



International student recruitment: Strategies for engagement & conversion

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Acknowledgements

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The evolving landscape of international student recruitment

International student recruitment is changing rapidly due to shifting demographics and rising global competition. To stay competitive, institutions must adopt a **digital-first, student-centered approach** and engage prospective students early with personalized outreach that highlights the value of studying in the US and the unique strengths of their institution.

Today's prospective international students navigate the admissions process primarily through **digital platforms, online research, and peer recommendations**, often making their decisions without ever visiting campus. They particularly consider institutional reputation, career outcomes, and student support systems to determine the right fit.

As institutions work to **expand and diversify their international student populations**, understanding enrollment trends and challenges is crucial for developing effective recruitment strategies.

Key enrollment trends (2023–2024 academic year)

According to the [Open Doors Report 2024](#), international student enrollment in the US has reached record levels. In the 2023–2024 academic year:

- **1.1 million** international students enrolled in the US (7% increase from the previous year).
- **Graduate enrollment** hit an all-time high of **502,291** (8% increase).
- **Undergraduate enrollment** remained stable at **342,875** (1% decline).
- India surpassed China as the leading country of origin, with **331,602 students** (23% increase), while China's enrollment declined to 277,398 students (4% decrease).
- **Enrollment from Bangladesh, Colombia, Ghana, Italy, Nepal, Pakistan, and Spain** reached record highs.
- **OPT participation grew to 242,782 students** (22% increase), the highest ever recorded.
- **International applicants using the Common App increased by 63%**, now making up 4–5% of total Common App applicants.

These trends underscore the **growing demand for US education** while reinforcing the need for institutions to **actively attract, engage, and support** international students.



Emerging challenges

While the **US remains a top study destination**, its **global market share is declining** as students explore alternative options. Competition from other countries is intensifying—Canada, the UK, and Australia have introduced more flexible visa policies, expanded work-study opportunities, and clearer post-graduation pathways, making them increasingly attractive to international students.

Meanwhile, economic and political factors continue to shape perceptions of the US as a study destination. Beyond academics, **cost, immigration policies, and career prospects** play a critical role in student decision-making. **Failure to address these concerns could accelerate enrollment declines.**

Key barriers impacting international enrollment:

- Rising tuition costs and limited scholarship options
- Challenges securing post-graduation work visas
- Visa delays and shifting perceptions of US immigration policies
- Increasing competition from domestic and non-US universities

To sustain and grow international enrollment, **universities must differentiate themselves** by fostering a sense of community early in the recruitment process and clearly communicating career outcomes, visa support, financial aid options, and cultural integration resources.

The future of international recruitment: What works and why

Many institutions wait too long to engage international students, often initiating outreach in their final year of high school with generic messaging that mirrors domestic student communication.

Without **clear, tailored messaging**, prospective students may receive irrelevant information—such as scholarships they are ineligible for, invitations to events they cannot attend, or cultural references that don't apply to them.

A one-size-fits-all approach is ineffective—international students have **different decision-making processes, cultural considerations, and academic priorities** that require a more tailored strategy.

Early engagement shapes enrollment decisions

Better institutional support significantly impacts student decisions. **82% of international students say better overall support** would have influenced their choice of school. Nearly two-thirds of **prospective students want to speak to current international students** before deciding where to apply.



How prospective students gather information:

- University website - 80%
- Current student or alumni - 67%
- General internet research - 43%
- Email and other communication from the university - 38%
- University admissions office - 34%

Top factors influencing where students choose to study include:

- High-quality academic programs
- A welcoming international student community
- A strong institutional reputation
- A vibrant campus culture

What international students want to know:

- Will there be other students from my background?
- Will I experience culture shock?
- What is campus life really like for international students?

Crafting a marketing strategy that resonates

A successful international recruitment strategy requires a data-driven approach that highlights institutional strengths and aligns with student priorities.

Key recommendations for effective messaging:

- **Showcase what sets your institution apart**
 - Highlight high-demand programs such as STEM fields, business, and healthcare
 - Feature alumni success stories and career outcomes
 - Promote faculty expertise and research opportunities
- **Use data to guide outreach**
 - Leverage institutional and global trends to refine messaging
 - Target high-growth markets based on past enrollment data
 - Feature testimonials and student success stories
- **Collaborate with Career Centers and ISSS**
 - Provide guidance on work visa pathways such as OPT, H-1B, and O-1
 - Highlight alumni career outcomes, visa success rates, and student engagement trends
 - Emphasize career support for international students
 - Leverage faculty and alumni networks to build credibility



A robust digital strategy is a non-negotiable

Today's international students rely on **digital platforms, online content, and virtual interactions** to research universities and make enrollment decisions. Without a strong digital presence, institutions risk losing prospective students to more tech-savvy competitors.

Key reasons to prioritize a strong digital presence:

- **Rising application volume** – Increased applications mean greater competition for top international talent.
- **High admissions staff turnover** – 71% of admissions officers and coordinators hold their positions for less than three years, even though they serve as a critical link between institutions and prospective students.
- **AI is reshaping admissions** – Generative AI is transforming how students apply and how applications are reviewed.
- **Most students never visit campus before enrolling** – Digital engagement is critical in shaping perceptions and driving enrollment.
- **Technology can improve efficiency and consistency** – Automated systems and digital platforms streamline outreach, ensuring prospective students receive timely, relevant information.
- **A strong online presence attracts students** – A well-structured website, virtual tours, and interactive social media help students assess fit.
- **Technology fosters community** – Platforms that connect prospective students with current international students improve engagement and build trust.
- **China and India dominate enrollment** – 53% of international students come from these two countries, making targeted digital outreach there essential.

Digital marketing strategies to target international students

1. **Engagement platforms for prospective students** – Many universities focus on engaging students after admission, but early engagement is equally important. Leveraging digital engagement platforms early in the recruitment process helps **bridge the gap between interest and enrollment**. By prioritizing **authentic, student-driven interactions**, institutions can ensure that prospective students feel welcomed, informed, and supported, giving them greater confidence in their decision to apply and enroll.
 - **Facilitate structured online chats** where prospective students can ask questions to current students and admissions officers.
 - **Create community-driven digital spaces** for prospective and admitted students to interact before arriving on campus.
 - **Prioritize peer mentorship and ambassador programs** to connect prospective students with current students from their home country, academic area of interest, or shared background.



- 2. Multi-platform global visibility** – A strong digital presence ensures that your institution is easily discoverable by international students. Since many rely solely on online resources to evaluate universities, institutions must invest in a **user-friendly, mobile-optimized, and globally accessible** digital strategy.
 - Optimize websites for mobile use since **students in certain markets** may rely on mobile devices to access websites and other digital platforms for daily tasks.
 - Establish localized digital marketing strategies.
 - Provide content in multiple languages.
- 3. Virtual campus tours and multimedia content** – Many international students will never visit campus before enrolling, making virtual experiences essential in their decision-making process. High-quality multimedia content can bridge the gap and offer a realistic preview of campus life.
 - Create **interactive virtual tours** that highlight academic buildings, student spaces, and housing.
 - Feature **student-led "day in the life" videos** to offer an authentic perspective.
 - Utilize **high-quality photos, 360-degree videos, and live campus walk-throughs** to create an immersive experience.
- 4. Active social media presence** – Social media platforms are key **information hubs and engagement tools** for international students. Universities must **maintain an active and authentic presence** across multiple platforms to highlight the student experience and connect with prospects in real time.
 - **Highlight international student voices and experiences** through testimonials and takeovers.
 - **Maintain engagement across key platforms** (e.g., WhatsApp, WeChat, Instagram) based on country-specific usage trends.
 - **Foster community by responding promptly to inquiries** and facilitating direct student-to-student interactions.
- 5. Online information sessions and webinars** – Virtual events provide **direct interaction with university representatives and current students**, addressing international students' key concerns about academics, cultural adjustment, and career pathways.
 - Offer **live and recorded sessions across different time zones** to ensure accessibility.
 - Include **Q&A panels with faculty, alumni, and student ambassadors** to offer multiple perspectives.



Conclusion and key takeaways

Attracting and enrolling international students requires a **strategic, digital-first approach** that prioritizes **early engagement, personalized communication**, and a sense of belonging. As competition grows, institutions must **differentiate themselves** by:

- Addressing key barriers such as cost, visa concerns, and career pathways
- Showcasing their strengths in academics, career outcomes, and student support

Prioritizing **digital strategies and investing in engagement platforms** will be key to standing out. Universities that leverage ambassador programs and interactive online communities can create **authentic connections** that **build trust, boost engagement, and drive conversion**.

Stand out with the Interstride Admissions Portal

Show prospective international students you're their perfect match.
Amplify your brand and nurture leads, and increase yield with Interstride.

Learn more at interstride.com



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