging their advantages in scientific research resources, focus on attracting and cultivating high-end doctoral talents, with policy design becoming more refined and personalised. Developing countries, on the other hand, take cultivating local scientific research talents as their core objective. With policies leaning towards funding support and incentives for returning home, and actively carrying out joint doctoral training programs with developed countries, developing countries leverage external resources to improve the quality of local doctoral training, thus forming a global doctoral study abroad ecosystem featuring complementary advantages and collaborative development.

3.1.2 Decoding Key National Policies: Differentiated Competition Strategies

The US, the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia, and Canada, as the core destinations for global doctoral study abroad, have built a comprehensive policy system around four key dimensions of doctoral training: research attributes, funding support, supervisor matching, and talent retention, each with its own focus and distinct characteristics.

(1) US

The US is the top destination for doctoral study worldwide, as well as the country with the largest scale of doctoral training and the strongest scientific research capabilities. The core orientation of its policies is "research priority, diversified funding, and talent retention." According to the report from the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (NCSES) 2024, the number of enrolled doctoral students in science, engineering, and health fields in the United States reached 312,148, constituting a substantial proportion of the doctoral population, overwhelmingly concentrated in STEM disciplines. (Source: NCSES)

In terms of admission and cultivation, US doctoral programs adopt the "application-review system," with the core assessment focusing on the applicant's research potential, academic background, and the alignment of their research plan. The program duration is typically 5–6 years, and supervisors have the dominant authority over scientific research guidance, funding allocation, and academic output of doctoral students.

In terms of financial support, most international doctoral students can receive various types of funding, which are mainly divided into three categories: Research Assistant (RA), Teaching Assistant (TA), and Fellowship.

In terms of talent retention, STEM doctoral graduates are eligible for a 24-month extension of Optional Practical Training (OPT), providing a total of up to 36 months of post-graduation work authorisation (Source: US Citizenship and Immigration Services, STEM OPT Extension).

(2) UK

The United Kingdom is the core destination for doctoral study in Europe, with its policy orientation being "efficient cultivation, focused funding, and visa convenience."

In terms of admission and cultivation, doctoral programs in the United Kingdom also adopt the "application-review system," focusing on examining the alignment between the research plan and the supervisor's research direction, with a relatively short duration of study and an emphasis on research efficiency and the output of results.

In terms of funding support, funding is primarily provided by the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), individual institutions, and research foundations. The UKRI minimum doctoral stipend

for the 2025/26 academic year is £20,780 (*Source: UKRI, 2025*). Funding available for international doctoral students includes UKRI scholarships, institutional scholarships, and specialised research scholarships.

In terms of visas and employment, the United Kingdom provides a "Student Visa" (Student Visa) for international doctoral students, allowing them to work 20 hours per week and full-time during holidays, providing them with flexible channels for practice and income generation. (*Source: UKCISA, Student Work, 2026*)

(3) Germany

The core orientation of Germany's doctoral study abroad policy is "research freedom, tuition-free, and integration of industry, academia, and research." In 2024, the number of doctoral students in Germany will reach 212,400, of which international doctoral students account for 25% (*Source: Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis)*).

In terms of admission and training, German doctoral programs adopt the "supervisor invitation system," with the core assessment focusing on the applicant's research ability and the feasibility of the research plan. The duration of study is usually 3 to 4 years, implementing the supervisor responsibility system, and granting doctoral students full research freedom.

In terms of financial support, Germany implements a "tuition-free" policy, where all international doctoral students can enjoy full tuition exemption and only need to pay a modest annual registration fee. Funding mainly comes from Humboldt Foundation scholarships, institutional research project grants, and corporate sponsorships.

In terms of talent retention, doctoral graduates are eligible for an 18-month job-seeking visa upon completion of their studies, allowing them to stay in Germany to look for employment. Those who secure a qualified position may apply for the EU Blue Card or a regular work visa, which can lead to permanent residency and citizenship pathways. The EU Blue Card offers facilitated access to the German labour market for highly skilled non-EU graduates, with reduced salary requirements for recent graduates (€41,041.80 per year as of 2024) (*Source: DAAD, 2024*).

(4) Australia

The core orientation of Australia's doctoral study abroad policy is "scientific research innovation, generous funding, and convenient immigration."

In terms of admission and cultivation, the "application-review system" is adopted, focusing on assessing academic background, research potential, and the feasibility of research plans. The program duration is 3–4 years, concentrating on the writing of doctoral dissertations and original research.

In terms of funding support, the funding system mainly includes the government scholarship Research Training Program (RTP), institutional scholarships such as the University International Postgraduate Award (UIPA) from the University of New South Wales (UNSW), and research project funding.

In terms of talent retention, Australia provides a fast-track "skilled migration" pathway for doctoral graduates, which offers additional migration points and allows them to apply for a 2-4-year work visa, significantly enhancing their competitiveness in migration and employment (*Source: Australian Government*).

(5) Canada

The core orientation of Canada's doctoral study abroad policy is "diverse scientific research, comprehensive funding, and talent priority."

In terms of admission and cultivation, the "application-review system" is adopted, comprehensively evaluating the applicant's academic background, research potential, and research plan. The program duration is 4–5 years, emphasising interdisciplinary integration and practical application.

In terms of funding support, funding is mainly provided by three major research institutions (NSERC, SSHRC, CIHR), which jointly implement the Canada Graduate Research Scholarship – Doctoral (CGS-D) program, providing doctoral students with an annual grant of CAD 40,000 for a period of 3 years, thus establishing a comprehensive and diversified funding support system (*Source: Alberta*).

In terms of talent retention, Canada provides a "fast-track immigration" channel for doctoral graduates, streamlining the application process and attracting doctoral talent to stay in the country for the long term.

3.1.3 China's Policy Positioning: From a Country of Overseas Student Outflow to a Participant in Talent Competition

Policies related to doctoral study in China have formed a pattern of "two-way efforts, perfect guarantee". On the one hand, through diversified funding and comprehensive services, support Chinese citizens to pursue doctoral degrees overseas; on the other hand, through preferential funding, access, and employment policies, attract top doctoral talents from around the world to study in China.

Regarding Chinese citizens pursuing doctoral degrees overseas, the relevant policies take "fallback funding and service support" as the core. In terms of funding, the China Scholarship Council (CSC) provides core funding, and universities and research institutions also establish special funding programs. For example, in terms of services and support, the CSC cooperates with Chinese embassies and consulates abroad to provide pre-departure training, academic connections, emergency assistance, and other services, and the China Service Center for Scholarly Exchange under the Ministry of Education provides services such as degree certification, employment guidance, and household registration support for returnees. For example, returnee doctoral students can directly obtain household registration in first-tier cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, and enjoy preferential policies such as housing subsidies and research start-up funds (*Source: Guicai*).

Regarding overseas doctoral students coming to China to study, relevant policies are guided by the principles of "attracting talent and optimising the environment." In terms of funding, the Chinese Government Scholarship, High-Level Postgraduate Program, has been established to provide full tuition waivers, on-campus accommodation, comprehensive medical insurance, and a living allowance. The living allowance is set at RMB 3,500 per month for doctoral students, with a funding period of 3 to 4 years. In terms of admission, the "application-review system" is adopted, and some universities offer bilingual teaching to lower the language threshold. In terms of employment and development, overseas doctoral students can enjoy the same employment benefits as Chinese doctoral graduates after graduation, and obtain long-term residence facilitation through the "talent visa" channel. (*Source: University of Jinan*)

3.2 Regional Selection: Differentiated Decision-Making Driven by Scientific Research Resources

The choice of study abroad region during the doctoral stage is centered on "matching of scientific research resources" as the core orientation, which is fundamentally different from the selection logic during the undergraduate and master's stages, presenting "high concentration, obvious differentiation, and prominent regionalization trends" characteristics. Major regions such as North America, Europe, and East Asia of doctoral international students tend to maintain their core positions in the future while showing a trend of diversified development.

3.2.1 Core Features: Scientific research resources are directed toward specific areas, and regional differentiation has become the norm

The core of choosing a study-abroad region for doctoral studies is "matching research resources," that is, the degree of match between regional research capabilities, cutting-edge layout, supervisor resources, etc., and one's own research direction, which overall presents characteristics of high concentration, distinct differentiation, and prominent regionalisation. Overall, the choice of doctoral study destinations presents characteristics of high concentration, distinct differentiation, and emerging regionalisation.

In addition, the choice of overseas study destinations for doctoral students also shows obvious "differentiated" characteristics: students majoring in cutting-edge STEM fields tend to choose North America and Europe, while those who value cultural fit and career development are more inclined to choose East Asia. In recent years, a regionalisation trend has become increasingly prominent, with a growing number of doctoral students opting for intra-regional mobility, leveraging regional research collaboration networks and scholarship programmes to enhance their academic capabilities.

(1) North America: The Core of Global Doctoral Education

North America hosts the largest share of global international PhD students, standing as the top destination by virtue of world-class research resources, abundant funding, and a strong academic environment. The United States accounts for 38% of the global total. NSF statistics indicate that international PhD graduates make up 38% of their doctoral cohort. (*Sources: OECD, NSF*) Although Canada hosts a smaller share of international doctoral students compared to the United States, it offers a well-developed funding ecosystem, with federal scholarships such as the CGRS-D (CAD \$40,000/year for up to three years) now open to international applicants, alongside institutional funding packages that often cover tuition and living expenses. Drawbacks of pursuing a doctorate in North America include high living expenses, lengthy training cycles (typically 5–6 years in the US, 4–5 years in Canada), and intense academic competition. (*Source: NSERC/SSHRC/CIHR, CGRS-D Program, 2026*)

(2) Europe: A strong scientific research foundation, friendly and diverse policies

Europe ranks as the second most popular destination, boasting profound academic heritage, diversified training frameworks, and favorable international student policies. Among European countries, the United Kingdom accounts for a relatively large share: HESA data show that in 2024/25, a total of 26,175 doctorate degrees were awarded in the UK, of which 54% were awarded to UK students and 46% to international students (*Source: UKRI*). According to the Basic Data on Universities and Research Establishments in Germany 2026 released by the German Science and Humanities Council (Wissenschaftsrat), the annual number of doctoral

degrees awarded in Germany has remained stable at around 28,000 in recent years (*Source: Galvanize Test Prep, 2026*). Drawbacks of pursuing a doctorate in Europe include obvious language barriers in non-English-speaking countries, uneven distribution of scientific research resources across institutions and regions, and significant differences in training standards and funding levels among countries.

(3) East Asia: An Emerging Hotspot Region

East Asia ranks as a significant destination for international doctoral students globally, and has seen a notable increase in attractiveness in recent years, thanks to its high-quality research resources, convenient cultural adaptation, low cost of living, and friendly talent retention policies. Among East Asian destinations, Singapore has a substantial proportion of international doctoral students, with a high scholarship coverage rate. Hong Kong (China) is another major destination, offering the generous Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme (HKPFS), and the majority of its doctoral students come from the Chinese mainland. Japan and South Korea serve as supplementary destinations. Challenges in the East Asian doctoral education landscape include relatively lower internationalisation levels in certain institutions compared to their Western counterparts, and in some cases, less autonomy in doctoral training structures.

(4) Other regions: great potential but limited scientific research resources

Regions such as South America, Africa, and Oceania account for only a small share of all international doctoral students worldwide. Their advantages include low study-abroad costs and low application thresholds; their drawbacks are a shortage of scientific research resources and insufficient funding, making it difficult to meet high-end scientific research needs.

3.2.2 Key Factors and Evolution Trends: From Ranking-Driven to Resource Adaptation

The core influencing factors for doctoral students' choice of study abroad regions, ranked by importance, are: Research Resource Fit, Policy Support, Supervisor Resources, Cost of Living, and Career Development Prospects. Among them, Research Resource Fit is the primary consideration for doctoral students when choosing a region, directly determining their research output and academic growth.

Over the next five years, global doctoral study abroad is expected to exhibit a trend of "decreasing proportion in core regions, the rise of East Asia, and prominent regionalization and diversification." North America and Europe will still occupy a core position, but their relative share is likely to decline as competition from Asian higher education systems intensifies. In contrast, the share of doctoral students choosing East Asian destinations is expected to rise, positioning the region as an important growth pole for global doctoral study abroad.

3.3 Professional Selection: Resonance between Cutting-edge Research and Demand-driven Forces

The choice of majors for doctoral study abroad is centered on "**research orientation**" and "**demand-driven**," presenting characteristics of being cutting-edge, cross-integrated, and highly differentiated. STEM majors are the core popular choices for doctoral study abroad globally, while humanities, social sciences, and other majors exhibit differentiated development.

3.3.1 Core Features: The Convergence of Academic Frontiers and Industrial Demands Forms a Momentum

The choice of majors for doctoral students studying abroad revolves around "scientific research and innovation" and "market demand," focusing on cutting-edge fields, aligning with industrial needs, and emphasizing interdisciplinary integration. Across OECD countries, STEM fields account for a substantial share of doctoral degrees awarded—approximately twice the share at the bachelor's level—reflecting the critical role of science and engineering in building national innovation systems. The trend of interdisciplinary integration has become increasingly prominent, with a growing number of international PhD students pursuing cross-disciplinary programmes worldwide. In addition, the characteristics of differentiation in major selection are significant: students from North America and Europe are more inclined to choose cutting-edge STEM majors, while East Asian international students tend to select both STEM majors and distinctive humanities and social sciences disciplines that are closely integrated with industries.

3.3.2 Global Popular Majors Map: Trends and Shifts in Popularity

STEM majors are the core hotspots for global doctoral study abroad, among which artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and big data are the three majors with the highest proportion and the fastest growth. Humanities and social science majors focus on characteristic and differentiated development, while other majors exhibit niche and precision characteristics. Each major has clear advantages and challenges:

(1) STEM majors: The core and popular choice for global doctoral study abroad, with a huge demand gap

STEM disciplines represent a major and structurally important component of the science and engineering (S&E) system in the United States. According to the 2026 report from NSF Science & Engineering Indicators, employment in STEM occupations grew by 26% from 2013 to 2023, reflecting the broad integration of STEM-related skills across the economy. In addition, between 2024 and 2034, employment in the STEM workforce is projected to increase by 6% (compared to 3% for all occupations), with S&E occupations expected to grow the fastest (9%). (*Source: U.S. Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics Talent*[NSF]) These structural trends are closely linked to advanced research training systems, particularly at the doctoral level, where science and engineering fields form the core of PhD education and research workforce development. The NSF highlights STEM as a foundational pillar of the national innovation system, connecting higher education, research training, and workforce outcomes. As a result, doctoral training in science and engineering continues to align closely with the expanding demand for STEM capabilities across both academia and industry.

(2) Artificial Intelligence major: the world's hottest doctoral major with the fastest growth rate

Artificial intelligence has become a central area of global investment and innovation, driven by rapidly increasing capital flows into AI-related technologies. According to OECD analysis of venture capital investment in artificial intelligence, AI firms captured 61% of global venture capital in 2025 (USD 258.7 billion out of USD 427.1 billion total), more than doubling AI's share from 30% in 2022. (*Source: OECD, Venture capital investments in artificial intelligence through 2025, 2026*) With explosive growth in AI investment and surging demand for AI talent, doctoral applications in AI-related fields are facing unprecedented intense competition, which are driven both by intensifying academic competition worldwide and by rising demand from the private sector for AI expertise. Against this backdrop of accelerated AI investment, doctoral-level training in artificial intelligence has experienced significant global demand growth. Evidence from the

ELLIS PhD Programme shows a record application cycle for the 2025/2026 cohort, with approximately 2,111 submitted applications, representing a 41% increase compared to the previous recruitment cycle. The applicant pool is highly international, spanning 94 countries, highlighting strong global competition for AI-focused doctoral training opportunities. (*Source: 2025/2026 ELLIS PhD Program Cohort Following Record Application Growth | ELLIS*)

(3) Biotechnology major: Outstanding scientific research potential and close integration of industry, academia, and research

Biotechnology ranks as one of the most popular doctoral majors worldwide, focusing on cutting-edge research directions such as gene editing, cell therapy, and biopharmaceuticals. In terms of regional distribution, it presents a pattern of "North America leading, Europe deeply involved, and East Asia rising": North America hosts a substantial proportion of international PhD students in biotechnology. Relying on top-tier research institutions and industrial clusters, the United States maintains world-leading research capabilities in this field. Europe ranks as another major hub, with Germany, the United Kingdom, and France as core research centres. Germany adopts a salaried position-based doctoral model, while the UK emphasises supervisor-oriented mentorship, each presenting distinctive research advantages. East Asia takes a growing share, with regions and countries including Singapore and Hong Kong (China) attracting increasing numbers of Asian overseas doctoral students with their high-quality academic and research resources. The advantages of this major include high research potential and broad employment prospects, while its disadvantages are high research difficulty, long research cycles, and extremely high requirements for research foundation and perseverance.

(4) Big data major: significant cross-border integration and strong talent demand

Big Data programs primarily focus on research directions including big data analytics, data mining, and data security. Closely aligned with global digital transformation trends, the discipline boasts strong market demand. Its growing popularity stems from the urgent need for professional big data researchers across industries. Sectors such as the internet, finance, and healthcare require doctoral-level talent to drive technological innovation, while countries worldwide continue to increase research investment in digital fields. In terms of regional distribution, North America serves as the core hub. Supported by top universities and mature internet industrial clusters, the United States emphasizes interdisciplinary integration and achieves a high conversion rate of research outcomes. Europe, led by the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Germany, features distinctive research strengths in data privacy protection and related fields. In East Asia, Singapore and Hong Kong of China concentrate on industry-oriented subfields with high cultural adaptability for international students. This discipline features strong interdisciplinary compatibility and broad employment coverage. Its main challenges include rapid technological iteration and high requirements for logical thinking and data analysis capabilities.

(5) Other popular STEM majors: Parallel development of basic and applied aspects, with distinct characteristics

Beyond the three high-demand STEM majors, disciplines including computer science, engineering, mathematics, physics, and chemistry still account for a substantial share of global international PhD enrollments, reflecting a general pattern of in-depth foundational discipline development and practice-oriented applied discipline cultivation. General computer science focuses on computer system architecture and software development, with North America and Europe serving as its core research regions. Engineering covers subdivisions such as mechanical and electrical engineering, closely matching the global demand for industrial upgrading and transformation, with Germany

and the United States holding prominent disciplinary advantages. Basic sciences, including mathematics, physics, and chemistry, provide fundamental support for scientific and technological innovation. North America and Europe possess top-tier research resources in these fields, and graduates predominantly pursue academic positions at universities or high-end research institutions.

(6) Humanities and social science majors: Focus on characteristics and pursue differentiated development

Humanities and social sciences (HSS) represent a stable and significant component of international doctoral education across OECD countries. According to OECD Education at a Glance 2025, arts, humanities, and social sciences together account for approximately one-fifth of doctoral graduates on average, highlighting their continued relevance within global higher education systems despite the overall dominance of STEM fields (*Source: Education at a Glance 2025 / OECD*). Within this structure, HSS disciplines demonstrate strong regional variation in research focus and academic traditions. European countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany, and France host a substantial proportion of humanities and social science doctoral students, reflecting long-established disciplinary strengths and diversified academic traditions. Compared with STEM fields, humanities and social sciences place greater emphasis on interpretive research, theoretical development, and socio-cultural analysis. Doctoral training in these areas is closely linked to regional academic traditions, with research topics often reflecting linguistic, historical, and cultural contexts. Although representing a smaller share of total doctoral education relative to STEM disciplines, HSS fields continue to attract internationally mobile doctoral candidates and maintain stable participation within global research systems.

(7) Other Majors: Niche Features, Precise Demand

Other majors such as art, sports, and medicine (non-biotechnology) account for a relatively small share of international doctoral students globally, exhibiting characteristics of niche specialization and precise demand. Among them, the art major focuses on areas such as fine arts, music, and design, with Europe and North America as the core regions, attracting international students through their profound artistic heritage and high-quality educational resources. Medicine-related majors (non-biotechnology) focus on areas such as clinical research and public health, with North America, Europe, and East Asia as the core regions, requiring solid medical foundations and clinical experience, and graduates often engage in clinical research or high-end diagnosis and treatment work after graduation.

3.3.3 Influencing Factors and Trend Prediction: Professional Trends in the Next Five Years

Based on the OECD's Report and Nature's predictions, in the next five years, doctoral study majors will exhibit three major trends:

- STEM majors continue to occupy a central position: Its proportion is projected to keep rising by 2029. Among all disciplines, three popular majors, including artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and big data, remain the top choices for international doctoral students.
- Interdisciplinary fields continue to heat up: NSF-funded graduate training programs further emphasise the development of doctoral researchers capable of working across disciplinary boundaries through structured interdisciplinary education and research environments (*Source:*

Learn About Interdisciplinary Research - Research Approaches / NSF). At the system level, NSF initiatives, such as the Integrative Graduate Education and Research Traineeship (IGERT) program, have been designed to prepare PhD scientists and engineers with interdisciplinary backgrounds and the skills needed to address complex research problems of significant scientific and societal importance. (*Source: (IGERT) / NSF*) Similarly, OECD analyses in the Science, Technology, and Innovation Outlook 2025 indicate that scientific research is increasingly conducted through interdisciplinary and international collaboration, reflecting a structural shift toward team-based and cross-domain knowledge production in advanced research systems (*Source: OECD 2025*).

- Major selection becomes more personalised: The proportion of niche specialty majors will gradually increase, and more international students will combine their own interests with the research needs of niche fields to choose suitable majors, breaking the pattern of "crowding into popular majors."

In addition, the choice of majors for future doctoral students studying abroad will show a distinct trend of "deep binding between regions and majors":

- North America: will continue to strengthen its advantages in cutting-edge STEM majors, focus on high-end fields such as artificial intelligence and Quantum Computing, and consolidate its leading position in scientific research.
- European Region: Will deepen its focus on basic sciences and humanities and social sciences majors, while combining the needs of the industrial sector to promote the in-depth integration of basic scientific research and industrial applications.
- East Asia Region: Focus on STEM majors closely related to local industries, while exploring the advantages of characteristic humanities and social science majors such as Chinese Language and Literature and East Asian Cultural Studies, to form a professional layout with distinct regional characteristics.

3.4 Age Structure: Diversification and Maturation Proceed in Parallel

The age distribution of global doctoral students studying abroad shows the distinct characteristics of "**dominated by maturity and steadily diversifying**". From the questionnaire results, the core age group is concentrated between 25 and 35 years old, accounting for the vast majority; meanwhile, the proportion of those aged 36 and above has been steadily increasing, mainly due to the promotion of part-time doctoral study programs in some countries.

3.4.1 Global Age Group Distribution of Doctoral Students Studying Abroad: From Single to Diverse

The age distribution of global doctoral students shows the distinct characteristics of "dominated by maturity and steadily diversifying". OECD data indicate that the median age at entry to doctoral programmes is 29 on average across OECD countries, with 60% of entrants aged between 26 and 37 years old (*Source: OECD*).

Notably, the proportion of students aged over 36 has been on the rise from 2020 to 2024. This change is mainly attributed to the on-the-job doctoral overseas study programs launched by some

countries, which have provided convenient overseas study channels for working professionals with work experience who wish to enhance their research capabilities, thus promoting the diversified development of the age groups of doctoral overseas study.

3.4.2 Portraits of Different Age Groups: Fresh Graduates, Working Professionals, and Career Changers on the Same Stage

Global doctoral study abroad groups across different age brackets exhibit distinct differential characteristics. The core group (25–30 years old) consists mainly of fresh master's graduates, focusing on popular STEM fields. The mature group (31–35 years old) pursues targeted development based on work and research experience. The two niche groups (above 36 years old and below 25 years old) are centred around early-career academic talent and in-service professional development, respectively. Each group shows significant differences in study abroad motivation, major selection, supervisor preference, etc., which are highly consistent with their own research accumulation and career planning.

- **25–30 years old (core group):** This group consists primarily of recent master's graduates who are motivated to systematically enhance their research capabilities. They tend to prefer popular STEM fields such as artificial intelligence and biotechnology, favor top universities in North America and Europe as well as young top-tier mentors, and highly rely on full scholarships. Overall, their research accumulation is relatively weak, but they have high academic enthusiasm and great potential.
- **31–35 years old (mature group):** This group typically has 1–5 years of work experience and is motivated by the desire to break through career plateaus. Their major selection is more targeted, preferring senior and top-notch mentors, and they pay more attention to cost-effectiveness in their choice of study-abroad destinations, with a practical research orientation. Overall, they exhibit characteristics of clear goals, strong autonomy, and outstanding research execution ability.
- **Over 36 years old (niche group):** This group mainly consists of working professionals who are driven by the desire to improve their research competence and pursue personal academic interests. Their choice of major is highly aligned with their own interests and work fields, and their choice of supervisor emphasises the alignment of academic concepts. Funding mainly comes from unit sponsorship and personal contributions. Overall, they have deep academic accumulation and pure research goals.
- **Under 25 years old niche group:** This group mostly comprises gifted students enrolled in accelerated bachelor-to-PhD or integrated master's-to-PhD programmes, motivated by the pursuit of early academic achievement. They tend to major in basic sciences such as mathematics and physics, and prefer top research universities in North America. This group has outstanding talent but lacks research practice experience and has a relatively impetuous academic mindset.

3.4.3 Deep-seated Drivers and Challenges: Transformation and Anxiety Amid the Lifelong Learning Wave

The age distribution of doctoral students studying abroad is shaped by four core factors: research accumulation, career planning, financial capacity, and family responsibilities. The relative weight of each factor varies significantly across age groups, leading to differentiated study abroad preferences and decision-making patterns.

- **Research accumulation directly determines how well students adapt to the rigorous research demands of doctoral programmes.** Those under 25 typically have limited research experience. The 25–35 age group demonstrates progressively stronger research backgrounds, and those over 36 often possess substantial academic or industry-based research expertise. These differences in turn influence their choice of majors and supervisors.
- **Career planning shows significant differences in career aspirations among different age groups.** Recent master's graduates (25–30) pursue doctoral degrees primarily for academic advancement and qualification enhancement. Working professionals (31 and above) seek career breakthroughs and specialised expertise. And early-career gifted students (under 25) aim for in-depth academic exploration and early research achievement. These varying motivations directly shape their study abroad goals and destination preferences.
- **Financial capacity influences funding sources and destination choices.** The core group (25–30) relies heavily on scholarships and fellowships, while mature applicants (31 and above) are more likely to draw on employer sponsorship, research project funding, or personal savings.
- **Family responsibilities have become an increasingly significant factor for applicants aged 31 and above.** For these individuals, decisions to study abroad must be carefully balanced against work commitments, family needs, and long-term career planning, often requiring more complex trade-offs than younger applicants face.

The challenges encountered by each age group are highly targeted and closely related to their own characteristics:

- **Group aged 25–30:** This group faces dual pressures of research performance and employment anxiety. They must rapidly develop advanced research capabilities and produce a high-quality doctoral dissertation, while simultaneously planning strategically for their post-graduation career paths.
- **Group aged 31 and above:** This group must reconcile the demands of doctoral research with existing career trajectories and professional identities. The core challenge lies in balancing the relationships among work, family, and studying abroad. Under the on-the-job learning model, energy is scattered, and the pressure of time management is relatively prominent.
- **Group under 25 years old:** This group, while exceptionally talented, faces the challenge of limited research experience and academic maturity. Their relatively short academic track record means they must rapidly build research competence while navigating complex supervisory relationships and dissertation expectations.

Chapter 4 Trend Analysis of Mainstream Study Abroad Destinations

4.1 Overview of Trends in Mainstream Study Abroad Destinations: Echelon Differentiation and Dynamic Evolution

Currently, the mainstream destinations for global doctoral study abroad are showing the core trends of "leading in the first echelon, breaking through with high cost-effectiveness, and binding research and industry," forming an overall differentiated pattern of three echelons: the first echelon takes top-notch research resources as its core competitiveness, the second echelon has become a popular growth point by virtue of high cost-effectiveness, and the third echelon features low budgets and policy orientation as a supplement. Meanwhile, doctoral study abroad is showing three key changes in application mode, major selection, and career trajectory, aligning with the needs of global research and industrial development.

The mainstream destinations for global doctoral study are clearly divided into three tiers based on comprehensive strength, attractiveness, and target population, with each tier having a clear positioning, prominent advantages, and demonstrating differentiated development characteristics.

(1) First Echelon (Core Preferred): US, United Kingdom, Singapore

The US, the United Kingdom, and Singapore are universally recognised as the most prestigious doctoral destinations, forming the core first-tier group. Leveraging core advantages such as top-notch scientific research resources and a well-established training system, this tier has become the primary choice for domestic high-achieving talents pursuing further education, with intense application competition and a high concentration of majors in the fields of science and engineering.

The core competitiveness of the three major countries or regions in this echelon is concentratedly reflected in four major advantages: First, they possess world-class scientific research resources, hosting leading universities and research institutions with substantial research funding and a vibrant academic environment. Second, they have mature doctoral training systems with standardised and refined processes spanning application review, supervisory guidance, and research output. Third, their doctoral degrees enjoy extensive academic recognition, providing strong support for subsequent academic pursuits or career development. Fourth, they offer diverse career development pathways, whether in academia or industry, offering broad opportunities for graduates.

As the primary choice for highly educated domestic talents pursuing doctoral studies, this echelon has the most intense application competition. Its professional distribution exhibits highly centralized characteristics, mainly focusing on science and engineering fields such as artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and computer science, which is highly consistent with the global demand trend for high-end scientific research talents.

(2) Second Echelon (High Cost-Effectiveness Preferred): Germany, Hong Kong (China)

Germany and Hong Kong (China), leveraging their core advantages of policy friendliness, controllable costs, and outstanding scientific research capabilities, have emerged as popular growth points for doctoral study abroad in recent years. Relying on tuition-free benefits and geographical and policy advantages respectively, they have attracted a large number of students

aspiring to pursue a doctorate, with the popularity of applications rising year by year.

Germany's core attractions lie in the tuition-free policy of public institutions and its well-established welfare system for position-based doctoral programs, which can effectively reduce the financial burden on international students. In addition, the DAAD Research Grants Doctoral Programmes provide funding of €1,400 per month, along with payments toward health, accident, and personal liability insurance, a travel allowance (upon application), an annual research allowance of €460, a monthly rent subsidy, and a monthly allowance for accompanying family members. The grant duration is up to four years, with funding initially awarded for a maximum of three years and subject to annual academic progress reviews (*Source: German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD)*). Meanwhile, it has strong scientific research capabilities in fields such as engineering and natural sciences, and its training quality is widely recognised.

Hong Kong (China) stands out through a distinct set of advantages: geographical proximity to the Chinese mainland, high cultural compatibility, convenient travel, and a clear and efficient student visa application process with electronic visa issuance upon approval (*Source: Immigration Department, Hong Kong*). Both have shown a trend of increasing popularity year by year, becoming highly cost-effective and popular choices for doctoral study abroad.

(3) Third Echelon (Potential Supplement): Japan, South Korea, and "Belt and Road" cooperation institutions

Japan, South Korea, and the partner institutions under the Belt and Road Initiative form the third echelon, characterised by low budgets and policy orientation as their core features. They are mainly targeted at applicants with limited budgets who rely on special scholarships for further study, suitable for students with specific backgrounds to choose as a potential supplement for doctoral study abroad.

The core advantage of this echelon lies in its high scholarship coverage, which can effectively alleviate the financial burden on international students. Meanwhile, its admission requirements are relatively flexible, with more targeted background requirements for applicants. The suitable candidates mainly include those with limited budgets who hope to complete their doctoral studies relying on special scholarships, or applicants with a foundation in minority languages and specific research directions (such as East Asian cultural studies, research fields related to minority languages), providing diverse options for aspiring doctoral students from different backgrounds and becoming an important supplement to the global doctoral study abroad landscape.

In addition, global doctoral study abroad also shows three key changes that profoundly affect study abroad decisions and development paths: doctoral study abroad applications have entered a stage of "intensive cultivation," major selection is highly concentrated in the fields of science and engineering, the career trajectories of doctoral graduates show diversified differentiation, and "academic training + industrial application" has become a new paradigm for compound development, meeting the needs of global scientific research and industrial development.

- First, the application model has entered the "intensive cultivation" stage, no longer simply relying on academic performance. Pre-planning and research accumulation (such as research project experience and academic paper publications) have become the core competitiveness for admission. Prospective applicants pay more attention to pre-matching with the research directions of supervisors and accumulating relevant research experience to enhance their application competitiveness.
- Second, major selection is highly concentrated, with science and engineering fields such as engineering, biology, and computer science becoming absolute hotspots. This trend is highly

consistent with the global demand for high-end industrial talent, reflecting the continuously strengthening linkage between the choice of majors for doctoral study abroad and industrial development.

- Third, the career trajectories of doctoral graduates show clear differentiation, breaking the traditional single path of "in-depth academic research." An increasing number of graduates are moving from the traditional academic community into high-value-added industries such as industrial R&D and fintech. The compound development model of "academic training + industrial application" has become a new choice for doctoral graduates, highlighting the deep binding between doctoral training and industrial needs.

4.2 Policy Interpretation of Mainstream Study Abroad Destinations

The policies of the three echelons of global doctoral study abroad all revolve around the three core dimensions of "scientific research training, funding support, and retention and development," presenting distinct echelon differentiation characteristics. The first echelon (US, United Kingdom, Singapore) takes the well-established scientific research training system, diversified scholarship support, and clear post-graduation retention path as its core advantages, catering to the needs of high-end scientific research talents. The second echelon (Germany, Hong Kong, China) highlights high cost-effectiveness with its policy friendliness, controllable costs, and close connection between scientific research and the local context. The third echelon (Japan, South Korea) features policy-oriented funding and targeted retention policies, catering to applicants with specific backgrounds. Overall policies are in line with the positioning of each echelon and the core demands of doctoral international students.

4.2.1 First Echelon (Core Preferred): US, United Kingdom, Singapore

The policies of the first-tier three countries all take "strengthening scientific research training, improving funding systems, and optimising retention paths" as the core orientation, which fits the scientific research needs and career development demands of the doctoral stage. The US focuses on scientific research practice and industrial adaptation; the United Kingdom focuses on efficient training and flexible retention, and Singapore relies on high-quality resources to create a convenient and friendly study abroad environment. The policy system is perfect and targeted, providing comprehensive support for doctoral students.

(1) US

The US doctoral study abroad policy is centered around the core guiding principles of "research priority, diversified funding, and smooth retention." Its visa policy is stable, scholarships are widely available and tilted towards science and engineering, the post-graduation retention path is clear, and the training model focuses on cultivating independent research capabilities, highly adapting to the dual needs of doctoral international students for in-depth research and industrial transformation.

- **Visa Policy:** During the doctoral stage, the F1 visa is the primary type. Visa review focuses on the rationality of the research direction and the sufficiency of financial proof (especially for applicants without full scholarship coverage), with no additional targeted restrictions, and the overall visa approval rate remains stable. Applicants in science and engineering fields need to cooperate in completing academic background checks to ensure that the research

direction has no sensitive associations, further ensuring research compliance.

- **Scholarship Policy:** The scholarship system is well-established, mainly divided into three categories: full scholarships (covering tuition fees + living expenses), half scholarships (covering partial tuition fees), and research assistant (RA) and teaching assistant (TA) stipends. Among them, scholarship competitions are directly linked to applicants' research backgrounds and academic outputs. Full scholarship positions at top-tier institutions witness cutthroat competition, highlighting the core value of individual research strength in doctoral admissions and funding acquisition.
- **Graduation Retention Policy:** After graduation, doctoral students can apply for a 12-month OPT (Optional Practical Training) visa, with those in STEM fields eligible for an extension to 36 months. During the OPT period, they can legally engage in scientific research and R&D work related to their majors. After accumulating work experience, they can apply for an H-1B work visa, which has no explicit quota restrictions, providing a clear retention path that precisely aligns with the development trend of doctoral graduates transitioning to the industrial sector. (*Source: Counsellor, 2026*)
- **Training Policy:** Mainly research-oriented, the program usually lasts 4–6 years, with a core focus on scientific research practice and academic output, requiring the completion of a high-quality doctoral dissertation and successful defense. The curriculum is mainly research-oriented, encouraging students to participate in research group projects and international academic conferences, with a key emphasis on cultivating independent research capabilities and academic innovative thinking, meeting the core needs of in-depth scientific research at the doctoral stage.

(2) United Kingdom

The United Kingdom's doctoral study abroad policy is centered around the core principles of "efficient cultivation, flexibility and convenience, and friendly retention." It features simple visa review, diverse types of scholarships, lenient post-graduation retention policies, and a cultivation model that focuses on the integration of research output and industry, meeting the needs of doctoral international students for efficient completion of their studies and diverse career development.

- **Visa Policy:** When applying for a Student Visa (formerly Tier 4) at the doctoral stage, applicants must provide a Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies (CAS) from their sponsoring university, proof of sufficient funds to cover tuition fees and living expenses for the first academic year, and evidence of English language proficiency (*Source: United Kingdom Student Visa*). The application process is standardised and well-established, with a generally favourable approval rate for genuine students holding offers from recognised UK institutions. Notably, PhD applicants can now begin their visa application six months before their programme start date (previously three months) (*Source: UK Visas for PhD Students*).
- **Scholarship Policy:** Scholarships primarily include UK government-funded schemes (such as UKRI studentships), institutional scholarships, corporate-sponsored awards, and scholarships offered through the China Scholarship Council (CSC) in partnership with UK universities. A standard UKRI studentship covers tuition fees and provides an annual tax-free stipend of £20,780 for the 2025/26 academic year (an 8% increase from the previous year), along with a Research Training Support Grant for incidental research costs. UKRI has confirmed that it does not plan to reduce student recruitment for the forthcoming year in light of this stipend increase (*Source: UKRI*).

- **Graduate Retention Policy:** After graduating, doctoral students can apply for a 3-year Graduate visa (post-study work visa), with no restrictions on majors and no requirement for employer sponsorship, allowing them to legally work and be self-employed in the United Kingdom. After accumulating work experience, they may switch to other visa routes, such as the Skilled Worker visa. The retention policy is favourable and fully meets the diverse career choice needs of doctoral graduates (*Source: UKVI, Graduate visa*).
- **Training Policy:** The academic system is relatively flexible, usually lasting 3–4 years, with doctoral dissertation research as the core (*Source: www.findaphd.com*). And the curriculum is concise, emphasizing the combination of scientific research output and practice, and encouraging students to cooperate with industry enterprises to conduct research. Some institutions offer joint doctoral programs with enterprises to achieve in-depth integration of academia and industry. Applications are led by supervisors, and students need to communicate with supervisors in advance to confirm the supervisor's willingness to recruit and the match of research directions, ensuring the targeted nature of training.

(3) Singapore

Singapore's doctoral study abroad policy is centered around the core guiding principles of "resource allocation, generous funding, and market-oriented retention." It features efficient visa review, high scholarship coverage that favors cutting-edge disciplines, clear pathways for post-graduation retention, a bilingual Chinese-English environment suitable for Chinese students, and a balance between academic depth and industrial application.

- **Visa Policy:** During the doctoral stage, students need to apply for a Student's Pass. Application materials include a passport, notarized transcripts and enrollment certificate, and an admission letter. Full-time doctoral students at public institutions can legally engage in part-time work without working hour restrictions, while doctoral students at private institutions are not allowed to engage in paid work. Visa review is efficient, usually taking 4–6 weeks to complete the approval process, enhancing the convenience of applications (*Source: BCI*).
- **Scholarship Policy:** The policy shows a clear bias toward research and cutting-edge disciplines. The NUS Research Scholarship and NTU Research Scholarship cover full tuition fees and provide a monthly living stipend of S\$3,000** for international PhD students (effective from January 2026), with an additional top-up of up to **S\$500 per month upon passing the PhD Qualifying Examination (*Source: NUS, NTU*).
- **Graduate Retention Policy:** Graduate Retention Policy: Doctoral graduates may apply for Singapore work passes (Employment Pass / S Pass) upon securing a job offer from a Singapore-registered employer. The employer is required to submit the application on behalf of the candidate. The minimum monthly salary threshold for the EP is S\$5,600 (S\$6,200 in the financial services sector), and applicants must pass the Complementarity Assessment Framework (COMPASS) with a score of at least 40 points. Both passes are not subject to foreign worker levy or quota restrictions (*Source: Eligibility*).
- **Cultivation Policy:** The program has a duration of 2–5 years (*Source: FindAPhD*), relying on top-tier public institutions with concentrated research resources, emphasising interdisciplinary research and international cooperation. And the curriculum takes into account both academic depth and industrial application, encourages students to participate in international academic exchanges, has strict requirements for doctoral dissertations, and its academic recognition is on par with that of British and American institutions. In addition, the

Chinese-English bilingual environment is suitable for Chinese students' learning, reducing the cost of language adaptation.

4.2.2 Second Echelon (High Cost-Effectiveness Preferred): Germany, Hong Kong, China

The policies of the second-tier regions in the two locations take "policy friendliness, cost controllability, and practical scientific research" as their core advantages. While Germany focuses on tuition-free benefits and a well-established postgraduate training system, and Hong Kong, China emphasise geographical convenience and connection with the Chinese mainland, both taking high cost-effectiveness as their core attraction, which is suitable for doctoral international students who value the balance between cost and scientific research.

(1) Germany

The German doctoral study policy is centered around the guiding principles of "research freedom, tuition-free education, and friendly retention policies," featuring a high visa approval rate, comprehensive welfare, a diverse training model that emphasises practical experience, leveraging the advantages of the position-based system to reduce financial pressure, and is suitable for applicants who aspire to delve deeply into research and pursue high cost-effectiveness.

- **Visa Policy:** When applying for a student visa at the doctoral stage, you need to provide the admission letter from the institution, proof of funds (not less than 13,092 euros per year), and a research plan. The visa approval rate is high, and there is no mandatory language requirement (English test scores can be provided). During the period of holding a student visa, you can legally work or intern for up to 140 full working days or 280 half working days, and after graduation, you can obtain a 18-month job-seeking visa, providing sufficient time for staying and finding employment. (*Source: German Ambassador to China, The Federal Government*)
- **Scholarship Policy:** The vast majority of public universities in Germany waive tuition fees for international doctoral students. Scholarships mainly include DAAD scholarships, special scholarships from institutions, and CSC government-sponsored scholarships. Some programs additionally provide research subsidies and living allowances, further reducing the financial burden.
- **Graduate Retention Policy:** After graduating with a doctorate, one can apply for an 18-month job-seeking visa (*Source: Steinbeis University*). After working in Germany for 2 years, one can apply for permanent residency. The doctoral stage generally adopts the post-based model, where doctoral students sign formal employment contracts with universities, enjoy full sets of social welfare such as statutory salary, medical insurance, and endowment insurance. The retention threshold is low, the welfare is comprehensive, and the attractiveness is prominent.
- **Cultivation Policy:** The programme typically lasts 3–5 years and offers a diverse range of doctoral training models. The traditional individual doctoral (apprenticeship) model remains common, where candidates conduct independent research under the supervision of a single professor. In addition, structured doctoral programmes, such as those offered by Graduate Schools, Research Training Groups, and EU Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) Doctoral Networks, provide interdisciplinary training, coursework, and close mentorship within a cohort-based framework. Joint and cotutelle doctoral programmes allow candidates to pursue research at both their home university and a German institution, with degrees

awarded by one or both universities. The system emphasises the cultivation of independent research capabilities, with access to well-equipped laboratories, substantial research funding, and strong encouragement for high-level academic publications, meeting the in-depth research needs of doctoral students.

(2) Hong Kong, China

The policy for studying for a doctorate in Hong Kong, China, is guided by the core principles of "convenience, efficiency, connection with the mainland, and lenient retention," featuring rapid visa review, high scholarship coverage, a training system that is in line with international standards and deeply connected to the mainland, making it suitable for applicants who wish to balance research quality, geographical convenience, and development opportunities in the mainland.

- **Visa Policy:** When applying for a student visa at the doctoral stage, applicants are required to provide an admission letter from a Hong Kong, China institution, proof of funds, and proof of identity. The visa review process is simple and fast, with no mandatory language requirements (some institutions may offer exemptions). Its geographical proximity to the Chinese mainland makes travel convenient, and the visa renewal process is straightforward, making it suitable for applicants who wish to balance access to mainland research resources with overseas study.
- **Scholarship Policy:** Scholarships mainly include the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government Scholarship (HKPFS), institutional special scholarships, enterprise cooperation scholarships, and CSC government-sponsored scholarships. The scholarship coverage rate is high, with some institutions providing full tuition waivers and living allowances for outstanding doctoral students, effectively alleviating financial pressure and lowering the application threshold. (*Source: University Grants Committee (UGC), Hong Kong*)
- **Graduate Retention Policy:** After graduation, doctoral students can apply for the Non-local Graduate Immigration Arrangement (IANG) in Hong Kong, which has no limit on the length of stay. They can legally work and start businesses in Hong Kong, enjoying the same employment benefits as Hong Kong permanent residents. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government has launched multiple talent introduction schemes, and doctoral graduates can apply for them on a priority basis. After staying in Hong Kong for 7 years, they can apply for permanent residency. The retention policy is lenient and favorable (*Source: Immigration Department (IMMD), Hong Kong*).
- **Cultivation Policy:** The program has a duration of 3–4 years (*Source: www.findaphd.com*), primarily focusing on research-based cultivation. Relying on top-tier universities in Hong Kong, China, it is rich in scientific research resources, emphasizing international academic cooperation and scientific research output. The curriculum is in line with international standards, encouraging students to participate in scientific research projects and academic exchanges on the Chinese mainland. Doctoral dissertations are subject to strict requirements, with high academic recognition, and are closely connected with academic institutions and enterprises on the Chinese mainland, laying a foundation for students to develop in the Chinese mainland after graduation.

4.2.3 Third Echelon (Potential Supplement): Japan, South Korea

The doctoral study abroad policies of the two countries in the third echelon are characterized by

"policy orientation, precise funding, and appropriate retention" as their core features. Visa reviews are strict, but with a stable approval rate. Scholarships are mainly government-specific, with relatively high thresholds. Retention policies are highly targeted, suitable for applicants with limited budgets, a foundation in small languages, and who wish to develop in East Asia.

- **Visa Policy:** When applying for a student visa at the doctoral stage, you need to provide the admission letter from the institution, proof of funds, and language proficiency scores (Japanese N2/Korean TOPIK Level 4 or above, with some English-taught programs exempted). Visa review is strict, but the approval rate is stable, so you need to prepare materials in advance and complete notarisation and certification to ensure a smooth application process.
- **Scholarship Policy:** Government-sponsored scholarships are a primary source of funding for doctoral students in Japan and South Korea, typically covering substantial portions of tuition and living expenses. However, these scholarships are highly competitive and have relatively stringent eligibility requirements, including strong academic records and demonstrated language proficiency. Additionally, certain joint doctoral training programmes under Belt and Road cooperation universities offer dedicated funding for specific applicant groups, supporting students with particular research backgrounds or regional interests.
- **Graduate Retention Policy:** After graduating with a doctorate, one can apply for a local work visa, which requires finding a matching employer sponsorship. Both Japan and South Korea provide visa preferences to highly educated talents (doctors), and after working for a certain number of years, one can apply for permanent residency. The retention difficulty is moderate, and it is overall suitable for applicants who hope to deeply engage in scientific research and career development in East Asia.

Chapter 5 Overview of Chinese Overseas Doctoral Students

5.1 Distribution Pattern: Structural Features Behind the Data

5.1.1 Overall Trend: Scale Growth, Structural Differentiation

The policy orientation of major host countries for doctoral study abroad plays a decisive role in shaping application requirements, admission competitiveness, funding accessibility, and post-graduation mobility pathways for Chinese doctoral students, which is also the core focus of the policy interpretation in the previous text.

By analysing the core data from 2021 to 2025 across five major core dimensions—proportion distribution, application and admission, scholarship coverage, graduation destinations, and employment trends—it can be seen that Chinese doctoral students' overseas studies present overall characteristics of "significant regional differences, obvious competitive differentiation, prominent funding stratification, diversified and adaptable destinations, and employment focusing on high-end sectors." The data differences in each dimension all stem from core factors such as policy drivers, research fit, and industrial demand, which can provide precise support for subsequent overseas study planning.

Region	Application Success Rate	Enrollment Rate (Admission → Registration) / Completion Rate (Enrollment → Graduation)	Scholarship Probability (Overall / STEM / Humanities & Social Sciences)	Proportion of Chinese PhD Students in the Local International PhD Student Population	Local Retention Rate After Graduation	Return-to-China Employment Rate After Graduation
US	Overall: 16%–20%; Top-tier Institutions: 5%–8%; STEM: 12%–18%; Humanities & Social Sciences: 8%–12%	Enrollment Rate: 90%–93%; Completion Rate: STEM ≥ 92%, Humanities & Social Sciences: 82%	Overall: 65%–70%; STEM ≥ 85% (Full Tuition); Humanities & Social Sciences ≈ 42%	37% (2023; ≥42% in STEM Fields)	55%–60% (≥65% in STEM; ≥35% in Humanities & Social Sciences)	40%–45%
United Kingdom	Overall: 12%–15%; G5 Institutions: 5%–7%; STEM: 12%–18%	Enrollment Rate: 94%–97%; Completion Rate: 85%–90%	Overall: 50%–60%; STEM: 60%–70%; Humanities & Social Sciences: 30%–40%	25%–30% (≥35% at G5 Institutions)	40%–45% (Boosted by the PSW Policy)	55%–60%
Singapore	Overall: 15%–20%; Popular Programs at NUS/NTU: 8%–10%	Enrollment Rate: 97%–99%; Completion Rate: 90%–93%	Overall: 80%–90%; STEM ≥ 95%; Humanities & Social Sciences ≈ 30%	40%–45% (≥45% at NUS/NTU)	60%–65% (Influenced by the 3-Year Post-Graduation Employment Bond Policy)	35%–40%
Germany	Application-based Track: 18%–22%; Position-based Track: 25%–35%; Elite Universities / Key Institutes: 10%–15%	Enrollment Rate: 92%–98%; Completion Rate: 90%–94% (Higher for Position-based Track)	Overall: ~60% (Scholarships + Government Sponsorship); Position-based Track: 100% Funded; STEM: 65%–75%; Humanities & Social Sciences: 40%–50%	18%–22% (≥25% in Position-based Track)	70%–75% (≥80% Retention Rate for Position-based Track)	25%–30%
Hong Kong, China	Overall: 6%–10%; Popular Programs at Top 3 Universities: 2%–5%	Enrollment Rate: 95%–98%; Completion Rate: 90%–92%	Overall: 70%–80%; STEM: 80%–90%; Humanities & Social Sciences: 50%–65%	30%–35% (≥40% at Top 3 Universities)	30%–35% (Local Employment + Entrepreneurship)	65%–70%
Japan	Overall: 10%–15%; CSC Government-Sponsored Track: 18%–25%	Enrollment Rate: 90%–93%; Completion Rate: 88%–92%	Overall: 70%–75%; STEM: 75%–85%; Humanities & Social Sciences: 55%–65%	15%–20% (≥25% in Government-Sponsored Programs)	20%–25%	75%–80%
South Korea	Overall: 8%–12%; KGSP Government Scholarship Program: 10%–15%	Enrollment Rate: 88%–92%; Completion Rate: 82%–87%	Overall: 65%–70%; STEM: 70%–80%; Humanities & Social Sciences: 50%–60%	10%–15% (≥20% in KGSP Programs)	15%–20%	80%–85%

**Source: Based on a 5-year data aggregation*

Unified Explanation of Data Caliber:

1. Timeframe: All data are annual averages for the past 5 years.
2. Definition of Core Indicators:
 - * Application success rate = Number of admitted students / Total number of applicants,

distinguishing differences between overall levels and top-tier institutions/popular majors, as well as between STEM and humanities and social sciences.

* Enrollment rate = Number of students actually registered / Number of admitted students; Doctoral completion rate = Number of students graduating normally after enrollment / Number of enrolled students. Overseas official institutions more commonly use "completion rate" as the core assessment indicator.

* Scholarship Probability = Number of recipients of full/main funding / Number of doctoral students enrolled in the current year, clearly distinguishing the differences between overall coverage and those in science and engineering, and humanities and social sciences, where doctoral students on postdoctoral positions in Germany are uniformly counted as "100% salaried" (including statutory wages and benefits).

* Proportion of Chinese doctoral students = Number of Chinese doctoral students / Total number of local international doctoral students, highlighting the proportion differences in government-sponsored programs and top-tier institutions.

* Retention and Return Ratio = Proportion of those who stay locally or return to their home country for employment or further study within 1–3 years after graduation, reflecting the short-term career flow of doctoral graduates and significantly influenced by national policies and industrial demands.

Explanation of Commonalities and Differences:

All regions exhibit the characteristic that "the success rate of applications, probability of scholarships, and retention rate in science and engineering are higher than those in humanities and social sciences", with the gap generally ranging from 20 to 30 percentage points. The application competition at top-tier institutions (such as the US Top 10, UK G5, Singapore NUS/NTU, etc.) is more intense, with the success rate 5 to 10 percentage points lower than that of ordinary institutions.

5.1.2 Regional Distribution: Asia Concentrated, Europe Differentiated, Adaptability Determines Attractiveness

The proportion of Chinese doctoral students among international students in major study-abroad destinations shows distinct regional differentiation, generally forming a pattern of "higher in Asia and lower in Europe." The core driving factors are the compatibility of each region's research system and training model with Chinese highly educated talents, while the government-sponsored policy also plays a significant guiding role in study-abroad choices. Specifically:

- The United States, Singapore, and Hong Kong, China are among the most important destinations for Chinese doctoral students, each offering distinct structural advantages in research capacity, academic accessibility, and cultural adaptability: the US has the world's top-notch scientific research resources, meeting the needs of Chinese doctoral students for in-depth research. Singapore focuses on cutting-edge disciplines and has sufficient scientific research investment, and its bilingual environment in Chinese and English reduces the adaptation cost. Hong Kong, China, relying on its geographical advantages, has close academic connections with the Chinese mainland and extremely high cultural adaptability. (Source: *International Students - IIE Open Doors*; *FULCRUM*; *Quick Stats* / *The University of Hong Kong*)
- Japan and Germany remain important destinations for Chinese doctoral students, supported

by established research collaborations and scholarship pathways, while South Korea attracts a comparatively smaller number of Chinese doctoral researchers. Language requirements also influence destination choices: Japanese-taught graduate programs commonly require Japanese proficiency at the JLPT N2 level, although English-taught programs may waive this requirement. Similarly, Korean-language programs often require intermediate Korean proficiency, with many institutions using TOPIK Level 4 as a reference standard. Research-field alignment and institutional availability may further affect Chinese doctoral students' choices of Germany. Government-sponsored scholarship schemes, particularly the China Scholarship Council (CSC) program, have played an important role in directing Chinese doctoral mobility toward selected research-intensive destinations. (*Source: Japan Student Services Organization, 2026; Fang, Lamers, and Costas, 2022.; LMU - CSC Scholarship Program*)

5.1.3 Application for Admission: Competition, Differentiation, and Mode and Fit Affect Success Rate

The success of PhD applications varies across major study-abroad destinations, influenced by admission models, competition intensity, research-field fit, and funding structures. Germany demonstrates a relatively transparent doctoral recruitment model, where many candidates apply directly for funded doctoral positions or research employment opportunities.

(1) In terms of application success rate, regional differentiation characteristics are prominent:

- Germany adopts a position-based doctoral and postdoctoral recruitment model, in which applicants apply directly for advertised research positions supervised by individual professors. Many doctoral and postdoctoral researchers are employed by universities under formal employment contracts as research staff, distinguishing Germany from centralized admission systems. (*Source: DAAD; Technical University of Munich; University of Jena.*)
- Hong Kong, China experiences intense competition for doctoral admission, particularly in rapidly developing research areas such as artificial intelligence and fintech. The Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme attracts outstanding applicants from around the world, while the number of funded doctoral places remains limited, contributing to highly competitive admissions.

(2) In terms of enrollment rate, the overall rate in each region remains generally high, among which:

- Singapore, Hong Kong (China), and the United Kingdom lead in enrollment rates, reflecting low post-admission registration thresholds and low student adaptation costs in these regions, with no need for additional language adaptation or complex procedures, and extremely high adaptability. Singapore, Germany, and the United States boast relatively high PhD completion rates, closely associated with sufficient scholarship support, well-established training systems, and comprehensive research supervision.
- South Korea and Japan have relatively low completion rates, mainly affected by factors such as language adaptation difficulties, differences in research rhythms, and academic atmosphere suitability, resulting in some students being unable to graduate normally. (*Source: Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO), 2025; González-Betancor and Dorta-González, 2020*)

5.1.4 Scholarship Coverage: Asian Top Universities and Germany's Position-based System Stand Out

Scholarship coverage in major study-abroad destinations shows distinct hierarchical characteristics, with the overall situation being "Asian top-tier institutions and Germany's position-based system stand out significantly." Both the scholarship coverage rate and funding intensity are highly correlated with local policy orientation, and generally tend to favor the fields of science and engineering. Specifically:

- **Singapore:** Singapore provides extensive doctoral scholarship support, particularly in STEM-related fields. Major doctoral scholarships at institutions such as NUS and NTU commonly provide tuition coverage and living allowances, aligning with Singapore's strategy of attracting high-level research talent. (*Source: NUS Graduate School; ASTAR.*) Doctoral scholarships at the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU) can cover full tuition fees plus living allowances, and are focused on cutting-edge disciplines, which is highly consistent with Singapore's policy orientation of "attracting high-end scientific research talents".
- **Germany:** Germany adopts a position-based doctoral employment model, where many doctoral researchers are hired by universities or research institutions under formal employment contracts with salary and social benefits. Public universities generally do not charge doctoral tuition fees, reducing financial barriers for international researchers. (*Source: Research in Germany; DAAD.*)
- **US, Hong Kong, China:** The United States and Hong Kong provide substantial doctoral funding opportunities, particularly in STEM fields. The United States offers a high full-funding rate for STEM majors, while Hong Kong, China, also boasts extensive scholarship coverage in STEM fields. This aligns with the policy orientation of both regions to strengthen scientific and engineering research and cater to industrial demands.
- **Japan, South Korea, and the United Kingdom:** The scholarship coverage rate is relatively low, but the government's special scholarships (UKRI, JASSO, KGSP) provide relatively large amounts of funding. However, the application threshold is also relatively high, with clear requirements for academic background and language proficiency, reflecting the policy approach of "targeted funding and screening for high-quality talent."

5.1.5 Graduation Destination: Regional differences are significant, with policies and culture dominating destination choices

The proportion of Chinese doctoral graduates staying locally and returning to China for employment shows distinct regional differences, with the core driving factors being the retention policies of various countries, industrial talent demand, and geographical and cultural suitability. The flow characteristics of different regions are highly consistent with the policy orientation interpreted earlier.

(1) In terms of Retention Rate:

- Germany demonstrates strong talent-retention advantages, mainly due to its employment-based doctoral system and relatively supportive immigration pathways. Many doctoral researchers are employed by universities or research institutions with formal employment contracts, while international graduates who complete their studies in Germany may become eligible for a settlement permit after two years of qualified employment, provided that they

meet requirements such as pension contributions and language proficiency. (Source: BAMF; *Make it in Germany; Research in Germany*)

- **Singapore comes second.** Influenced by the policy of signing a contract to stay in Singapore for three years with a scholarship, the retention rate remains high. Meanwhile, Singapore's market-oriented employment environment also attracts a large number of Chinese doctoral graduates.
- **The US and the United Kingdom have a medium retention rate.** The UK's PSW visa and the US's STEM OPT extension policy provide sufficient time and channels for graduates to stay, supporting the retention rate to remain within a reasonable range.

(2) In terms of the return rate:

- **South Korea, Japan, and Hong Kong, China have the highest rates:** Hong Kong, China benefits from its convenient geographical location, with a large number of graduates returning to mainland universities and research institutions. In Japan and South Korea, due to factors such as fierce employment competition among local highly educated talents and differences in cultural adaptability, most Chinese doctoral students choose to return to China, and after returning, they are mainly concentrated in fields such as materials, precision instruments, and semiconductors.
- **The US and Germany have the lowest return rates:** Returnees mainly focus on high-end manufacturing, university research, and other fields, with the core being that scientific research and industrial resources in these two regions are of high quality, providing greater room for development and retention.

5.1.6 Employment Destinations: Diversified Pathways with High-End Industries Reverse-Trailing Study Abroad Choices

In the past five years, the proportion of Chinese doctoral students returning to China has continued to rise, and the employment path has shown the characteristics of "from academic singularity to diversified diversion." The demand for high-end industries has become the core factor guiding the choice of Chinese doctoral students' study majors and graduation flows, which echoes the policy tilt direction of various regions.

- **Overall:** Combined with the data from the "Blue Book on Returned Overseas Chinese Scholars in Beijing," 15.86% of returned doctoral scholars choose to work and live in Beijing. In addition, 60% are concentrated in new productive forces sectors such as artificial intelligence and medical health, reflecting the growing demand for doctoral talents in high-end domestic industries, and also closely related to the guidance of domestic policies on industry-university-research integration and talent introduction (Source: *Western Returned Scholars Association*).
- **From the perspective of career paths:** Chinese doctoral graduates are breaking the traditional "single academic" development model and moving towards "diversified divergence": traditional universities and research institutes remain the main destinations, but the attractiveness of R&D positions in enterprises is gradually increasing, especially the demand for engineering and applied doctoral graduates from high-tech enterprises has increased significantly. This employment trend has also indirectly influenced the choice of overseas study majors among Chinese doctoral students, resulting in the popularity and retention rate of overseas study for science and engineering doctoral students remaining

consistently higher than those of humanities and social sciences doctoral students. This forms a two-way correspondence with the characteristic that scholarships and retention policies in various regions are tilted towards science and engineering, further highlighting the linkage logic of "policy guidance, major choice, and employment flow". (Source: *Ministry of Education of China*)

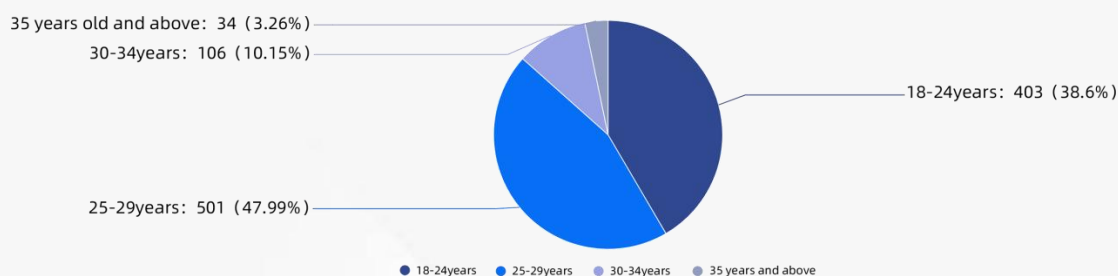
5.2 Portrait of the Group of Overseas Doctoral Students: Who Chooses to Pursue a Doctorate Abroad?

Based on the collected 1044 valid questionnaires, this paper analyses various core dimensions of doctoral study abroad from three levels: "Accurate presentation of data-in-depth interpretation of industry trends-practical suggestions for applicants," deeply related to global university policies, industry competition landscape, and employment market dynamics, ensuring that the interpretation is based on evidence and the suggestions are feasible.

5.2.1 Student Portrait: Balancer of Academic Aspirations and Career Anxiety

(1) Age Structure: Overall, the youth group dominates, age barriers are prominent, and applications for career transition are on the rise:

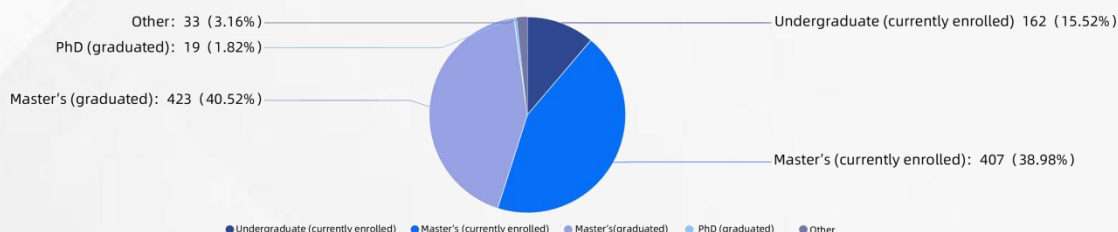
- **The youth group has become the absolute main force, and "academic continuity" has become the core characteristic of the industry:** The combined proportion of the 18–29 age group reaches 86.59%, with the 25–29 age group having the highest proportion. This reflects that the current mainstream path for overseas doctoral applications is the continuous further education model of "undergraduate-master-doctor". Young people, with their advantages of high energy and strong academic plasticity, have become the core preferred group for admission by institutions and the core service target of study abroad agencies.
- **Age barriers are significant, and older applicants are caught in a double bind:** The proportion of those aged 30 and above is only 13.41%, highlighting the implicit age barriers in overseas doctoral applications. Top overseas institutions tend to recruit younger applicants, believing they have greater research potential and longer cultivation periods. Meanwhile, older applicants face dual constraints from family and career, resulting in both low application willingness and success rates, a trend that is particularly evident in top institutions in Europe and the United States.
- **Career transition applications have emerged as a niche growth point:** The proportion of the 30–34 age group has reached 10.15% and is showing an upward trend year by year, reflecting that an increasing number of professionals are achieving career transition and title promotion through overseas doctoral studies. Especially in fields such as education and scientific research, a doctoral degree has become the core support for career advancement, driving the emergence of the niche track of "on-the-job doctoral applications" in the study-abroad industry.



* Data source: REAL PhD Team 2026 Questionnaire Survey (N = 1044)

(2) Educational background: With the master's degree group as the core, early applications from undergraduates are on the rise, and educational stratification determines the application path

- **The master's degree group forms the core of the industry, and the competition for applications has reached a white-hot stage:** The combined proportion of current master's students and graduated master's degree holders is 86.42%, making them the absolute core of overseas doctoral applications. The research training experience accumulated during their master's stage is their core competitiveness, but it also directly leads to a continuous decline in the admission rates of popular majors at top universities.
- **The rise of the early application group for undergraduate programs is expected to become an incremental market in the future:** The proportion of undergraduate students currently enrolled has reached 11.52%, highlighting the trend of "early planning, early application." Undergraduate students are aware of the advantages of direct doctoral programs and are preparing in advance, which is driving study abroad agencies to launch segmented services such as early application and early planning for undergraduate programs.
- **Educational background stratification determines the application path, with significant differences:** Applicants with a prestigious university background have more advantages in applying to top-tier institutions. Those with a non-985/211 university background tend to choose mid-tier institutions and applied doctoral programs, forming an industry pattern of "educational background stratification corresponding to application stratification".
- **Application paths are becoming increasingly diversified:** The "other" category (accounting for 2.23%) reflects that overseas doctoral applications are no longer limited to traditional paths, with an increase in special paths such as applying after upgrading from junior college to a master's degree and on-the-job further education, providing more possibilities for applicants with different educational backgrounds.

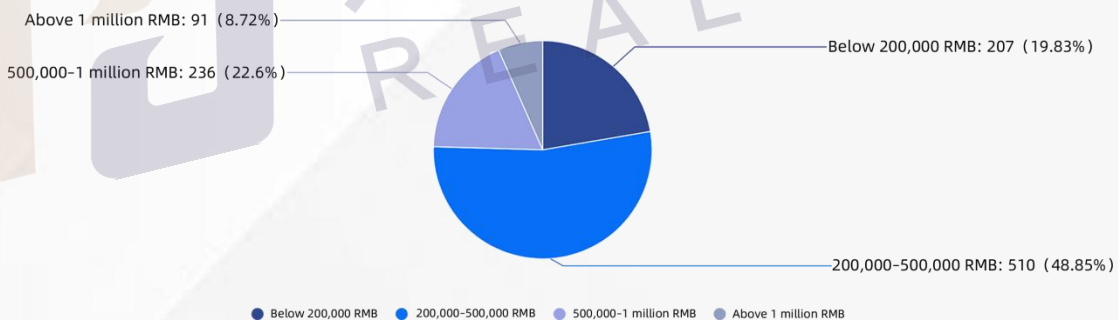


*Data source: REAL PhD Team 2026 Questionnaire Survey (N = 1044)

5.2.2 Family Portrait: Decision-Makers in Educational Investment and Risk Aversion

(1) Annual household income situation: Middle-class families are the main force, with a prominent demand for cost-effectiveness, and product stratification has become an inevitability in the industry

- **Middle-class families have become the core support of the industry, with cost-effectiveness emerging as the core consumption logic:** Families with an annual income of 200,000–500,000 yuan account for 48.85%, making them the absolute economic powerhouse. This group has driven institutions to launch high-cost-effective core packages, making them the mainstream products in the industry.
- **Scholarship demand among low-income groups is strong, focusing on low-cost destinations:** Families with an annual income of below 200,000 yuan account for 19.83%, facing significant economic pressure and relying on scholarships and government-sponsored programs. Most will prioritize low-cost destinations such as Europe and Southeast Asia.
- **High-income groups drive the development of high-end customized services:** Households with a total income of 500,000 yuan and above account for approximately 31.32%, emphasising personalization and professionalism, and willing to pay a premium for high-quality services, becoming a profit growth point for institutions.
- **Income stratification determines application choices, leading to the formation of a product stratification pattern:** Different income groups show significant differences in destination and service selection, driving the industry to form a service model of "product stratification, precise matching."



* Data source: REAL PhD Team 2026 Questionnaire Survey (N = 1044)

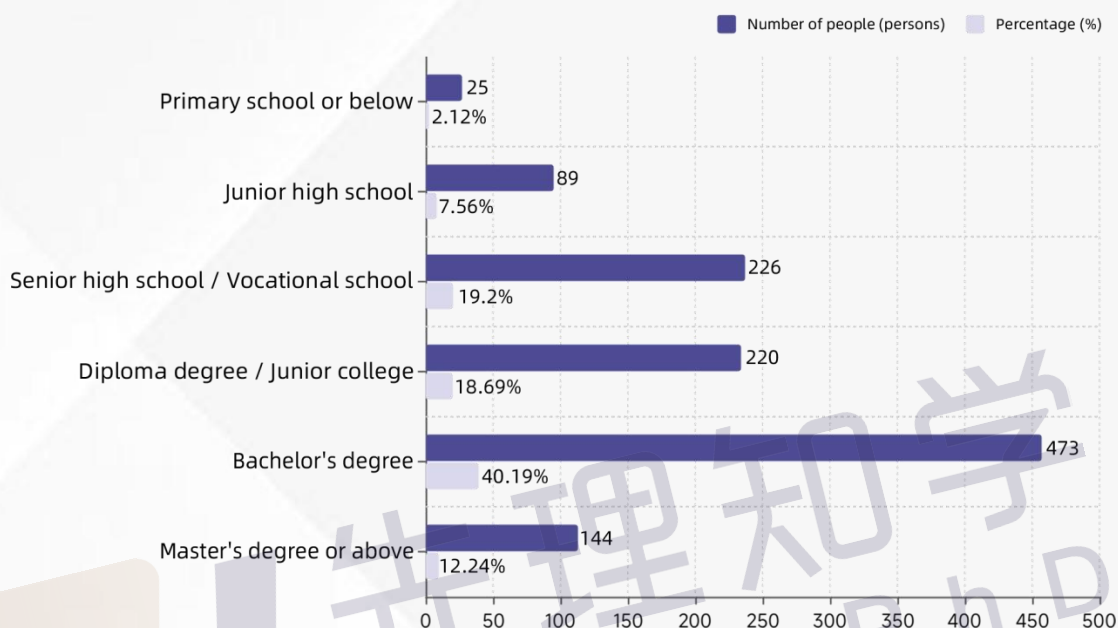
(2) Parental educational background: Dominated by highly educated families, with differentiated information acquisition capabilities, and trust building is the key to service

- **Highly educated families have become the core of decision-making, with professional needs becoming prominent:** Parents with a bachelor's degree or above account for 52.43%, and they lead or are deeply involved in decision-making, having higher requirements for institutional professionalism, academic alignment, etc., thus driving institutions to improve their service professionalism.
- **Families with secondary education backgrounds are the core target audience:** Parents with high school or secondary vocational school and junior college education levels together account for 37.89%. They highly rely on professional guidance from institutions, with their

core needs being process popularisation and one-stop services, and their trust directly affects customer conversion.

- **Highly Educated Families Drive the Academic Upgrade of Services:** Parents with a master's degree or higher have in-depth knowledge of overseas education, and their core needs are academic alignment and resource connection, which drive institutions to transform towards academicisation and strengthen their research tutoring capabilities.

Parents' Educational Background

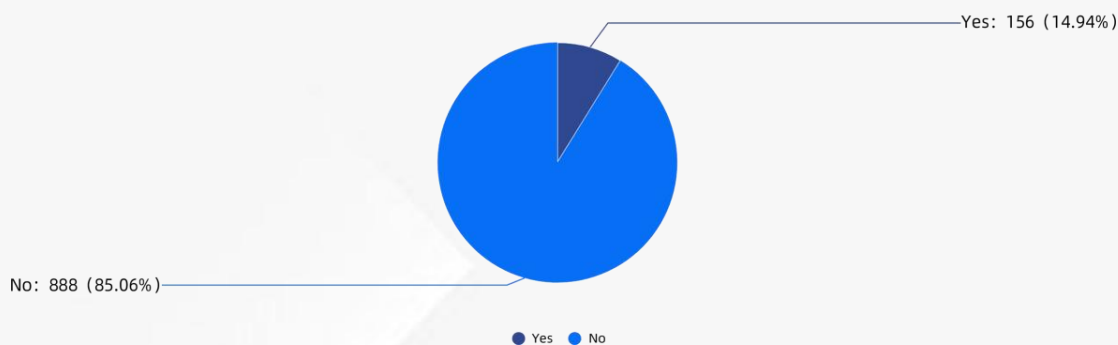


* Data source: REAL PhD Team 2026 Questionnaire Survey (N = 1044)

(3) Parents' overseas experience: The inexperienced group dominates, the information gap becomes the core pain point, and trust building becomes the core competitiveness of institutions

- **The information gap is the core pain point of the industry, and the value of institutional popular science is prominent:** 85.06% of parents have no overseas experience, families lack information, and their dependence on institutions is high. Therefore, institutional popular science and guidance have become the core competitiveness.
- **Families with overseas experience have precise needs and value academic alignment:** 14.94% of parents have overseas experience, and their needs focus on academic alignment and resource connection, preferring institutions with high professionalism and abundant academic resources.
- **Information transparency and word-of-mouth have become the core advantages of institutions:** Information asymmetry has led families to highly value institutional transparency and word-of-mouth. Leading institutions have gained market advantages through transparent services and high-quality cases, making it more difficult for small and medium-sized institutions to build trust.

Whether parents have overseas study or work experience



* Data source: REAL PhD Team 2026 Questionnaire Survey (N = 1044)

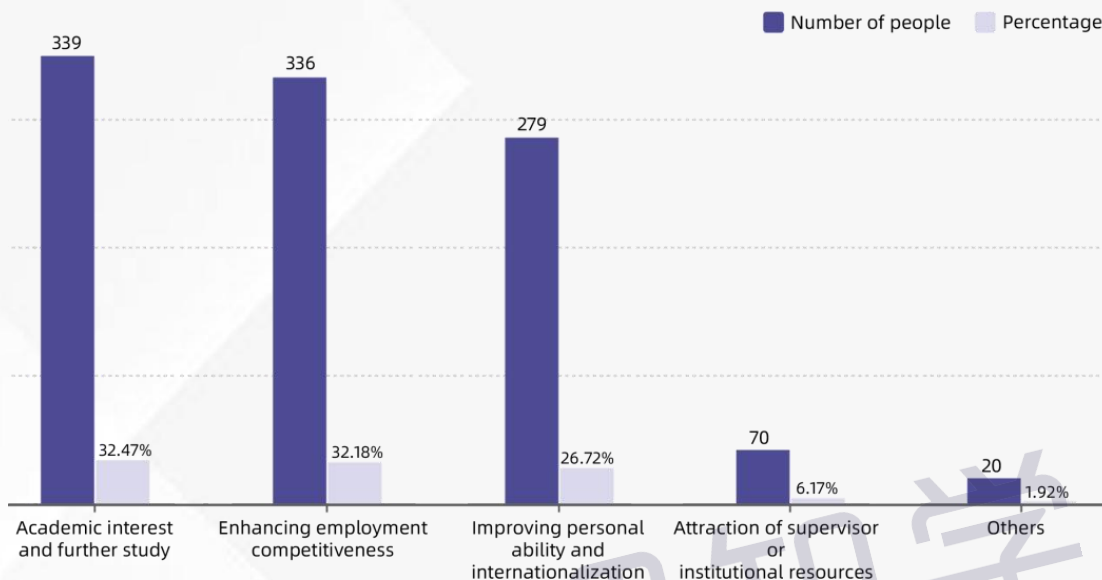
5.3 Decision-making Logic for Doctoral Overseas Study: Interweaving and Trade-off of Multidimensional Factors

5.3.1 Application Objectives and Research Directions: Emphasise both academic and career orientation and promote the upgrading of industry services through disciplinary diversification

- **Equal emphasis on academic pursuit and career development:** "Academic interest and further study" (32.47%) and "Enhancing employment competitiveness" (32.18%) account for almost the same proportion. This reflects that doctoral applicants not only value in-depth academic exploration but also highly focus on career development prospects, presenting a dual-core motivation structure of "academics + employment."
- **Prominent personal growth aspirations:** "Enhancing personal capabilities and internationalisation vision" (26.72%) accounts for nearly 30%, indicating that doctoral study abroad is not only an academic or career choice but also an important path to self-improvement and broadening global horizons, reflecting the comprehensive consideration of long-term development by high-level talents.
- **Low proportion of resource orientation:** "Attraction of tutor or institutional resources" only accounts for 6.71%, indicating that applicants are more focused on their own growth and goal achievement, rather than simply relying on external resources, and their decision-making is more rational and autonomous.
- **Academic orientation aligns with global scientific research development needs:** The applicant group led by academic interests is highly compatible with the talent needs of global universities for basic research and innovative breakthroughs, and such applicants are more likely to gain the favor of mentors and support for research funding.
- **Employment orientation highlights the talent gap in industries:** The demand to enhance employment competitiveness is directly related to the urgent need for high-end interdisciplinary talents in current global industrial upgrading (such as artificial intelligence, biomedicine, and the digital economy), and a doctoral degree has become an important stepping stone to enter core technology and management positions.

- **Internationalisation vision aligns with the global talent mobility trend:** The pursuit of enhancing personal capabilities and internationalisation vision echoes the major trend of talent mobility in the context of globalization and is also highly consistent with the "priority for international talent" introduction policy in the Asia-Pacific region.

Primary goals for applying to overseas PhD programs

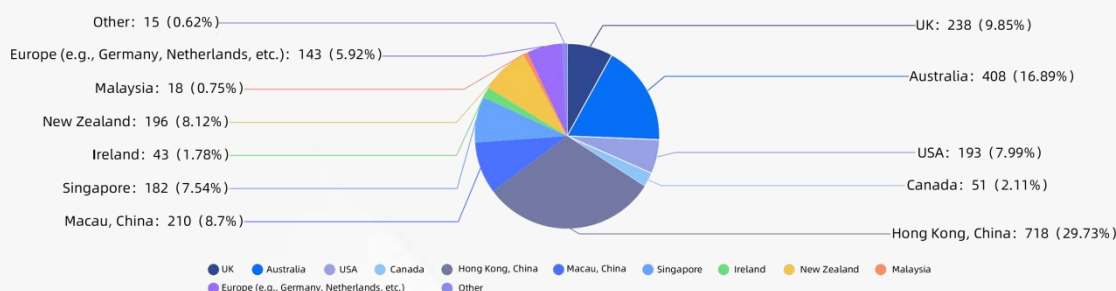


* Data source: REAL PhD Team 2026 Questionnaire Survey (N = 1044)

5.3.2 Application Research Areas and Intended Study Abroad Destinations: Reshaping the Geographical Pattern of Doctoral Study Abroad and the Rise of Applied Disciplines

1) Regional trends: Asia-Pacific has become the core growth area, while the share of Europe and the Americas continues to contract

- **The Asia-Pacific region has witnessed a strong rise, with policy dividends emerging as the core driving force:** Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore, and Australia together account for over 62.86%, becoming the main regions for doctoral study abroad. This pattern stems from the Asia-Pacific region's continuous open attitude towards high-level talent, as well as the active introduction of talent recruitment policies, residency facilitation, entrepreneurship subsidies, and tax incentives, etc. in various places. Meanwhile, natural advantages such as cultural proximity, convenient commuting, and controllable living costs (about 1/3 of those in Europe and the US) have further attracted doctoral applicants aiming for employment, settlement, and long-term development.
- **The attractiveness of traditional study-abroad destinations in Europe and the US continues to decline:** The US and Canada account for a significantly lower proportion in this data. Considering the global study-abroad policy environment in recent years, countries such as the UK, US, and Canada have continuously tightened visa reviews for basic research doctoral students, with some majors facing issues such as strict scrutiny, extended processing periods, and fluctuating approval rates. Coupled with the uncertainty of the international scientific research cooperation environment, high thresholds for employment and cultural integration, the overall risk appetite of applicants has decreased.

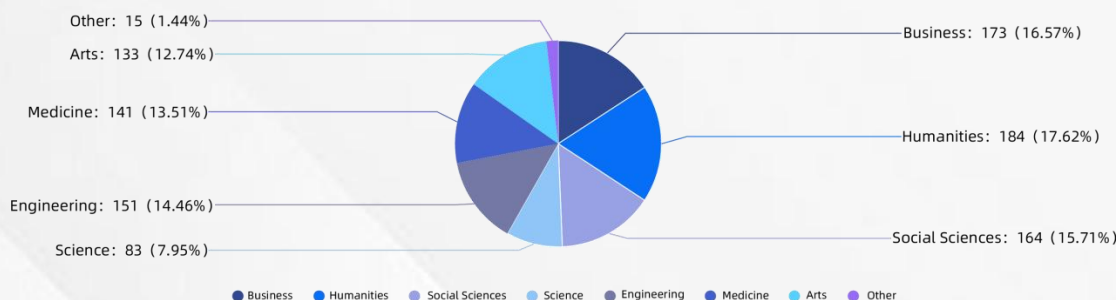


* Data source: REAL PhD Team 2026 Questionnaire Survey (N = 1044)

(2) Disciplinary Trends: Humanities Lead, and Interdisciplinary and Applied Disciplines Become the Mainstream Focus

- **Humanities, Social Sciences, and Business dominate, with significant employment-oriented characteristics:** The combined proportion of liberal arts, social sciences, and business is close to 49.9%, becoming the mainstream choice for doctoral applications. Behind this structural change is the shift of the doctoral cohort from pure academia to the industrial sector: Humanities, Social Sciences, and Business doctoral students have clear career paths in government, universities, consulting, finance, public affairs, international organisations, and other fields, highly matching the needs of the global and domestic high-end talent market.
- **Interdisciplinary fields have received dual preferential treatment from policies and scholarships:** Disciplines such as medicine and art have already approached the proportion of traditional engineering disciplines, reflecting the general trend of global scientific research towards interdisciplinary integration and innovative application transformation. Interdisciplinary directions such as biomedical Big data, digital art, artificial intelligence + healthcare, carbon neutrality policies, and intelligent education are not only key research areas supported by various countries but are also more likely to receive support from top doctoral scholarships such as Hong Kong HKPFS, Australia IPRS, and Singapore A*STAR.
- **Competition in basic science is intensifying, and the difficulty of application continues to rise:** The lowest proportion of basic science is not due to a weakening of demand, but rather a dual increase in competition and thresholds. Globally, the number of scholarships for basic disciplines has contracted, and the level of funding has declined. Coupled with increased restrictions such as visa reviews, the number of admissions by supervisors, and laboratory resources, applicants for basic disciplines must strengthen the application scenarios, transformation value, and social significance in their research plans to adapt to global scientific research funding and policy orientation.

Distribution of Intended Research Fields



* Data source: REAL PhD Team 2026 Questionnaire Survey (N = 1044)

(3) Service and Policy Trends: Orientation toward refined services and outcome transformation

- **Overseas study services are evolving from large-scale to full-chain refinement:** Doctoral applications are no longer just simple school submissions. The industry as a whole is shifting from the "batch application" model to full-chain customized services, including research background enhancement, research plan customisation, supervisor outreach, scholarship application, visa and settlement planning, driving service providers to upgrade toward specialization, in-depth development, and academicisation.
- **Global doctoral policies are shifting toward the dual goals of "talent retention + achievement transformation":** Policy design in major study-abroad destinations increasingly emphasises attracting, retaining, and making good use of talent. For example, Hong Kong provides STEM doctoral students with a 3-year IANG job-seeking visa, Australia offers immigration points to doctoral students participating in industrialization projects, and Singapore provides financial support to research achievement transformation teams. The policy orientation is clear: interdisciplinary, applied disciplines, and industrialisation-oriented research will continue to receive greater support, which will become a key dividend direction for doctoral applications in the coming years.

5.3.3 Considerations for Intended Regions and Institutions: The Triple Drivers of Funding, Academics, and Life

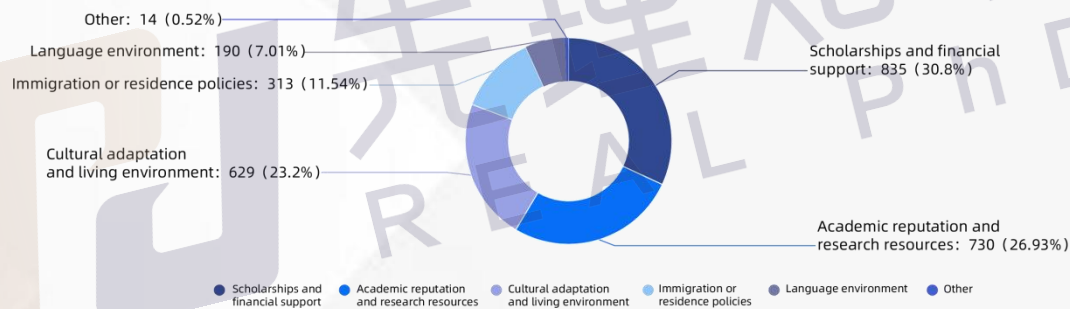
(1) Core decision-making logic: capital first, academics as the foundation, and life as the basis

- **Financial support runs through whole-link decision-making:** In destination selection, scholarships and financial support rank first with a proportion of 30.8%. In institution selection, scholarships and funding opportunities follow closely behind tutor matching with a proportion of 25.5%. The doctoral program usually lasts 3–5 years, and the high tuition fees and living costs have significantly increased families' attention to financial support, making full-scholarship programs the core prerequisite for determining the feasibility of applications.
- **Academic pursuit is the essential core of doctoral applications:** In destination selection, academic reputation and research resources account for 26.93%. In institution selection, the match of the supervisor's research direction (26.36%) and world ranking or academic reputation (20.88%) together account for 47.24%, highlighting the core characteristics of "academic orientation and supervisor-based" in doctoral applications.
- **Life adaptability and long-term development have become important pillars:** In destination selection, cultural adaptation and living environment account for 23.2%, and immigration or residency policies account for 11.54%. In institution selection, geographical location and living costs account for 8.99%, and graduate employment situation accounts for 13.14%, together constituting the third driving force of "life + development". Applicants incorporate long-term plans such as settlement, employment, and permanent residency into their decision-making, which highly resonates with the trend of the Asia-Pacific region becoming a popular destination.

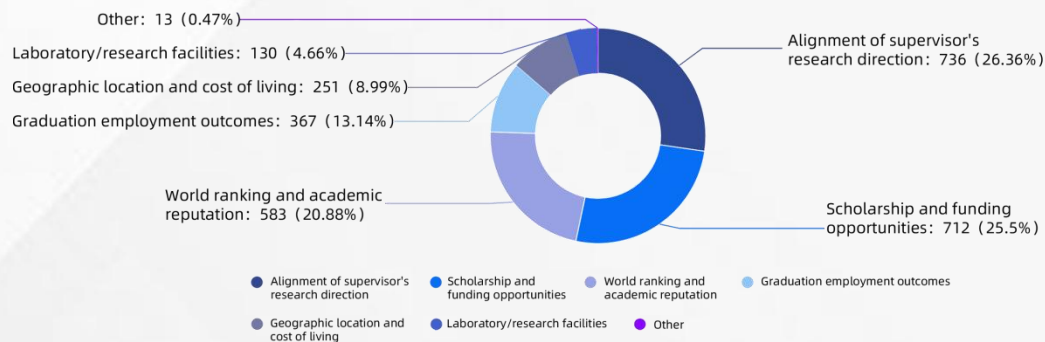
(2) Changes in Factor Weights and Underlying Causes

- **Financially Driven Rational Choice:** Against the backdrop of global inflation, the tightening of household budget constraints, high tuition fees, fierce competition for scholarships, high living costs, and uncertainties in visa and employment policies in European and American countries have prompted applicants to be more inclined to choose the Asia-Pacific region, which offers sufficient financial support and stable living conditions.
- **Underlying Support of Academic Logic:** Doctoral training centers around personalised research, so the match between students and supervisors has thus surpassed institutional rankings as the primary consideration, while the academic reputation of institutions provides crucial endorsement for subsequent academic and career development.
- **Amplifying Effect of Asia-Pacific Advantages:** Hong Kong, Macao, Singapore, and Australia have natural advantages in aspects such as cultural proximity, compatible lifestyles, and convenient Chinese language use. At the same time, combined with liberal immigration or residency policies and abundant scholarship resources, the comprehensive attractiveness of "capital + academics + life + policy" has been significantly enhanced.
- **Non-core status of language and hardware:** Language environment only accounts for 7.01% in destination selection, and laboratory or research facilities only account for 4.66% in institution selection, indicating that language barriers have weakened with the popularisation of the academic lingua franca, and hardware facilities are more dependent on the academic resources of supervisors and institutions.

Distribution of Considerations When Choosing an Intended Study Destination



Distribution of Factors Valued When Choosing Target Universities

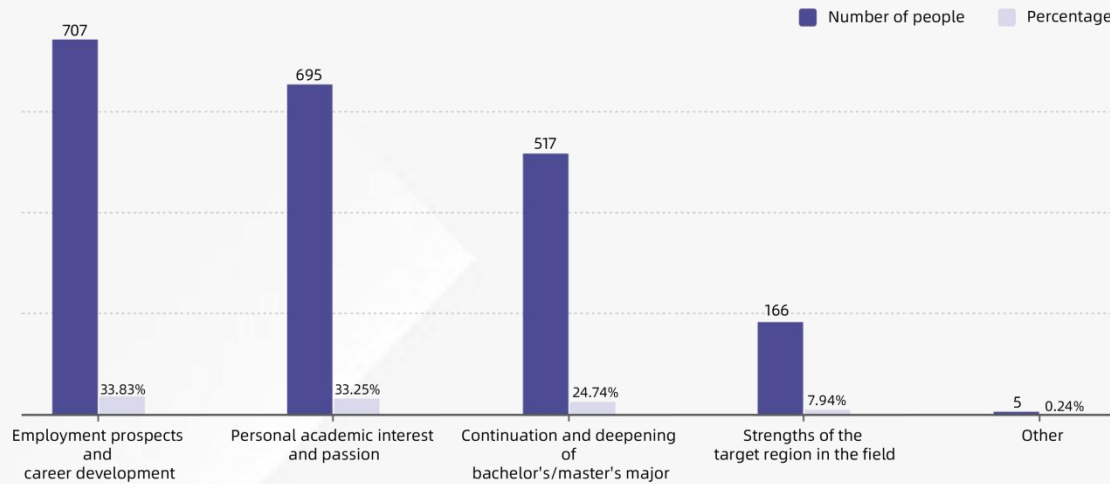


* Data source: REAL PhD Team 2026 Questionnaire Survey (N = 1044)

5.3.4 Selection of Applied Major: Collaborative Decision-Making Based on Interests, Foundations, and Regional Resources

- **The rational shift from the "academic ideal" to the "professional reality," with employment orientation becoming the mainstream:** The proportion of 33.83% has for the first time exceeded academic interest, becoming the primary basis for doctoral applicants to choose their majors. This marks a structural transformation of doctoral education from "pure academic elite cultivation" to "high-end applied talent reserve," highly consistent with the urgent global demand for high-level talents in industrial upgrading.
- **Academic interest remains the fundamental underpinning:** The 33.25% proportion indicates that academic enthusiasm remains the core internal driving force supporting long-term scientific research during the doctoral stage. Especially in basic disciplines and cutting-edge interdisciplinary fields, interest remains the core consideration for supervisors when screening candidates and a necessary prerequisite for producing original research results.
- **Competitiveness of Professional Continuity Guarantee Application:** Most applicants (24.74%) still choose to delve deeper based on their undergraduate and postgraduate majors, which not only aligns with the objective law of academic accumulation but also minimises the difficulty of cross-disciplinary applications to the greatest extent. It is a rational choice that balances "academic feasibility" and "application success rate."
- **Regional professional advantages have become the logic for differentiated selection:** The 7.94% proportion reflects the collaborative decision-making thinking of "professional + region." Applicants match the industrial advantages and policy preferences of the target region (such as the Hong Kong Talent List, Singapore's shortage of professional fields, and Australia's key supported disciplines) to achieve the triple binding of academic development, regional resources, and career development.
- **The shortage of high-end talent is driving a shift toward career orientation, and the scientific research evaluation system is gradually aligning with the job market:** As global technological competition intensifies, countries are regarding doctoral talent as a core strategic resource. Enterprises and governments have seen a surge in demand for doctoral candidates with the ability to solve complex problems, and high-paying positions and clear career paths are attracting applicants to lean towards applied and interdisciplinary majors. Universities and research institutions are placing increasing emphasis on candidates' "ability to translate research into practical applications" and "industry adaptability" during recruitment, further prompting applicants to consider both academic depth and career prospects when choosing their majors.
- **Economic pressure and long-term development anxiety prompt rational choices:** The long duration and high economic cost of a doctoral program make post-graduation employment returns a key consideration for both families and individuals. Meanwhile, with the increasing uncertainty in the global job market, applicants tend to choose majors with "stable employment prospects and high career ceilings" to reduce long-term development risks.

Distribution of Criteria for Choosing a PhD Program



* Data source: REAL PhD Team 2026 Questionnaire Survey (N = 1044)

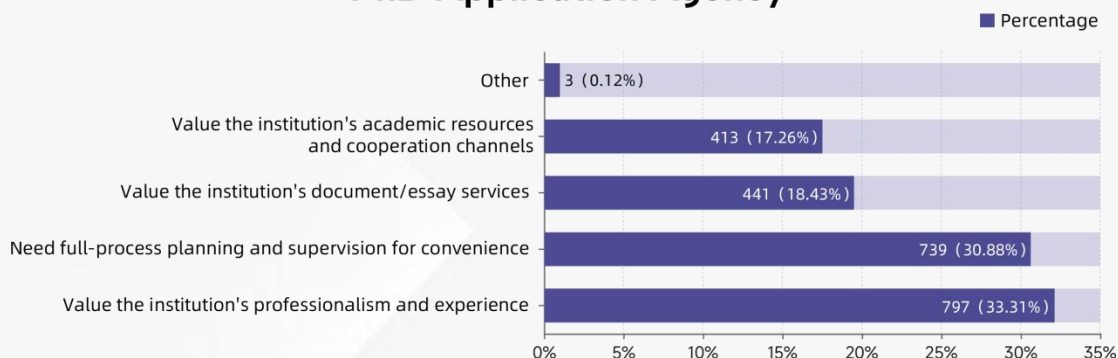
5.4 Selection of Overseas Study Agencies: From Information Intermediaries to Strategic Partners

5.4.1 Selection Motivation: Driven by Information Asymmetry, Catalysed by Service Preferences

(1) Core Motivation: Professionalism and the need for a hassle-free experience are the core logic behind institutional selection

- **Professional trust is the primary decision-making basis:** 33.31% of applicants cited "institutional expertise and experience" as the top reason. The high complexity and high risk of doctoral applications make applicants highly dependent on the institution's accumulation of policy interpretation, academic matching, and application processes, with professional reputation becoming the institution's core competitive edge.
- **Full-process planning and supervision have become a pain point of inelastic demand:** 30.88% of applicants pursue "worry-free service." The doctoral application process is long and involves multiple steps, and applicants hope to reduce time costs and decision-making risks through the full-process supervision of institutions, which highly resonates with the family background of "parents having no overseas experience and a significant information gap."
- **Documents and academic resources are important factors for extra points:** Document services (18.43%) and academic resources (17.26%) have similar proportions, indicating that applicants not only value the professionalism of application materials but also expect to enhance their chances of admission and scholarship success by leveraging the institution's tutor resources and cooperation channels.

Distribution of Reasons for Choosing a PhD Application Agency

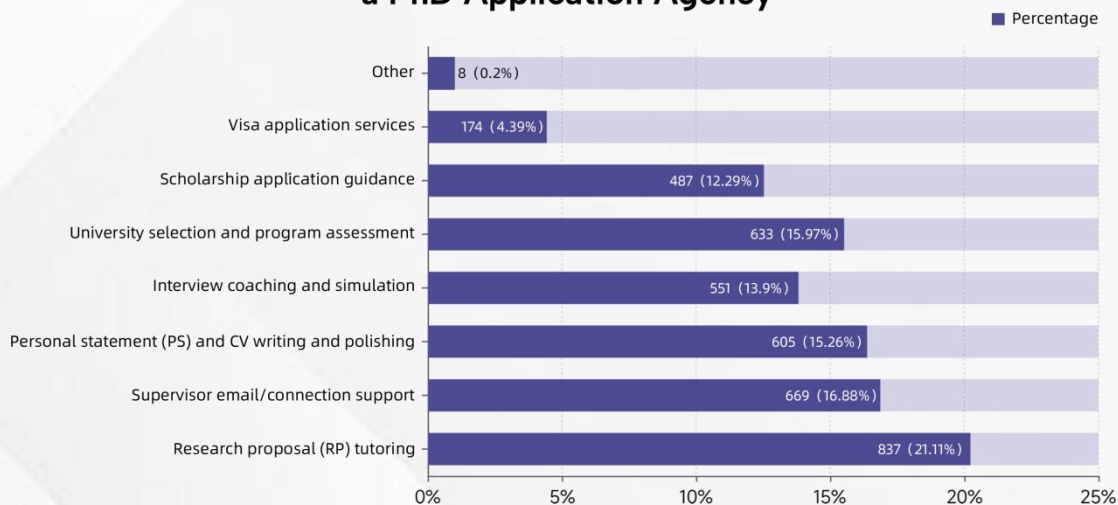


* Data source: REAL PhD Team 2026 Questionnaire Survey (N = 1044)

(2) Service Preferences: Academic core processes have become the high ground of institutional service value

- **Research Proposal (RP) tutoring is the most core service demand:** It ranks first with a proportion of 21.11%. RP is the "academic soul" of doctoral applications, directly determining the supervisor's judgment of the applicant's research potential. Its professional requirements are much higher than those of undergraduate or master's applications, making it the most dependent link for applicants on institutions.
- **Faculty outreach and document service are key supports:** Faculty outreach support (16.88%) and document writing optimisation (15.26%) follow closely. Outreach is the core bridge connecting applicants with target faculty, while documents are the intuitive presentation of personal background and academic potential. Together, they form the key closed loop for a successful application.
- **The demand for whole-process services has become prominent:** Services such as school selection and positioning (15.97%), interview coaching (13.9%), and scholarship guidance (12.29%) have balanced proportions, indicating that applicants need a whole-link solution from "planning to enrollment" rather than fragmented services for a single link.

Distribution of the Most Valued Service Content When Choosing a PhD Application Agency



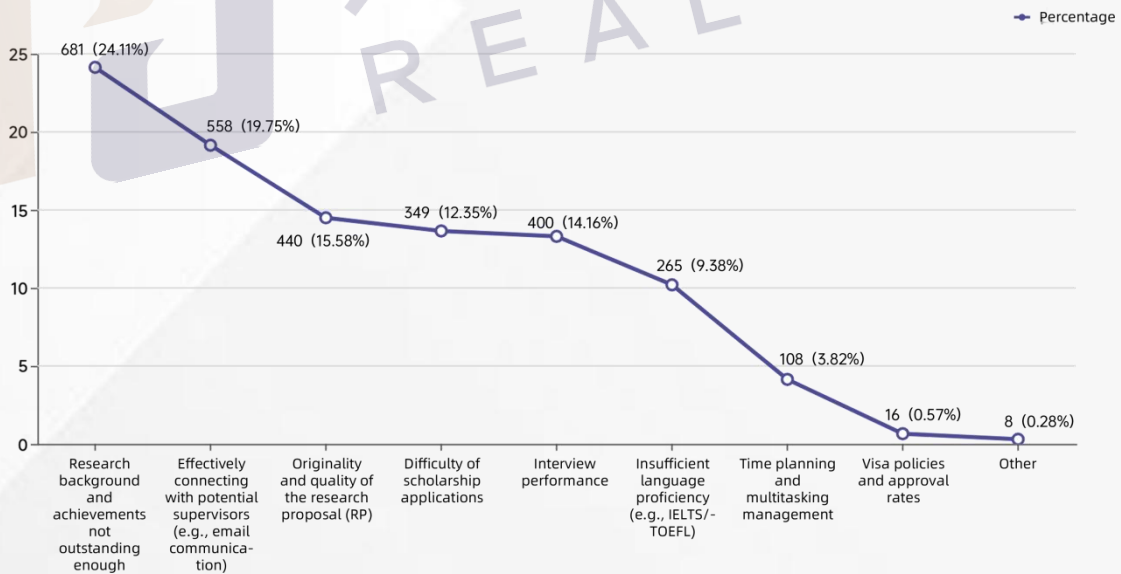
* Data source: REAL PhD Team 2026 Questionnaire Survey (N = 1044)

5.4.2 Service Demands: From Single-point Support to Whole-link Escort

(1) Core pain point: Scientific research and academic communication are the biggest obstacles to applying for a doctoral program

- **Insufficient research background is the primary source of anxiety:** 24.11% of applicants are most worried about "inadequate research background and achievements." This directly reflects the high requirements of doctoral applications for academic hard power achievements, such as papers, projects, and patents, which are the core basis for supervisors to judge candidates' potential and also the key to differentiating competitiveness.
- **Networking with supervisors and the quality of the research proposal (RP) are the second major bottlenecks:** "Effective networking with supervisors" (19.75%) and "Originality and quality of the RP" (15.58%) together account for over 35.33%, indicating that applicants have significant shortcomings in academic communication skills and research design capabilities, which is also the most vulnerable link in DIY applications.
- **Scholarships and interviews are key success or failure factors:** The difficulty of scholarship applications (12.35%) and interview performance (14.16%) account for similar proportions, indicating that applicants not only focus on "whether they can be admitted" but also care more about "whether they can afford to study" and "whether they can pass the final assessment by the supervisor," with economic pressure and assessment pressure coexisting.
- **Language and Time Management are secondary pain points:** Insufficient language proficiency (9.38%) and time planning issues (3.82%) account for relatively low proportions, indicating that applicants are more focused on core academic abilities, and language and process-related issues can be resolved through standardized means.

Distribution of Users' Biggest Concerns During the Application Process



* Data source: REAL PhD Team 2026 Questionnaire Survey (N = 1044)

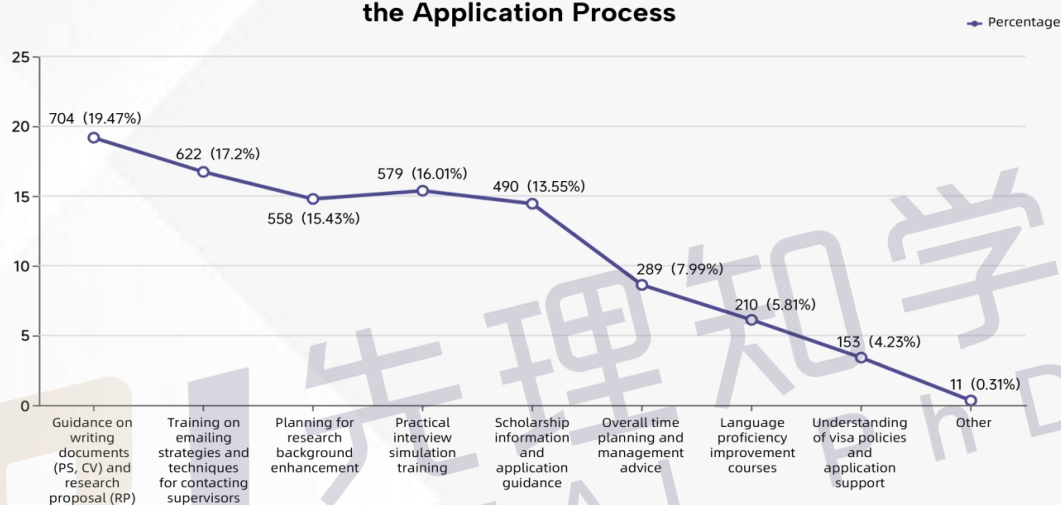
(2) Service Demand: Precise matching of pain points, and academic-oriented services have become inelastic demand

- **Personal Statement or RP and networking guidance are the most core needs:** Personal Statement and RP writing guidance (19.47%) and networking strategy training (17.2%) rank

in the top two positions, highly corresponding to the pain points of "RP quality" and "networking efficiency". Applicants urgently need professional guidance to enhance the professionalism of their academic materials and communication.

- **Research, interview, and scholarship services form a demand triangle:** Research background enhancement planning (15.43%), interview practice simulation (16.01%), and scholarship application counseling (13.55%) have balanced proportions, covering the entire process of "pre-background accumulation, mid-application materials, post-assessment and funding," reflecting a strong demand for whole-link academic support.
- **Time and language services are basic supplementary services:** Overall time planning (7.99%) and language improvement courses (5.81%) have stable demand and are suitable as standardised supporting services to enhance the overall experience of applicants.

Distribution of Help and Support Users Hope to Receive During the Application Process



* Data source: REAL PhD Team 2026 Questionnaire Survey (N = 1044)

5.4.3 Deep-seated Causes and Insights from the Institutional Perspective

- **The high threshold of doctoral applications has driven up the demand for professional services:** Doctoral applications have extremely high requirements for academic fit, research potential, and material professionalism, with a low success rate for DIY, which provides room for differentiated competition in the study-abroad industry.
- **Information gap and time cost drive the "worry-free" service:** Most applicants (and their families) lack experience in overseas doctoral applications and are also faced with research and academic pressures. The whole-link planning and supervision of institutions can effectively fill the information gap and free up time and energy, becoming a core value point.
- **Academic service capabilities have become the core competitiveness of institutions:** Applicants' high level of attention to RP tutoring, networking support, and academic resources requires institutions to transform from "traditional study-abroad agencies" to "academic service institutions," build an academic tutor team composed of doctoral students or postdoctoral researchers, and deeply cultivate academic matching and research guidance capabilities.
- **Refined service stratification is the future direction:** Different applicants have varying

needs; academically oriented individuals value RP and networking more, those sensitive to funding focus on scholarship guidance, and those with limited time require full-process supervision. Institutions can design stratified products accordingly to improve service precision and customer satisfaction.

5.4.4 Development Suggestions for Doctoral Application Institutions

- **Strengthen the core of academic services:** Form a professional academic tutor team, delve deeply into core aspects such as RP writing, tutor networking, and academic matching, and create a differentiated label for "academic services."
- **Create a full-process refined product:** Build a complete service chain around "school selection and positioning, RP tutoring, networking support, document optimisation, interview simulation, scholarship guidance, and visa processing" to meet the "worry-free" needs of applicants.
- **Establish a professional reputation and trust system:** Through methods such as sharing real cases, outputting academic real stuff, and leveraging customer testimonials, convey the institution's professionalism and build a trust barrier for applicants.
- **Explore the tiered service model:** Design basic, advanced, and premium service packages for applicants with different backgrounds (academically oriented, cost-sensitive, time-constrained) to improve customer reach and revenue efficiency.
- **Connecting with the resource advantages of the Asia-Pacific region:** In light of the trend of doctoral applicants clustering in Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore, and Australia, we will delve deeply into the resources of institutions and supervisors in the Asia-Pacific region, provide targeted regional application and settlement employment services, and seize the market opportunity.

5.4.5 Insights for Institutions Applying for Doctoral Programs: Pain Points Are Opportunities, and Professional Services Build Core Barriers

- **Academic service capabilities are the foundation for an institution's survival:** Applicants' high dependence on research improvement, RP writing, and supervisor communication guidance requires institutions to assemble a team of doctoral or postdoctoral academic tutors and delve deeply into core competencies such as research design, academic expression, and supervisor communication.
- **End-to-end solutions are a competitive advantage:** Integrated services from research background planning → RP or essay writing → networking strategy → interview simulation → scholarship application can precisely address the core concerns of applicants and build a professional image of "academic companion" for institutions.
- **Tiered services meet differentiated needs:** Modular products can be designed to address different pain points. For those with weak research capabilities, the "Research Background Enhancement + RP Tutoring" package can be selected. For those with insufficient communication skills, the "Cold Email Strategy + Interview Simulation" training can be chosen. And for those sensitive to funding, the "Scholarship Application Tutoring + Full Process Time Planning" can be opted for. This tiered model can not only improve the precision of services but also expand the customer coverage.
- **Data and case accumulation strengthen trust:** Institutions can convey their ability to

"address core pain points" to applicants by showcasing real cases of scientific research improvement, success rates of networking, and scholarship admission data, thereby building a professional trust barrier.



Chapter 6 Strategies for Overseas Doctoral Applications

Important note: the admission rates, case backgrounds, and application strategies mentioned below are based on statistical analysis of historical data and do not represent the probability of success for any individual application. PhD admission outcomes are affected by multiple uncontrollable factors, including the number of available places in a given year, supervisors' funding availability, and the level of competition among applicants. Historical data does not constitute any form of commitment or guarantee regarding future outcomes.

Doctoral study abroad applications need to follow the core logic of "pre-planning, research as the core, material adaptation, and process closure loop," and the general process can be divided into four major stages: pre-preparation, material preparation, application submission, and follow-up. Pre-planning, research accumulation, and material refinement are the three core prerequisites for a successful application, which require early planning and targeted efforts based on one's own background and the requirements of the target institution to avoid blind applications.

6.1 Overview of the Overseas Doctoral Application Process

6.1.1 General Process: A Comprehensive Breakdown of the Entire Process from School Selection and Positioning to Enrollment and Registration

The general application process for doctoral study abroad has clear time nodes and core focuses and needs to be advanced in accordance with the rhythm of "early preparation, material refinement, standardized submission, and follow-up and implementation." The stages are closely connected, and allocating sufficient time can effectively improve the success rate of applications and reduce the probability of errors.

(1) Preparatory Phase (12–18 months before application):

The core is to clarify the direction, accumulate strength, and lay a foundation for subsequent applications. It is necessary to clarify one's own research direction, systematically sort out academic background and research experience, and form a clear academic context. Conducting precise research on the research resources and admission requirements of target countries, institutions, and supervisors is necessary to ensure a high degree of match in research directions. Prepare language test scores (TOEFL/IELTS), GRE/GMAT (required for some majors) in advance to avoid last-minute cramming. And actively accumulate research achievements, including published papers, project participation, academic competition awards, etc., to strengthen one's core competitiveness.

(2) Material Preparation (6–12 months before application):

The core is "precise adaptation and key emphasis": The core materials need to comprehensively cover academic ability and research potential, while being optimised specifically in combination with the differences of target countries. Core materials include the personal statement (PS), the research proposal (RP, the core for doctoral applications), 2–3 recommendation letters (preferably from academic referees), transcripts, academic degree

certificates, language test scores, and research achievement certificates. Differentiated preparation needs to conform to the application characteristics of each country. For example, Germany requires early contact with supervisors to obtain invitations; the US requires highlighting research potential; and the United Kingdom requires strengthening the alignment between the research proposal and the supervisor's research direction.

(3) Application Submission (Before the Institution's Deadline):

The core is "standardisation and timeliness": To avoid missing opportunities due to minor mistakes. It is necessary to closely monitor the application deadlines of institutions (some institutions have rolling applications) and plan the submission time reasonably. Strictly submit materials through the institution's official website or application system as required, ensuring that the materials are complete and in the correct format. Pay the application fee as stipulated, and some institutions may offer fee waivers, so it is necessary to understand the relevant policies in advance.

(4) Subsequent process (1–6 months after submission):

The core is "proactive follow-up and timely response": Ensuring the smooth progress of the application process. Patiently wait for the preliminary review results from the institution, promptly pay attention to the institution's notifications, and supplement relevant materials as required. Carefully prepare for the interview session essential for the doctoral application, sort out relevant issues such as research experience and research plan in advance, and improve the interview pass rate. After receiving the admission offer, promptly confirm acceptance, simultaneously advance subsequent matters such as visa application and accommodation arrangements, and ensure smooth enrollment.

6.1.2 Core Nodes

The core competitiveness of doctoral applications is concentrated in research background and planning ability, with the four prerequisites being indispensable. Pre-planning is the foundation, research accumulation is the core, background enhancement is a bonus, and material refinement is the key. The combination of these four can significantly enhance the competitiveness of applications, especially suitable for applications to top-tier institutions.

- **Preparatory Planning:** The preparation period for doctoral applications is long. It is recommended that students in their senior years of undergraduate studies or the early stages of master's programs clarify their academic interests and identify their research directions. For students from ordinary institutions, it is advisable to start preparing 1–1.5 years in advance. For those aiming for top-tier institutions, it is recommended to initiate the process 2 years ahead. Sufficient time should be reserved for approaching potential supervisors, accumulating research experience, preparing application materials, and applying for scholarships to avoid last-minute panic and ensure the orderly progress of each stage.
- **Research Accumulation:** Research background is the core competitiveness of doctoral applications. Applicants should actively participate in research group projects, strive for summer research opportunities, and publish high-quality academic achievements (such as journal papers, conference papers, etc.), construct a complete academic narrative, and highlight the alignment between their own research potential and the research direction, which is also a core consideration factor for admission to top-tier institutions.
- **Background Enhancement:** Expand academic networks and accumulate international

academic experience through overseas study visits, joint projects, international academic conferences, etc. Actively seek recommendation letters from international mentors to enhance the recognition of applications. Target and address personal weaknesses, such as insufficient research experience or low language scores, to achieve diversified background enhancement and strengthen application competitiveness.

- **Core of Application Materials:** Required materials must be complete and standardised. Among them, the Research Proposal (RP), as the core of a doctoral application, should clearly define the research topic, literature review, research methodology, time plan, and expected outcomes and be highly aligned with the research interests of the target supervisor. The Personal Statement (PS) should highlight the academic growth trajectory and research potential; recommendation letters must be persuasive; and transcripts, research achievement certificates, etc., must be authentic and standardised, comprehensively demonstrating one's academic capabilities. Considering the policy orientations of various countries mentioned earlier, material preparation should focus on meeting the core requirements of the target country, laying the foundation for subsequent differentiated applications.

6.2 Application Guide for Mainstream Countries

Doctoral applications in mainstream study-abroad countries exhibit significant differential characteristics, with core differences concentrated in networking requirements, language standards, scholarship applications, process details, and key points to avoid pitfalls. These differential characteristics highly correspond to the policy orientations of mainstream study-abroad destinations mentioned in 2.3.2 above. Application strategies for each country are formulated around its policy core, such as research priority in the US, tuition-free and position-based system in Germany, and connection with the Chinese mainland in Hong Kong, China. It is necessary to formulate application strategies tailored to the policy characteristics of each country, adapt to one's own background and career plan, avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to applications, and improve the accuracy and success rate of applications.

6.2.1 US

US doctoral applications are based on "research potential as the core and flexible adaptation as the principle," where networking is not mandatory but proactive engagement is recommended. Language and standardised test requirements are relatively high, and scholarship applications need to be pursued simultaneously. Key issues such as misalignment in positioning and academic fabrication should be avoided. It is suitable for applicants with in-depth research capabilities, highly consistent with the policy orientation of the US, which emphasises "research priority, diversified funding, and smooth retention" as mentioned earlier.

- **Networking Strategy:** Networking is not mandatory, but it is recommended to contact potential supervisors 3–6 months in advance, sending your resume, research experience, and preliminary research ideas, highlighting the alignment between your own research interests and the supervisor's research direction. Proactively understand the supervisor's admission plan and scholarship quota to avoid blind applications. Effective networking requires highly personalised communication rather than standardised templates. Applicants should demonstrate clear research alignment with potential supervisors by providing concise information about their academic background, research experience, CV, and preliminary

research ideas. Pre-application communication studies indicate that supervisors pay close attention to research fit and the quality of initial inquiries. (Source: *Burford et al., 2024; Henderson et al., 2024.*)

- **Language Requirements:** English proficiency is a core requirement for most international PhD applications. Requirements vary by institution and programme, but many research-intensive universities set minimum thresholds around TOEFL iBT 90+ or IELTS 7.0+, while highly competitive programmes may expect higher scores, such as TOEFL iBT 100+ or IELTS 7.5+. Some universities provide exemptions for applicants with previous degrees completed in English-medium institutions. GRE requirements are increasingly programme-specific: some doctoral programmes still require GRE scores, while others make them optional. Submitting strong GRE scores may strengthen applications, particularly for quantitative disciplines. (Sources: *Duke Graduate School, n.d.; Harvard Business School, n.d.; Stanford Graduate Admissions, n.d.*)
- **Scholarship Application:** It is recommended to submit the scholarship application simultaneously with the university application, with a focus on full scholarships in science and engineering. Prepare detailed research plans and scholarship application essays to highlight your own research potential and academic value. You can also apply for the CSC government-sponsored scholarship, but you need to understand the annual policy requirements in advance and plan your application time reasonably. (Source: *NSF; FindAPhD; CSC*)
- **Guide to Avoiding Pitfalls:** Avoid blindly aiming for top-tier institutions; instead, make a reasonable self-assessment based on your own research background. Pay attention to the authenticity and consistency of your research experience, and do not exaggerate or fabricate academic achievements. Prepare your language test scores in advance to avoid missing admission opportunities due to language requirements not being met. Closely monitor relevant professional policies to ensure that your application direction has no sensitive associations and meets visa review requirements. Choose your application direction in combination with your own career plan, and fully utilise the benefit of the OPT extension for STEM majors to 36 months.

6.2.2 United Kingdom

Doctoral applications in the United Kingdom are centered around "networking as the key and research proposal as the core", with no unified standardised test requirements, moderate language requirements, and a focus on avoiding issues such as templated networking and vague research proposals. They are suitable for applicants seeking efficient cultivation and diversified development, highly consistent with the policy orientation of the United Kingdom's "efficient cultivation, flexibility, and friendliness towards retention" mentioned earlier.

- **Core of networking:** Networking is an important component of applying for a PhD in the United Kingdom, particularly for research-based doctoral programmes. Many UK universities recommend that applicants contact potential supervisors before submitting a formal application to discuss research interests, proposal alignment, supervisory availability, and possible funding opportunities. Applicants are generally advised to prepare a concise introduction, CV, and research proposal outline, and tailor their communication to the supervisor's research expertise. Prior engagement with a potential supervisor does not guarantee admission but can strengthen the application by demonstrating academic fit and increasing the likelihood that appropriate supervision is available.

- **Language Requirements:** Most programs require TOEFL 80+ or IELTS 6.5+ (with no individual band score below 6.0), while top-tier institutions require TOEFL 90+ or IELTS 7.0+ (with no individual band score below 6.5). There is no unified standardised test requirement (no GRE/GMAT required), but some doctoral programs in business and liberal arts may require submission, so it is necessary to confirm the specific requirements of the institution in advance (*Source: British Council*).
- **Research Proposal (RP):** The research proposal is a key component of UK PhD applications, particularly for research-based doctoral programmes. It should demonstrate a clear research question, academic significance, appropriate methodology, and feasibility while showing strong alignment with the prospective supervisor's research interests and the department's expertise. Although the required length varies significantly by institution and discipline, applicants should strictly follow the specific word-count and formatting requirements of their target programmes. Seeking feedback from potential supervisors, academic mentors, or experienced researchers can help refine the proposal structure, strengthen its originality, and improve the overall competitiveness of the application.
- **Guide to Avoiding Pitfalls:** Avoid using template-based prospecting letters. Each letter to a supervisor should be tailored to highlight the alignment of research interests. Research proposals must not be plagiarised or overly general but should include specific research ideas and feasible plans. Scholarship applications should be prepared in advance to avoid missing the application deadline. Make full use of the flexibility of the program duration (3–4 years), communicate with supervisors to determine the enrollment time based on your own circumstances, and, after graduation, take full advantage of the 3-year PSW visa to gain work experience.

6.2.3 Singapore

Singapore's doctoral application is centered around "top-tier institutions as the core and research innovation as the orientation," with relatively high requirements for language and research background. Scholarship applications need to be advanced simultaneously, focusing on avoiding issues such as incomplete materials and theoretical RP. It is suitable for applicants who are adaptable to both Chinese and English and are oriented toward cutting-edge research, highly consistent with the policy orientation of Singapore's "resource tilt, generous funding, and market-oriented retention" mentioned earlier.

- **University Positioning:** Prioritise focusing on top public universities such as the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU). These two universities have the most intense competition for doctoral applications and high admission thresholds. It is recommended to submit applications after having an excellent research background (with academic achievements and overseas research experience). You can simultaneously apply to universities such as Singapore Management University and Singapore University of Technology and Design as backup options to increase the probability of admission.
- **Language Requirements:** Most majors require a TOEFL score of 90+ or an IELTS score of 7.0+. Some science and engineering programs may waive language test scores (proof of English-language research achievements or English-taught courses must be provided). Some majors require submission of GRE/GMAT scores. The core of the application process assesses the alignment between research background and research plan, and applicants to cutting-edge disciplines should emphasise their own research innovation. (*Source: NTU*,

NTU)

- **Scholarship Application:** Prioritise applying for full scholarships from the target institutions, understand the scholarship application deadlines in advance (usually synchronised with the institution application), prepare targeted scholarship application documents, highlighting one's own academic potential and the cutting-edge nature of research directions. Applicants accepting grants need to clarify their work commitments after graduation and make reasonable choices based on their own career plans.
- **Guide to Avoiding Pitfalls:** Avoid overlooking the application deadline for university scholarships and missing the optimal application timing. Research proposals should align with Singapore's research orientation (emphasising application and innovation) to avoid purely theoretical expressions. Pay attention to the notarisation and certification of student pass application materials to prevent incomplete materials from affecting visa approval. Understand in advance the requirements of the bilingual (Chinese and English) learning environment and prepare for adaptation. Full-time doctoral students at public universities can legally take part-time jobs (with no working hour restrictions) and can reasonably utilise part-time opportunities to accumulate practical experience.

6.2.4 Germany

Doctoral applications in Germany are characterised by "public institutions as the first choice and a position-based system as the feature," with no mandatory language requirements and a flexible application process. They focus on avoiding issues such as insufficient financial proof and mismatches in the training model, catering to applicants seeking high cost-effectiveness and in-depth research, and are highly consistent with the policy orientation of Germany's "research freedom, tuition-free, and friendly retention" mentioned earlier.

- **University Selection:** Applicants typically prioritise research-intensive public universities, especially institutions with strong scientific and engineering research capacity, such as Technical University of Munich and RWTH Aachen University. The German doctoral system places strong emphasis on supervisor fit and research project alignment. Private universities may also be considered when they provide specific research advantages or funding opportunities.
- **Language Requirements:** Germany does not impose a nationwide language requirement for doctoral studies. Language requirements depend on the specific university and programme. Many international doctoral programmes operate primarily in English, while German proficiency can improve daily integration and future employment opportunities. Applicants should confirm whether IELTS, TOEFL, German certificates, or previous English-medium education evidence are accepted by their target programme.
- **Application Process:** German PhD applications are relatively flexible compared with fixed-cycle systems in other countries. Individual doctorate applicants usually contact potential supervisors directly, while structured doctoral programmes and research positions follow formal recruitment procedures. Funded doctoral positions supported by research organisations such as the DFG are commonly advertised through universities and research groups. (*Source: Research Careers: PhD*)
- **Pitfall Avoidance Guide:** Applicants should prepare the financial documentation required for visa applications, carefully evaluate the differences between individual doctorate and structured doctoral programmes, and ensure strong alignment between their research

background and the proposed project. Understanding visa procedures and preparing documents early can help avoid delays.

6.2.5 Hong Kong, China

Doctoral applications in Hong Kong, China are characterised by **"geographical convenience as an advantage and connection with the Chinese mainland as a feature,"** with low difficulty in networking, a clear application cycle, and a focus on avoiding issues such as neglecting the research value of the Chinese mainland and visa delays. They are suitable for applicants who consider both the development of the Chinese mainland and value convenience, highly consistent with the policy orientation of Hong Kong, China, which emphasises "convenience, efficiency, connection with the Chinese mainland, and lenient retention" mentioned earlier.

- **Networking Strategy:** Applicants are encouraged to contact potential supervisors before submitting applications, especially for research-based doctoral programmes. Initial communication should include a concise CV, research background, and a research proposal or research interests summary, highlighting the connection between the applicant's academic experience and the supervisor's research areas. However, requirements vary by university and department, and some programmes do not require prior supervisor confirmation.
- **Language Requirements:** English proficiency requirements vary across universities and disciplines. Many programmes require IELTS or TOEFL scores, while applicants with previous English-medium education may be eligible for exemptions depending on institutional policies. Some programmes, particularly in business-related fields, may require GRE/GMAT scores. Beyond formal requirements, doctoral admissions focus strongly on research ability, academic preparation, and the quality and feasibility of the proposed research plan.
- **Time Planning:** Applicants should monitor university application rounds and scholarship deadlines carefully. For major funding schemes such as the Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme (HKPFS), applications generally open around September and require initial submission by early December. Applicants should prepare research proposals, references, and supporting documents well in advance.
- **Guide to Avoiding Pitfalls:** Avoid overlooking the value of research experience on the Chinese mainland, as Hong Kong institutions highly recognize the research capabilities of top mainland universities. Research proposals should align with the research orientation of Hong Kong institutions (emphasising international cooperation and applied research). Pay attention to the time nodes for visa processing to avoid delays in enrollment due to visa issues, as the visa renewal process is straightforward, and renewal matters can be reasonably planned. Understand the employment policies for staying in Hong Kong in advance and plan your career development path in combination with talent introduction programs.

6.2.6 Japan, South Korea

PhD applications in Japan and South Korea are based on **"minority languages as the foundation, government scholarships as the core."** The selection of universities should focus on top universities and cooperative projects, and focus on avoiding problems such as substandard language and lagging scholarship applications. It is suitable for applicants with limited budgets, a minority language foundation, and a desire to develop in East Asia. It is highly consistent with the policy orientation of "policy orientation, precise funding, and retention adaptation" in Japan and

South Korea mentioned earlier.

- **Language Preparation:** Language requirements depend on the teaching language of the doctoral programme. Applicants applying for Japanese or Korean-taught programmes generally need local language proficiency, while English-taught programmes usually require TOEFL or IELTS scores. For example, universities may accept English proficiency evidence for international programmes, while Japanese or Korean proficiency is required for local-language programmes. Applicants should confirm requirements with each department in advance.
- **Scholarship Application:** Applicants should pay close attention to major government-funded scholarships, including Japan's MEXT/JASSO scholarships and South Korea's Korean Government Scholarship Program (GKS). These programmes provide substantial financial support but are competitive and require careful preparation of academic records, research plans, recommendation letters, and language qualifications.
- **University Selection:** Applicants should prioritise research-intensive universities with strong international programmes, such as the University of Tokyo, Kyoto University, Seoul National University, and other leading institutions. Selection should be based not only on ranking but also on supervisor availability, research resources, and funding opportunities.
- **Pitfall Avoidance Guide:** Language test scores need to be prepared in advance and notarised and authenticated to ensure a smooth visa review. The application period for government special scholarships is relatively long, so time needs to be planned in advance. After graduation, one must find an employer sponsor to apply for a local work visa, so it is necessary to understand the local job market and policy requirements in advance.

6.3 Trends in Doctoral Application and Admission

6.3.1 United Kingdom

(1) Regional Trends: From "Clustering in London" to "Industry-Oriented"

At the doctoral stage, the compatibility between research resources and the industrial ecosystem becomes crucial. Currently, when selecting a region, applicants tend to focus more on access to cutting-edge laboratories, partner enterprises, and the cost-effectiveness of living expenses.

- **London and South East England: A Convergence of Top Resources with Intense Competition.** This region is home to G5 universities such as Imperial College London, UCL, and LSE, and is closely connected to the City of London and Tech City (e.g., Shoreditch). For doctoral students pursuing fields such as finance, artificial intelligence, and biomedicine that highly rely on top-notch facilities and interpersonal networks, this remains the top choice. However, the relatively high cost of living and extremely high admission thresholds are causing some applicants to turn to other regions.
- **North-central England (Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield):** Rising on the back of the "Northern Powerhouse," it offers outstanding cost-effectiveness. This region is becoming a popular choice for doctoral students in science and engineering. Taking graphene research at the University of Manchester and advanced manufacturing at the University of Sheffield as examples, these disciplines have numerous collaborative projects with industry (such as the

BBC, Siemens, and Rolls-Royce). Compared to London, living expenditures in these areas are much more affordable, yet the research value remains high.

- **Scotland (Edinburgh, Glasgow): An Innovation Hub for Artificial Intelligence and Traditional Disciplines.** The University of Edinburgh is an important European research base for artificial intelligence, and its School of Informatics is renowned worldwide. Tuition fees in Scotland are usually lower than in London, and its unique cultural atmosphere attracts a large number of doctoral students focusing on fields such as artificial intelligence ethics, renewable energy, and medicine.
- **Wales and Northern Ireland: Niche but Precise "Cost-Effective" Choices.** For students with limited budgets but a pursuit of specific research fields, Cardiff University's School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, and Queen's University Belfast's School of Agriculture and Food Science and School of Medicine, Dentistry and Biomedical Sciences offer a lower cost of living and a focused research environment.

(2) Institutional Trends: Multi-dimensional evaluation replaces the "rank-only theory"

As the competition for doctoral applications intensifies, applicants' evaluations of institutions have become more comprehensive.

- **Universities that are "resource-rich" and have strong employment prospects continue to gain popularity.** In addition to traditional academic reputation, students are increasingly concerned about the actual career paths of graduates. For example, Imperial College London topped the 2026 ranking in the Daily Mail precisely because it ranked first in the UK in both core indicators of "high-skilled jobs" and "graduate salaries."
- **Universities that are "friendly to students from a non-985/211 university" but have outstanding professional strength are favored.** Universities like Newcastle University (Medicine), the University of Liverpool, etc., attract a large number of practical applicants due to their strong positions in certain academic fields and in-depth cooperation with industries (such as the sports science cooperation between the University of Sheffield and Premier League clubs).
- **Supervisor match has become a core decision-making factor.** The key to doctoral admission lies in supervisor match and the quality of research proposals. Students tend to choose institutions that have top scholars in their specific research fields, even if the overall ranking of the institution is not among the top.

(3) Professional Trends: Interdisciplinary and Industry Convergence Become the Mainstream

In recent years, doctoral applications in the United Kingdom have shown the characteristics of "declining popularity in traditional humanities and social sciences, and a surge in technology-driven and interdisciplinary disciplines." However, in terms of total numbers, engineering and technology, computer science, medical-related disciplines, as well as social sciences and business management have consistently been the largest professional sectors in terms of the number of students at the doctoral level, maintaining a high base in each academic year, with the overall trend showing a slow increase or remaining stable at a high level.

Based on case data analysis, the proportions of each major category are as follows:

Professional Category	Percentage Share
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Social Sciences and Management	46.6%
Engineering and Technology Major Category	20.7%
Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences	15.7%
Natural Sciences Category	9.8%
Life Sciences and Medicine Category	7.2%

*Data Source: REAL PhD Team of Xianli Zhixue

➤ **Social Sciences Takes the Lead: Mentor-led System and Flexible Funding Channels**

1) Supervisor's Discretion and Self-Funding Channel: Doctoral applications in the United Kingdom are highly dependent on supervisor acceptance. Social science research often does not require expensive laboratory equipment, with the main costs being the supervisor's time and library resources. Therefore, supervisors have great autonomy in admitting students. As long as they approve the research plan, even students without scholarships (self-funded) can relatively easily obtain admission, which provides an entry ticket for a large number of international students.

2) Diverse sources of funding: Social science funding does not rely entirely on large-scale grants from the United Kingdom government. In addition to university scholarships, there are also numerous charitable foundations, trust funds (such as the Wellcome Trust's cross-funding of social science and medicine), and corporate sponsorships (such as business school doctoral students often being supported by financial institutions). Moreover, social science doctoral education is closely linked to master's education, and many students use pursuing a taught master's degree as a springboard to establish connections.

3) Broad career prospects: Social sciences (especially management and education) are closely aligned with the job market. Many applicants hope to obtain a doctoral degree to teach at universities or enhance their competitiveness in industries such as consulting, finance, and international organisations.

➤ **Engineering and Technology: Steady Growth Driven by Industry**

1) The prevalence of project-based doctoral programs: Unlike social sciences, most engineering doctoral programs are project-based. After supervisors secure research projects, they recruit doctoral students to complete sub-projects. Such doctoral students usually come with their own funding (tuition fees and living expenses are covered by project funds), and the competition is extremely fierce, but it offers high cost-effectiveness for students.

2) The industrial sector is clearly segmented: In the United Kingdom, there is a significant talent shortage in high-tech manufacturing (new energy, aerospace, chip design), and many outstanding students choose to directly enter the industrial sector rather than immediately pursue a doctoral degree. This results in the proportion of pure research-oriented talents in the applicant pool remaining relatively stable, but the total number is not as large as that in the social sciences.

➤ **Humanities and Social Sciences: A Small but Sophisticated Academic Commitment**

1) Polarisation of competition: Applicants for traditional majors in literature, history, philosophy, and art usually have a strong academic passion. However, due to the relatively narrow scope of employment (mainly in teaching positions, museums, and cultural institutions), the number of applicants is relatively stable, and the base is not large.

2) Scholarships are scarce but concentrated: Although the overall proportion is not high, there are some very well-known specialised scholarships in the humanities and social sciences (such as sponsorships related to the BBC and the British Museum), and the competition for scholarships from the AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) is extremely fierce. Students who can obtain funding are often the cream of the crop.

➤ **Natural Sciences and Life Medicine: Academic Elites Amidst the Funding Cold Wave**

1) High hard costs: The cost of training doctoral students in science, technology, engineering, and medicine is much higher than that in the social sciences. For a doctoral student in chemistry or biomedical science, the annual cost of experimental consumables and equipment maintenance can be as high as tens of thousands of pounds, and supervisors must have sufficient grants to recruit students.

2) Impact of Brexit and the Full Scholarship Model: After the United Kingdom left the European Union, it lost some EU research funding support in the short term, and the tuition fees for EU students increased, which affected the expansion capacity of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) programs. Almost all STEM and medical doctoral programs require full funding support. A supervisor may only have 1-2 spots per year but will receive hundreds of applications, resulting in an extremely low admission rate.

3) New Opportunities in Interdisciplinary Fields: Although the proportion of pure natural sciences and pure medicine is low, interdisciplinary fields are on the rise. For example, bioinformatics (computer science + life science), environmental science (geography + chemistry + policy), neuroscience (psychology + medicine), etc. These fields often have the opportunity to apply for interdisciplinary funding and may become growth points in the next few years.

(4) Age trend: The diversification of application entities, with the trend of younger age slowing down

- **Applicants are still mainly fresh graduates, but the proportion of those who pursue a doctorate after working has increased.** Although the overall trend of younger age has slowed down, new characteristics have emerged at the doctoral stage: more and more applicants choose to return to campus after working for a period of time, with a clear awareness of industrial issues (for example, the number of people pursuing a DBA, or Doctor of Business Administration, has been steadily increasing, requiring years of management experience).
- **Chinese applicants continue to grow steadily and have clear goals.** Chinese students remain the largest source of international students in the United Kingdom, with the number of applications continuing to rise. These students are generally better prepared, more rational in their goals, and place greater emphasis on "the dual deepening of academic aspirations and career planning."
- **Applications from older candidates (21+) have increased in specific fields.** In urgently needed and scarce industries such as medicine and nursing, due to the huge demand both in the United Kingdom and internationally, many mature students have been attracted back to apply.

6.3.2 Australia

(1) Scale Trend: Australia's international students exceed one million, with the higher education sector driving a significant expansion of the doctoral cohort

According to official PRISMS data, as of January to October 2025 (YTD Oct 2025), the total number of international students studying in Australia was 1,020,279. Among them, there were 535,011 international students in higher education, accounting for approximately 52.4% of all international students. This level covers master's and doctoral programs and is the core carrier for international doctoral students studying in Australia. Vertical comparison shows that the scale of international students in higher education has continued to recover after the pandemic: 353,030 in 2022, 428,784 in 2023, 488,747 in 2024, and 535,011 in 2025. This means that although the scale of doctoral students has not been separately disclosed, the international students in higher education, which includes them, expanded by approximately 52% between 2022 and 2025, and the doctoral student group must be nested within this significantly expanding structure. (Source: Australian Tertiary Education Commission)

(2) Student Source Trends: China and India Lead, with South Asia and Southeast Asia Constituting Important Segments

In terms of the structure of the source countries of international students, in 2025, Australia's international students will be highly concentrated in Asian countries, and this pattern also applies to the higher education system, where the international doctoral student population is located. According to the national distribution map:

- China remains the largest source country, with a total of approximately 195,419 Chinese students (51,780 new students and 143,639 continuing students);
- India ranked second, with a total of approximately 141,800 people (31,687 new students and 110,113 enrolled students);
- Following it are Nepal (approximately 70,263), Vietnam (approximately 36,588), the Philippines (approximately 34,789), etc. in sequence.

Since doctoral education belongs to the higher education level, and international doctoral students mainly come from countries with strong scientific research and higher education output capabilities, it can be clearly determined that the source structure of international doctoral students is highly concentrated in China and India, followed by South Asian and Southeast Asian countries. (Source: Australian Tertiary Education Commission)

(3) Professional Trends: Business and Social Sciences Lead in the Overall Scale, while Engineering and Social Sciences Drive the Landscape of Doctoral Applications in a Dual-Engine Manner

Based on the 2024 student enrollment data from Australian public universities (Table A Providers), at the overall higher education student level, the distribution of majors shows a clearly concentrated structure: Management and Commerce (349,756 students) and Society and Culture (306,676 students) are the largest major fields. Health-related majors also have a relatively large scale (293,880 students). Engineering and Related Technologies (119,735 people), Information Technology (157,572 people), and Natural and Physical Sciences (122,038 people) constitute the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Basic Sciences sector. Other majors such as Education (148,379 people), Creative Arts (90,428 people), etc., fall within the medium- or small-scale range. (Source: Australian Tertiary Education Commission)

According to case data statistics, doctoral applications in Australia exhibit distinct centralisation characteristics, particularly prominent in the two major fields of social sciences and management, as well as engineering and technology, which together account for as high as 58.8%, constituting the main body of doctoral education in Australia.

➤ **The "industry-driven" characteristics of engineering doctoral degrees: abundant opportunities and substantial funding**

Engineering and Technology accounts for 17.5%, and the driving force behind it is solid industrial demand and substantial research funding.

1) Inelastic demand for mining and energy: As a major resource-exporting country, Australia has a consistently strong demand for high-end talent in fields such as mining engineering, oil and gas exploration, etc. Tutors in relevant engineering majors often have a large amount of horizontal project funding from the industrial sector (such as BHP, Rio Tinto), which can provide generous scholarships for doctoral students.

2) Characteristics of Environmental Engineering: In the face of global climate change and the unique local ecosystem (such as the protection of the Great Barrier Reef), Environmental Engineering, Renewable Energy, and Water Resources Management have become key development areas, attracting a large amount of special government funding.

3) Integration of industry, academia, and research: Engineering Doctorate programs are often tied to specific enterprises. During their studies, students may directly participate in solving the actual technical problems of enterprises, and graduates are highly competitive in the job market.

➤ **Characteristics of "Academic Migration" and "Area Studies" in Social Sciences and Management**

This sector accounts for as much as 41.3%, reflecting Australia's unique position as an immigrant country and an important node in the Asia-Pacific region.

1) The continuous popularity of business and management: Business majors such as accounting, finance, and management have long been the top choice for international students (including Chinese students) studying in Australia, and this trend extends to the doctoral level.

2) Policy and Regional Research Needs: The Australian Government attaches great importance to political and economic research in the Asia-Pacific region. Majors such as Public Policy, International Relations, and Social Work receive stable government funding, aiming to cultivate experts who can understand Asia-Pacific affairs.

3) Interdisciplinary research is prevalent: An increasing number of studies in the field of social sciences have combined data analysis, urban planning, and sustainable development, further expanding the application base of this major category.

➤ **"Deepening" and "Characterisation" of Humanities and Social Sciences**

The proportion of liberal arts and humanities and social sciences is 15.0%, on a relatively small scale, but it has a precise positioning and presents the characteristics of being "small but beautiful".

1) Relying on unique cultural resources: Humanities research in Australia often relies on its colonial history, Aboriginal culture, and diverse immigrant cultures. Areas such as Aboriginal studies and cultural heritage conservation have strong regional uniqueness, attracting international scholars with a keen interest in them.

2) "Invisible Barriers" in Application Thresholds: Humanities and social science doctoral

programs have extremely high requirements for English writing skills and cultural understanding, which naturally create a certain application threshold.

➤ **The "High Barriers" and "Resource Centralisation" of Medicine and Natural Sciences**

Life Sciences and Medicine (18.5%) and Natural Sciences (7.7%) together account for 26.2%, and applications exhibit typical characteristics of "high threshold, high funding, and strong background".

1) **The "elite screening system" in medicine:** Australian medical education itself is extremely rigorous at the undergraduate level. For international students, applying for a Doctor of Medicine not only requires a strong research background but often also requires having clinical qualifications recognized locally in Australia.

2) **Orientation of "basic research" in natural sciences:** Although basic sciences such as mathematics, physics, and chemistry do not account for a high proportion overall, they remain strong in Australia's top "Group of Eight" universities. These fields usually rely on the support of national research funds (such as ARC), and their research directions are more inclined towards theoretical breakthroughs or applied basic research combined with engineering.

6.3.3 New Zealand

(1) Professional Trends: Structural Characteristics Dominated by Liberal Arts and Precise Strategies for Applications in Science, Engineering, and Medicine

In the doctoral applications in New Zealand, the proportion of each major category is as follows:

Professional Category	Percentage Share
Social Sciences and Management	65.9%
Engineering and Technology Major Category	12.1%
Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences	12.9%
Natural Sciences Category	5.3%
Life Sciences and Medicine Category	3.8%

*Data Source: REAL PhD Team of Xianli Zhixue

➤ **Prominent structural characteristics of "humanities dominance, science and engineering niche"**

1) **Areas of Absolute Advantage:** The combined proportion of the broad categories of Social Sciences and Management (65.9%) and Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences (12.9%) reaches as high as 78.8%. This indicates that New Zealand's doctoral education system has extremely high inclusiveness and resource advantages in the field of humanities and social sciences. (Source: REAL PhD)

2) Niche and Sophisticated Fields: The total proportion of the three major fields of nature science, engineering, and technology, and medicine is only 21.2%, reflecting that New Zealand has a relatively small scale of doctoral training in hard science fields, characterised by "small but excellent" or "a large gap." (Source: REAL PhD)

➤ **Deep Shaping of Academic Cultivation by Industrial Structure**

1) Service-driven economy: The economic pillars of New Zealand mainly include agriculture, tourism, education exports, and natural resource-based management (such as environmental protection and sustainable agricultural management). This directly gives rise to a large demand for research in social science fields such as business, tourism management, public policy, education, and sociology.

2) Limited demand in science and engineering fields: Compared with countries with large manufacturing or high-tech industrial clusters, New Zealand has a small proportion of high-end industries, resulting in limited domestic demand for top-level R&D positions in fields such as engineering and biomedicine, which in turn affects the enrollment scale and funding allocation of universities in these fields.

➤ **"Resource Scarcity" and "Local Protection" in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Medicine**

1) Funding and Supervisor Resources: Doctoral research in science, technology, engineering, and medicine (STEM) fields heavily relies on experimental equipment and consumables, resulting in substantial funding consumption. Due to the weak industrial foundation in this field in New Zealand and relatively limited sources of funding, the available funds are not abundant.

2) Invisible differences in application thresholds: New Zealand's polytechnic medical disciplines are small in scale, with limited supervisor funding that is prioritised for local students. For international students, applying for these programs means competing with local students for scarce funding, so "self-funding" has become a practical strategy.

(2) Implications and Positioning for International Students

➤ **The "Profit-making Period" for Humanities and Social Sciences Applicants:** For students applying for social sciences or humanities and arts, New Zealand is truly a "paradise." It has a wide range of majors, a large number of tutors, and research topics can more easily find local practical cases and data support (such as Maori cultural studies, Pacific regional development, ecosystem tourism management, etc.).

➤ **The "Precise Matching" Strategy for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Medicine Applicants :**

1) Applicants with strong funding dependence should exercise caution: If they must rely on a full scholarship to study abroad, it is extremely difficult to apply for a doctoral program in science, technology, engineering, or medicine in New Zealand.

2) Opportunities for self-funded/government-sponsored applicants: If students can clearly indicate self-funding (such as CSC government sponsorship) or bring their own corporate sponsorship, the success rate of cold emailing will significantly increase, as this can bypass the most headache-inducing funding issue for supervisors.

3) Focus on Advantageous Areas: New Zealand still has world-class strengths in specific science and engineering fields, such as Earth Sciences (earthquakes, volcanoes), Environmental Science, Veterinary Science (related to agriculture), and Food Science. These fields may have more

optimistic application opportunities than indicated by the data proportion.

6.3.4 Hong Kong, China (Taking the Statistical Data of the University of Hong Kong as an Example)

(1) Scale Trend: Stable scale, dominated by internationalisation, with the proportion of non-local students continuously exceeding 80%

Overall, doctoral study in Hong Kong presents characteristics of stable scale, an extremely high proportion of international students, and a balanced rhythm of new enrollments and graduations. The doctoral stage in the Hong Kong higher education system is not a large-scale expansion project but rather operates with a core model characterised by high selectivity, small scale, and high internationalisation.

- **Enrollment Scale:** According to the statistics of student enrollment in the 2024/25 academic year, the total number of Research Postgraduate students is 4,480, accounting for 10.6% of the total 42,330 enrolled students in the university, and is a core component of the cultivation of high-end scientific research talents in Hong Kong's higher education institutions.
- **Student Source Structure:** The proportion of non-local students has reached 86.0%, significantly higher than that at the undergraduate level (29.6%) and the taught postgraduate level (68.5%), indicating that Hong Kong's doctoral programs rely to a large extent on non-local students for support, and its doctoral training system itself is primarily positioned as "international doctoral study abroad".
- **Annual New Enrollment:** In the 2024/25 academic year, the number of newly enrolled research postgraduate students is 1,176, among whom the proportion of non-local students is as high as 88.8%, further indicating that the growth of Hong Kong's doctoral programs is almost entirely driven by non-local doctoral students.
- **Graduation Scale:** In the 2023/24 academic year, the number of research postgraduate graduates was 741, with the proportion of non-local students among graduates standing at 77.6%. The graduation scale maintains a relatively stable proportional relationship with the enrollment and new intake scales, reflecting that doctoral training in Hong Kong continues to operate at a steady pace. (Source: HKU)

(2) Student Source Trend: Doctoral study in Hong Kong, China, is highly dependent on mainland Chinese students, accounting for over 90%.

Overall, the source structure of doctoral students studying in Hong Kong, China is highly concentrated in the Chinese mainland, showing characteristics of single dominance and marginalization of other regions. At the doctoral level, a multi-regional decentralized student source pattern has not been formed; instead, it remains highly bound to the mobility of postgraduate students from the Chinese mainland.

- **Student Source Structure:** Research postgraduate education at HKU demonstrates a highly internationalised structure. In the 2024/25 academic year, Research Postgraduate students numbered 4,480, with non-local students accounting for approximately 86% of enrolment, indicating that HKU's doctoral training system relies heavily on international student participation. (Source: The University of Hong Kong, 2025)
- **Cross-level comparison:** At the undergraduate level, the proportion of students from the Chinese Mainland is 65.5%. At the taught postgraduate level, it further increases to 95.1%,

while at the research postgraduate level, where doctoral students are located, the proportion remains stable at 92.8%. This indicates that from undergraduate to postgraduate to doctoral levels, mainland students have always been the most core and stable source for Hong Kong's higher education institutions.

- **Students from other regions:** Other Asian countries and regions account for 9.1%, European countries 1.8%, North American countries 1.4%, Australia and New Zealand only 0.5%, and other regions together 0.4%, forming a very obvious structural gap with students from the Chinese mainland. (Source: HKU)

(3) Professional distribution: Doctoral applications in Hong Kong, China are concentrated in the social sciences and medicine, but core scientific research resources are tilted towards engineering and science.

- **From the perspective of the overall structure,** the distribution of doctoral programs in Hong Kong, China, shows a clear orientation toward scientific research and technology. Engineering, medicine, and science not only have the largest number of students but are also basically all concentrated in government-funded projects, reflecting that the cultivation of doctoral students in Hong Kong focuses on high-research-intensity disciplines in terms of resource allocation. (Source: HKU)
- **Professional Distribution:** In the 2024/25 academic year, the total number of research postgraduate students was 4,480. Among them, the engineering doctoral program had the largest scale, with 1,152 students enrolled (accounting for approximately 25.7%). The medical program had 1,071 students enrolled (accounting for approximately 23.9%), and the science program had 783 students enrolled (accounting for approximately 17.5%). These three major fields together accounted for more than 67% of the total doctoral scale, constituting the core disciplinary sectors of doctoral training in Hong Kong, China. (Source: HKU)
- **Second Echelon:** Social Sciences and Education form the second echelon, with 291 doctoral students in Social Sciences and 238 in Education, accounting for 6.5% and 5.3% of the total doctoral student population, respectively. (Source: HKU)
- **Business School Scale:** There are 501 doctoral students in the fields of economics and business administration, accounting for less than 11.2%, which is in sharp contrast to the large scale at the taught postgraduate stage, indicating that the business school in the Hong Kong, China system is mainly focused on taught postgraduate programs. (Source: HKU)
- **In the application distribution of doctoral programs in Hong Kong, China,** the broad category of Social Sciences and Management accounts for 31.8%, both the broad categories of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences and Life Sciences and Medicine account for 13.9%, the broad category of Engineering and Technology accounts for 11.5%, and the broad category of Natural Sciences accounts for 9.5%. It can be seen that the professional distribution of doctoral applications in Hong Kong, China, exhibits the structural characteristics of "dominated by social sciences, equal emphasis on humanities and medicine, and limited scale of science and engineering". This distribution is closely related to Hong Kong's industrial structure (developed finance, trade, and service industries), the research strength areas of universities (medicine, humanities, and social sciences), and the allocation of research funds. (Source: HKU)
- **Social Sciences and Management dominate:** This field leads by a wide margin with a 31.8% share, reflecting the strong research capabilities of Hong Kong's universities in areas

such as business, economics, sociology, and management, given Hong Kong's status as an international financial, trade, and commercial center. (Source: HKU)

- **Humanities and Arts and Life Sciences are tied for the second echelon:** Both accounting for 21.4%, tied for second place. This indicates that doctoral education in Hong Kong, China maintains a deep traditional advantage in the humanities, while Life Sciences and Medicine also benefit from sufficient medical research funding. (Source: HKU)
- **The proportion of the engineering and technology fields is relatively low:** Accounting for 13.9%, it is in the middle position. Although Hong Kong, China has strong international competitiveness in some engineering fields (such as electronic engineering and computer science), its scale is far smaller than that of social sciences, humanities, and life sciences in the overall structure of doctoral applications. (Source: HKU)
- **The application scale of the natural sciences category is the smallest: accounting** for only 11.5%, it has the lowest proportion among the five major disciplinary fields, which may be related to the lack of large-scale natural resource research scenarios in Hong Kong and the limited capacity of relevant basic research positions. (Source: HKU)

6.3.5 Macao, China

(1) Professional Trends: Concentration and Divergence under the Monopoly of "Big Social Sciences"

According to official Macao higher-education statistics, Macao had 10 higher education institutions in 2024/2025, including 4 public institutions and 6 private institutions. In the same academic year, Macao's higher education system had 3,718 teaching staff, 62,463 registered higher-education students, and 390 operating higher-education programmes, including doctoral, master's, bachelor's, postgraduate diploma, and higher-education diploma programmes. (Source: Government Information Bureau of the Macao SAR, 2025)

From a system-level perspective, Macao's higher education sector has expanded rapidly in recent years. The number of students in Macao's higher education institutions increased from approximately 34,000 in AY 2018/2019 to approximately 55,500 in AY 2023/2024, representing growth of more than 60%. During the same period, the proportion of postgraduate students increased from 25.53% to 39.00%, while the number of higher education programmes increased from approximately 280 to more than 360. (Source: Education and Youth Development Bureau, Macao SAR Government, 2024)

In AY 2024/2025, Macao had a total of 10 higher education institutions. (Source: Education and Youth Development Bureau (DSEDJ), Macao SAR Government, 2024) The Macao SAR Government also stated that it would continue to promote and coordinate higher education institutions to develop in line with key industries and the internationalisation of higher education, further improve disciplinary layout, deepen and expand research and education cooperation, and promote joint training programmes between local and overseas higher education institutions. (Source: Education and Youth Development Bureau (DSEDJ), Macao SAR Government, 2024)

- **The application pattern should be understood as "soft-discipline concentration + service-economy orientation":** Although no public official dataset was found for discipline-by-discipline doctoral application distribution, the overall higher-education student structure shows that business, humanities, services, social sciences, and education together account for about 75.7% of enrolment. This indicates that Macao's higher-education demand is strongly

aligned with management, tourism, services, culture, communication, and education-related fields. (Source: Education and Youth Development Bureau of the Macao SAR, 2025; author's calculation)

- **The “big social sciences” field has a dominant position, but STEM and health niches are being strengthened by policy:** The Macao Government states that higher-education development is being aligned with the “1+4” economic diversification strategy, including integrated tourism and leisure, traditional Chinese medicine and big health, modern finance, high technologies, MICE commerce, and culture and sports. It also notes that local higher-education institutions are expanding research and industry cooperation in integrated circuits, traditional Chinese medicine, and smart-city Internet of Things. (Source: Government Information Bureau of the Macao SAR, 2025)
- **The application distribution is highly consistent with the dominant disciplines of institutions:** This distribution characteristic is closely related to the disciplinary layout and dominant areas of Macao's higher education institutions. The dominant disciplines of Macao's higher education institutions are mainly concentrated in social science fields such as business, education, literature, art, communication, and tourism management, with large enrollment scales and abundant tutor resources. In contrast, fields such as engineering, natural science, and medicine involve high-tech laboratory equipment, resulting in limited doctoral program offerings and enrollment quotas.

(2) Implications for Applicants:

For students with a social science / humanities / business / education / tourism background: Macao remains a highly relevant destination because its higher-education enrolment is concentrated in Business, Administration, and Law, Arts and Humanities, Services, Social Sciences, Journalism and Information, and Education, which together account for about 75.7% of total enrolment. However, this also means competition is likely to be concentrated in these fields, so applicants should strengthen their research proposal, methodology, language preparation, and supervisor fit. (Source: Education and Youth Development Bureau of the Macao SAR, 2025; author's calculation)

For students with STEM, medical, health, or interdisciplinary backgrounds: Although ICT, health and welfare, engineering, and science together account for only about 24.3% of the higher-education student structure, these areas are supported by Macao's policy priorities and newly developed programmes in public health, biomedical sciences, materials science and engineering, financial technology, and related areas. The key strategy is not broad application but precise matching with laboratories, supervisors, and funded research platforms. (Source: Education and Youth Development Bureau of the Macao SAR, 2025; author's calculation)

For Mainland Chinese applicants: Macao is an active cross-border higher-education destination. In 2024/2025, new Mainland China registrations reached 15,528, of which doctoral students accounted for approximately 16.8%. This indicates that doctoral demand is meaningful but selective, and applicants should avoid treating Macao as a low-threshold alternative. (Source: Government Information Bureau of the Macao SAR, 2025; author's calculation)

6.3.6 Singapore (Based on NTU Official Data Analysis)

(1) Scale trend: A 65% surge over four years, with expansion led by full-time taught programs, and the proportion of doctoral students remaining stable at 20%

From the perspective of the overall scale of postgraduate students, NTU's postgraduate enrollment has been continuously expanding from AY 2021–22 to AY 2025–26, with the total number increasing from 9,513 to 15,729. This expansion is almost entirely driven by full-time postgraduate students, with the proportion of full-time students rising from approximately 72.8% to 86.5%, while the number of part-time postgraduate students has been continuously contracting. In the AY2025–26 academic year, the number of enrolled students in the Research category (research-based) was 3,478 of which approximately 93% were in doctoral programs, corresponding to a doctoral enrollment size of 3,236 accounting for approximately 20.6% of all postgraduate students at NTU. This data reflects that doctoral students are a research-based group with a stable size but a controlled proportion within NTU's postgraduate system, and their expansion pace is significantly slower than that of taught postgraduate students. *(Source: NTU)*

(2) Professional Trends: The "Strong Science and Engineering" Characteristics and Hierarchical Structure of NTU's Doctoral Training

From the perspective of the distribution of majors and schools on the scale of doctoral students, NTU's doctoral training is highly concentrated in fields related to science, engineering, and computing.

- **Core Segments:** There are 1,271 doctoral students in the School of Engineering (accounting for approximately 39.3%), 616 in the School of Science (accounting for approximately 19.0%), and 514 in the School of Computing and Data Science (accounting for approximately 15.9%). The three segments together cover approximately 74.2% of the total number of doctoral students, indicating that NTU's doctoral system is clearly concentrated in the fields of engineering, natural science, and computing in terms of disciplinary resource allocation. *(Source: Nanyang Technological University, 2025a; NTU)*
- **Subsequent echelons:** School of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (285 people), Graduate College Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program (270 people), School of Medicine (145 people), National Institute of Education (144 people), Nanyang Business School (72 people), etc. *(Source: Nanyang Technological University, 2025a)*
- **Largest Doctoral Programs:** Doctor of Computational and Data Science (514 students), Doctor of Electrical and Electronic Engineering (429 students), Doctor of Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering (257 students), Doctor of Materials Science and Engineering (239 students), and Doctor of Mathematical and Physical Sciences (239 students). *(Source: NTU)*

(3) Gender pattern: Due to disciplinary differences, 74% of students in the School of Engineering are male, while 70% of students in the School of Humanities are female.

In terms of gender structure, among the number of NTU doctoral students in the AY2025–26 academic year, there were 2,202 males (accounting for approximately 63.3%) and 1,276 females (accounting for approximately 36.7%), with the proportion of males significantly higher than the approximately 55.51% level of males in the overall postgraduate population of the same year. This disparity is particularly evident among different schools: the proportion of males among doctoral students in the School of Engineering is close to 73.9%, and that in the School of Computing and Data Science exceeds 81.3%. In contrast, the proportion of females among doctoral students in the School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences is approximately 70.5%, and the proportion of females among doctoral students in the School of Medicine is also slightly higher than that of males. Overall, the gender distribution differences at the doctoral level mainly stem from differences in disciplinary structure. *(Source: NTU)*

6.3.7 US

(1) Scale trend: Steady with an upward trend, the number of international doctoral students in the US continues to grow

Overall, the general trend of studying for a doctorate in the US can be summarised as follows: a slight increase in scale, a stable structural position, and a high concentration of training platforms. Against the backdrop of the recovery of the total number of international students and the differentiated adjustment at the undergraduate and master's levels, the doctoral level has not shown a significant decline but has continued to maintain a growth trend.

- **Scale Change:** According to the Open Doors International Student Census Tables, the number of international doctoral students enrolled in US higher education institutions was 149,618 in the 2023/24 academic year, rising to 153,418 in the 2024/25 academic year, an increase of 3,800 within a year, with a year-on-year growth of approximately 2.54%. Against the backdrop of the overall recovery and continuous growth of international students, the doctoral stage has maintained steady expansion.
- **Academic Hierarchical Structure:** In the 2024/25 academic year, the number of international undergraduate students increased by 4.2% year-on-year, while the total number of international postgraduate students decreased by 2.7% year-on-year. Despite a slight decline in the total number of postgraduate students, the number of doctoral students still increased, indicating that the adjustment at the postgraduate level mainly occurred at the master's level, and doctoral programs overall maintained stable operation.
- **Distribution of Institution Types:** Among international students in the US, 89.1% are enrolled in Doctoral Universities, while Master's Colleges and Universities account for only 6.0%. This distribution indicates that the US international student system itself operates with Doctoral Universities at its core, and doctoral programs possess strong stability. (Source: *Open Doors International Students Data (Institute of International Education)*)

(2) Professional Trends: From "Quantitative Expansion" to "High-Education Orientation" - Structural Differentiation of Chinese Students Studying in the US and the Resilience of the Doctoral Pathway

- **Changes in the student source structure:** In the 2024/25 academic year, the total number of Chinese students decreased by 4% year-on-year, but this decline was not evenly distributed, mainly concentrated in the undergraduate stage. The number of Chinese undergraduates decreased by 10.2% compared to the previous academic year, the largest decline among all levels. In contrast, the number of students at the postgraduate stage only decreased by 2.1%. This indicates that, against the backdrop of the overall decline in the size of Chinese students, the demand to continue pursuing postgraduate and doctoral degrees in the US is significantly stronger than that at the undergraduate stage. (Source: *Institute of International Education, 2025*)
- **At the institutional level:** 89.1% of Chinese students are enrolled in Doctoral Universities, far higher than other types of institutions. This means that Chinese students pursuing doctoral degrees in the US do not disperse into different types of universities but continue to concentrate in the research university system centered on doctoral training and scientific research. Overall, Chinese student enrollment is shifting from "quantity expansion" to "highly educated, research-oriented". (Source: *Open Doors International Students Data (Institute of International Education)*)

(3) Professional Trends: STEM dominates, with US international doctoral training highly concentrated in engineering and computer science

- **Professional Structure:** In the 2024/25 academic year, the major with the largest number of international students was Mathematics and Computer Science (305,377 students, accounting for 25.9%), followed by Engineering (217,016 students, accounting for 18.4%), with the combined total of the two already exceeding 44% of all international students. At the postgraduate level, STEM majors accounted for 64%, significantly higher than the 43% at the undergraduate level. Since all doctoral students belong to the postgraduate system, this data directly reflects the concentration trend in major selection at the doctoral level.
- **Trends of Change:** The number of students in Mathematics and Computer Science majors increased by 8.7% year-on-year, Engineering majors by 3.3%, and Physics and Life Sciences by 7.8%, all maintaining positive growth trends. This indicates that the expansion of US doctoral programs mainly occurs in academic fields with a strong research orientation and direct relevance to technological innovation and basic research. (Source: *InAmerica Education*, 2025)

6.3.8 Canada

(1) Scale trend: System expansion, doctoral stability

Overall, the scale of doctoral study in Canada shows the trend characteristics of "system expansion and doctoral stability." Against the backdrop of the rapid growth of international student numbers and significant changes at the undergraduate and college levels, the doctoral stage has not fluctuated significantly with scale fluctuations.

- **Overall trend:** According to Statistics Canada, the total number of students enrolled in public colleges and universities in Canada reached 2.3 million in the 2023/2024 academic year, representing a year-on-year increase of 5.8%, which is the most significant annual growth since the pandemic. (Source: *Canadian Postsecondary Enrolments & International Students (Statistics Canada)*)
- **Growth of International Students:** The number of enrolled international students increased by 103,953 year-on-year (+22.2%). Among them, the number of international students within the university system increased by 21,345, a year-on-year growth of 8.1%. Since doctoral degrees in Canada are only awarded by universities, the continuous growth of the international student population at the university level means that the potential pool of students at the doctoral stage continues to expand. (Source: *Canadian Postsecondary Enrolments & International Students (Statistics Canada)*)
- **Doctoral graduation scale:** During the period from 2014 to 2023, the number of doctoral graduates in Canada has always remained at a low but stable level, without any significant decline. (Source: *Canadian Postsecondary Enrolments & International Students (Statistics Canada)*)

(2) Student Source Trend: The enthusiasm for Chinese students studying in Canada has cooled, and the doctoral admission channel has entered the stage of "high threshold, stable scale".

Overall, the IRCC nationality data reflects that the overall flow of Chinese students studying in Canada has cooled down, while the doctoral stage is more characterized by relative stability within the overall contraction.

- **Trends in Chinese Student Enrollment:** According to IRCC data, the number of Chinese holders of study permits was at a high level before 2019. After 2020, affected by the pandemic and restricted cross-border mobility, the number of Chinese study permits coming into effect showed a significant decline. In 2025 (as of November), the number of Chinese study permits coming into effect was approximately 46,375, significantly lower than the pre-pandemic annual peak, indicating that the overall scale of Chinese students studying in Canada has entered a contraction phase.
- **Characteristics of the Doctoral Pathway:** Against this backdrop, the trend of Chinese students entering the doctoral pathway in Canada is more characterised by structural retention rather than scale expansion. As part of long-term study permits, doctoral study permit applications and approvals highly depend on research background, supervisor resources, and the carrying capacity of the university system. With the overall decline in the number of Chinese study permits, the proportion of students able to enter the doctoral stage has relatively increased, but the absolute scale has not grown synchronously, indicating that Chinese doctoral students studying in Canada are shifting from a stage of "quantitative growth" to a stage of "high threshold, stable scale". (Source: *Canadian Postsecondary Enrolments & international students (Statistics Canada)*)

(3) Professional Trends: Doctoral training in Canada is highly concentrated in engineering and computer science

- **Professional Trends:** According to data from Statistics Canada, in the 2023/2024 academic year, the majors with the most significant growth among international students within the university system include mathematics, computer and information science, as well as engineering and engineering technology. Among them, mathematics, computer and information science increased by 11.6% year-on-year (+4,305 people), and engineering and engineering technology increased by 1.8% year-on-year (+1,731 people), both maintaining a positive growth trend. (Source: *Canadian Postsecondary Enrolments & International Students (Statistics Canada)*)
- **Focus of Doctoral Training:** Since doctoral degrees in Canada are only awarded by universities, the above-mentioned professional changes directly reflect the disciplinary focus at the doctoral level. In contrast, although business and administrative management have experienced rapid overall growth, their growth has mainly been concentrated in colleges and teaching-based programs, and has not become the main source of the expansion of doctoral training scale. Overall, the trends in doctoral programs in Canada are characterized by a clear orientation toward science and engineering, high disciplinary concentration, and a stable pace of change. (Source: *Canadian Postsecondary Enrolments & international students (Statistics Canada)*)

(4) Gender Pattern: Engineering and Computing are male-dominated, while Education and Health are female-dominated

Overall, the gender structure of doctoral students in Canada shows distinct disciplinary differentiation characteristics: women dominate the overall student system, but men still predominate in STEM fields, especially in engineering and computer science, where doctoral students are most concentrated.

- **Overall gender structure:** In the 2023/2024 academic year, among all enrolled students, females accounted for approximately 54%, and males approximately 43%. (Source: *Statistics Canada, 2025*)

- **STEM Fields:** Among the total number of students enrolled in STEM fields, males account for approximately 61.5%. In the fields of engineering and engineering technology, males account for over 76.2%. In the fields of mathematics, computer science, and information science, males account for approximately 71.5%. These two areas are precisely the most concentrated core disciplines in Canada's doctoral training. (*Source: Statistics Canada, 2025*)
- **Non-STEM fields:** In areas such as health, education, social and behavioral sciences, arts, and humanities, the number of women is significantly higher than that of men. For example, in health-related majors, there are 183,576 women and 50,292 men. In the education field, there are 75,657 women and 22,893 men. (*Source: Postsecondary International Student Enrolments*)

6.4 Doctoral Application and Admission Status

6.4.1 United Kingdom (Taking the official report of the University of Oxford as an example)

Based on the data from the Graduate Admissions Statistics released by the University of Oxford for the 2023–24 admissions cycle, it is possible to analyse the characteristics of graduate research degree programs (graduate research Degrees, including doctoral and other research-based degrees).

In this round of applications, the graduate research category received a total of 11,726 applications, accounting for 31.1% of the total number of graduate applications. However, based on the final admission results, the proportion of the graduate research category in the final number of admitted students is significantly lower than its application proportion, reflecting that research-based programs face significantly higher screening intensity at the admission stage than taught programs. (*Source: Higher education student enrolments UK: 2023 to 2024*)

(1) Professional Structure:

Graduate Research projects are mainly distributed across four major directions: social sciences, humanities, mathematical, physical, and life sciences (MPLS), and medical sciences, with significant differences in admission rates among different directions.

- **Mathematics, Physics, and Life Sciences:** The overall admission rate is relatively low among major academic fields. This field receives a high volume of applications, while the number of available research-oriented positions is limited, indicating a strong emphasis on the continuity of research background, research capability, and alignment with supervisors' research interests.
- **Medical Science Direction:** The overall admission rate is approximately in the medium range, with greater emphasis placed on research training experience, experimental skills, and fit with specific research projects.
- **Humanities and Social Sciences:** The overall admission rate is relatively high in numerical terms. However, in the actual admission process, considerable weight is still placed on the subjective evaluation of research proposal quality, academic writing ability, and research potential.

(2) Gender Structure:

During the 2023–24 admissions cycle, among the finally admitted graduate students, the number of female admits was 3,508 (accounting for 52.4%), and the number of male admits was 3,192 (accounting for 47.6%), with no obvious gender imbalance overall. (*Source: Higher education student enrolments UK: 2023 to 2024*)

6.4.2 US

Overall, PhD admissions in the United States show several stable characteristics. First, the overall PhD admission rate has remained low over the long term. Second, there are significant differences in doctoral admission rates among different disciplines, with education and health-related fields being relatively more lenient, while fields such as science, technology, computer science, and social sciences facing the most intense competition. Third, the doctoral admission rate is not positively correlated with the scale of applications, and fields with more applicants often face stronger screening pressure.

(1) Overall acceptance rate:

Based on the 2024 data released by the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS), US universities received a total of approximately 899,141 applications for doctoral programs, with approximately 168,015 ultimately accepted. Compared to master's and other graduate programs, the acceptance rate for doctoral programs is significantly lower, reflecting the fundamental characteristics of high selectivity and limited enrollment. (*Source: CGS*)

(2) Subject distribution:

- **Fields with High Acceptance Rates:** Doctoral programs in Education have the highest acceptance rate, Health Sciences, and Public Administration and Services.
- **Fields with Low Admission Rates:** The PhD admission rate for Social and Behavioral Sciences is among the lowest across PhD programs. PhD admission rates are also relatively low in Biological and Agricultural Sciences, Mathematics and Computer Science, and Business. The admission rate for Engineering PhD programs is in the lower-middle range.

(3) Application Volume Analysis:

The fields with the highest number of doctoral applications in the US are mainly concentrated in biological and agricultural sciences, social and behavioral sciences, and engineering disciplines. Although the application volume in these fields is large, the doctoral admission rate has not increased in tandem with the rising number of applications, indicating that doctoral programs in these areas are subject to multiple constraints such as research resources, supervisor capacity, and funding support, presenting the typical structural characteristics of "high application volume, low admission rate".

(4) Institution Type:

In 2024, the overall application acceptance rate of public universities was higher than that of private universities. However, at the doctoral level, regardless of whether in the public or private university system, the admission rate of doctoral programs was significantly lower than that of master's and other graduate programs. Moreover, in most professional fields, the doctoral admission rate was usually only half or even lower than that of the corresponding master's programs.

6.4.3 Canada (Based on Data Analysis from the University of Toronto)

Overall, PhD admissions at the University of Toronto display a highly structured pattern: a large applicant pool, strict control at the admission stage, and a stable and predictable level of enrolment. PhD admission rates have long been significantly lower than the typical levels seen in taught postgraduate programmes, indicating that PhD admissions in Canada are not expansion-oriented but are primarily constrained by research resources and supervisors' capacity.

Based on the official data from the "Doctoral Admission & Enrolment Statistics" published by the University of Toronto, it is possible to analyse the characteristics of Canadian doctoral programs in terms of application scale, admission rate, final enrollment rate, and student source structure.

(1) Application and Enrollment Scale:

During the five academic years from 2019 to 2024, the number of applications for the doctoral program at the University of Toronto has consistently remained at a relatively high level, but the fluctuation range of the number of admitted and finally enrolled students is significantly smaller than that of the number of applicants, indicating that the number of doctoral admission spots is strictly constrained by the capacity of supervisors, research resources, and funding conditions.

(2) Admission Rate and Enrollment Rate:

Over the past five years, admission rates for PhD programs have generally remained relatively low. In contrast, the final enrollment rate (Yield Rate) of the doctoral program has long remained at a relatively high level, with the overall range approximately 59% to 67%, reflecting that doctoral admissions at top Canadian universities have strong certainty and binding nature. (Source: University of Toronto School of Graduate Studies, 2025)

(3) Gender Structure:

Among doctoral students in the 2023/24 academic year, females accounted for 52.3% (3,293 people), males accounted for 46.6% (2,937 people), and the overall situation was relatively balanced. (Source: University of Toronto School of Graduate Studies, 2025)

(4) Nationality Structure:

Among the doctoral students enrolled in the 2023/24 academic year, Canadian citizens and permanent residents accounted for 63.01% (3,967 people), while international students accounted for 36.99% (2,329 people). After receiving offers, international doctoral students have a relatively strong willingness to actually enroll, and doctoral programs still maintain high attractiveness at the international level. (Source: University of Toronto School of Graduate Studies, 2025)

6.5 Doctoral admission rates by region

6.5.1 United Kingdom

Admission Trends: According to the latest data from HESA, in the 2024/25 academic year, affected by visa policies, the number of international students enrolling in taught postgraduate (PGT) programs decreased by 10%, while the number of research postgraduate (PGR) students increased by 11% against the trend. This indicates that while tightening the admission criteria for master's programs, universities in the United Kingdom are still actively expanding their pool of high-level research talent. (Source: NCUB)

Admission Rate of Elite Universities: According to the "2024/25 Graduate Admissions Report" released by the University of Cambridge, the total number of doctoral applications was 13,079, with 1,309 finally admitted. Among them, the admission rate for the Doctor of Clinical Medicine was the lowest. (Source: *University of Cambridge Admissions Statistics 2024/25 Academic Year*)

Admission Background Characteristics: Admission data show that a significant proportion of cases have a non-211 university undergraduate background, some have a non-211 university master's background, and a small number have no master's background, while most have received RP tutoring. From the data, it can be seen that the doctoral admission review in the United Kingdom does not discriminate against the origin of the first degree. In the case of a disadvantaged undergraduate background, it can be hedged through a master's background or a strong research background. However, the competitiveness of a non-211 university master's background will significantly decline. "Direct doctoral admission" is extremely difficult in the United Kingdom, and the vast majority still need a master's degree as a stepping stone. An RP with rigorous academic logic and matching the supervisor's research direction is a crucial variable in admission.

6.5.2 Australia

Admission Trends: Data from the Australian Department of Education for October 2025 shows that the number of international student enrollments in the higher education sector increased by 10% year-on-year. Although the overall approval rate for student visas has declined, the government announced that it will increase the international student admission quota (NPL) to 295,000 in 2026. (Source: *Department of Education, Australia, 2025*)

Admission Rate of Elite Universities: The PhD admission rates of Australia's Group of Eight (Go8) universities are relatively stable. Due to the implementation of the quota system, universities tend to admit "high-quality applicants" with a high GPA (3.8+) and clear research outputs.

Admission Background Characteristics: Among cases of obtaining admission to a doctoral program in Australia, a significant proportion have a non-211 university undergraduate background, some have a non-211 university master's background, a very small number have no master's background, and nearly half have received RP tutoring. Combining Data Analysis:

- Having a master's background is more advantageous for applying to a doctoral program in Australia.
- Completing a good background enhancement during the master's program can minimise the impact of the undergraduate background.
- RP quality is a favorable factor for obtaining an offer and even a scholarship.

6.5.3 New Zealand

Admission Trends: According to the Education New Zealand (ENZ) report in December 2025, the number of international students in universities increased by 15% from January to August 2025, reaching a total of 36,045. China remains the largest source market (accounting for 35%). (Source: *ENZ International Education Snapshot & Public Perception Survey 2025*)

Admission Rate of Elite Universities: The PhD admission rate in New Zealand is relatively high. Its greatest competitive advantage lies in the policy of "international students enjoying domestic tuition fees."

Admission Background Characteristics: Among cases of obtaining admission to a doctoral program in New Zealand, a considerable majority have a non-211 university undergraduate background, some have a non-211 university master's background, a very small number have no master's background, and most have received RP tutoring. Based on admission data, applying for a doctoral program in New Zealand can be said to be one of the most inclusive regions globally:

- Students from non-985/211 backgrounds have a high admission rate, indicating that New Zealand institutions highly recognize Chinese mainland institutions and are not overly restrictive with their list requirements.
- Even if the master's institution has a non-985/211 background, there is still a relatively high admission rate, indicating that as long as one has excellent academic performance, the door to New Zealand remains open.
- New Zealand has a small number of tutors and limited enrollment quotas, and they determine whether students are "manageable" through RP.

6.5.4 Hong Kong, China

Admission Trends: In the 2024/25 and 2025/26 academic years, the number of UGC-funded doctoral places in Hong Kong will remain stable at 7,200. The government is vigorously attracting top global non-local students through the HKPFS Scholarship (with the number of places increased to 400).

Admission Rate of Elite Universities: The doctoral admission rate of the top three universities in Hong Kong (HKU, CUHK, HKUST) is relatively low. (Source: *Hong Kong 2025/26 Budget – University Grants Committee (Head 190)*)

Admission Background Characteristics: Based on admission data, a significant proportion of cases have a non-211 university undergraduate background, some have a non-211 university master's background, a small number have no master's background, and over half have published in good journals. It can be seen that:

- Hong Kong, China, tends to prefer applicants with both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees from 985/211 institutions or overseas undergraduate degrees. If the applicant has a non-985/211 undergraduate background, their postgraduate background must be strong.
- Hong Kong, China has limited spots and fierce competition for scholarships, and having publications makes it relatively easier to get on the supervisor's consideration list.

6.5.5 Macao, China

Admission Trends: According to the official announcement from the University of Macau, the number of graduate applications has hit new highs year after year.

Admission Background Characteristics: Based on admission data, half of the cases have a background of non-211 university undergraduate, some have a background of non-211 university master's, a small number have no master's background, and most have received RP tutoring. It can be seen that:

- Direct doctoral opportunities in Macao and China are relatively higher compared to other countries and regions, making it a great choice for outstanding undergraduates.
- Macao and China have a relatively high recognition of non-211 universities on the Chinese mainland, but it should be noted that the University of Macau tends to prefer applicants with

a "double first-class" background.

- Universities in Macao and China have a relatively small research volume, and supervisors pay more attention to whether students can independently complete their doctoral dissertations. The quality of RP is crucial.

6.5.6 Ireland

Admission Trends: The HEA November 2025 report shows that Irish doctoral graduates have extremely strong employment competitiveness after graduation, with an employment rate as high as 80.2%. *(Source: HEA Irish Graduate Outcomes Survey 2025)*

Admission rate of prestigious schools: ICT and pharmaceutical fields have relatively high admission rates, with emphasis placed on the alignment between master's-level training and industry-academia-research collaboration.

6.5.7 Malaysia

Admission Trends: In 2024/25, the government will vigorously attract talent in STEM fields by establishing a dedicated AI institute. *(Source: Malaysia Higher Education Statistical Brief (MOHE))*

Admission Rate of Elite Universities: Public institutions, such as UM and UPM, have relatively high admission rates, but their GPA requirements have been rising year by year.

6.5.8 Singapore

Admission Trends: Registration data for the 2024/25 academic year at the National University of Singapore (NUS) show that there are 4,353 enrolled doctoral students, of whom approximately 40% are non-local students. *(Source: NUS Postgraduate Enrolment Statistics 2024/25)*

Admission rate of elite schools: The admission rate is extremely low.

6.5.9 US

Admission Trends: The CGS 2025 Flash Survey shows that the acceptance rate of admission offers by international doctoral students has remained stable or is on an upward trend. Despite facing visa barriers and cost-of-living challenges, top research universities (R1) still receive more than 70% of international doctoral applications worldwide.

Admission Rate of Elite Universities: The average PhD admission rate in STEM fields at the Top 30 U.S. universities are low. Competition at R1 universities is far more intense than at other types of institutions. *(Source: CGS 2025 International Graduate Admissions Status Brief; CGS Preliminary Fall Graduate Application & Enrolment Data Report 2025)*

6.5.10 Canada

Admission Trends: Despite the Canadian government implementing a total quota for international student visas, the doctoral level is not subject to the quota. The 2025–26 budget report of the University of Toronto clearly states that the number of doctoral students is planned to increase from 8,079 in 2024 to 8,084 in 2025, and is expected to grow steadily over the next five years.

Admission rate of prestigious universities: Taking the University of Toronto as an example, competition among doctoral applicants remains fierce, with a large number of candidates vying for limited places in popular STEM disciplines. (Source: *University of Toronto Budget Report 2025–26 (Including Enrolment Plans Through 2029)*)

6.5.11 Europe

Admission Trends: The Wissenschaft Weltoffen 2025 report released by DAAD shows that in the winter semester of 2024/25, the number of international students in Germany reached 402,000 (a new historical high), among whom doctoral students accounted for 28%. (Source: *DAAD: Statistical Data from Wissenschaft weltweit 2025*)

Admission rate of elite universities: Germany adopts the "post system," and the admission rate completely depends on the research funding of specific supervisors.

6.6 Doctoral Application and Admission Cases

6.6.1 United Kingdom

Case 1:

Representative Institution: University of Oxford - Clinical Medicine/Engineering

Admission Case Profile: Bachelor's and master's degrees from top domestic universities, with academic performance ranking among the top of the major, high-level language test scores, multiple publications in professional journals, and several years of overseas laboratory research collaboration experience.

Analysis: The number of graduate applications for the 2023–24 academic year at the University of Oxford is substantial, of which research degrees account for a minority. (Source: *University of Oxford Official Admissions Bulletin 2023/24*).

Key Success Factors: The core of this student's success lies not in a high GPA, but in the Research Proposal (RP). Their research direction highly overlaps with the ongoing ERC-funded project of the supervisor, and they demonstrated proficient pre-operational skills with specific experimental equipment at Oxford (such as the multiphase flow test rig) during the interview.

Case 2:

Representative Institution: University College London (UCL) - Education

Profile: Bachelor's and master's degrees from high-quality domestic universities, with excellent academic averages, advanced-level language test scores, and several years of frontline teaching-related research experience.

Analysis: The UCL Institute of Education (IOE) has long ranked first in the world, and its admissions in 2025 will place greater emphasis on the social impact of research results on policy or practice.

Key Success Factors: An RP (Research Plan) with a highly critical social perspective, accompanied by published chapters of educational monographs.

Case 3:

Representative Institution: King's College London (KCL) - Psychiatry

Profile: Master's degree in Clinical Medicine from a top domestic university, with outstanding academic performance, high-level language test scores meeting the requirements, and multiple high-impact academic papers published as first author.

Analysis: IoPPN at KCL is globally top-notch in psychology and neuroscience, placing extreme emphasis on clinical data processing capabilities.

Key Success Factor: Co-applied for a joint training project with the supervisor one year in advance.

Case 4:

Representative Institution: University of Manchester - Materials Science

Profile: Bachelor's degree from a top domestic university, with outstanding academic performance, a patent in the field of graphene-related research, and language test scores meeting institutional requirements.

Analysis: The University of Manchester will continue to strengthen its leading position as the "Home of Graphene" in 2025, providing special scholarship channels for applicants with early patents.

Key Success Factors: Entered a national laboratory during undergraduate studies and possesses experimental skills for independently operating complex transmission electron microscopes.

Case 5:

Representative Institution: University of Southampton - Optoelectronics

Profile: First-class bachelor's degree from a UK university, with excellent academic performance and awards in mathematical modelling competitions.

Analysis: The Optoelectronics Research Centre (ORC) in Southampton is the birthplace of optical fiber and has extremely high requirements for mathematical proficiency.

Key Success Factors: The undergraduate graduation project topic is highly consistent with the ongoing research on photonic crystal fibers by the supervisor.

Overview: Based on the summary of REAL PhD internal admission data, the most typical case profile for applying to the United Kingdom is as follows:

Background Dimension	Typical Characteristics
Educational Pathway	Non-211/985 undergraduate + prestigious master's degree; or top-tier double-first-class universities Bachelor + Master
Master's Grades	Average score of 75+ (Distinction) for Australian master's programs; Merit or above for UK master's programs
Bachelor's Grades	Non-211/985: 80+ and 211: 78+ (flexible standards)

Publications	For applications to Group of Eight universities: One international conference or journal paper is recommended. For other universities: No publications required
RP Quality	Highly aligned with the supervisor's research direction
Key Focus in Emailing (Supervisor Contact)	Clearly state self-funding status or plan to apply for CSC scholarships, which greatly increases response rates

6.6.2 Australia

Case 1:

Representative Institution: The University of Melbourne - Education/Science

Profile: First-class honours bachelor's degree from an Australian university, with excellent academic performance and language test scores meeting the institution's application requirements.

Analysis: According to the official statement in 2025, the University of Melbourne has an extremely early deadline (October 31) for reviewing scholarships for research projects (*Source: University of Melbourne 2025 Admissions Guide*).

Key Success Factor: "Scholarship Suitability." The applicant brought their own high-quality RTP scholarship application essay, demonstrating strong academic self-motivation.

Case 2:

Representative Institution: The University of Melbourne - Building Information Modeling (BIM)

Profile: Background of study at a top domestic university, with excellent academic performance, language test scores meeting the application requirements of prestigious universities, and several years of frontline professional experience in the architecture industry.

Analysis: The School of Architecture at the University of Melbourne tends to admit applicants with insights into industry pain points.

Key Success Factors: RP proposed a computational model to reduce the cost of complex irregular-shaped buildings.

Case 3:

Representative Institution: University of New South Wales (UNSW Sydney) - Business School (Management & Governance)

Profile: Bachelor's degree from a top domestic university and a master's degree from a well-known overseas institution, with outstanding academic performance, high scores in business-related standardised tests, and two years of research experience at a leading financial institution.

Analysis: UNSW Business School will adopt a "two-step" admission strategy from 2025 to 2026. Most applicants will first enter the Master of Pre-Doctoral Business Studies (MPDBS) program for one year of intensive research training, and those with excellent performance will be directly promoted to the PhD program. For applicants with high GMAT scores and practical experience in

large enterprises, the school places greater emphasis on their ability to transform business pain points into academic research topics.

Key Success Factors: Initiating networking first to obtain the initial review invitation from the supervisor. A high GMAT score demonstrates a foundation in quantitative analysis, and experience at large enterprises provides real research cases.

Case 4:

Representative Institution: Monash University - Pharmaceutical Sciences

Profile: Master's degree in Pharmacy from a UK university, with excellent academic performance and a high-quality academic paper published as sole first author.

Analysis: Monash Pharmacy has consistently ranked first in the world for years, with extremely strict requirements for the fundamentals of pharmacokinetics.

Key Success Factor: Accurately answered questions about the chemical mechanism of the new drug delivery system during the interview.

Case 5:

Representative Institution: The University of Queensland (UQ) - Mining Engineering

Profile: Background in a sector-specialised domestic university, with good academic average scores and one year of internship experience related to mining areas in Australia.

Analysis: Australia is rich in mining resources and has an extremely high admission rate for international students with local internship experience.

Key Success Factors: Having accumulated local professional qualifications in Australia.

Case 6:

Representative Institution: The University of Western Australia (UWA) - Deep Sea Oil and Gas Exploration

Profile: Background in a relevant engineering discipline from a domestic university, with excellent academic performance and language test scores meeting the application requirements.

Analysis: The University of Western Australia has a close partnership with oil and gas giants and tends to recruit students with strong engineering computing capabilities.

Key Success Factors: Proficiency in multiphase flow simulation software.

Overview: Based on the summary of REAL PhD internal admission data, the most typical case profile of applicants to Australia is as follows:

Background Dimension	Typical Characteristics
Educational Pathway	Non-211/985 undergraduate + prestigious master's degree; or Double First-Class undergraduate + prestigious master's degree
Master's Grades	Australian master's: 75+ (Distinction) / UK master's: Merit or above
Bachelor's Grades	Non-211/985: 80+ and 211: 78+ (relatively flexible)

Publications	For applying to Group of Eight (Go8): 1 international conference or journal paper recommended; for non-Go8 universities: publications are not required
RP Quality	Must align with the supervisor's research direction
Key Focus in Emailing (Supervisor Contact)	Clearly state "able to self-fund" or "will apply for CSC"—supervisor response rate increases significantly

6.6.3 New Zealand

Case 1:

Representative Institution: University of Auckland - Agriculture/Environmental Science

Profile: Master's degree from a high-quality domestic university, with good academic performance and one SCI-indexed academic paper published.

Analysis: Among international students at the University of Auckland in 2024, Chinese students have the highest proportion (6,371), and doctoral admissions are relatively diverse (*Source: University of Auckland 2024 Key Statistics page*).

Key Success Factors: "Pragmatism." The research project addressed the current pain points in local agricultural waste treatment in New Zealand and received indirect support from relevant projects of the Environment Agency.

Case 2:

Representative Institution: The University of Auckland - Urban Planning

Profile: Integrated bachelor's and master's degree background from a UK institution, with academic performance assessed at an excellent level and high-level language test scores.

Analysis: As the largest city in New Zealand, the planning department of this school has the most abundant resources.

Key Success Factors: RP represents the algorithmic model of local traffic congestion in Auckland.

Case 3:

Representative Institution: The University of Waikato - Law

Profile: Master of Laws degree from a top domestic university, with good academic performance and high-level language test scores.

Analysis: The University of Auckland Law School is renowned for its research on indigenous rights and is interested in comparative law topics.

Key Success Factors: RP conducts research on the ethnic minority cultural protection law.

Case 4:

Representative Institution: Auckland University of Technology (AUT) - Sports Performance

Profile: Master's degree from a high-quality domestic university, with professional experience in strength and conditioning coaching for a professional sports team, and language test scores meeting the application requirements.

Analysis: AUT ranks first in New Zealand in Sports Performance analysis.

Key Success Factors: Possessing the original physiological monitoring data of professional athletes.

Overview: Based on internal admission data, the most typical case profile of applicants to New Zealand is as follows:

Background Dimension	Typical Characteristics
Educational Pathway	Non-211/985 undergraduate + prestigious master's degree (GPA 85+); or Double First-Class undergraduate + prestigious master's degree (Merit)
Master's Grades	Non-211/985: 85+ / UK & Australian Master's programs: Merit or above
Bachelor's Grades	Non-211/985: 80–85+
Publications	Prior academic publications are recommended
RP Quality	Must be logically rigorous, well-supported by the literature, and highly feasible
Key Focus in Emailing (Supervisor Contact)	Confirm supervisor vacancies at an early stage. Supervisors in New Zealand hold substantial decision-making power

6.6.4 Hong Kong, China

Case 1:

Representative Institution: The University of Hong Kong (HKU) - Business/Law

Profile: Bachelor's degree from a top domestic university, with outstanding academic performance and advanced-level language test scores.

Analysis: HKU's 2024 report shows that the number of Mainland Chinese students at the postgraduate level increased significantly (*Source: the HKU Annual Report 2024*).

Key Success Factors: "Standardized Score Dominance." In an environment where all applicants are from 985 institutions, an IELTS score of 8.0 and an outstanding GPA are the only bargaining chips to pass the first-round Committee screening.

Case 2:

Representative Institution: City University of Hong Kong (CityU) - Energy and Environment

Profile: Background of study at a top domestic university, with excellent academic performance, language test scores meeting the application requirements, and R&D experience related to solar cell materials.

Analysis: Hong Kong City University has made significant investments in the field of clean energy.

Key Success Factor: Demonstrated experimental data on photoelectric conversion efficiency superior to the mentor's existing materials during the interview.

Case 3:

Representative Institution: The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU), School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM)

Profile: Background of study at a well-known overseas institution specialising in hotel management, with excellent academic performance and management trainee experience at a high-end, star-rated hotel.

Analysis: SHTM ranks among the top three in the world and highly values industry endorsements.

Key Success Factor: The recommendation letter comes from an executive of an international hotel giant.

Case 4:

Representative Institution: The Education University of Hong Kong (EdUHK) - Psychology

Profile: Background of study at a high-quality domestic institution, with good academic performance and language test scores meeting the application requirements.

Analysis: The Hong Kong Institute of Education focuses on research in child psychology and special education.

Key Success Factors: RP's intervention program targeting social disorders in autistic children is highly comprehensive.

Case 5:

Representative Institution: Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU) - Communication

Profile: Master's degree in Media and Communication from a well-known domestic institution, with outstanding academic performance and advanced-level language test scores.

Analysis: The School of Communication at Hong Kong Baptist University is Asia's top institution, emphasizing the consideration of New Media ethics.

Key Success Factors: RP delved deeply into the impact of AI-generated content on the authenticity of news.

Overview: Based on the summary of internal admission data, the most typical case profile of applicants to Hong Kong, China is as follows:

Background Dimension	Typical Characteristics
Educational Pathway	Double First-Class undergraduate + QS100 master's degree; or Non-211/985 undergraduate + QS50 master's degree

Master's Grades	UK system: Distinction or Hong Kong: 3.6/4.0+
Bachelor's Grades	Double First-Class: 82+ or Non-211/985: 87+
Publications	Preferably have good journal publications
RP Quality	Must be highly aligned with the supervisor's research direction
Timing for Emailing (Supervisor Contact)	Initiate email contact from July to September

6.6.5 Macao, China

Case 1:

Representative Institution: University of Macau - Chinese Medicine/Microelectronics

Profile: Master's degree from a domestic institution, with academic performance at a good level.

Analysis: Doctoral applications at the University of Macau usually require an IELTS 6.0 or a TOEFL score of 550. (Source: *University of Macau 2026 Admissions Prospectus PDF*).

Key Success Factors: "Regional Resource Binding." The case has fully leveraged Macau's positioning as a "bridgehead" for traditional Chinese medicine to go global, and RP has extremely high potential for government funding.

Case 2:

Representative Institution: University of Macau - Portuguese Studies

Profile: Bachelor's degree in a Portuguese-related major from a domestic institution, with language test scores meeting the application requirements of prestigious universities and overseas study experience in Portugal.

Analysis: As a China-Portugal platform, this direction has received strong support from the government.

Key Success Factors: Native-level Portuguese proficiency and profound cultural understanding.

Case 3:

Representative Institution: University of Macau - Finance

Profile: Background of study at a top domestic university, with excellent academic performance, language test scores meeting the application requirements, and project experience related to fintech.

Analysis: In 2025, finance-related research activities at the University of Macau showed increasing engagement with emerging areas such as fintech, digital finance, and technology-driven financial markets. (Source: *University of Macau Faculty of Business Administration, 2025*)

Key Success Factors: Possess cross-disciplinary capabilities in programming and financial modeling.

Case 4:

Representative Institution: Macau University of Science and Technology - Chinese Medicine

Profile: Master's degree in Traditional Chinese Medicine from a high-quality domestic institution, with excellent academic performance and papers published in core professional journals.

Analysis: The State Key Laboratory of Quality Research in Chinese Medicine at the University of Macau has strong capabilities.

Key Success Factors: Possess solid experimental skills in traditional Chinese medicine ingredient analysis.

Case 5:

Representative Institution: City University of Macau - Cultural Industry

Profile: Master's degree in an art-related major from a high-quality domestic institution, with good academic performance and language test scores meeting the institution's application requirements.

Analysis: The Doctorate in Cultural Industries at the University of Macau is one of its advantageous disciplines, emphasizing the background of the integration of Chinese and Western cultures.

Key Success Factors: RP focuses on a case study of Macau's transformation from a gambling culture to a non-gambling culture.

Overview: Based on the summary of internal admission data, the most typical case profile of applicants to Macau, China is as follows:

Background Dimension	Typical Characteristics
Educational Pathway	Direct PhD application: 985/211 undergraduate with 87+; Master's to PhD application: Non-211/985 undergraduate + Non-211/985 master's (both 85+)
Master's Grades	Non-211/985 master's: 85+ or UK or Australian master's: Merit or above
Bachelor's Grades	Non-211/985: 83–88+ (varies depending on institution ranking)
Publications	Publications recommended
RP Quality	Must be logically rigorous, with a solid literature foundation, and aligned with the supervisor's research direction
Key Focus in Emailing (Supervisor Contact)	Contact potential supervisors in advance

6.6.6 Ireland

Case 1:

Representative Institution: Trinity College Dublin - Biomedical

Profile: Bachelor's degree in a medical-related major from a domestic institution, with relevant research experience.

Analysis: TCD has approximately 1,740 PhD research students, while international students account for approximately 24% of the university's overall student population, reflecting its strong international orientation. (*Source: Trinity College Dublin, 2022*)

Key Success Factor: "Mutual Trust Among Mentors." Through the joint recommendation of European professors and leveraging the background of Ireland's biopharmaceutical industry cluster, we successfully secured full funding from the school.

Case 2:

Representative Institution: University College Dublin (UCD) - Agricultural Science

Profile: Background of study at a top domestic university, with excellent academic performance, language test scores meeting the requirements, and laboratory work experience related to food science.

Analysis: UCD leads Europe in the field of agricultural technology.

Key Success Factors: RP demonstrates the potential of blockchain applications in food traceability.

Case 3:

Representative Institution: University College Cork (UCC) - Microbiology

Profile: Master's degree in Medicine from a top domestic university, with excellent academic performance and high-level language test scores.

Analysis: UCC's APC Microbiome Ireland is the world's leading microbiome research center.

Key Success Factors: The RP topic selection precisely aligns with the ongoing probiotic research direction of the center.

6.6.7 Malaysia

Case 1:

Representative Institution: University of Malaya (Universiti Malaya) - Economics and Management

Profile: Master's degree background, with several years of relevant industry experience and generally good academic performance during studies.

Analysis: The UM Doctoral Program places extreme emphasis on business background, with admission criteria requiring a CGPA of no less than 3.0/4.0 (*Source: University of Malaya PhD Handbook 2025–2026*).

Key Success Factors: "Empirical Experience." Applicants have transformed years of industry data into research samples, and this scarcity compensates for the lack of academic paper output.

Case 2:

Representative Institution: National University of Malaysia (UKM) - Law

Profile: Background in Law from a high-quality domestic institution, with good academic performance and language test scores meeting the application requirements.

Analysis: The school's law program leads the way in Malaysia and supports comparative legal research between China and Malaysia.

Key Success Factors: The RP topic selection has practical economic, trade, and legal significance.

Case 3:

Representative Institution: Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) - Environmental Science

Profile: Bachelor's degree in Environmental Engineering from a domestic institution, with good academic performance and language test scores meeting the application requirements.

Analysis: USM fully supports the United Nations SDGs goals.

Key Success Factors: Carbon sink research on mangrove conservation aligns with local government planning.

Case 4:

Representative Institution: Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) - Management

Profile: Background of study at a domestic undergraduate institution, with excellent academic performance, university teaching experience, and extensive accumulation of management-related case studies.

Analysis: UUM is the pioneer of the School of Management, emphasizing academic rigor.

Key Success Factors: Solid capabilities in questionnaire surveys and statistical modeling.

Case 5:

Representative Institution: Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) - Food Science

Profile: Master's degree in a food-related major from a domestic institution, with excellent academic performance and practical experience in quality management in the food industry.

Analysis: UPM is relatively authoritative in the fields of agriculture, forestry, and food.

Key Success Factors: The research plan on tropical fruit processing technology has commercial value.

6.6.8 Singapore

Case 1:

Representative Institution: National University of Singapore (NUS) - Engineering/Systems Science

Profile: Background of study at a well-known domestic university, with excellent academic performance and multiple corporate research internship experiences.

Analysis: The number of research students admitted by NUS in 2024/25 is extremely small (Grand Total 4,839, only one-third of the number of coursework students). (*Source: NUS Graduate Statistics 2024/25*).

Key Success Factor: "Technical Hardcore Level." During the interview, this student completed

three rounds of complex on-site algorithm coding, demonstrating strong engineering implementation capabilities.

Case 2:

Representative Institution: National University of Singapore (NUS) - Public Policy

Profile: Several years of government-related work experience, a background from a well-known domestic university, excellent academic performance, and outstanding foreign language ability.

Analysis: The LKYSPP places great emphasis on policy sensitivity.

Key Success Factors: Unique insights into Asian energy security policies.

Case 3:

Representative Institution: Nanyang Technological University (NTU) - Environmental Engineering

Profile: Master's degree in Environmental Engineering from a well-known domestic university, with excellent academic performance, outstanding foreign language proficiency, and experience independently publishing professional academic papers.

Analysis: The School of the Environment at NTU offers generous funding, with extremely high admission requirements.

Key Success Factors: Demonstrated an innovative cost optimization model for membrane treatment technology.

Case 4:

Representative Institution: Singapore Management University (SMU) - Data Science

Profile: Overseas financial industry work experience, excellent academic performance during study, and outstanding standardised test scores.

Analysis: SMU values the cross-application of business and data.

Key Success Factors: Master practical algorithm capabilities in the field of financial risk control.

6.6.9 US

The CGS 2025 survey shows that R1 universities (top research institutions) received a lot of international doctoral applications, with STEM acceptance rates remaining stable but having extremely high thresholds.

Case 1:

Representative Institution: Harvard University - Economics

Profile: Background from a high-quality overseas undergraduate institution, with exceptionally outstanding academic performance, top scores in the national postgraduate entrance examination, and strong recommendation letters from several leading scholars in the field.

Analysis: Harvard's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences (GSAS) had a low PhD admission rate in 2025 (*Source: Harvard 2025 PhD Admissions Brief*). The admission rate for Harvard Business School's (HBS) PhD programme, Class of 2025, was even lower, and 37% of students were international students (*Source: Harvard Business School 2025 Doctoral Student Profile*).

Key Success Factor: "Academic Circle Effect." The mentor's recommendation letter directly

attests to the applicant's independent modeling ability when dealing with large-scale datasets, and this "academic trust" surpasses any standardized test scores.

Case 2:

Representative Institution: Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) - Human-Computer Interaction (HCI)

Profile: Bachelor's degree from a top domestic university, with excellent academic performance, outstanding language ability, high-quality open-source project outcomes, and strong technical accumulation.

Analysis: Admission weightings for CMU's CS majors: Research output > GPA > TOEFL.

Key Success Factors: The extensive influence of open-source projects demonstrates their independent development and research capabilities.

Case 3:

Representative Institution: Northwestern University - Materials Science and Engineering

Profile: Bachelor's degree from a top domestic university, with excellent academic performance, outstanding language ability, and recommendation letters from several senior scholars.

Analysis: The Department of Materials has been ranked among the top three in the United States for many consecutive years, and the Holistic Review is extremely rigorous.

Key Success Factors: The recommendation letter comes from an alumnus of the school (a domestic heavyweight), establishing a strong trust endorsement.

Case 4:

Representative Institution: Duke University - Genomics

Profile: Master's degree from a well-known domestic university, with excellent academic performance, good language proficiency, and multiple academic outputs on bioinformatics-related algorithms.

Analysis: Duke School of Medicine prefers interdisciplinary talents with a cross-background in bioinformatics.

Key Success Factors: The built-in algorithmic tool has resolved an efficiency bottleneck in genome sequencing.

Case 5:

Representative Institution: Johns Hopkins University (JHU) - Public Health

Profile: Master's degree in Public Health from a high-quality overseas institution, with excellent academic performance, outstanding standardised test scores, and frontline overseas volunteer experience in pandemic prevention and control.

Analysis: JHU highly values applicants' actual social contributions and field research capabilities.

Key Success Factors: The accumulation of real frontline epidemiological data impressed the interviewers.

Case 6:

Representative Institution: The University of Chicago - Economics

Profile: Master's degree from a well-known domestic university of finance and economics, with excellent academic performance, strong quantitative ability, and participation in national-level finance-related research projects.

Analysis: The Economics Department of the University of Chicago, known as the "Nobel Cradle," has an almost obsessive requirement for mathematical logic.

Key Success Factors: The deduction of complex macro models during the interview demonstrated excellent intuition.

6.6.10 Canada

Case 1:

Representative Institution: University of Toronto - Computer Science

Profile: A bachelor's degree from a domestic institution and a master's degree from a well-known overseas institution, with good academic performance.

Analysis: In the 2024–25 academic year, the University of Toronto surpassed 100,000 total enrolments across its three campuses, reaching 102,431 students. Graduate students accounted for approximately 21.3% of total enrolment, reflecting UofT's strong postgraduate education and research capacity. Doctoral programmes represent a selective research-oriented component within this large graduate system. (Source:)

Key Success Factors: The "Proximity Principle." The applicant participated in a research project led by a University of Toronto professor as a Research Assistant during their master's program. Canadian elite universities highly prefer applicants who have already had academic outputs in the country.

Case 2:

Representative Institution: University of Waterloo - Cybersecurity

Profile: Background of study at a well-known domestic university, with excellent academic performance, good language ability, and repeated achievements in cybersecurity-related competitions.

Analysis: The University of Waterloo has a close partnership with the Communications Security Establishment (CSE) of Canada and values practical experience.

Key Success Factor: Submitted an in-depth report on blockchain vulnerability mining.

Case 3:

Representative Institution: McMaster University - Nuclear Engineering

Profile: Background of study at a well-known domestic university, with excellent academic performance and internship experience in a nuclear power-related position.

Analysis: McMaster University has the only university research reactor in Canada and places great emphasis on safety awareness and operational background.

Key Success Factors: Passed the background check and demonstrated strong experimental operation specifications.

Case 4:

Representative Institution: University of Montreal (Université de Montréal) - Artificial

Intelligence (Mila)

Profile: Bachelor's degree in a computer-related major from a top domestic university, with excellent academic performance and participation in paper publication at a top international academic conference.

Analysis: Mila is one of the world's leading AI research hubs, bringing together more than 1,400 researchers specializing in machine learning. Due to its strong reputation in artificial intelligence research, positions associated with Mila are highly competitive, although official admission ratios are not publicly disclosed. (Source: Mila, 2025)

Key Success Factor: Obtained preliminary recognition from members of the Yoshua Bengio team.

Case 5:

Representative Institution: University of Victoria - Marine Science

Profile: Background of study at a high-quality domestic university, with good academic performance, language ability meeting the requirements, and professional diving-related qualifications.

Analysis: The school's marine resource research has significant geographical advantages.

Key Success Factors: Demonstrated practical experience in underwater sensor deployment.

Case 6:

Representative Institution: The University of Western Ontario - Sports Management

Profile: Master's degree from a domestic sports-specialised institution, with outstanding language ability and experience participating in the preparation of major sports events.

Analysis: Xida's sports science ranking is very high, and it highly values management experience in major sports events.

Key Success Factors: The Research Plan (RP) focuses on the sustainable legacy development of major sports events.

6.6.11 Europe

Case 1:

Representative Institution: ETH Zurich - Robotics/Architecture

Portrait: During overseas master's studies, published a paper at a top international academic conference.

Analysis: ETH had a relatively low PhD admission rate in 2025. As a public university, it offers extremely low tuition fees, but its selection process is highly rigorous (Source: ETH 2026 Admissions Analysis Report).

Key Success Factor: "Job Fit." Most ETH doctoral students are recruited through job positions, and this student precisely matched the specific technical stack of "underwater robot dynamics" required by the laboratory.

Case 2:

Representative Institution: Technical University of Munich (TUM, Germany) - Power Systems

Profile: Background in a relevant major from a top domestic university, with excellent academic

performance, outstanding language ability, and two years of professional experience in a well-known electrical industry company.

Analysis: German engineering doctoral programs tend to recruit international students with industrial internship experience.

Key Success Factors: While meeting the requirements of background and having relevant work experience in German enterprises.

Case 3:

Representative Institution: École Polytechnique (France) - Applied Mathematics

Profile: Background in Mathematics from a top domestic university, with outstanding academic performance and excellent language ability.

Analysis: French elite schools highly value mathematical modeling intuition.

Key Success Factor: Solved a complex stochastic process deduction on the spot during the interview.

Case 4:

Representative Institution: Delft University of Technology (TU Delft, Netherlands) - Wind Energy Engineering

Profile: Master's degree from a top domestic university, with excellent academic performance, good language ability, and ongoing research projects highly aligned with the target programme.

Analysis: Delft is the European hub in the wind energy sector.

Element: Demonstrated the latest algorithm for wind turbine blade optimisation during the interview.

Case 5:

Representative Institution: KTH Royal Institute of Technology (Sweden) - Wireless Communications (6G)

Profile: R&D professional background in a leading domestic communications company, with excellent academic performance and language test scores meeting the requirements.

Analysis: KTH is deeply tied to Ericsson.

Key Success Factors: Having a core patent background.

Case 6:

Representative Institution: University of Helsinki (Finland) - Evolutionary Biology

Profile: Background from a high-quality domestic university, with excellent academic performance and fieldwork experience related to the professional field.

Analysis: Nordic doctors do not charge tuition fees and place greater emphasis on academic independence.

Key Success Factors: The RP topic selection is highly innovative.

6.7 Doctoral Application Strategy Recommendations

6.7.1 United Kingdom

(1) Policy Direction:

According to the visa guidelines for the 2025/26 academic year, the United Kingdom will continue to maintain the 3-year Graduate Route visa for doctoral graduates, but this requires applicants to maintain extremely high attendance and research progress records during their studies at the university (*Source: UK Gov*).

(2) Strategic Recommendations:

- **"Secure a position" and initiate contact one year in advance:** Doctoral positions at G5 institutions are often filled very early in the application cycle, with supervisors frequently having already identified potential candidates by the initial application stage in December.
- **Strengthen ATAS Review Preparation:** For applicants in STEM fields, the ATAS review has become increasingly stringent. It is advisable to avoid overly sensitive military or dual-use technology terminology when writing research summaries.
- **Core Strategy:** Tutors in the United Kingdom place great emphasis on specificity and feasibility in research proposals. A strong RP must demonstrate a clear and logical research plan, including detailed timelines, methodology, and expected outcomes across each stage of the doctoral journey.
- **Hardcore Indicator:** Strong academic credentials are highly valued among G5 admittees. A solid first-class honors degree or equivalent academic achievement is a significant advantage. If your GPA is not competitive, robust research outputs such as publications in reputable journals can help strengthen your application.
- **Pitfall Avoidance Guide:** Do not send mass emails. Tutors in the United Kingdom value "Fit." A well-crafted, tailored prospecting letter far outperforms a hundred generic mass emails.

6.7.2 Australia

(1) Policy Direction:

Starting from 2026, Australia will implement the "traffic light" visa processing model. Applications for institutions in the "green light zone" (where the utilisation rate of enrollment quotas is less than 80%) will receive the fastest approval (*Source: Aussizz Group*).

(2) Policy Recommendations:

- **GS Replaces GTE Review:** The new "Genuine Student (GS)" requirement has replaced GTE. The application letter must logically explain the direct connection between the chosen course and future career plans, rather than simply indicating immigration intent (*Source: IDP Education*).
- **Unrestricted working hours:** During their doctoral studies, there are no restrictions on working hours, which is a significant advantage for clients with family relocation needs.
- **Timeline:** 10 months in advance. Australia has two intake seasons in February and July, and the corresponding scholarship rounds generally close in August and April of the previous

year.

- **Core Strategy:** GPA is the primary competitiveness. The Australian RTP Scholarship employs a rigorous scoring system, and achieving a competitive GPA—broadly equivalent to a first-class honours level—is critical for full scholarship consideration. Without such academic standing, securing full funding remains very challenging.
- **Soft background:** Emphasise the number of published papers. In the Australian review system, the weight of a first-author SCI paper is very clear.
- **Guide to Avoiding Pitfalls:** Initiate networking first, obtain the supervisor's "Expression of Interest" letter, and then proceed with the subsequent formal online application process after the EOI submission is approved.

6.7.3 New Zealand

(1) Policy Direction:

In 2026, New Zealand will continue to implement the "Domestic Fees" policy for doctoral students. Taking the University of Auckland as an example, the annual tuition fee for a doctoral degree is only about 8,847.60 NZD, but students are required to reside within New Zealand (*Source: University of Auckland*).

(2) Policy Recommendations:

- **Emphasise the feasibility of "implementation":** In the application, demonstrate a plan for utilizing local research resources in New Zealand. Mentors tend to prefer admitting students with high resilience who can stay on campus stably to participate in experiments.
- **Timeline:** Rolling applications at any time.
- **Core Strategy:** New Zealand is very pragmatic. Mentors hope to see that you can independently manage projects, and it is recommended to attach a detailed feasibility report in the prospecting letter to prove that your project can be implemented in the New Zealand environment or resources.
- **Background Requirements:** IELTS requirements are usually 6.5 to 7.0, and the requirements for direct doctoral admission for undergraduates are slightly more lenient than those in Australia, but a strong motivation for independent research is required.

6.7.4 Hong Kong, China

(1) Policy Direction:

The 2026/27 HKPFS (PhD Fellowship Scheme) competition remains fierce. In addition to the monthly stipend, awardees will also receive an additional HK\$40,000 cash prize provided by universities such as HKU (*Source: HKU: HKPFS 2026/27*).

(2) Policy Recommendations:

- **Concurrent Application:** Both the initial RGC application and the university's full application must be completed by December 1 (*Source: HKU: HKPFS 2026/27*).
- **Core Strategy:** The majority of successful applicants to top Hong Kong institutions come from prestigious 985 universities in China or well-regarded overseas institutions. For those aiming for the HKPFS, exceptional academic performance, combined with significant

research outputs such as provincial-level awards or high-impact journal publications, is essential to remain competitive.

- **Soft background:** Preference for the “high-output” type. A strong English proficiency score (typically IELTS 7.0 or equivalent) is expected across most programmes, and some specialised or business-related fields may also require or recommend GRE/GMAT scores to strengthen applications.

6.7.5 Macao, China

(1) Policy Direction:

Macao's institutions of higher learning are strengthening scientific research collaboration with the Hengqin Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone.

(2) Policy Recommendations:

- **Aligned with the Greater Bay Area Policy:** Applicants whose research topics align with Greater Bay Area priority areas, such as health sciences, modern finance, and high-technology sectors, may find their applications more competitive, as these fields are strategically supported by regional development initiatives.
- **Core Strategy:** The University of Macau (UM) maintains a flexible language policy, generally accepting IELTS 6.0/6.5 or CET-6 450+ for most programmes. The University of Macau (UM) is very friendly to mainland recommended students (exempted students), and those eligible for recommendation admission may have a distinct advantage when applying to UM.
- **Soft Background:** UM places considerable emphasis on research backgrounds aligned with its National Key Laboratories, particularly in microelectronics, traditional Chinese medicine, and smart cities. Candidates with research experience in these areas will find their applications significantly strengthened.

6.7.6 Ireland

(1) Policy Direction:

In 2026, the GOI-IES Scholarship Program will open 60 full scholarship positions, including a €10,000 stipend and a full tuition waiver (*Source: HEA, 2026*).

(2) Policy Recommendations:

- **Seize the March Deadline:** The application deadline for Ireland scholarships is usually in mid-March, and you must first obtain an offer from an institution before applying for the government scholarship (*Source: HEA, 2026*).
- **Core Strategy:** Industry-University-Research Collaboration. Many doctoral programs in Ireland are sponsored by enterprises (funded by SFI). If your research can be linked to technology companies in Dublin (Google/Intel/Pfizer), the admission rate and scholarship probability will double.
- **Background Requirements:** IELTS 6.5+, average score 85+, emphasis on internationalization vision and cross-cultural collaboration skills.

6.7.7 Malaysia

(1) Policy Direction:

The 2026–2036 Education Blueprint emphasises the integration of AI and digital tools across all levels of education. Malaysia has become a major destination for Chinese students, with numbers growing rapidly in recent years, driven by cost-effectiveness, cultural familiarity, and strong bilateral educational ties.

(2) Strategic Recommendations:

- **Core Strategy:** Friendly to Interdisciplinary Applications. If you wish to transition from science and engineering to management or education, Malaysia offers a flexible and welcoming environment for interdisciplinary doctoral research.
- **Background Requirements:** An average score of 80+ and an IELTS score of around 6.0 are sufficient. However, in recent years, the requirements for high-quality paper publications have been increasing. It is recommended to highlight the "regional significance" of the research (such as its impact on Southeast Asian economies) in the research proposal to strengthen your application.

6.7.8 Singapore

(1) Policy Direction:

Application deadlines for admission in August 2026 mostly fall between November and December 2025 (*Source: NTU 2026*).

(2) Strategic Recommendations:

- **Prepare a Video Essay:** Universities such as NTU now require the submission of short video presentations. This assesses not only academic knowledge but also oral English and logical expression skills.
- **Core Strategy:** Combining Academic and Industrial Pursuits. Singaporean universities highly value "practical application scenarios." If you have experience in senior algorithm positions at large companies (such as Tencent, Huawei, Shopee), applying for a PhD in AI or engineering at NTU/NUS is extremely advantageous.
- **Hardcore Indicators:** A GPA of 3.8/4.0 or 90/100 is the standard. Interviews are very hardcore, usually involving multiple rounds of Technical Fundamentals, directly assessing algorithmic deduction or coding ability.

6.7.9 US

(1) Policy Direction:

Federal funding uncertainty has directly constricted doctoral admissions at U.S. research universities. According to new data from the Association of American Universities (AAU) Data Exchange, which surveyed 55 major research universities, doctoral admissions for fall 2026 declined by 15% compared to fall 2025. (*Source: AAU 2026*).

(2) Policy Recommendations:

- **Diverse Funding Channels:** In addition to applying for school fellowships, one should actively seek special funding from the NSF or industry associations.
- **"Cultural Fit" in Interviews:** US high school professors highly value applicants'

contributions to the laboratory team culture. It is recommended to clearly mention in the SOP how to participate in interdisciplinary collaboration.

- **Core Strategy:** Holistic Review (Comprehensive Review). A strong GPA (such as 3.8+) is often the baseline, but what determines admission is your research match degree. The US tends to admit doctoral students with "potential," so your statement of purpose (SOP) should tell a good story about your research logic and long-term motivation.
- **Soft Background:** Internships at top-tier companies or summer research at prestigious overseas universities are highly advantageous.
- **Guide to Avoiding Pitfalls:** Do not blindly trust the GRE. Many R1 universities have made it optional, but if your background is average, a high GRE score (e.g., 330+) can still serve as a useful complement to strengthen your application.

6.7.10 Canada

(1) Policy Direction:

Great news: Starting from January 1, 2026, master's and doctoral students are exempt from the Federal Learning (FL) license cap (Cap Exemption), and do not need to submit a provincial attestation letter (PAL). Doctoral applications can also enjoy a 14-day expedited approval channel (*Source: IRCC*).

(2) Policy Recommendations:

- **Strategy Core:** First secure a supervisor, then obtain admission. Most Gabor applications must obtain the supervisor's "Initial Interest" before the online application. It is recommended to complete targeted supervisor outreach between September and October.
- **Soft Background:** Preference for a "Research-based Master's". If you are a direct PhD applicant, your undergraduate research experience must cover a complete research cycle.
- **Guide to Avoiding Pitfalls:** Pay attention to the tuition waiver policy. Some provinces (such as Ontario) have special tuition fee reductions for doctoral students, so be sure to clarify the composition of funding before applying.

6.7.11 Europe

(1) Policy Direction:

The DAAD 2026 Scholarship in Germany places greater emphasis on the alignment between the research proposal and the expertise of the German supervisor, and the degree completion time must be within the past 6 years (*Source: DAAD: Scholarship Database 2026*).

(2) Policy Recommendations:

- **Pay attention to the dynamic update of the "position system":** Check the vacancy page of the institution daily, as European doctoral admissions are essentially "talent recruitment."
- **Core Strategy:** Treat applying for a PhD as "job hunting." You do not need to wait for the application season, but instead keep an eye on the vacancies or positions on the school's official website every day.
- **Background Requirements:** Place extreme emphasis on the suitability of the master's thesis topic. For example, German supervisors do not care how high your TOEFL score is (as long

as it is sufficient), but rather what models you used in your master's thesis and what experimental equipment you are familiar with (such as the Siemens protocol mentioned earlier). Many European continental institutions also tend to favor candidates with domestic or overseas educational experience.

- **Hardcore Indicator:** Many European universities and colleges mandate that applicants must hold a master's degree to apply for a PhD.



Chapter 7: Guide to Overseas Ph.D. Application Experience

Important Note: The admission rates, case backgrounds, and application strategies mentioned below are based on statistical analysis of historical data and do not represent the probability of success for any individual application. PhD admission outcomes are affected by multiple uncontrollable factors, including the number of available places in a given year, supervisors' funding availability, and the level of competition among applicants. Historical data does not constitute any form of commitment or guarantee regarding future outcomes.

7.1 Breakdown of Overseas Ph.D. Application Processes by Region

7.1.1 United Kingdom

(1) School System and Enrollment Time

The doctoral program in the United Kingdom typically lasts 3–4 years on a full-time basis (*Source: FindAPhD*). Most regions implement year-round rolling admissions, but scholarship applications have clear deadlines. The main entry time is from September to October each year (autumn entry), and some programs offer an entry option in January (spring entry).

(2) Academic Qualification Requirements

- Educational Background: Applicants are usually required to hold a master's degree (Merit or Distinction level) in a relevant discipline, or a bachelor's degree with a 2:1 honors classification (Upper Second Class) or above. Some top universities (such as Cambridge) require a first-class honors degree (First Class) or a high 2:1 (*Source: Cambridge Admissions Office*).
- Proof of research ability: You need to submit your master's thesis grade or proof of an independent research project. Some institutions accept a 2:2 grade but require relevant work experience.

(3) Language proficiency requirements

- IELTS: The overall score is usually required to be 6.5 to 7.5, with each individual component not less than 6.0 (specific requirements vary by major).
- TOEFL iBT: The total score requirement is generally 90–100 points or above.
- Language exemption criteria: Degree holders from English-speaking countries or those who have completed their degrees in English-speaking countries may apply for exemption.

(4) Application Process and Key Points in Time

- 12–15 months ago (summer before enrollment)
- Begin researching potential mentors and projects
- Prepare for language exams
- Preliminary conceptualization of the research plan
- 10–12 months ago (autumn before enrollment)

- Determine the list of target institutions
- Contact potential supervisors (prospecting)
- Write a Research Proposal
- 8–10 months ago (winter before enrollment)
- Submit an early project application
- Apply for major scholarships (such as UKRI)
- Deadline for Key Scholarships

Durham University: February 6, 2026 (online application and material submission must be completed before this date). (*Source: Durham University (2026)*)

Queen Mary University of London: January 28, 2026 (including scholarship application). (*Source: Queen Mary University of London, 2026*)

Imperial College London: November 3, 2025 (for January/February 2026 entry). (*Source: Imperial College London, 2026*)

(5) List of Application Materials

- 1) Academic transcripts and degree certificates (certified translation required)
- 2) Research Proposal (usually 2000–3000 words)
- 3) Personal Statement
- 4) Academic CV
- 5) Two to three academic recommendation letters
- 6) Proof of English language proficiency
- 7) Writing sample (required for some majors)
- 8) Proof of funds or scholarship application materials

(6) Application Method

Applications are submitted online through the official application portals of each university, with application fees typically ranging from £20 to £100. (*Source: Oxford; Cambridge*). Some programs require preliminary approval from a supervisor before a formal application can be made.

7.1.2 Ireland

(1) School System and Enrollment Time

The doctoral program in Ireland typically lasts 3–5 years on a full-time basis, with a dual intake system: two admission opportunities each year in March and September. Taking Trinity College Dublin as an example, the application deadline for the March 2026 intake is December 31, 2025, and the deadline for the September intake is May 1, 2026. (*Source: TCD, 2026*)

(2) Academic Qualification Requirements

- Educational Requirements: Must hold a master's degree in a relevant discipline, with a grade of 2:1 Honours (Second Class Honours, Grade 1) or equivalent. Candidates with a background in a Research Masters are preferred.

- Academic Requirements: Undergraduate programs typically require a 2:1 Honours Degree (Trinity College Dublin standard), while doctoral applicants generally need to hold a master's degree (*Source: TCD, 2026*).
- Direct admission: Holders of a first-class honors degree at the undergraduate level can directly apply for a doctoral program on the basis of demonstrating strong research capabilities. (*Source: FindAPhd Ireland*)

(3) Language proficiency requirements

- IELTS: Minimum overall scores vary by course band. For standard entry (Band B), an overall score of 6.5 with no individual band below 6.0 is required. And for higher-demand courses (Band C), an overall score of 7.0 with no band below 6.5 is required. (Trinity College Dublin requirement) (*Source: TCD English*)
- TOEFL: Requirements also depend on the band. For Band B, the minimum is 90 overall (with no section below 21) for tests taken before January 2026. For tests taken after that date, the new scoring scale applies (overall 4.5 with no section below 4.0). For Band C, the requirement is 100 overall (no section below 23) for older tests, or 5.0 overall (no section below 4.5) under the new scale. (*Source: TCD English*)
- Exemption Conditions: Exemptions may be requested by applicants who have completed a primary degree entirely through the medium of English, supported by official documentation from the degree-awarding institution. Exemptions are considered on a case-by-case basis and are not automatic. (*Source: TCD English*)

(4) Application Process

PhD applications in Ireland emphasise research fit, and the process is relatively flexible:

- 1) Determine the research direction: clarify research interests and career goals.
- 2) Contacting potential supervisors for rapport-building: It is essential to communicate with potential supervisors in advance and obtain their approval, which is the key to a successful application.
- 3) Prepare a research plan: Write a detailed research proposal, including research questions, methodology, and a literature review.
- 4) Submit applications online: Submit through each university's application system.
- 5) Interview and Assessment: Applicants who pass the initial screening are required to participate in an interview (usually online).
- 6) Admission and Scholarship Application: Apply for relevant funding after receiving admission.
- 7) Application Deadline:

Government of Ireland International Education Scholarship (GOI-IES): Applications open on January 29, 2026, with the deadline of March 12, 2026 (*Source: UCD, 2026*).

University of Galway Hardiman Scholarship: Deadline February 6, 2026 (*Source: Galway 2026*).

Maynooth University John & Pat Hume Doctoral Awards: The application deadline is April 17, 2025 (for the 2025/26 academic year) (*Source: Maynooth 2025*).

(5) List of Application Materials

- 1) Undergraduate and master's transcripts and degree certificates

- 2) Research Proposal
- 3) Personal Statement/Motivation Letter
- 4) Curriculum Vitae (CV)
- 5) Two academic recommendation letters
- 6) Proof of English Language Proficiency
- 7) Copy of passport
- 8) Mentor Recognition Certificate (required by some schools)

(6) Scholarships and Financial Aid

- GOI-IES: 60 places per year, open to non-EU students, offering €10,000 living expenses + full tuition fee waiver (*Source: UCD, 2026*).
- Hardiman PhD Scholarships: Offered by the University of Galway, with €25,000 annual living expenses + full tuition waiver, for a 4-year program (*Source: Galway 2026*).

7.1.3 Australia

(1) School System and Enrollment Time

The duration of a doctoral program in Australia is typically 3–4 years of full-time study (extendable up to a maximum of 6 years), with the academic year usually starting in February and ending in November, and a vacation period from June to July. Although most programs operate on a year-round application acceptance system, scholarship applications have strict deadlines. (*Source: FindAPhD; PhD in Australia 2026 | Eligibility, Scholarships, Visa & More*)

(2) Academic Qualification Requirements

Educational background: To apply for doctoral programs in Australia, applicants generally need relevant undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications, and each Australian university lists clear academic entry criteria on official websites; for example, Monash University. Two core qualifications are accepted for direct PhD admission: a Master by Research degree, or an Honours Bachelor's degree graded Honours Class IIA or higher (equivalent to an average score above 75%). While outstanding applicants with only a coursework master's degree can be admitted to certain disciplines, they must submit valid proof of research competence, such as a dissertation accounting for more than 25% of their total master's credits. (*Source: FindAPhD; Academic entry requirements*)

Research Readiness: Research papers, dissertations, or research project certificates need to be submitted.

Direct Assessment: Universities such as UNSW provide the HDR Self-Assessment Tool for applicants to pre-assess their eligibility. (*Source: UNSW*)

(3) Language proficiency requirements

IELTS: Overall score 6.5–7.0, with no individual band score below 6.0 (the Faculty of Law at the University of Sydney requires an overall score of 7.0 and individual band scores of 6.0). (*Source: Doctor of Philosophy (Law)*)

TOEFL iBT: Total score 79–100, with minimum requirements for individual sections.

PTE Academic: Overall Score 58–65.

(4) Application Process and Timeline

The application for a doctoral degree in Australia follows the "find a supervisor first" model (*Source: FindAPhD*). The following application procedures and schedules are summarised based on our internal practical experience:

- 1) Finding a supervisor (10–12 months before enrollment): Browse the supervisor's research interests and send a research proposal and CV for supervisor prospecting.
- 2) Prepare materials (8–10 months before enrollment): transcripts, research plans, language test scores, etc.
- 3) Official Application (6–8 months before enrollment): Submit an online application through the university's official website, with the scholarship application proceeding concurrently with the admission application.
- 4) Waiting for Results: The review period is usually 6–12 weeks.
- 5) Visa Application: After receiving an offer, apply for a Subclass 500 student visa, providing a COE, financial proof, and OSHC insurance.

(*Source: FindAPhD*)

Key Dates for Scholarships

(Taking the University of Melbourne as an example):

Round 1: Deadline is October 31, 2025 (results to be announced in December)

Round 2: Deadline is January 31, 2026 (results announced in March)

Round 3: Due on May 15, 2026 (results to be announced in July)

(*Source: The University of Melbourne*)

(Taking the Australian National University as an example):

Round 1: August 31, 2024 (for admission in 2025, the corresponding date in 2026 should be referred to)

Round 2: April 15, 2025 (subject to reference of the corresponding date in 2026)

(*Source: The Australian National University*)

(5) List of Application Materials

- 1) Undergraduate and master's transcripts, degree certificates
- 2) Research Proposal (usually a 300-500-word overview)
- 3) Academic Curriculum Vitae (CV), including research experience and publication records
- 4) Proof of English Language Proficiency
- 5) Two academic recommendation letters
- 6) Supervisor Endorsement
- 7) Sample of thesis or research project (if any)
- 8) Copy of passport

(6) Scholarships and Financial Aid

- Research Training Program (RTP): Government-funded, including a tuition fee waiver + approximately AUD \$37,000 in living expenses per year.
- University of Melbourne Graduate Research Scholarship: Covers full tuition fees + living expenses of \$38,500 per year + Overseas Student Health Cover (*Source: PhD Study in Australia 2026*).

7.1.4 New Zealand

(1) School System and Enrollment Time

The doctoral program in New Zealand typically lasts 3–4 years on a full-time basis, with the academic year starting in February and ending in November, and June–July being the vacation months. The main intake times are February (First Semester) and July (Second Semester).

(2) Academic Qualification Requirements

Universities set distinct entry criteria for different doctoral programmes and disciplines. Taking the PhD programme in Engineering at the University of Auckland as an example, the core academic requirements are as follows:

- Educational Background: Must hold a research-based master's degree (Master's degree with a significant research component, i.e., thesis accounting for more than 25%) or an honours bachelor's degree (Second Class, First Division or above, equivalent to B+ or 75%).
- Research Experience: Must complete a thesis/research project equivalent to one year of full-time study.
- Grade Requirement: The minimum grade requirement is Second Class First Division (B+ or 75%).

(*Source: FindAPhD; The University of Auckland*)

(3) Language proficiency requirements. Taking Auckland University of Technology (AUT) as an example, the specific standards are listed below:

- IELTS: Overall score 6.5 to 7.0, with no individual band score below 6.0.
- TOEFL iBT, PTE Academic, Cambridge English, etc. are also widely accepted.
- Exemption Conditions: Holders of degrees from English-speaking countries may be exempted.

(*Source: English language requirements for doctoral programmes - AUT*)

(4) Application Process and Timeline

The following application procedures and timelines are summarised based on the company's internal practical experience:

Step 1: Confirm eligibility (12–18 months before enrollment)

- Check if your academic qualifications meet the standards for a research master's degree or an honors bachelor's degree.

Step 2: Find a Mentor (Key Step)

- Browse the profiles of tutors from universities such as the University of Waikato and contact potential tutors.

- A formal application can only be submitted after receiving a written invitation (Invitation to Apply) from the supervisor.

Step 3: Prepare materials

- Research Proposal
- Transcript, Degree Certificate
- Contact information for two academic referees
- CV and Publication Record

Step 4: Online Application

- Submit through the official school system (e.g., University of Auckland, AUT, etc.).
- Submit at least 3 months before the expected start date (AUT requirement: for the February intake, the research plan must be submitted by December 15 of the previous year).

(5) List of Application Materials

- 1) Academic Transcript and Degree Certificate (to be certified)
- 2) Research Proposal
- 3) Statement of Intent for Personal Research
- 4) Curriculum Vitae (CV)
- 5) Detailed contact information of two academic referees (the referees will be contacted by the school)
- 6) Proof of English Language Proficiency
- 7) Copy of passport
- 8) Proof of funds or intention to apply for a scholarship

(6) Tuition Fees and Scholarships

- Tuition fees: International doctoral students typically pay the same tuition fees as local students.
- Scholarships: Universities offer Doctoral Scholarships

(Source: The Ultimate Guide to Studying in New Zealand 2026; U3.35 Definition of a 'domestic student').

7.1.5 Singapore

(1) School System and Enrollment Time

The doctoral program in Singapore typically has a 4-year full-time duration (some programs range from 2 to 5 years), with the main intake in August (autumn) each year, and some programs offering intake in January (spring). *(Source: FindAPhD)*

(2) Academic Qualification Requirements

- Educational Background: Must hold a Bachelor's degree (Honours degree, at least Upper Second Class) or a Master's degree in a relevant field. Some programs accept outstanding undergraduate graduates to apply directly. *(Source: FindAPhD).*

- Academic Achievements: NTU Business School requires excellent undergraduate academic performance and outstanding research potential (*Source: Doctor of Philosophy / Business*).

(3) Language proficiency requirements (Taking NTU as an example)

- IELTS: Overall score 6.5 to 7.0 (Individual requirements vary by major).
- TOEFL iBT: Usually requires a score of 100 or above.
- Exemption: Holders of degrees from English-speaking countries are exempt.

(*Source: Doctor of Philosophy / Electrical and Electronic Engineering*)

(4) Application Process and Key Dates (Taking NTU as an Example)

Application Rounds and Deadlines :

- NTU Research Scholarship (Admission in August 2026): October 1, 2025 – January 31, 2026 (*Source: Research Programmes Admission Guide; NTU Research Scholarship*).
- Nanyang President's Graduate Scholarship (NPGS) (Admission in January 2027): June 1, 2026 to July 31, 2026; early submission is recommended (*Source: Nanyang President's Graduate Scholarship*).
- Self-financed or externally funded (Admission in August 2026): By January 31, 2026 (*Source: Research Programmes Admission Guide*).

Trial Process:

The following trial process is summarised based on the company's internal practical experience.

- Application review usually starts in January
- Interview Notice: Between February and May
- Admission results: Announced between February and May
- Student Pass Application: Initiated after Admission

(5) List of Application Materials

The following List of Application Materials is compiled based on official website information and the company's internal practical experience.

- 1) Undergraduate and master's transcripts and degree certificates
- 2) Research Proposal
- 3) Personal Statement
- 4) Curriculum Vitae (CV)
- 5) Two academic recommendation letters (submitted directly by the recommenders)
- 6) Proof of English Language Proficiency
- 7) GRE/GMAT scores (required by some business schools)
- 8) Copy of passport

(*Source: FindAPhD*)

(6) Scholarship

- NTU Research Scholarship: Covers full tuition fees + a monthly living allowance (*Source:*

NTU Research Scholarship).

- NPGS: Higher Allowance + Conference Travel Support (*Source: Nanyang President's Graduate Scholarship*).

7.1.6 Hong Kong, China

(1) School System and Enrollment Time

The doctoral program in Hong Kong typically lasts 3–4 years on a full-time basis (4 years for direct entry from undergraduate and 3 years for entry with a master's degree). The main intake is in September (autumn), and some programs offer entry in January (spring). (*Source: FindAPhD*)

(2) Academic Qualification Requirements

- Educational Background: Must hold a master's degree from an accredited university; or a first-class honors bachelor's degree (direct entry to a doctoral program from undergraduate) (*Source: FindAPhD*).
- Grade Requirements: Undergraduate grades typically must reach 3.0/4.0 or above, or an equivalent level (*Source: GPA for PhD Admissions: Requirements by Field / DiscoverPhDs*).
- Special Requirements: Some majors require the GRE/GMAT (e.g., the doctoral program at CUHKSZ). (*Source: School of Management and Economics / CUHKSZ*)

(3) Language proficiency requirements (Taking City University of Hong Kong as an example)

- IELTS: Overall score 6.5–7.0, with no individual band score below 5.5–6.0 (the School of Law at City University may require 7.0).
- TOEFL iBT: Usually requires a score of 79–100.
- Exemption: Holders of degrees taught in English are exempt.

(*Source: City University of Hong Kong*)

(4) Application Process and Key Dates

Application Channel:

1) Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme (HKPFS): Established by the Research Grants Council (RGC), it is open to outstanding students worldwide.

2) Apply directly to universities: Apply through each university's online system.

HKPFS 2026/27 Key Dates (The following key dates are compiled based on official website information and the company's internal practical experience):

- First-round application (RGC system): Closes at 12:00 noon on December 1, 2025 (Hong Kong time).
- Complete Application (University System): Submit by 11:59 PM on December 1, 2025, to the selected university.
- Interview: December 2025 – March 2026.
- Results Announcement: March–May 2026.

(*Source: Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme / Research Grants Council*)

Direct application deadlines for each university (for September 2026 entry):

Lingnan University:

- Main Round: November 1, 2025 – January 16, 2026
- 1st Clearing Round: January 17–April 30, 2026 (subject to availability)
- 2nd Clearing Round: May 1–August 31, 2026 (for entry in January 2027)

(Source: Lingnan University Graduate School)

City University of Hong Kong (CityU):

- Usually synchronized with HKPFS, the deadline is December 1

(Source: City University of Hong Kong)

HKMU (Hong Kong Metropolitan University):

- 2026 Fall Enrollment (Full-time): November 1, 2025 - March 31, 2026

(Source: Research Postgraduate - Admissions)

(5) List of Application Materials (The list of application materials is compiled based on official website information and the company's internal practical experience):

- 1) Undergraduate and master's transcripts, degree certificates (certification required)
- 2) Research Proposal
- 3) Personal Statement/Motivation Letter
- 4) Curriculum Vitae (CV)
- 5) Two to three academic recommendation letters
- 6) Proof of English language proficiency
- 7) GRE/GMAT scores (required for some majors)
- 8) Writing Sample (for some humanities and social sciences majors)
- 9) HKPFS Reference Number (if applicable)

(Source: FindAPhD; Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme / Research Grants Council)

(6) Scholarship

- HKPFS: Provides an annual subsidy of HK\$344,400 (approx. US\$43,907) + HK\$14,400 for conference travel expenses, with a maximum funding period of 3 years. *(Source: Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme / Research Grants Council)*
- University Postgraduate Scholarships: For example, Lingnan offers HK\$19,280 per month (to be increased to HK\$19,660 after candidate confirmation). *(Source: Financial Support / Research Postgraduate Programmes)*

7.1.7 Macao, China

(1) School System and Enrollment Time

The doctoral program in Macau usually lasts 3 years for full-time study (some programs range from 4 to 6 years). Universities such as the University of Macau mainly offer admission in August

(fall), and some programs have spring admission. *(Source: DSEDJ)*

(2) Academic Qualification Requirements

- Educational Background (Taking the University of Macau as an example): Must hold a master's degree or an equivalent qualification recognized by the university. For direct doctoral programs from undergraduate students, they must hold a bachelor's degree with excellent academic performance and demonstrate strong research capabilities. *(Source: University of Macau)*
- Special Channel: MUST (Macau University of Science and Technology) 2026/27 New Direct PhD Channel for Undergraduates, Open to Outstanding Fresh Graduates from the World's Top 200 Universities *(Source: School of Graduate Studies / University of Macau)*.

(3) Language proficiency requirements

- IELTS (Taking the University of Macau as an example): Overall score of 6.0 or above, with no individual band score below 5.5. *(Source: University of Macau)*
- TOEFL (Taking the University of Macau as an example): 550 or above for the paper-based test, 80 or above for the internet-based test. *(Source: University of Macau)*
- CET-4 and CET-6: Accept CET-6 scores (e.g., the University of Macau). *(Source: PhD and Other Doctoral Degree Programmes)*

(4) Application Process and Key Dates

University of Macau 2026/27 Application Timeline:

- Application Open: August 1, 2026
- Application Deadline: March 13, 2026 (Second Round)
- Scholarship Deadline: The application deadline for the UM PhD Scholarship and Teaching Assistant positions is January 15, 2026
- School Start Date: August 2026

(Source: University of Macau)

Macau University of Science and Technology (MUST) 2026/27:

- The undergraduate direct doctoral program covers majors such as Earth and Planetary Sciences, Artificial Intelligence, Tourism Management, and Law.

(Source: School of Graduate Studies / University of Macau)

(5) List of Application Materials (Taking the University of Macau as an example)

- 1) ID card/passport and proof of residence
- 2) Recent color photo
- 3) Undergraduate and master's graduation certificates, degree certificates, and transcripts
- 4) Electronic Registration Record of Academic Credentials (for Mainland graduates) or Academic Credential Certification (for overseas graduates) issued by the Ministry of Education
- 5) Certificate of Enrollment (Fresh Graduate)
- 6) Proof of English Proficiency

- 7) Email addresses of two recommenders (one must be an academic recommender)
- 8) Research Proposal (within 15 pages or less than 1 MB)
- 9) Personal Academic Resume

(Source: University of Macau)

(6) Scholarship

- UM PhD Scholarship: MOP 20,000 per month, up to 4 years (Source: UM PhD Scholarship)
- UM PhD Teaching Research Assistant: Monthly allowance starting from MOP 12,500 or equivalent to the average tuition fee (Source: UM PhD Teaching Research Assistant)
- MUST Scholarships: Depending on the project, usually include a tuition waiver + living allowance (Source: School of Graduate Studies - Prospective Students - Fees - Scholarships)

7.1.8 Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools

(1) Project Types and Characteristics

Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools are mainly divided into two categories :

- 1) Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools: cooperative universities with independent legal person status, such as The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shenzhen, New York University Shanghai, Duke Kunshan University, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, etc.
- 2) Joint training programs of non-independent legal entities: awarding dual degrees or single degrees through cooperation between Chinese and foreign universities.

(2) Academic System and Enrollment Time

It is usually 4 years of full-time study (direct PhD from undergraduate) or 3–4 years (starting from a master's degree).

(3) Academic Qualification Requirements (Taking CUHK-Shenzhen as an example)

- Educational Requirements: Hold a bachelor's degree from an accredited university with a grade no lower than "B"; or hold a master's degree.
- Standardized Tests: GRE General or GMAT scores (for some programs) are required to be submitted.
- Academic Potential: Must demonstrate the ability to engage in high-level research.

(Source: CUHKSZ)

(4) Language Proficiency Requirements

- IELTS: Overall score 6.5–7.0 (e.g., XJTLU requires 6.5 with a minimum of 6.0 in each component; some programs require 7.0).
- TOEFL iBT: Usually requires 80-100 points.
- Waiver Conditions: Those who have completed a degree in an English-speaking country may be eligible for a waiver (XJTLU waives the requirement for graduates from specific *Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools* cooperative universities).

(Source: Entry Requirement - Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University)

(5) Application Process and Key Dates

Taking CUHK-Shenzhen's 2026 admission as an example:

- Application Open: September 2025
- Application Deadline: April to May 2026
- Tuition fee: RMB 140,000/year
- Funding: Tuition waiver + Teaching Assistant stipend

(Source: Humanities and Social Sciences Postgraduate Office / CUHKSZ; CUHKSZ, Shenzhen Fee Standards; Applied Psychology / CHUKSZ)

Take Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU) as an example:

- Application Method: Applications are accepted throughout the year, but scholarship positions are on a first-come, first-served basis
- Degree Award: A doctoral degree awarded by the University of Liverpool, United Kingdom
- Tuition fee: RMB 99,000/year (fully self-funded); scholarships can cover 50%-100% of tuition fees
- Features: Provides opportunities for short-term research visits to the University of Liverpool in the United Kingdom

(Source: Doctoral Degree at XJTLU; Postgraduate Research Scholarships - XJTLU; Programme Fees - XJTLU)

(6) Chinese Government Scholarship (China Studies Program)

- Funding items: tuition fees, living expenses, and international travel expenses
- Application Deadline: February 28, 2026
- Applicants: Currently enrolled doctoral students (joint training) at foreign universities or those applying for a Chinese doctoral degree
- Partner Institutions: Including 18 top universities, such as Sun Yat-sen University

(Source: China Studies Program PhD Fellowships 2026 at Sun Yat-sen University)

(7) List of Application Materials (The following list of application materials is compiled based on official website information and internal practical experience)

- 1) Bachelor's/Master's degree certificates, graduation certificates, and certified copies
- 2) Official Transcript and Verification Report
- 3) English Language Proficiency (IELTS/TOEFL/GMAT/GRE)
- 4) Contact information of at least two referees
- 5) Personal Statement
- 6) Curriculum Vitae (CV)
- 7) Writing Sample (recommended to provide)
- 8) Other supporting materials (publication records, award certificates, etc.)

(Source: FindAPhD)

7.2 Application Strategy Recommendations for Each Region

The planning suggestions below are formulated in accordance with the policies of respective regions, combined with our internal service practical experience.

(1) Application Time Planning Recommendations

- 1) 12–18 months in advance: Define the research direction, prepare for language exams, and screen target supervisors.
- 2) 6–12 months in advance: Complete networking, write a research plan, and prepare application materials.
- 3) 3–6 months in advance: Submit applications, prepare for interviews, and apply for scholarships.

(2) Networking Strategy

- Commonwealth countries (United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand): Networking is crucial. It is recommended to contact the supervisor 2-3 months before the formal application, attaching a research plan and CV.
- Hong Kong, China, and Singapore: HKPFS and NPGS applicants are required to complete communication with their supervisors before the deadline.
- Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools: Tutor matching is relatively flexible, but pre-communication can improve the success rate.

(3) Key Points of Scholarship Application

- Round awareness: Most scholarships (UKRI, ANU, Melbourne, HKPFS) have clear application rounds, with the first round having a higher success rate.
- Automatic Review: Most scholarships in Australia do not require a separate application and are automatically reviewed along with the admission application.
- External Funding: Actively apply for external funding such as CSC (China), government scholarships (e.g., GOI-IES), etc.

7.3 Overview of Application Timelines by Region

7.3.1 United Kingdom

(1) Overview of Application Timeline

Take Aston University as an example. Doctoral applications across the United Kingdom are mainly divided into autumn entry (September/October) and spring entry (January), with autumn being the mainstream admission season. (*Source: PhD - Aston Business School*) Timeline for autumn entry in 2026 (September 2026 Entry):

Time Node	Application Items	Remarks
September - November 2025	Application Open Period	Most universities are open for applications, and it is recommended to

		submit as early as possible
December 2025 - February 2026	application peak period	Scholarship application deadlines are usually earlier
March–June 2026	Main Deadline	Application for Closing Most Courses
June–August 2026	Supplementary Enrollment Phase	Only available for under-subscribed courses; limited spots

Key Deadline:

- University of Oxford/University of Cambridge: Graduate applications typically close between December 2025 and May 2026, varying by program. (Source: *University of Oxford; University of Cambridge*)
- University of Edinburgh: The application deadline for September 2026 entry is May 29, 2026; for January 2027 entry, it is September 30, 2026. (Source: *University of Edinburgh*)
- University of Manchester: The application deadline for internal scholarships is December 1, 2025; the application deadline for self-funded applications is June 30, 2026. (Source: *PhD Business and Management (2026 entry) | The University of Manchester*)
- Imperial College London President's PhD Scholarship: Round 1 on November 3, 2025, Round 2 on January 12, 2026, Round 3 on March 2, 2026. (Source: *Imperial College London*)

(2) Important Reminder

- Rolling Admission Mechanism: Most doctoral programs in the United Kingdom adopt Rolling Admission. It is recommended to submit applications by November–December 2025 to compete for scholarships.
- Scholarship deadline: The application deadline for most scholarships is 2 to 3 months earlier than that for the course application.
- Visa reservation time: After obtaining the CAS, at least 3 weeks of visa processing time must be reserved. (Source: *UK Government Visa*)

(3) Application Timeline for Fall 2026 Enrollment:

The planning content below is formulated based on the standard application deadlines of universities in the aforementioned regions, combined with our internal service practice experience.

June–August 2025: Determine objectives and prepare materials

- Determine the research direction, target institutions, and supervisors: Based on academic background and future research interests, determine the research direction, and search for corresponding institutions and supervisors, with a focus on the supervisors' research achievements and recent projects.
- Language Exams: Prepare for language exams according to the application requirements of the target institution/major. It is recommended to achieve an IELTS score of 6.5+ (higher scores are required for liberal arts majors).
- Application materials preparation: Bachelor's and Master's graduation certificates, degree

certificates, transcripts, award certificates, academic papers, etc.

September–November 2025: Preparation for networking

- Reaching out to potential supervisors: Based on the target supervisor, write a prospecting letter to inquire about the admission plan and express the intention to apply; PS: Reaching out to potential supervisors is a continuous task, and it can still be continued after January of the following year to seek application opportunities.
- Write a research plan: Based on the research direction, further define the research topic, write an outline for the research plan, and make detailed revisions according to the research direction of the supervisor with whom you have communicated.
- Prepare documentation: Personal Statement (PS), Curriculum Vitae (CV), Recommendation Letter (RL), and other application materials required by the school, and prepare to submit them.

December 2025 to January 2026: Official Application and Scholarship Application

- Submit Application: Submit applications to institutions based on the responses from the preliminary contact.
- Scholarship Application: The application deadlines for scholarships at most UK institutions are around January. The CSC scholarship application opens on March 10 and closes on April 1, and students need to prepare and submit scholarship application materials as required within the specified timeframe. (*Source: CSC*)

February–May 2026: Waiting for Results and Interview Preparation

- Interview Preparation: After submitting your application, prepare for the interview in advance, review your professional knowledge, and once you receive the interview notice, you can prepare your PPT and conduct mock interviews in advance; language expression, logic, mastery of professional knowledge, future planning, etc., may all affect the interview outcome.
- Wait for results: Patiently wait for the application results. Generally, institutions will issue admission notices one after another from February to May. During this period, maintain communication with the institution's admissions office or supervisor to stay informed of the application progress in a timely manner. If you receive multiple offers, compare the advantages, scholarship opportunities, etc. of different institutions before making a final decision.

June to September 2026: Visa Application and Pre-departure Preparation

- Visa Application: After receiving the admission notice, prepare the materials required for the visa application, such as a passport, admission letter, financial proof, visa application form, photo, etc., and then proceed with the student visa application.
- Pre-departure Preparation: Make all necessary preparations for studying in the United Kingdom. (*Source: FindAPhD-A; FindAPhD-B; FindAPhD-C*)

7.3.2 Ireland

(1) Overview of the Application Timeline

Doctoral applications in Ireland usually have two intake batches: March intake and September

intake (*Source: Trinity College Dublin*). Taking Trinity College Dublin as an example:

Enrollment Batch	Application Deadline	Scholarship Application Deadline
Enroll in March 2026	December 31, 2025	December 31, 2025
Enroll in September 2026	May 1, 2026	January 15, 2026 (Economics and other majors)

Specific professional differences:

- Business School Doctoral Program: Applications are open until June 30, 2026, but scholarship applications must be submitted by March 31, 2026. (*Source: Trinity College Dublin*)
- PhD in Economics: The application deadline is April 1, 2026, and the scholarship consideration deadline is January 15, 2026. (*Source: Trinity College Dublin*)
- Doctor of Social Work and Social Policy: March intake deadline is December 31, 2025; September intake deadline is May 1, 2026. (*Source: Trinity College Dublin*)

(2) Application Key Points

- Contact with potential supervisor: Before applying, you must contact potential supervisors, obtain preliminary consent, and then submit your application.
- Research Proposal: A detailed research proposal (approximately 2 pages on A4 paper) must be submitted.
- Academic Requirements: Usually requires a 2:1 Honours Degree + an excellent Master's Degree. (*Source: Trinity College Dublin*)

(3) Application Time Planning:

The planning content below is compiled based on the standard application timelines of the aforementioned institutions, combined with our accumulated internal service experience.

January–March 2025: Determine the research direction and target institutions

- During this phase, the refinement of the research area should be completed, and top institutions in Ireland (such as Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin, etc.) and matching supervisors should be identified.

April–June 2025: Contacting supervisors (networking) and writing research proposals (RP)

- This is the core of the application. It is necessary to thoroughly study the target supervisor's recent papers, write a highly relevant and innovative research plan (RP), and proactively send a prospecting email. The quality of the RP directly determines whether the supervisor is willing to accept you.

July–September 2025: Prepare application materials and submit an online application

- Improve your CV and personal statement (PS), and contact referees to obtain recommendation letters. Doctoral applications in Ireland are usually on a rolling basis, but popular programs and scholarships (such as IRC scholarships) have specific deadlines, with the vast majority falling between October and December 2025. At this stage, all application

materials must be submitted online.

October 2025–March 2026: Interviews and Waiting for Results

- If you pass the initial screening, you will receive an interview notice from the supervisor or committee. The interview will focus on assessing the feasibility of your research plan and your academic potential. Meanwhile, the results of the scholarship application will also be announced at this stage.

April–June 2026: Receive Offer and Process Visa

- After receiving the admission notice, confirm acceptance of the offer and start preparing for pre-departure matters such as visa materials, medical examinations, and booking air tickets.
(Source: Trinity College Dublin)

7.3.3 Australia

(1) Overview of the Application Timeline

Australia operates on a three-semester system (February, July, November) (Source: *Key Intake Dates for Study in Australia 2026*). Doctoral applications are open year-round, but sufficient time must be reserved to process scholarships and visas. For research degrees, it is necessary to contact supervisors in advance and submit a research plan.

Key points in time in 2026:

Enrollment Batch	Application Open	Application Deadline	Course start time	Scholarship deadline
February 2026 (S1)	July 2025	October - November 2025	February 17–27, 2026	August - September 2025
July 2026 (S2)	February 2026	March - May 2026	July 27, 2026	March - April 2026
November 2026 (S3)	July 2026	August - September 2026	October - November 2026	Depending on the project

(2) Deadline for key universities:

- Australian National University (ANU):

Enrollment in February: December 15, 2025

Enrollment in July: April 15, 2026 (Source: *The Australian National University*)

- University of Melbourne:

February Enrollment: October 1, 2026

Enrollment in July: February 1, 2027 (Source: *The University of Melbourne*)

- University of Sydney:

Enrollment in February: September 11, 2026

Enrollment in July: December 18, 2026 (Source: *RTP scholarships / The University of Sydney*)

- Monash University:

Enrollment in February: July 31, 2025

Enrollment in July: March 31, 2026 (*Source: Monash University*)

(3) Application Time Planning:

The planning content below is formulated based on the standard application deadlines of universities in the aforementioned regions, combined with our internal service practice experience.

March–June 2025: Determine the direction and institutions

- Define the research direction: Combine your own academic background and interests to focus on a specific research area.
- Screen target universities and supervisors: Check the official websites of Australian universities (such as the Group of Eight G8), and look for supervisors whose research interests align with yours. Focus on reading the supervisor's recently published papers to understand their research trends.
- Prepare basic materials: Start organizing basic documents such as a personal academic curriculum vitae (CV), transcripts, degree certificates, etc.

July–September 2025: Initiate networking and language preparation

- Write and send prospecting emails: This is a crucial step toward a successful application. Based on a deep understanding of the supervisor's research, write personalized and high-quality prospecting emails to express a strong desire to join their research group. It is recommended to cast a wide net while focusing on following up with supervisors who respond positively.
- Take a language test, such as IELTS or TOEFL, and ensure that your score meets the minimum requirements of your target institution. It is recommended to complete the test before this stage to allow time for retaking it.

October–December 2025: Write research plans and refine application materials

- Write a Research Proposal (RP): Refine your research proposal based on the supervisor's feedback. The RP is the core material for assessing your research potential and must be logically rigorous and clearly targeted.
- Prepare recommendation letters: Contact your undergraduate or graduate supervisor or professor, communicate in advance, and invite them to write a recommendation letter for you.
- Prepare a Personal Statement: Elaborate on your academic background, research interests, motivation for the application, and future plans.

January–April 2026: Submit the application and wait for results

- Online Application Submission: After the application system of the target institution opens, submit all materials in a timely manner. The application deadline for admission in July (26Fall) is usually from April to May 2026, but some popular programs or scholarships may have earlier deadlines. Be sure to refer to the official website for accurate information.
- Prepare for the interview: Some institutions or supervisors may arrange online interviews to assess your research capabilities and communication skills.
- Applying for Scholarships: The Australian government and various universities offer a

variety of scholarships (such as the Australia Government Research Training Program - RTP), whose application deadlines are usually earlier than or coincide with the project application deadlines, requiring special attention. (Source: *Key Intake Dates for Study in Australia 2026*)

7.3.4 New Zealand

(1) Overview of the Application Timeline

Taking the University of Auckland as an example, New Zealand's PhD programmes accept applications year-round, with February and July serving as the two primary intake commencement months (Source: *2026 Programme Start Dates – University of Auckland*). PhD tuition fees are the same as those for local students (approximately NZ\$6500–7500 per year) (Source: *Tuition fees and cost of living*), offering high cost-effectiveness. Applicants need to contact their supervisors in advance and prepare a detailed research plan.

Key point in time in 2026:

Enrollment Batch	Application Proposal Submission	Officially Closed	Result Notification	Scholarship Deadline
Enroll in February 2026	August–September 2025	October–December 2025	November–December 2025	September 1, 2025
Enroll in July 2026	January - February 2026	March - May 2026	April - May 2026	March 1, 2026

(2) Information on key institutions:

- University of Auckland: Rolling admissions; it is recommended to apply 6 months in advance (Source: *Doctor of Philosophy – University of Auckland*)
- University of Otago:

1) Scholarship review rounds: March 1, June 1, September 1, November 1 (Source: *University of Otago*)

2) Doctoral applications are open year-round, but a complete application must be submitted 4–6 weeks before the scholarship review.

- Victoria University of Wellington: February intake closes in December 2025, July intake closes in May 2026 (Source: *Victoria University of Wellington*)

(3) Application Time Planning:

The planning content below is formulated based on the standard application deadlines of universities in the aforementioned regions, combined with our internal service practice experience.

Phase 1: Preparatory Work (March–August 2025)

- Determine the research direction
- Screen target institutions and supervisors
- Enhance research background (GPA recommended 3.0+)

- Prepare for a language test (IELTS 6.5/6.0 or equivalent)

Phase 2: Establishing Contact with Advisors (June–October 2025)

- New Zealand PhD applications must first obtain the supervisor's approval.
- Prime Time to Email Mentors: 10 AM on Tuesday
- Cite at least 3 papers by the target supervisor from the past 3 years

Phase 3: Application Sprint (September 2025 – January 2026)

- Write a Research Plan (RP)
- Prepare application materials (transcripts, recommendation letters, CV, etc.)
- Submit the online application (after receiving a positive response from the supervisor)

Phase 4: Interviews and Admissions (November 2025–March 2026)

- Prepare for an interview
- Wait for the offer (about 6–8 weeks)
- Confirm the offer within 6 weeks

Phase 5: Visa and Enrollment (March–September 2026)

- Apply for a visa
- Confirm the enrollment date

(Source: University of Waikato; PhD application process; Doctoral applications – University of Auckland)

7.3.5 Singapore

(1) Overview of the Application Timeline

Taking Nanyang Technological University (NTU) as an example, most PhD programmes across Singapore mainly enroll new students for the August intake annually. The application cycle for this intake is relatively long, running from November of the preceding year to January of the intake year (Source: NTU Singapore). NUS and NTU are the main choices, with fierce competition, generous scholarships, and early deadlines. Key points in time for 2026:

Institution	Enrollment Time	Application Open	Application Deadline	Scholarship Deadline
National University of Singapore (NUS)	August 2026	May 2025	November 1, 2025	Synchronize with the application
Nanyang Technological University (NTU)	August 2026	November 1, 2025	December 15, 2025	July 31, 2025
Singapore Management University (SMU)	August 2026	November 17, 2025	March 19, 2026	Depending on the project

(2) Information on key institutions:

Nanyang Technological University (NTU):

- Application period: November 1, 2025 - December 15, 2025
- Nanyang President's Graduate Scholarship (NPGS): Deadline: July 31
- Interview: February 2026 – March 2026
- Result: February–May 2026 (*Source:*)

National University of Singapore (NUS):

- Deadline for international students enrolling in August: November 1, 2025 (for some programs)
- Research projects require contacting the supervisor in advance and determining the research topic (*Source: National University of Singapore*)

Singapore Management University (SMU):

- Enrollment in August: Open on August 1 of the previous year, closes on January 31 of the current year
- January enrollment: opens on February 1 of the same year and closes on June 30 (*Source: Singapore Management University*)

7.3.6 Hong Kong, China

(1) Overview of the Application Timeline

Most doctoral programs in Hong Kong admit students in September, and applicants can receive full funding through the HKPFS (Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme) (*Source: Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme / Research Grants Council*). The application process is divided into the Main Round and the Clearing Round, with the Main Round being the most competitive but offering the most scholarship opportunities. Key points in time for 2026:

Time Node	Application Items	Remarks
September–November 2025	Preparation Phase	Identify a supervisor, write an RP, and prepare language test scores
December 1, 2025	HKPFS and Main Wheel Application Deadline	All eight schools have a unified deadline, with the most scholarship opportunities
December 2025–February 2026	Interview Stage	Each institution arranges interviews for shortlisted candidates
March 31, 2026	Liquidation Round Application Deadline	Only applicable to understaffed projects, with very few

		scholarships
February–May 2026	Results Announcement	HKPFS results are usually announced in March–April

The application time for the eight schools is unified:

- The University of Hong Kong (HKU): Main round on December 1, 2025; Clearing round on April 30, 2026. *(Source: HKU)*
- The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK): Main round on December 1, 2025; clearing round deadlines vary by programme. *(Source: Application Deadlines / CUHK Graduate School)*
- Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST): Same as above. *(Source: HKU Science and Technology Fok Ying Tung Graduate School)*
- The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong Baptist University, Lingnan University, and The Education University of Hong Kong all follow the RGC unified schedule. *(Source: Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme / Research Grants Council)*
- Scholarship Amount: HKPFS provides HK\$344,400 per annum (approximately US\$43,907) + HK\$14,400 conference allowance *(Source: Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme / Research Grants Council)*

Information on Key Universities

- The University of Hong Kong (HKU): Highest QS Ranking, Strong in Medicine, Architecture, Law, and Business
- The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK): Strong Research Capabilities in Humanities, Social Sciences, and Business
- Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST): Leading in Science, Engineering, and Computer Science
- The Hong Kong Polytechnic University: Outstanding in Design, Hotel Management, and Engineering
- City University of Hong Kong: Renowned for Creative Media, Law, and Business
- Hong Kong Baptist University: School of Communication Asia's Top
- Lingnan University: excels in humanities disciplines such as philosophy and sociology
- The Education University of Hong Kong: Asia's Number One in the Field of Education
- Language Requirements: Usually IELTS 6.5 (no individual band score below 6.0), TOEFL 80–90; some business majors require GMAT/GRE

Application Timeline Planning

The planning content below is formulated based on the standard application deadlines of universities in the aforementioned regions, combined with our internal service practice experience.

March–June 2025: Determine the direction and screen mentors

- Refine research directions: Determine specific research topics based on undergraduate and

graduate backgrounds

- Screen target mentors: Check the official websites of the eight universities and read at least 5 papers by mentors in the past 5 years
- Language Exam Preparation: IELTS 7.0 or TOEFL 100+ is recommended, as HKPFS is highly competitive and requires high scores
- Academic background enhancement: If you have published papers or participated in research projects, supplement them at this stage

July–September 2025: Networking and Research Proposal Writing

- Initiate networking: Start sending networking emails in July, with the prime period from August to September
- Write a Research Plan (RP): 3000–5000 words, which should demonstrate innovation and feasibility
- Prepare recommendation letters: Contact 2–3 professors who are familiar with your academic abilities
- Notarized translation of materials: Transcripts, degree certificates, etc., in both Chinese and English versions

October–December 2025: Online Application Submission and Scholarship Application

- Online application system opening: Usually opens in early October
- HKPFS Application Deadline: 12:00 noon, December 1, 2025 (Hong Kong Time)
- Submit the main wheel application: Be sure to complete it 3–5 days before the deadline to avoid network congestion
- Scholarship materials: Additional submission of HKPFS personal statement, research plan abstract, etc. is required

January–March 2026: Interviews and Waiting for Results

- Interview Preparation: Review RP content, prepare the PPT (10–15 minutes), and conduct mock interviews
- Formal Interview: Conducted from January to February in the form of a video interview or on-site interview
- Waiting for results: HKPFS results are usually announced at the end of March, followed by the issuance of university offers
- Select an offer: If you receive multiple admissions, compare the supervisors, research directions, and scholarship situations

April–August 2026: Visa and Pre-departure Preparation

- Confirm the offer and pay the fee: Confirm acceptance and pay the deposit within 4–6 weeks
- Apply for a student visa: Apply to the Hong Kong Immigration Department, with a processing time of 4–6 weeks
- Accommodation Arrangement: Apply for a school dormitory or rent a house off-campus
- Pre-trip preparations: Apply for a permit to enter Hong Kong and Macao, purchase insurance,

and prepare daily necessities

(Source: Research Grants Council (RGC); Graduate School, HKU; Graduate School, CUHK; HKUST; HKPU; City U)

7.3.7 Macao, China

(1) Overview of the Application Timeline

The University of Macau (UM) and Macau University of Science and Technology (MUST) are the primary choices, with two intakes per year (August and January) (Source: *PhD and Other Doctoral Degree Programmes; University of Macau*). The doctoral program typically lasts 3–4 years, and some majors offer Chinese-language instruction options. Tuition fees are cost-effective, and the scholarship coverage rate is high. Key points in time for 2026 (Source: *University of Macau*):

Enrollment Batch	Application Open	Application Deadline	Scholarship Deadline	Results Announcement
Enroll in August 2026	October 2025	March 13, 2026	January 15, 2026	March - May 2026
Enroll in January 2027	May 2026	July 31, 2026	Not applicable	September - October 2026

(1) Key Information:

University of Macau (UM):

- Application Deadline for Doctoral Scholarship/Teaching and Research Assistantship: January 15, 2026 (Only applicable for admission in the first semester). (Source: *University of Macau*)
- Newly added majors: Smart Grid, Artificial Intelligence and Education, Pharmaceutical Science, etc.
- Application fee: MOP \$500 (approx. USD\$62)

Macau University of Science and Technology (MUST):

- Applications for the 2026/2027 academic year doctoral program are now open (Source: *School of Graduate Studies / MUST*)
- New undergraduate direct doctoral program launched, targeting outstanding undergraduates from the world's top 200 universities
- Provide bilingual Chinese-English teaching options (Source: *PhD Moodle / MUST*)

(2) Application Key Points

- Contacting the supervisor: It is highly recommended to contact the supervisor before applying, and then submit the application after obtaining preliminary approval.
- Language Requirements: IELTS 6.0 or TOEFL 80 (some majors taught in Chinese may be exempted)
- Academic Requirements: A Master's degree, with a recommended GPA of 3.0+/4.0 or

equivalent. (Source: *PhD and Other Doctoral Degree Programmes*)

➤ Scholarship Type:

1) University of Macau PhD Scholarship: MOP\$20,000 per month, up to 4 years. (Source: *UM PhD Scholarship*)

2) Teaching Assistant (TA) Allowance: MOP\$12,500 - 14,000 per month. (Source: *UM PhD Teaching Research Assistant*)

3) Macau University of Science and Technology Full Scholarship: Covers Tuition + Living Allowance. (Source: *Scholarship / MUST*)

(3) Application Timeline Planning

The planning content below is formulated based on the standard application deadlines of universities in the aforementioned regions, combined with our internal service practice experience.

March–July 2025: Preliminary Preparation and Direction Determination

- Determine the research area: Combine it with the development directions of Macau's industries (such as traditional Chinese medicine, gaming and tourism management, microelectronics, etc.)
- Screening target institutions: University of Macau (comprehensive research-oriented) vs. Macau University of Science and Technology (application-oriented)
- Language Exams: Prepare for IELTS/TOEFL, with a target score of 6.5/90+
- Academic Background Enhancement: Participate in research projects, publish papers, and attend academic conferences

August–October 2025: Networking and Material Preparation

- Contacting Advisors: Starting in August, send prospecting emails with a CV and preliminary research interests attached
- Write a research plan: 2000–3000 words, which must align with the supervisor's research direction
- Prepare application materials: undergraduate and graduate transcripts, degree certificates, recommendation letters (2), CV, and PS
- Understand scholarship policies: Read in detail the application requirements for various types of scholarships

October 2025–January 2026: Online application submission and scholarship application

- Online Application System Opening: The University of Macau usually opens in mid-October
- Scholarship application deadline: January 15, 2026 (applicable only to the August intake)
- Complete online application submission: Ensure all materials are complete and pay the application fee
- Follow up on the application status: Regularly log in to the system to check the progress and supplement materials

February–May 2026: Interviews and Admissions

- Interview Notice: Interview invitations will be received from February to March

- Prepare for the interview: review the content of the RP, understand the characteristics of Macau institutions, and prepare self-introductions in both Chinese and English
- Waiting for results: Offers will be issued successively from April to May
- Comparative Selection: Consider scholarship amount, supervisor compatibility, and research direction

June–August 2026: Visa and Enrollment Preparation

- Confirm acceptance of the offer: Pay the tuition deposit
- Apply for a student visa: Apply for a "Special Permission to Stay" from the Macau Public Security Police Force
- Accommodation Arrangement: Apply for on-campus dormitories (limited availability; apply early) or rent off-campus housing
- Pre-trip preparations: Apply for a permit to enter Hong Kong and a Macau visa, and understand the cost of living in Macau

(Source: Graduate School, University of Macau; Graduate School, MUST; Higher Education Support Office, Macao; University of Macau PhD Scholarship Information)

7.3.8 Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools

(1) Overview of the Application Timeline

Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools at the doctoral level, approved by the Ministry of Education, allow students to obtain a foreign doctoral degree (certifiable by the Service Center for Chinese Scholars Abroad) without full long-term overseas residency. The program duration is 3–6 years. Part-time doctoral tracks adopt concentrated modular teaching models, which are suitable for on-the-job personnel to upgrade their academic qualifications while balancing work and study; full-time academic PhD programmes require full on-campus research training. *(Source: Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China)*. The main project enrollment time in 2026: *(Source: How to Apply - XJTLU)*

(1) Teaching Mode:

- Full-time on-campus study (Mainstream PhD): Students study full-time on the Suzhou campus of Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University for 3–4 years, completing taught modules and laboratory research on site.
- Flexible part-time PhD (Limited tracks): Available for in-service practitioners with industrial backgrounds; adopt hybrid online-offline arrangements. Core lab and seminar courses require on-campus attendance, while partial theoretical modules can be completed via online learning platforms.
- Intensive short-term workshops: Intensive academic seminars and summer training camps are held every summer vacation for all doctoral candidates to advance research and academic exchange

(2) Application Key Points

- Project qualification verification: All XJTLU doctoral programmes are fully recorded on the Ministry of Education's supervision platform for Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools. Applicants may log onto the official platform to check the official accreditation and

valid term of the university.

- Degree Certification: Graduates will be awarded a PhD degree issued by the University of Liverpool (UK). The qualification can be verified and authenticated by the Chinese Service Center for Scholarly Exchange, enjoying the same legal validity as degrees obtained through full overseas study.
- Application Requirements: Applicants may hold a master's degree or an outstanding bachelor's degree (direct PhD entry is available). No mandatory 5-year working experience for general academic PhD tracks; industry-focused engineering doctorate programmes prefer candidates with relevant industrial practice experience.
- Tuition fees: Annual tuition fees for doctoral programmes range from RMB 75,000 to RMB 990,000, paid on an annual basis; generous university and research council scholarships are widely available to cover tuition and living stipends.

Popular Project Types:

- Academic PhD (Mainstream): Covers science, engineering, humanities, social science, and business research, targeting graduates aiming for academic or research institute careers.
- Education Doctorate (EdD): Doctor of Education, suitable for university teachers and education administrators

(3) Application Timeline Planning

The planning content below is formulated based on the standard application deadline of the aforementioned university, combined with our internal service practice experience.

October 2025–January 2026: Project Screening and Eligibility Assessment

- Check official accreditation: Confirm XJTLU's legal qualification on the Ministry of Education Sino-foreign cooperative education supervision platform.
- Self-qualification matching: Match academic background, language proficiency, and research experience against programme entry standards.
- Programme comparison: Compare research supervisors, lab resources, and foreign partner university rankings, as well as tuition and scholarship benefits across different disciplines.
- Consult the admissions team: Email or attend online info sessions to confirm the curriculum, research training, and graduation criteria.

February–April 2026: Material Preparation and Pre-review

- Prepare application materials: master's degree certificate, transcript, work certificate, recommendation letters (2–3), and a personal statement.
- Write a research plan: Determine the research direction based on actual work and demonstrate its application value.
- Language Preparation: Some programs require IELTS 6.0/TOEFL 80 or passing the in-school English test.
- Attend the information session: Most programs hold online/offline admission information sessions to learn detailed information

May–June 2026: Formal Application and Assessment

- Submit an online or paper application: Application methods vary for different programs, so

pay attention to the differences in deadlines.

- Take the entrance exam, including a written test (English + professional foundation) and an interview.
- Comprehensive Assessment: The institution evaluates candidates comprehensively based on their academic background, work experience, and interview performance.
- Waiting for admission notice: Results are usually available in 4–6 weeks.

July–August 2026: Admission Confirmation and Enrollment Preparation

- Confirm acceptance of admission: Pay the first installment or the full amount of tuition fees.
- Sign a training agreement: clarify the learning method, graduation requirements, and degree conferral conditions.
- Complete enrollment procedures: submit educational credential verification reports, medical examination reports, etc.
- Preparatory work before starting: Read preparatory materials, form study groups, and prepare research tools.

From September 2026: On-the-job learning and research

- Complete the course study: Earn the required credits as per the training program.
- Conduct doctoral dissertation research: select topics in combination with work practice and regularly report progress.
- Participation in academic activities: international exchanges, academic conferences, and enterprise research.
- Thesis defence & graduation: Submit the doctoral dissertation, pass internal and external peer review, and successfully defend it orally to obtain the University of Liverpool PhD degree.

(Source: Ministry of Education Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools Regulatory Information Platform; How to Apply - XJTLU; XJTLU; Programme Fees - XJTLU)

7.3.9 Comparison Table of Application Times by Region

To facilitate internal institutional planning, a time comparison table for admission applications in 2026 has been specially formulated:

Region	Earliest opening	Main Wheel Cutoff	Liquidation Round Deadline	Scholarship Deadline	Visa Preparation Period
United Kingdom	September 2025	January - March 2026	June - July 2026	January - March 2026	3 months before the start of school
Ireland	September 2025	December 2025/May 2026	Scroll	January 2026/6 months in advance	3 months before the start of school

Australia	Annual	November 2025/May 2026	August–September 2026	4–6 months in advance	3 months before the start of school
New Zealand	Annual	October - December 2025 / March - May 2026	Scroll	March/June/September/November	2–3 months before the start of school
Singapore	November 2025	January 15–31, 2026	March 2026	January 2026	2–3 months before the start of school
Hong Kong	September 1, 2025	December 1, 2025	March 31, 2026	December 1, 2025	3 months before the start of school
Macau	August 2025	January 2, 2026 / March 13, 2026	July 31, 2026	January 15, 2026	2 months before the start of school
Sino-foreign cooperation	October 2025	March–June 2026	Visual Project	Visual Project	No visa required

Special Recommendation:

The recommended contents below are formulated based on the information outlined above, combined with our internal service practices.

- 1) Hong Kong's HKPFS and Singapore's NPGS are the most generous doctoral scholarships in Asia, but their deadlines are extremely early (December 2025), so they need to be prepared first.
- 2) For G5 universities in the United Kingdom and TCD/UCD in Ireland, it is necessary to contact the supervisor in advance, and it is recommended to reserve a 3-6 month period for networking.
- 3) Applications for Australia and New Zealand can be submitted throughout the year, but scholarship reviews have fixed time points that cannot be missed.
- 4) Sino-foreign cooperative programs are suitable for working professionals, but it is necessary to pay attention to the latest list approved by the Ministry of Education to avoid enrolling in unregistered programs.

7.4 Suggestions for Overseas Doctoral Applications

7.4.1 Precise Networking Strategy: The Core Step in Establishing Academic Connections

(1) Preparatory work for networking: Screening of target professors and background research

The core of networking is to establish an academic connection between the applicant and the supervisor, with the prerequisite of accurately screening supervisors and conducting in-depth research to avoid ineffective communication.

Professors without admission rights should be prioritized for exclusion: Affiliated Professor (affiliated professor, without independent admission rights) and Emeritus Professor (emeritus professor, not admitting students) are directly excluded.

Recommendation on the priority of networking: Senior Lecturer (Commonwealth institutions, combining research and teaching, with a strong willingness to recruit) > Assistant Professor (young scholars, with a sufficient recruitment quota, focusing on the applicant's potential) > Professor (academic authority, rich in resources but with a limited quota and fierce competition) > Associate Professor (with a steady recruitment pace).

Core Dimensions of Tutor Screening:

- ① Enrollment quota (confirmed through the official website, laboratory homepage, admission announcement, and feedback from senior students);
- ② Research direction matching (avoid blind networking across fields);
- ③ Research funding (confirmed through fund projects and paper funding annotations to ensure scientific research and scholarships).

Key points for academic research: Read the supervisor's top journal core papers in the past three years (prioritize submitted or to appear results, aligning with the latest directions). Sort out the research context and identify the points of fit between one's own research experience and the supervisor's research topics. Distinguish the focus of different academic ranks: senior professors emphasize academic alignment, while young professors emphasize research potential.

(2) Core Guide to Writing Networking Letters

Core Principles: Emphasize the academic nature, de-emphasize utilitarianism, and take academic discussion as the entry point. The core content must include three points:

- ① Sincere academic admiration (based on research and understanding, not empty or vague)
- ② Research matching elaboration (combined with the supervisor's thesis/project, demonstrating "understanding of the research")
- ③ Future research ideas (1–2 preliminary ideas in relevant directions, demonstrating capabilities)

Key Points to Avoid Pitfalls: Do not directly ask about scholarships (mention it tactfully after the supervisor shows interest); do not pile up GPA and language scores (reflect them in the CV); do not use templates for mass distribution.

Standard Structure:

- ① Concise subject (Format: Inquiry about a PhD Position in [Research Area] – [Your Name])
- ② 3–4 sentences of self-introduction (educational background, core research experience, research direction)
- ③ Match degree elaboration (combined with specific papers)
- ④ Core Advantages (focus on 1–2 research experiences, highlighting skills and achievements)
- ⑤ Clearly state the request (inquire about the enrollment quota for 2026 and request further communication)
- ⑥ Attachments (only attach the academic CV; RP will be provided as needed)

Communication rhythm: If there is no response to the first email within 2–3 weeks, send a concise follow-up email (supplementing new academic entry points); communication gradually shifts toward academic discussion, with differentiated responses to tutors of different professional titles. (Source: FindAPhD)

(3) New Trends and Precautions for Networking in 2026

- ① **Caution in sensitive areas:** For sensitive STEM fields (such as aerospace, AI, etc.), avoid sensitive keywords, clarify the academic and civilian value of research, and cooperate with background checks
- ② **Mainstream of online communication:** You can proactively propose a 15-20 minute online meeting and prepare key points for communication in advance
- ③ **Strictly adhere to taboos:** Do not mass-send templates, do not exaggerate scientific research capabilities, and do not mention immigration intentions

7.4.2 Writing the Research Proposal (RP): The Core Key to a Successful Application

(1) Core Principles for RP Writing and Preparatory Work

Core Positioning: Demonstrate scientific research capabilities and potential for critical thinking, and prove the ability to independently conduct doctoral research.

Preparatory Work:

- ① Follow the requirements of the institution (the length is mainly 2,000–3,000 words, and can be streamlined for science and engineering disciplines)
- ② Communicate with the mentor during the preliminary contact and adjust the framework to meet their needs
- ③ Submission in stages: Submit a complete RP after in-depth communication, and submit the RP framework during the initial preliminary contact

(2) RP Standard Structure and Content Writing Guide

7 General Modules:

- ① Title and Abstract (the title should be concise, and the abstract should be 200–300 words, including background, problem, method, achievement, and significance);
- ② Research Background and Literature Review (elaborate on the current situation and gaps, analyze and evaluate the literature, without simply listing);
- ③ Research questions and objectives (focus on 1–2 core issues, set achievable stage and final goals);
- ④ Research methods and technical routes (for science and engineering, elaborate on experimental design and tools; for humanities and social sciences, highlight theories and ideas, and mark time nodes on the technical route);
- ⑤ Significance of the research and expected outcomes (academic and applied value, outcomes quantifiable);
- ⑥ Ethical considerations (if the experiment involves sensitive data, compliance measures must be specified; if not, briefly mention it);
- ⑦ References (30–50 articles, high impact within the last 5 years, with compliant formatting).
(Source: CSC)

Professional differences: Science and engineering emphasise experimental feasibility and innovation, while humanities and social sciences emphasise the depth of literature and logic;

Avoiding Pitfalls: Do not choose overly broad topics, do not obscure research methods, and do not overlook institutional differences.

(3) New Trends in RP in 2026

- ① Bonus points for an interdisciplinary perspective (highlighting interdisciplinary innovation and experience);
- ② Align with policy hotspots (enhance competitiveness by integrating with the scientific research policies of the target country/institution);
- ③ Regularization of digital tools (mention the application of AI, big data, etc., in research and demonstrate relevant skills). (Source: From Proposal to Viva: A Modern PhD Journey in 2026)

7.4.3 Application Document Optimization: Comprehensive Display of Personal Competitiveness

(1) Core Document Types and Key Writing Points

Core Documents: CV, PS, and recommendation letters, focusing on academic orientation and complementarily showcasing competitiveness.

CV: Highlight research experience and downplay irrelevant content.

Modules: Educational background (in reverse chronological order, indicating GPA and core courses), research experience (STAR, highlighting personal contributions), published papers (indicating status and author order), research skills (aligned with the research direction), and awards (prioritizing academic ones).

PS: Tell academic stories, not repeat CVs.

Content: Origin of academic interest, core scientific research growth (encountering difficulties, solving them, and reaping rewards), fit with the institution/mentor, doctoral research and career planning (demonstrating stability), with sincere and personalized language.

Recommendation Letter: Prioritize research supervisors (most persuasive), followed by relevant teaching instructors. Provide comprehensive supporting materials to guide recommenders to highlight research-related qualities and avoid empty praise.

(2) Document the Adaptability Adjustment Strategy

University Adaptation: Research universities emphasize research potential, while applied universities emphasize practical abilities; the Commonwealth values concise logic, and the US values individual stories.

Professional Adaptation: Science and engineering disciplines emphasize quantitative achievements and skills, while humanities and social sciences focus on critical thinking and writing.

Scholarship Adaptation: Highlight academic potential and research value, align with selection criteria, and tactfully explain financial needs.

(3) Document Polishing and Review Process

Multi-round review:

- ① Self-review (logic, authenticity, and grammar)
- ② External review (academic suggestions provided by research mentors, senior students, and optimization of language as needed)
- ③ Final proofreading (format, word count, and completeness of attachments) (*Source: FindAPhD*)

7.4.4 Interview Preparation and Response: The Final Core Level

(1) Interview Types and Key Assessment Focus

Common Types:

- ① Single-sided (1V1, tutor-led, assessing research capabilities and suitability)
- ② Group interview (1VN, with faculty professors, assessing comprehensive abilities)
- ③ Wheel battle (multiple rounds of 1V1, high intensity, assessing adaptability and professionalism)

Core evaluation criteria: academic ability, research potential, communication skills, teamwork, motivation for studying abroad (sincerity and stability).

(2) Interview Full Process Preparation Guide

Pre-research: Thoroughly understand the supervisor's latest achievements and the characteristics of the department, and sort out the core of the RP and potential issues.

Preparation for High-Frequency Questions: Academic (RP core, innovation points, etc.), Motivation (reasons for school/tutor selection, etc.), Behavioral (research challenges, teamwork, etc.), sort out ideas in advance.

Mock Interview: Familiarise yourself with the process, optimise expression, and adapt to interview language.

Material Preparation: For in-person interviews, bring hard copies of the RP, CV, etc.; for online interviews, debug equipment, prepare electronic versions, and dress appropriately.

(3) Interview On-site Skills and Follow-up

On-site Skills: Stay calm and sincere, answer concisely and systematically, don't make up answers when you don't know, and ask 1-2 high-quality questions at the end of the interview (avoid being overly utilitarian).

Follow-up: Send a thank-you note (personalized, mentioning communication details) within 24 hours, without over-following up.

(4) New Trends in Interviews in 2026

- ① Online interviews have become normalized (emphasizing details)
- ② Deepening the assessment of scientific research potential (in-depth inquiry into research details and solutions)
- ③ The assessment of cross-cultural adaptation ability is prominent (prepare relevant response strategies) (*Source: FindAPhD*)

7.4.5 Visa Application Guide: Core Principles of Compliance and Authenticity

(1) Core visa requirements of mainstream study-abroad countries/regions

Australia: Core Preparation GS Statement (proving genuine intention to study, no immigration tendency, available in full and reduced versions), focusing on domestic ties, course differences, and post-return career planning.

United Kingdom: Sensitive majors need to complete ATAS certification (4-6-week cycle, accurately fill in course modules, and clearly define the civilian value of research), and apply in advance.

Hong Kong, China/Singapore: Materials are simplified, with the core being admission letters, proof of funds, and educational qualification certifications. Some institutions will provide visa agency services in 2026.

(2) General Notes for Visa Application

Core Principles: Authenticity, completeness, and consistency; no falsification of materials.

Proof of funds: Covers tuition fees and living expenses, with a clear source.

Educational Certificate: Notarized/certified as required, with consistent information.

Interview: Answer truthfully, highlight your intention to study abroad, and avoid discussing any inclination toward immigration.

Plan your time in advance, stay informed about policy changes, and avoid the risk of visa rejection.

(*Source: Immigration and citizenship Website; UK ATAS; Immigration Department, HKSAR Government; Immigration & Checkpoints Authority, Singapore*)

7.4.6 Scholarship Application Guide: The Core Path to Reducing Study Abroad Costs

(1) Scholarship Classification and Application Priority

Scholarship Classification:

- ① Government scholarships (high in amount, highly competitive, such as CSC, ORS); (*Source: 2026 CSC; FindAPhD*)
- ② College/Professional Scholarships (highly targeted, synchronized with the application);
- ③ Mentor Program Scholarship (low difficulty, stable funding, requires mentor approval).

2026 Priorities: Mentor Program Scholarship > Institutional Scholarship > Government Scholarship (Mentor-led scholarships are easier to obtain, and government scholarships can serve as a supplement).

(2) Application Guide for Scholarships in Mainstream Countries/Regions

United Kingdom: Focus on applying for scholarships from key institutions (such as EPSRC, Chancellor's Scholarship), highlight academic achievements and research results, and apply to institutions simultaneously. (*Source: FindAPhD*)

Australia: Rely on networking, strive for supervisor recommendations, highlight the feasibility of the research proposal, and meet the academic requirements. (*Source: FindAPhD-A; FindAPhD-B*)

Hong Kong, China: HKPFS has strong competitiveness (valuing university background, high GPA, and papers) and requires a tutor's recommendation. (*Source: Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme / Research Grants Council*)

Singapore: The SINGA Scholarship focuses on STEM fields, highlighting research skills and alignment. (*Source: BII - Graduate Research*)

CSC: First obtain a tuition-free offer, emphasize the intention to return to China, and pay attention to the cooperation quota of institutions. (*Source: 2026 CSC*)

(3) General Tips for Scholarship Applications

Prepare 6–12 months in advance and pay attention to the deadline;

Optimise the evaluation criteria for material fit;

Communicate with supervisors to seek recommendations;

Apply through multiple channels to increase the success rate.

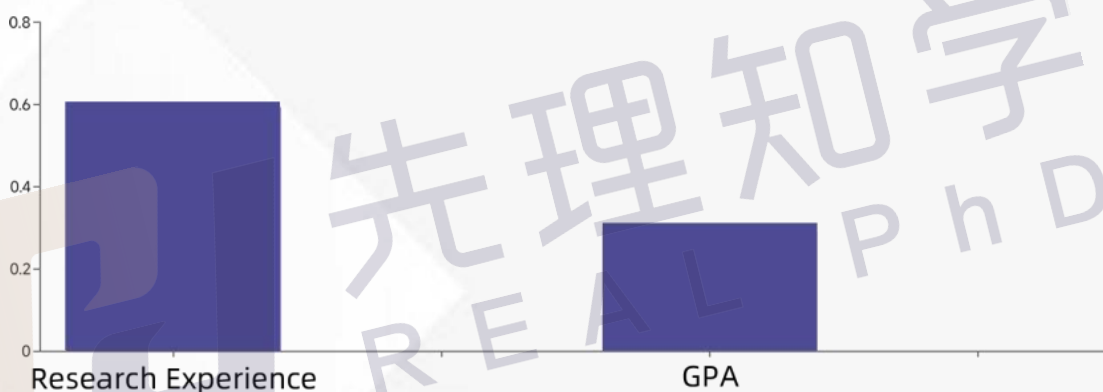
7.5 Common Misconceptions in Overseas Doctoral Applications

Studying abroad at the doctoral level is essentially the "establishment of transnational scientific research collaboration relationships," and its core logic is fundamentally different from that of "knowledge-receiving study abroad" at the undergraduate and master's levels. However, limited by information asymmetry and cognitive biases regarding the nature of doctoral training, a large number of applicants fall into common pitfalls during the process of applying for a doctoral program overseas, which not only reduces the success rate of applications but may also pose potential risks to subsequent scientific research and academic growth. The following analyzes the six core pitfalls of applying for a doctoral program overseas and dissects the underlying cognitive roots and avoidance paths.

7.5.1 Misconception 1: Equating doctoral applications with master's applications and overemphasizing GPA and language scores

In undergraduate and graduate study abroad applications, GPA (Grade Point Average) and language test scores (such as TOEFL and IELTS) are the core screening criteria. This consistent perception leads most applicants to still regard these two factors as the "key to success" in doctoral applications, and they even invest a great deal of effort in improving their scores, while neglecting the core orientation of doctoral training: research potential and collaborative suitability. From the perspective of admission logic, the "supervisor-student" relationship at the doctoral stage is essentially a research partnership, rather than a simple "teaching-learning" relationship. The core requirement for supervisors to select doctoral students is to find collaborators who "can handle specific research projects and possess original research capabilities," rather than "high-achieving learners." Findings from admissions research published by the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) show that research experience and alignment of research interests carry heavier evaluative weight in PhD candidate assessments, while Grade Point Average receives less priority during holistic review. (Source: *Achievable*, 2026)

PhD Admission Evaluation Trends



In terms of PhD candidate screening, research universities in the United States prioritize research fit and research experience in their admission criteria. Most institutions set a minimum entry requirement of 3.0 on a 4.0 grading scale, and higher scores deliver limited marginal benefits to admission outcomes. GPA is generally treated as a threshold indicator. (Source: *GPA for PhD Admissions: Requirements by Field | DiscoverPhDs*) Recent surveys indicate that admissions committees must constantly balance multiple factors during decision-making, including applicant caliber, funding availability, research alignment, and cohort composition. Among these factors, research fit acts as a structural variable equally vital to academic competence. (Source: *CRA-E CISE Report on the PhD Admissions Process, Computing Research Association Education Committee*)

The core of avoiding this misunderstanding lies in shifting the focus of the application from "academic improvement" to "demonstration of research potential." Specifically, applicants need to focus on research experiences related to the target research direction (such as master's thesis topics, participation in horizontal or vertical projects), and clearly present their academic thinking, problem awareness, and research methods through a research proposal. Meanwhile, the primary goal of language proficiency is to meet the minimum requirements of the target institution, and the remaining energy can be devoted to improving academic English applications (such as paper

writing and academic conference communication), which has far greater practical value for subsequent scientific research collaboration than simply increasing scores. (Source: FindAPhD-A; FindAPhD-B)

7.5.2 Misunderstanding 2: Fuzzy selection of research directions, lacking consideration of academic compatibility with the supervisor

Some applicants adopt a "scattergun approach" mindset during the application process, with their descriptions of research directions being too general (e.g., "I am interested in the field of artificial intelligence"), or blindly chasing popular fields without precisely matching the research directions of their target supervisors. This approach overlooks the core premise of doctoral training—academic fit, which refers to the alignment between the applicant's research interests and methods and the supervisor's research area and current projects—and this is precisely the key factor determining the success or failure of the application and the research efficiency during the doctoral stage. (Source: FindAPhD)

In terms of doctoral training, academic circles generally recognize that the alignment between students' and supervisors' research interests stands as one of the critical factors affecting PhD completion duration and research output. A systematic review covering multiple disciplines demonstrates that the quality of supervisor guidance, including the degree of match between supervisors and students in research interests and topics, is strongly correlated with doctoral candidates' research performance and retention rates. (Source: Sverdlik et al., 2018)

At the admissions screening stage, supervisors tend to prioritize applicants whose research proposals are relevant to their ongoing projects to guarantee smooth continuity and effective utilization of laboratory research resources. (Source: German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) also explicitly advises applicants in its PhD application guidelines to draft research proposals centered on target supervisors' core research foci and clearly highlight intersections between the two, which is regarded as a core strategy to boost admission chances. (Source: DAAD)

Taking Canada's STEM PhD admission system as an example, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) serves as one of the primary funders for university STEM research. Its Discovery Grant program provides long-term operational funding for basic laboratory research, and supervisors' project grants constitute a major source of research assistant stipends for PhD students. Under this framework, PhD admission decisions at Canadian research universities are jointly constrained by supervisors' funding status and research trajectories. Since a supervisor's intake capacity is directly determined by their available research funding, applicants whose research topics fail to connect with the supervisor's existing projects may be rejected due to insufficient financial support. Even applicants with outstanding overall academic records face substantial admission hurdles if their research directions misalign with the supervisor's ongoing projects. (Source: NSERC)

The key to avoiding this misunderstanding lies in "precise matching" rather than "extensive application." Applicants need to systematically sort out the research fields, core papers published in the past 5 years, ongoing research projects, and funding sources of potential supervisors through platforms such as the official website of the target institution, ResearchGate, Google Scholar, etc., to ensure that there is a clear intersection between their own research interests and the supervisor's research direction. When writing the research proposal, they need to raise specific questions based on the supervisor's research achievements rather than making general statements. In addition, contacting the supervisor by email in advance to confirm their willingness to recruit students and

the fit with the project can help improve the chances of application success. (Source: FindAPhD-A; FindAPhD-B; FindAPhD-C)

7.5.3 Misunderstanding 3: Ignoring the particularity of the funding mechanism during the doctoral stage and passively waiting for scholarship disbursement

Different from the funding model dominated by "institutional scholarships + self-funding" during the undergraduate and master's stages, the funding mechanism at the doctoral stage has a strong "research binding attribute," with most funds directly linked to the supervisor's research projects and foundation grants. However, some applicants lack awareness of this mechanism, relying solely on "general scholarships" (such as the China Scholarship Council and scholarships uniformly distributed by institutions), passively waiting for application results, and neglecting to actively pursue special funding tied to research projects. This leads to a low success rate in funding applications or affects the stability of the doctoral stage due to insufficient funds. (Source: FindAPhD; CSC)

Within the global funding framework for doctoral studies, supervisors' research projects represent one of the primary sources of financial support for PhD candidates. Taking Canada as an illustration, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) allocates long-term funding for fundamental research within STEM laboratories. Its Discovery Grant program sustains high-quality research in natural sciences and engineering over a standard five-year term, delivering sustained operational funding. Such grants form a central source of research assistant stipends for doctoral students. At the institutional level, numerous scholarships are tied to specific research topics or supervisors' ongoing projects, while a small number of universities offer unrestricted entry scholarships with no research track limitations. Overall, Canada's doctoral funding system bears a distinct supervisor-driven characteristic: a supervisor's available research funding frequently acts as a decisive factor shaping admission outcomes and financial support packages. Bound by fixed research scopes and budget limits attached to research grants, supervisors are unlikely to offer research assistant funding to applicants whose proposed research topics lack coherence with their active projects. This creates risks of incomplete financial aid packages for mismatched candidates. (Source: NSERC)

The United States National Science Foundation (NSF) has long tracked data on PhD graduates' funding sources through its Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED). Statistics reveal stark disparities in funding channels across disciplines: STEM doctoral students rely heavily on research assistant stipends disbursed from their supervisors' active projects, whereas far fewer humanities and social science PhD candidates secure funding through supervisors' research grants. Doctoral funding application protocols vary drastically across nations. Passively waiting for general scholarship application windows will easily lead to missed admission and funding opportunities. Australia's government-funded Research Training Program (RTP) scholarships are allocated autonomously by individual universities, and nearly all institutions mandate applicants to secure a matching supervisor in advance during practical screening. Without prior alignment of research topics with potential supervisors, applicants meeting the basic scholarship eligibility criteria still face a high risk of rejection. (Sources: NSF, Research Training Program; Research Training Program – Australian Government Department of Education)

The core of avoiding this misunderstanding lies in "actively adapting to funding channels": First, when screening supervisors, it is necessary to focus on their funding status, which can be inquired through channels such as the "public announcement of scientific research projects" on the official website of the institution and the acknowledgment section of the supervisor's published papers.

Second, proactively ask supervisors about the possibility of funding support and clarify whether there are scholarship quotas tied to the project. Third, prepare funding application materials in a targeted manner, highlighting the value of one's own research to the project's advancement rather than simply emphasizing personal achievements.

7.5.4 Misconception 4: Expectation Deviation Regarding Academic Output: Confusing the Relationship between Doctoral Dissertations and Journal Publications

Applicants' perception of academic output during the doctoral stage often falls into two extremes: one is the "sole focus on papers," believing that doctoral graduation requires publishing multiple papers in core journals, which leads to excessive pursuit of short-term publication achievements during the application stage and neglect of research depth. The other is "neglect of publication," believing that simply completing the doctoral dissertation suffices without the need to pay attention to journal publications, resulting in limited subsequent career development (especially in the academic path). The essence of these two biases lies in the misunderstanding of the core objective of academic output during the doctoral stage (the core of doctoral training is the "formation of original research ability"), the doctoral dissertation is the concentrated manifestation of this ability, while journal publication is a means of disseminating and validating research results, and the two are not simply in a "causal relationship" or "substitute relationship." From the perspective of global doctoral training standards, the originality of the doctoral dissertation is the core evaluation indicator, and journal publication is not a unified requirement. A 2023 global survey conducted by ASAPbio covering researchers across multiple countries found that only a minority of participating institutions formally mandated doctoral candidates to publish journal manuscripts prior to graduation, while most institutions took "passing the doctoral thesis defense and making original academic contributions" as the core graduation criteria. However, many participating institutions allow doctoral candidates to expand and publish core chapters of their completed dissertations after the thesis defense as a viable alternative graduation pathway. (Source: ASAPbio, 2023)

It is worth noting that the focus of academic output varies across different stages: during the application stage, doctoral supervisors pay more attention to the applicant's "research potential" (such as whether the research conducted during the master's stage has original ideas, data collection, and analysis capabilities), rather than the number of published papers. At the doctoral stage, the core of academic output lies in the depth and originality of the doctoral thesis, while journal publications serve as a further validation of the thesis results, with quality far outweighing quantity. As outlined in PaperEdit's 2026 guidance on PhD publication expectations, a single rigorous, high-quality research output delivers greater competitive advantage for long-term academic careers than a portfolio consisting of numerous superficial low-impact manuscripts. (Source: PaperEdit, 2026)

To avoid this misunderstanding, it is necessary to clarify the "phased academic output goals": during the application phase, there is no need to blindly pursue publication; the focus should be on presenting the integrity and original thinking of the master's research; during the doctoral phase, with in-depth research of the doctoral dissertation as the core, under the guidance of the supervisor, the most innovative parts of the dissertation should be organized into journal articles for submission, emphasizing the academic influence of the journals rather than the quantity of publications, while also taking into account the dissemination rhythm of research results.

7.5.5 Misconception 5: Single-minded career planning, focusing solely on the academic faculty path

Influenced by the traditional perception that "pursuing a doctorate means becoming a teacher," most applicants in the doctoral application stage solely focus their career goals on "full-time faculty positions in universities," overlooking the "diverse career adaptability" fostered during the doctoral stage. This singular career planning not only leads to increased subsequent employment pressure but may also result in neglecting the cultivation of skills required in non-academic fields due to the "academic path orientation" during the doctoral stage, thus limiting career development opportunities. According to the 2023 OECD policy paper tracking global doctoral employment trajectories, only a minority of PhD holders secure full-time academic faculty roles within universities, with corporate R&D divisions, national research laboratories, and government science governance bodies acting as major employers of doctoral talent; diversified career trajectories have become mainstream choices for PhD graduates across OECD member economies. *(Source: OECD, 2023)*

Distinct disciplinary divides exist in non-academic career options for PhDs. A far larger share of engineering and computer science PhDs move into industrial R&D roles, while substantial numbers of humanities and social science doctorates take up non-faculty positions in public research institutions and policy administration. Even for applicants aiming for long-term academic careers, university faculty posts are not the sole viable target. Industrial and policy research experience can build differentiated competitive edges. The report "Empowering STEMM Career Pathways" released by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) notes that career pathways for scientific professionals have grown increasingly diverse. The report advocates creating new flexible entry points for STEMM careers and redefining traditional benchmarks of success, recognizing that all career trajectories contribute equally to scientific advancement. Against this backdrop, job seekers with cross-sector research experience gain an edge in academic recruitment. Such experience also better equips them to conduct interdisciplinary research projects and apply for diversified research grants. *(Source: AAAS)*

The core of avoiding this misunderstanding lies in "establishing a diverse career perception and planning for capacity building in advance": First, understand the employment distribution of the discipline through authoritative employment data (such as the OECD report and annual employment reports of doctoral students from target institutions), and break the ingrained perception that "a doctoral degree necessarily leads to a teaching career." Second, combine personal interests and abilities to identify potential career paths (academic path, industrial R&D, scientific research management, policy consulting, etc.), and cultivate relevant capabilities accordingly. For example, applicants planning to enter the industry can participate in enterprise cooperation projects during their doctoral studies to enhance their technology transfer capabilities. Applicants planning to engage in scientific research management may proactively participate in tasks such as project funding applications and academic conference organization within research groups. Third, during the doctoral stage, maintain an open mind, broaden career horizons through channels such as internships, academic exchanges, and industry seminars, and avoid missing opportunities due to a single plan.

7.5.6 Misconception 6: Underestimating the importance of cross-cultural academic collaboration capabilities and only focusing on the instrumental nature of language

Most applicants equate "language proficiency" with "intercultural academic communication

skills," believing that as long as their TOEFL or IELTS scores meet the requirements, they can smoothly carry out scientific research collaboration during the overseas doctoral program. However, in reality, intercultural collaboration at the doctoral level not only requires "language communication ability" but also demands "understanding cultural differences in academic norms, mastering the communication logic of scientific research collaboration, and adapting to different academic evaluation systems." The lack of these skills is an important reason for the difficulties in adaptation and slow progress in scientific research among overseas doctoral students. International doctoral students tend to encounter cross-cultural communication challenges in research at the early stage of enrollment. One core root lies in divergent academic norms across nations, covering gaps in perceptions regarding authorship conventions, supervisor communication etiquette, and research ethics standards. Such cultural adaptation barriers may slow research progress, and some students may fall into academic struggles due to failure to integrate into their research group's academic culture.

PhD training models vary considerably across the globe, and prior familiarity with these differences facilitates smoother adaptation for applicants. The U.S. training system generally empowers doctoral candidates to independently formulate research proposals and cultivate independent research capabilities, with supervisors adopting an advisory and mentoring approach. Germany's doctoral education has gradually shifted away from the traditional one-on-one mentorship model toward structured training in recent years. Structured programs deliver systematic research guidance to PhD students within tightly integrated research teams. Japan's research ecosystem places heavy emphasis on collective group projects and long-term research initiatives. Proficiency in language alone, without an understanding of cross-border research collaboration cultures, tends to undermine teamwork efficiency. (*Sources: Science Careers, China Education Daily, Science Tokyo*)

The key to avoiding this misunderstanding lies in "transcending the instrumental nature of language and cultivating cross-cultural academic collaboration capabilities": First, during the application stage, proactively understand the academic norms and collaborative culture of the target country, which can be achieved through channels such as reading the "Graduate Academic Handbook" of the target institution, communicating with current doctoral students (especially Chinese seniors), and participating in online academic lectures at the target institution. Second, improve the application ability of academic English, with a focus on training skills such as academic writing (e.g., paper structure, logical expression) and academic presentation (e.g., conference reports, project presentations), and academic debate (e.g., expressing opinions in group discussions). Third, during the doctoral stage, maintain an open and inclusive mindset, proactively communicate and address confusion in collaboration with supervisors and classmates, actively adapt to different academic thinking styles, and, at the same time, adhere to one's own academic stance and original thinking, so as to achieve mutual benefit and win-win results in cross-cultural collaboration.

7.6 Case Analysis of Applying for a Doctorate: Counterattack and Cross-Border

The value of theoretical frameworks and general strategies lies in guiding the direction, while in-depth analysis of real cases can reveal the specific application of principles in complex realities and the key factors for success and failure. After all, success in doctoral applications is by no

means the output of a single template, but rather the creative alignment of personal characteristics and project requirements under the guidance of strategies. To demonstrate the diverse possibilities of this alignment, this section focuses on two typical scenarios, "turnaround breakthrough" and "cross-border transformation," and conducts in-depth dissections of successful cases.

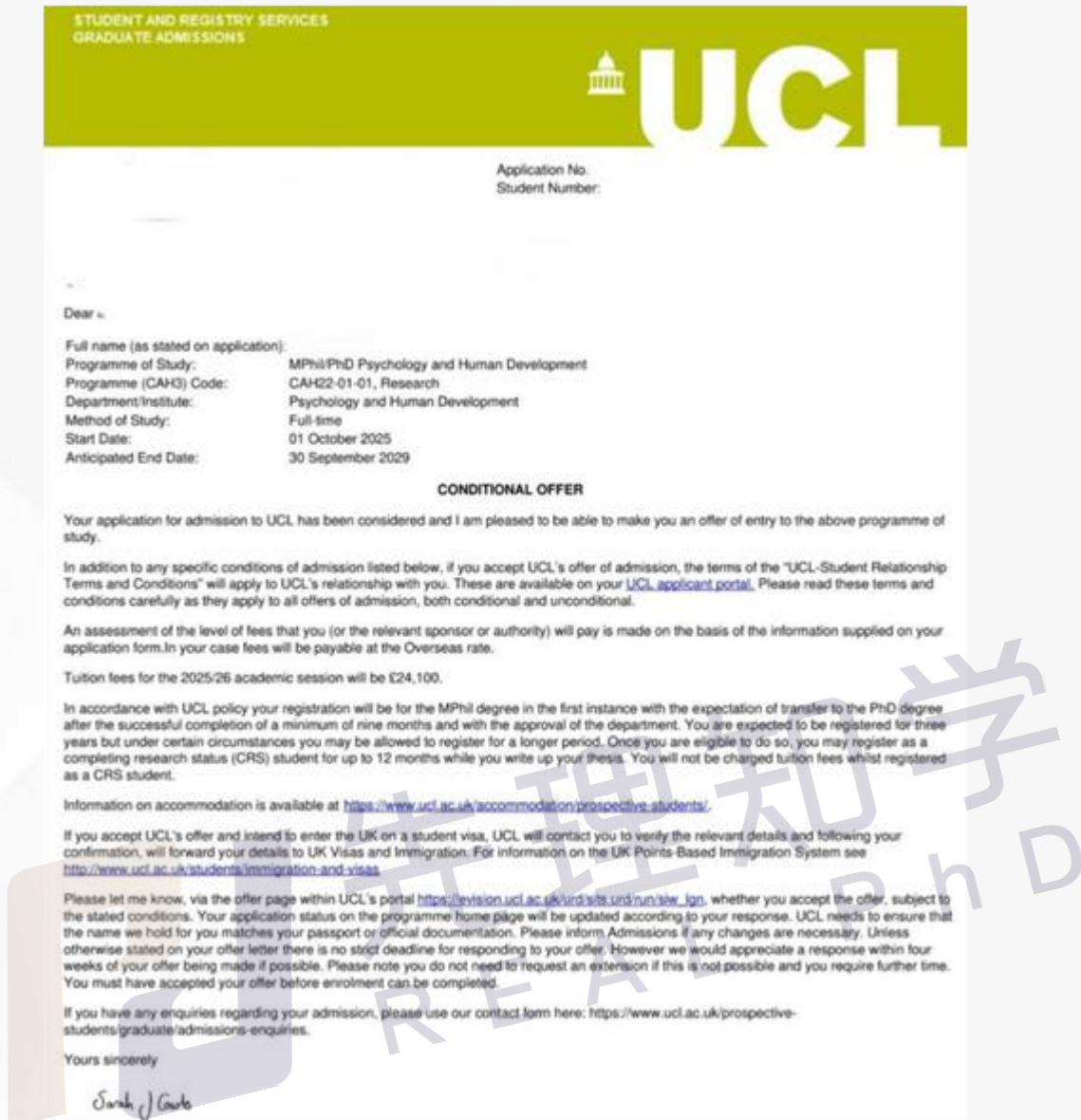
Case: From a non-211 university clinical background to an interdisciplinary PhD at UCL, breaking through with "focus" and making a comeback with "matching"

(1) Applicant Profile

- **Background:** Bachelor's degree in Clinical Medicine from an ordinary domestic undergraduate institution, with academic ranking among the top of the major; Master's degree in Internal Medicine from an ordinary domestic undergraduate institution, with generally good academic performance.
- **Standardized Scores:** An excellent overall IELTS score, with balanced scores across all components and solid language proficiency.
- **Research/Internship/Paper Experience:** Accumulated rich academic achievements during bachelor's and master's studies, with multiple papers published in domestic and international journals. The applicant also has clinical internship experience at a Grade-A tertiary hospital, has participated in provincial-level research projects, and demonstrates solid academic research ability, strong academic writing skills, and substantial clinical practice experience.

(2) Application Result

- **Finally admitted to the Doctoral Program in Psychology and Human Development at University College London (UCL, a G5 institution in the United Kingdom).**
- **Core Highlights:** Transitioned from clinical medicine (internal medicine) to psychology and human development, achieving interdisciplinary transformation. Based on multiple journal papers and extensive clinical internship experience, with rich and clear research capabilities and solid practical skills, I defeated numerous competitors with better backgrounds but less prominent research achievements, and secured admission to a G5 university.
- **Offer Display:**



Psychology and Human Development MPhil/PhD, University College London, United Kingdom

25Fall Autumn Admission Showcase (Master's/Doctoral Program in Psychology and Human Development)

(3) Application Timeline and Key Planning Milestones

- **January–March 2024: Define research interests, fill cognitive gaps, and initiate language test preparation**

Sort out one's own background, combine clinical internship and work experience, and identify the interdisciplinary direction of "medicine + psychology." Focus on screening research priorities in the fields of psychology and medicine, as well as the research directions of supervisors, and clarify the core requirements and application time (language, RP, supervisor outreach, etc.) for applications. Develop a detailed IELTS preparation plan, investing 3–4 hours per day, focusing on writing and speaking, while reading relevant psychological literature to accumulate academic vocabulary and research ideas.

April–May 2024: Prepare for networking and confirm application materials, and advance the progress of the research plan

After confirming the relevant information of the target supervisor, start the supervisor outreach process by writing your curriculum vitae (CV) and supervisor outreach letter, and simultaneously prepare materials such as undergraduate and graduate transcripts and papers. During your work in the hospital, focus on the psychological state of chronic disease patients, consciously collect cases and primary data, and record your own observations and thoughts to provide creative input for the writing and advancement of your research proposal (RP).

- **June–August 2024: Conduct targeted networking, establish contact with the supervisor, continuously refine the research plan, and achieve the language proficiency goal**

Even during the summer vacation, I did not stop. I continued to stay in touch with the supervisors I had previously contacted, wrote personalized prospecting letters based on their research directions, highlighting the alignment between my clinical background and the supervisors' research interests. During this period, I received the supervisors' guidance and positive responses on my RP, continuously improving and revising it. I achieved a 7.0 (with a minimum of 6.5 in each sub-score) on my first attempt at the IELTS, targeted and strengthened my weaknesses in writing and speaking, and reached the target of 7.5 (with a minimum of 7.0 in each sub-score) on my second attempt.

- **September–October 2024: Interview invitations, refining RP, and perfecting application materials**

Received interview invitations from other institutions one after another, and prepared thoroughly by deeply integrating the research directions of supervisors and personal backgrounds. After successfully obtaining the oral offer from the supervisor, screened the supervisors and institutions that one is most interested in and wishes to enroll in, and repeatedly revised, optimized, and polished the materials in accordance with their RP requirements. Sorted out the academic and non-academic materials during undergraduate and master's studies, and finalized the written materials to pave the way for subsequent online application matters.

- **November–December 2024: Submit applications and fully prepare for school interviews**

Pay attention to the application time for the program and the scholarship deadline on the official website of the target institution. When the application opens, formally submit the online application for the doctoral program and simultaneously follow up with potential supervisors. Pay attention to and promptly respond to the institution's requests for supplementary materials. In light of the characteristics of UCL's doctoral interviews, organize the core interview questions (such as details of the research proposal, understanding of the literature, emergency handling, etc.), conduct mock drills with foreign teachers, and prepare response strategies based on your own clinical and research experiences.

- **January–June 2025: Participate in school interviews, wait for application results, and apply for a visa**

Familiarize yourself with the core of the research plan, identify and address gaps based on mock interview feedback, formally participate in the interview, and calmly respond to questions from the supervisor and committee. Patiently wait for the application result after the interview; successfully obtain the admission notice from UCL, confirm the offer, and then wait for the university to issue the CAS for admission eligibility; prepare for the subsequent visa application.

- **July–October 2025: Obtain a visa, prepare for departure, and successfully enroll in school**

As time and progress advance, successfully obtain the CAS and secure the visa. Pre-departure

arrangements, including accommodation, air tickets, luggage, understanding the school registration process, orientation activities, and student account activation. Complete tuition fee payment and insurance purchase; report in person, collect the student card, and complete course selection and laboratory/mentor matching.

(4) Core Competence Mining and Analysis: How to Transform "Ordinary" into "Outstanding"

➤ Visualization of "Research Potential":

The applicant can calmly accept the reality of their non-elite university background, not blindly pursue "high-end" scientific research achievements, but instead focus on their most core "clinical + psychological" interdisciplinary advantage. In the application materials, the applicant not only described their experiences but also detailed how they identified research gaps in the literature, designed data crawling plans, addressed data challenges, and the econometric models used and their principles. This demonstrated to the supervisor or committee that the applicant has the potential to independently execute a complete research process.

➤ Creation of the ultimate "matching degree":

Instead of blindly following the trend to apply for the popular Doctor of Clinical Medicine program, the applicant combined their own focus on "patient psychology" during clinical internships and targeted the interdisciplinary program of Psychology and Human Development at UCL. After in-depth research on the research achievements of target supervisors, it was found that many supervisors have research experience related to "psychological intervention for chronic disease patients." Therefore, in the prospecting letter and research proposal, I emphasized my own accumulation in psychological research on chronic disease patients, and even proposed specific cooperation ideas (such as supplementing the supervisor's research samples with my own clinical data), so as to make the supervisor feel that "this student can quickly integrate into my research group and contribute to my research".

➤ The "academic persona" is clear and consistent:

From the early stages of planning, the applicant established the academic persona of a "clinical background psychology researcher," which was consistently emphasized throughout every stage of the application process. Language preparation focused on academic expressions in the social sciences, and research achievements revolved around "clinical + psychology." Networking and research proposals highlighted cross-disciplinary advantages; during the interview, the applicant emphasized their unique understanding of the "relationship between disease and human psychological development," avoiding the confused positioning of "pursuing clinical studies while also crossing into psychology." This allowed the supervisor to clearly see the applicant's long-term research interests and clear academic plan, thereby enhancing trust.

(5) Decryption of Document Strategies (Cover Letter and Research Proposal)

➤ Networking Letter: Focus on "Fit" and "Potential" Instead of Listing Resumes

Focus on Research Interests: At the beginning, directly state "one's own clinical background + research interest in the psychological development of chronic disease patients," then combine the supervisor's specific research achievements (cite 1-2 relevant papers by the supervisor) to explain why one is interested in the supervisor's research direction and what one's clinical and research experience can contribute to the supervisor's research (such as first-hand clinical data, clinical intervention experience), avoiding "general talk."

Future Goals and Conclusion: Clearly articulate one's doctoral research goals, explain the support that this UCL project can provide, and express one's willingness to learn and sincerity in cooperation. The conclusion should be concise and sincere, neither over-compliant nor hiding one's own shortcomings, openly stating that "although with an ordinary background, one has strong execution ability and enthusiasm for research."

Supplementary Tips: Tailor different versions of the prospecting letter for different target supervisors, adjusting the focus of each version according to the supervisor's specific research direction, to avoid "mass-sending the same prospecting letter" and increase the response rate (ultimately, 4 supervisors provided positive responses, and 2 supervisors offered suggestions for RP modification).

➤ **Research Proposal (RP): Not a "castle in the air," but "grounded and implementable"**

RP is the "core essence" of doctoral applications, especially for interdisciplinary applicants with ordinary backgrounds, where the quality of RP directly determines the admission outcome. Therefore, the core advantages of RP are "rooted in clinical practice, aligned with the supervisor's direction, and rigorous in methodology."

Highlight innovative points, distinguish from pure psychological research (lacking a clinical perspective) and pure clinical research (lacking a systematic analysis of psychological development), highlight interdisciplinary advantages, and, at the same time, combine with the supervisor's existing research to propose supplementary research ideas, enabling the supervisor to see the feasibility and innovation of the research.

(6) School Selection Strategy, Interview Preparation, and Performance

- School Selection Strategy: Avoid being greedy or blind; make rational school selections, reject "shotgun applications," and mostly focus on interdisciplinary programs, such as Psychology and Human Development at University College London (UCL) (core target, precisely matching one's own background and research direction). Doctor of Health Psychology at the University of Edinburgh (aligned with the "Medicine + Psychology" direction, with a slightly lower threshold than the G5). Doctor of Clinical and Health Psychology at the University of Manchester (accepting candidates from non-top-tier universities, with relatively relaxed research requirements). Finally, with precise matching, successfully secured an offer from the reach school UCL, achieving a comeback.
- Interview Preparation and Performance: Sincerity is paramount. Instead of presenting "perfect answers," showcase the "thinking process." In the early stage, approach interview coaching with dedication, value the feedback from foreign mock interviews, and invest effort in multiple mock practice sessions. In the later stage, during the actual interview, do not deliberately conceal one's own weaknesses (such as a non-elite university background), nor exaggerate one's own achievements. Always maintain a sincere and humble attitude, focusing on demonstrating "one's own thinking process" and "problem-solving abilities," so that the tutor can feel the academic qualities and potential that a doctoral applicant should possess, which is also the key for the applicant to stand out in the interview.

[Case Insights / Consultant Comments]

The victory in this case is the victory of "strategic focus" over "mediocre background," the victory of "precise matching" over "blind accumulation," and even more, the victory of "down-to-earth" over "eager for quick success and instant benefits." For applicants with a medical background who have non-211 undergraduate and postgraduate degrees and no top-tier publications, cross-applying

for a G5 social science doctoral program is not a pipe dream. The core insights are as follows:

- The essence of a doctoral application is "academic matchmaking": finding a "research soulmate" is far more important than crafting a fancy resume. The core of the doctoral stage is "conducting research under the guidance of a supervisor." Therefore, "whether your research interests and capabilities match those of the supervisor" is far more important than "how good your institutional background is." The success of this applicant lies primarily in precisely targeting supervisors and programs that "accept medical backgrounds and have highly aligned research directions," fundamentally increasing the probability of admission.
- The Research Proposal (RP) is your academic calling card: for applicants with ordinary backgrounds, the RP is the "core weapon" to make up for their background shortcomings. An excellent RP does not lie in "how lofty the research direction is," but in "precise research questions, feasible research methods, and prominent innovation points," and more importantly, in "aligning with one's own experience and the supervisor's research direction." The applicant's RP is rooted in clinical practice, supported by first-hand data, and has clear practical value, which is also the key to impressing the supervisor.
- "Networking" is a necessary strategic step, not an "unnecessary step": For interdisciplinary applicants with ordinary backgrounds, networking can help you establish contact with the supervisor in advance, enabling the supervisor to understand your research potential and suitability, and even obtain the supervisor's suggestions for revising the RP, thus avoiding "blindly submitting applications and being directly rejected." This applicant received positive feedback from the supervisor through personalized networking, laying a solid foundation for subsequent interviews and admission.
- Telling a story of "growth" is more persuasive than simply listing "achievements": a doctoral application not only evaluates your existing achievements but also assesses your research potential and learning ability. This applicant did not shy away from their background of not being from a Double First-Class university; instead, through "persistence in language preparation", "accumulation in clinical internships", and "refinement of research achievements", they told a story of "gradually growing from an ordinary clinical student into an applicant with interdisciplinary research potential," allowing the supervisor to see the self-discipline, execution ability, and academic enthusiasm behind it: this is also the core confidence for applicants with ordinary backgrounds to stage a comeback.

Sample: Applicant's Self-Statement

My journey of applying for a doctoral program lasted 20 months, starting to prepare in January 2024. Every step was filled with uncertainty and suffering. The full-course companionship of the institution was the confidence that enabled me to persevere to the end. Initially, I had no clue about the timeline of the doctoral application. It was the teachers from the institution who broke down the application process into clear monthly milestones, from language test preparation, research refinement, to supervisor outreach, RP writing, and interview preparation, providing me with a clear direction and helping me avoid confusion. During the days of waiting for responses to supervisor outreach, anxiety and irritability often engulfed me. I broke down and wanted to give up several times, but the institution's service staff always patiently listened, gently comforted me, helped me analyze the reasons, and helped me regain my confidence. During the application process, difficulties kept emerging, such as RP bottlenecks, material errors, and confusion during interviews. They were always able to respond promptly, resolve each issue one by one with their professional capabilities, and accompany me through the tough times with warmth and

meticulousness. Eventually, I was able to break through the constraints of being a non-985/211 university graduate, achieve a remarkable comeback, and secure an offer for a doctoral program at UCL, making this difficult yet precious journey worthwhile.



Chapter 8 Trend Review and Recommendations

8.1 Trend Analysis: From Scale Expansion to Quality Competition

Looking back at the overseas doctoral application and study experience over the past five years, the most prominent trend has been the shift from "quantitative growth" to "structural differentiation." The "extensive application" approach that relied on information asymmetry and the widespread admiration for prestigious universities in the early days has largely become ineffective, replaced by a refined game influenced by geopolitics, the popularity of disciplines, and funding sources. Specifically, although STEM majors in the US still hold top-level appeal, visa scrutiny and the risk of academic decoupling have led to an accelerated diversion of students to European position-based doctoral programs (such as those in Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands) and prestigious universities in Singapore and Hong Kong in Asia. Meanwhile, the acquisition of scholarships shows a "Matthew Effect," where top candidates hold multiple full scholarship offers, while ordinary applicants, even with qualified backgrounds, face "difficulty in admission" due to the contraction of tutor funding and the intense competition of CSC (CoinEx Smart Chain). In addition, interdisciplinary capabilities (such as "AI + Science") have become a new screening criterion, and applicants with a single-discipline background are at a significant disadvantage in the admission process. (Source: American Chemical Society, 2026; CASISD, 2025; Lee, S. and Kim, J., 2018)

8.2 Core Bottlenecks: Information Lag and Capability Mismatch

Despite the large application base, reviewing cases of application failure and the risk of dropout among doctoral students, the two core contradictions remain prominent. First, severe information asymmetry: the vast majority of applicants still overly rely on QS rankings to select schools, neglecting in-depth background checks on the sustainability of the supervisor's funding, laboratory culture, and graduation cycle, which leads to real dilemmas such as "supervisor job-hopping," "funding interruption," or "conflicts in mentoring style" after enrollment. (Source: Hazelkorn, E., 2025) Second, the mismatch between application capabilities and doctoral requirements: A large number of applicants are still trapped in the inefficient cycle of "template-based prospecting" and "sentimental statements," lacking the awareness to demonstrate "verifiable research capabilities." For example, they are unable to prove their "immediate combat effectiveness" with technical stacks (such as PyTorch, Cryo-EM) and pre-experimental results. This disconnection in soft skills directly results in many doctoral students facing a long adaptation period even after enrollment due to the lack of systematic academic writing and ethical review training (Source: Baker, L., 2024).

8.3 Forward-looking Suggestions: Return to the Essence of Scientific Research and Implement Precise Strategies

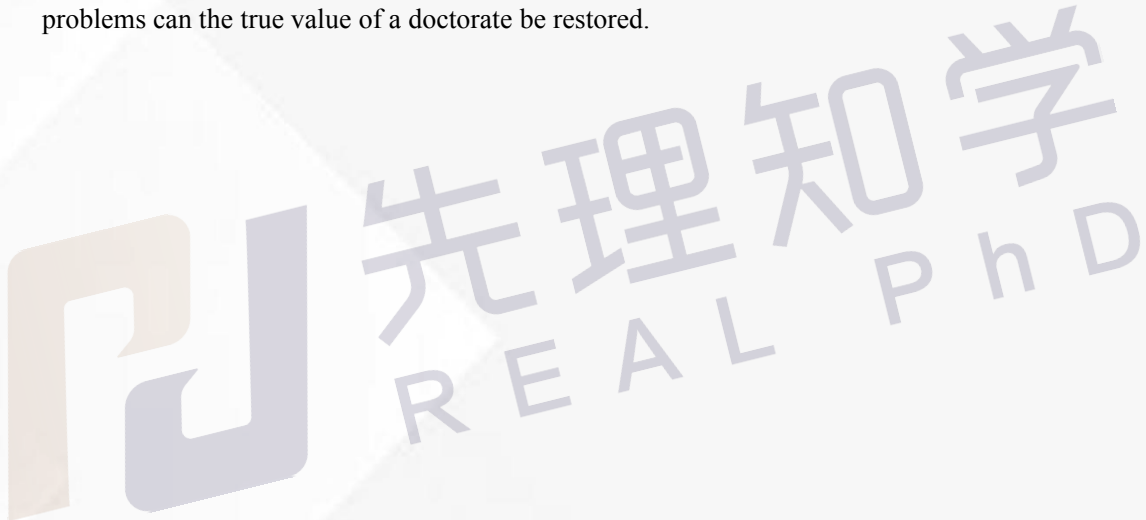
Looking towards the future, the core advice for overseas doctoral study can be summarised as a three-character strategy of "precision, combination, and preparation."

First, abandon the "casting a wide net" approach to applications and establish a three-dimensional background check system of "supervisor-laboratory-alumni." Before reaching out to supervisors, thoroughly read their papers, propose specific experimental improvements or cross-application suggestions, and transform ineffective outreach into academic dialogue.

Second, adopt "combined financing" to replace the mindset of "waiting for full scholarships." Proactively apply for CSC living expense support, external foundation scholarships (such as Humboldt, Marie Curie), and local enterprise projects simultaneously to reduce dependence on a single supervisor's funding.

Third, strengthen the hard skill reserve of "pre-doctoral" students. Complete the "minimum viable verification" of the research plan, basic programming, or experimental operation before going abroad. For policymakers and universities, it is recommended to establish an "overseas supervisor academic credit database" and promote the British-style pre-training model for research master's degrees.

An overseas doctoral degree is no longer a gilded label, but a high-risk scientific research investment lasting five years—only by making study-abroad decisions precise to specific research topics and supervisors and possessing the risk-resistant ability to independently solve unknown problems can the true value of a doctorate be restored.



Chapter 9 Conclusion

The path of studying for a doctoral degree overseas has never become easier due to information transparency, nor has it ever lost its value because of fierce competition. What this study attempts to do is not to promise a shortcut, but to tear down a high wall of information. We have reviewed the trends, pointed out the application pitfalls, and also provided specific application strategy recommendations. However, all methodologies ultimately boil down to that most fundamental question: Are you ready to invest five years or even longer in a research question? If your answer is yes, then, no matter which country you go to or which supervisor you follow, you already possess the most core quality for a doctoral career—resilience. May this white paper serve as a small lamp before your journey, and the light ahead will ultimately be lit by yourself.



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