



The international graduate student admissions experience

Do graduate enrollment management professionals understand the needs of international applicants?

April 2024



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About Interstride

Interstride is an ed-tech company that supports higher-ed institutions attract, support, and retain international students, from admissions to career success. Interstride partners with 180+ colleges and universities and supports 150K+ international students and alumni.

Admissions teams use Interstride's Admissions Portal to engage and enroll international students through chat, community, and curated resources. Career Services teams use Interstride's Career Portal to help students find international-friendly jobs, community, and resources on career development and visa & immigration.





About NAGAP

NAGAP, the Association for Graduate Enrollment Management (GEM), is the only professional organization devoted exclusively to the concerns of individuals working in the graduate enrollment management environment.

The mission of NAGAP is to engage and advance GEM professionals by promoting excellence and collaboration through education, research, and professional development.





Introduction

This academic year saw international student enrollment surpassing to pre-pandemic levels – with international graduate students driving the growth. With this growth, it's crucial to understand their unique experiences: challenges, resources, and key factors of influence in their pursuit of an advanced degree in the U.S.

This joint research project between Interstride and NAGAP compares and contrasts international graduate students' actual admissions experiences to GEM professionals' understanding of those experiences, building upon the findings from 2023.

The report highlights the top challenges and resources relied upon by international graduates at various stages of the admissions journey. It will also delve into their level of satisfaction with the information and support received from their institutions, and the factors that influenced their choices. The results highlight where universities can be more aligned with students' needs to attract and support international applicants better. The report concludes with a discussion of actionable takeaways.



Key findings:

01

How international enrollment is managed varies by school. Most (62%) universities don't have someone solely dedicated to international admissions, but 36% do.

02

International graduates choose the U.S. over other countries for various reasons, with 66% citing the strength of employment opportunities, 60% citing strength of academics, and 46% citing that universities in the U.S. offer more support for international students.

03

The top challenges international graduate students faced remained largely consistent from the research phase to the decision phase. Most cited understanding finances and tuition costs (65% citing as such for during the research phase; 61% during the decision phase), followed by choosing the right institution (63%; 49%), and understanding career outcomes (49%; 43%), as top challenges throughout the admissions journey

04

The most helpful resources international graduate students relied on are the university website (80%), current students or alumni at the school (67%), and general internet search (43%).

05

Rankings are a top online resource for the majority of graduate international students.

06

The top challenges faced and resources relied upon by graduate international students remain largely the same, from the research phase to the decision phase.

07

Understanding career outcomes is a key challenge for international graduate students and influential in their choice of institutions.



08

Parental influence exists, but may be lower than GEM professionals expect. While 80% of professionals believe parents are influential in graduate international students' choice of institutions; only 32% of students report so.

09

Peer-to-peer connection is valuable for graduate international students, with 82% citing those conversations as helpful or extremely helpful.

10

International graduate students will reach out to make peer connections, regardless of whether there is a formal institutional program in place. 37% of student respondents reported having reached out to their personal network, 29% reached out proactively through social media, with 6% proactively asking the admissions for a connection.

11

While many challenges international students face are systemic and outside of an institution or individual's control, many things identified by graduate international students in the report are within an admissions and enrollment office's influence.

Recommendations

- Highlight career pathways and outcomes for international graduate students.
- Foster International student connections and community. International graduate students value the perspective of fellow peers and international students.
- Connect with other departments to better understand the international graduate students interested. This can include the admissions and enrollment team, international students and scholars services, as well as student services and career services.



Methodology

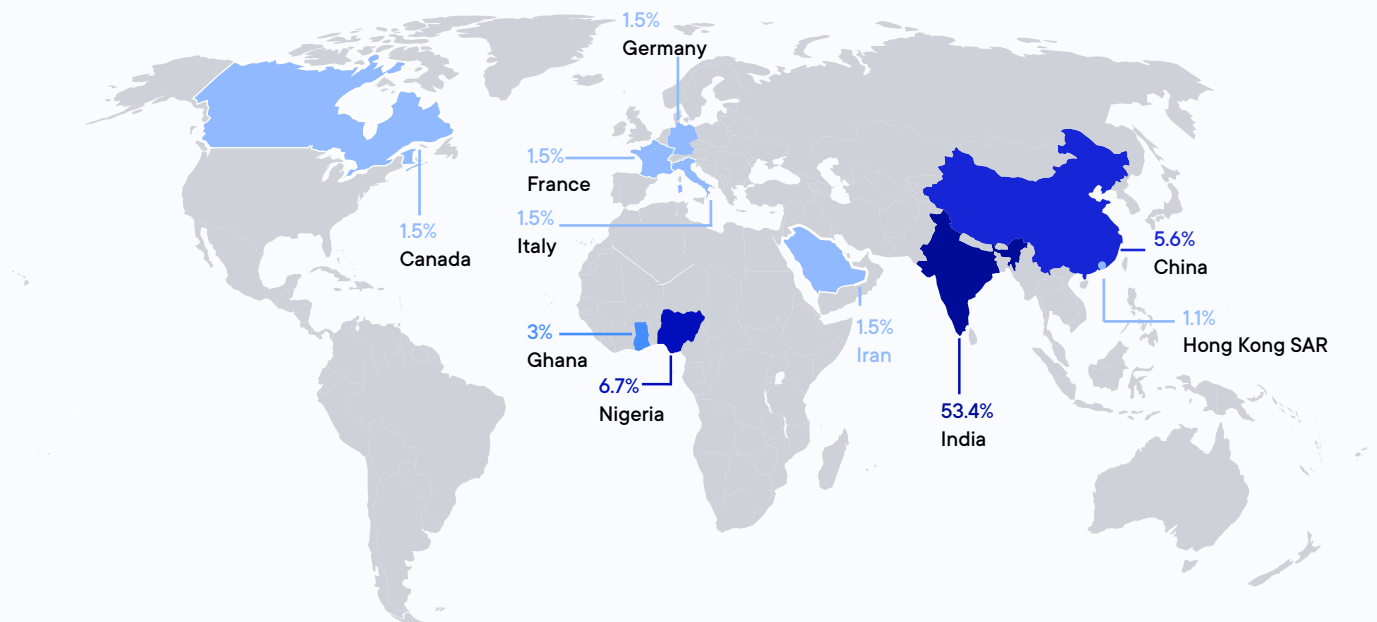
To compare and contrast international graduate students' experience with GEM professionals' perceptions, two surveys with similar questions were sent to both populations.

In December 2023, Interstride received 286 survey responses from international graduate students studying in the U.S.

The student respondents come from 49 unique countries, with the most representation from India (53%), followed by Nigeria (7%), China (6%), and Ghana (3%). The gender representative is even between females (49%) and males (50%), with the remaining preferring not to share.

What is your nationality?

286 Students **56** Countries



82%

Master's

18%

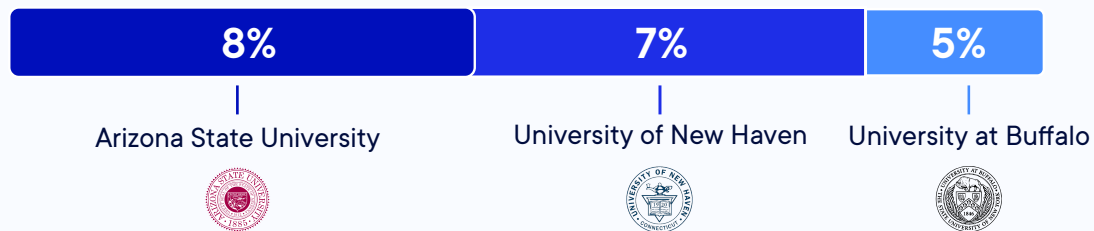
Doctorate



The top fields of study were Engineering (30%), Business and Management (26%), and Math and Computer Science (18%). As a result, most respondents' degrees (82%) are STEM-designated. Most of the respondents are master's students (82%), with the remainder pursuing doctoral degrees (18%).

The most popular universities where respondents are enrolled are Arizona State University (8%), the University of New Haven (7%), and the University at Buffalo (5%).

The most popular universities where respondents are enrolled



Most respondents completed their undergraduate degree outside of the U.S. (89%). This means that for most respondents, their graduate admissions experience was the first time they experienced the U.S. higher-ed admissions journey.

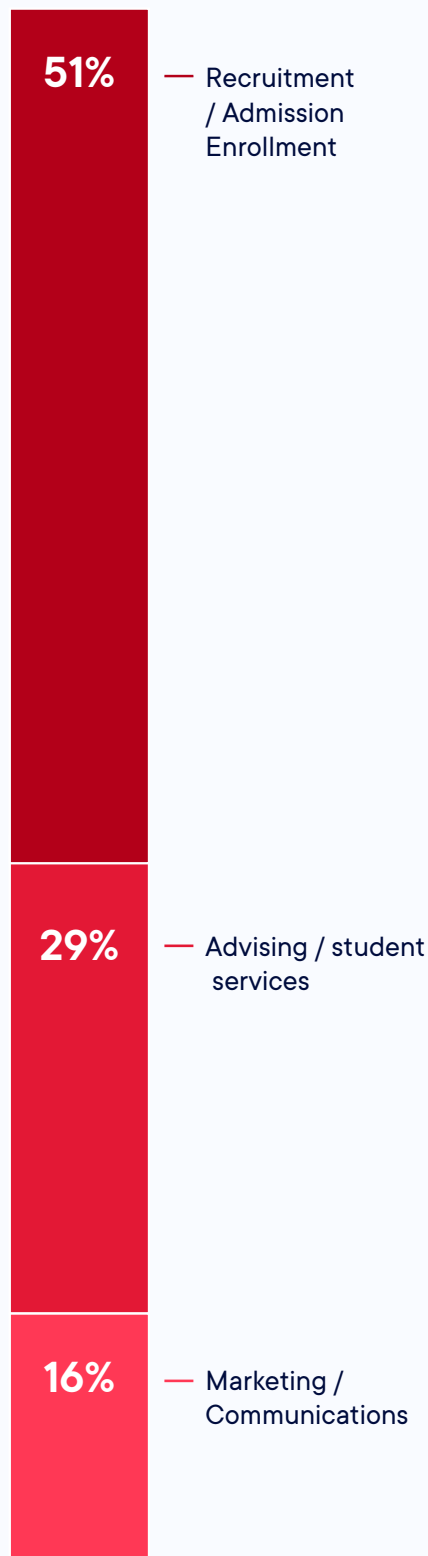
A majority of respondents (78%) want to work in the U.S. after graduation for some amount of time, while others are unsure (18%), or have decided they do not want to stay or work (3%).

In December 2023, Interstride received 86 survey responses from NAGAP members who are graduate enrollment management (GEM) professionals.

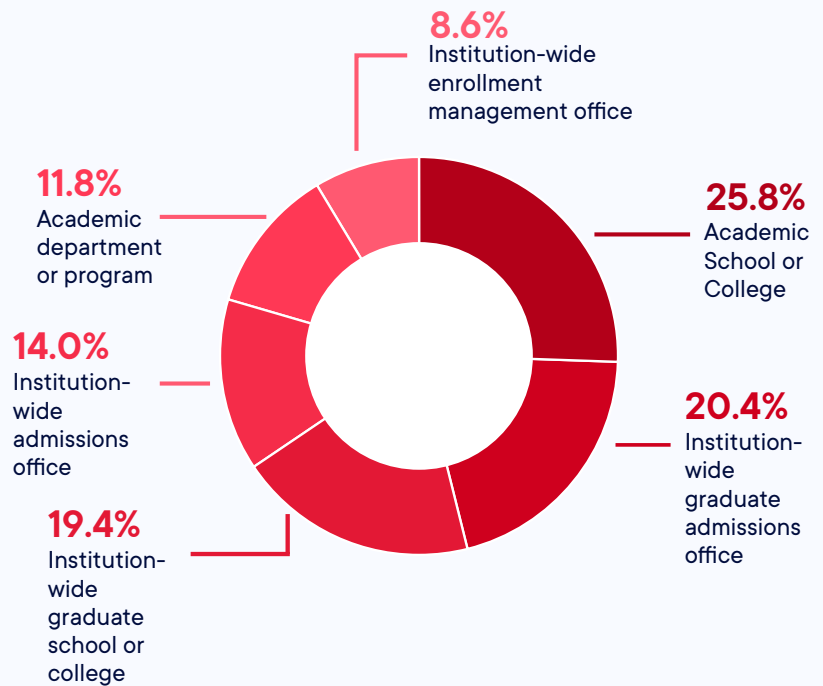
GEM respondents equally work at private (48%) and public (49%) non-profit universities, with 2% from for-profit universities. Examples of universities where respondents work at include: Syracuse University (4%), and schools like Chapman University, Florida International University, UCLA, Boston University, and Brigham Young University (2% each).



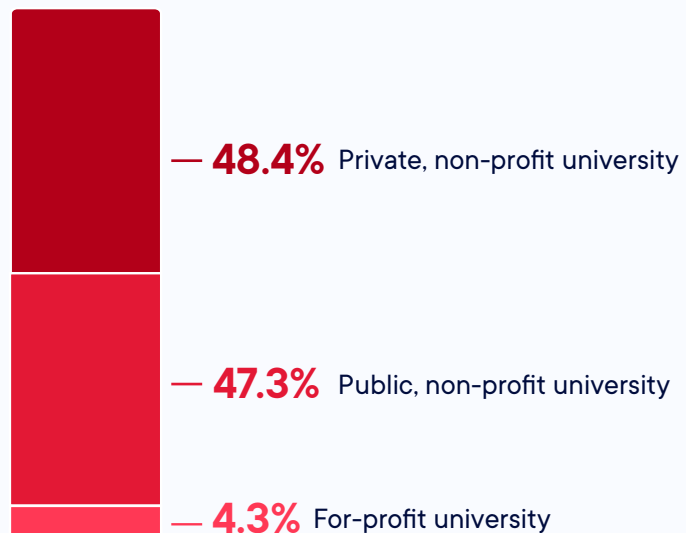
In which of the following areas do you work?



In which office or unit on campus do you work?



At which type of institution do you work?





Research Results

International enrollment goals

How the responsibility of international admissions is handled also varies by school. 36% of respondents' universities had a dedicated staff for international admissions, but most (62%) do not.

Asked if respondents' offices have been asked to increase international graduate enrollment in the 2023-24 admissions cycle, 47% responded yes, 41% responded no, and 13% did not know.

For the 47% of respondents who were asked to increase international graduate enrollment, most are unaware of a specific goal. 28% were asked to increase it by up to 10%, 13% by up to 20%.

Does your office have at least one person solely dedicated to international graduate admissions?



Has your office been asked to increase international graduate enrollment in the 2023-2024 admission cycle?



By how much were you asked to increase international graduate enrollment?





How are you engaging international applicants?

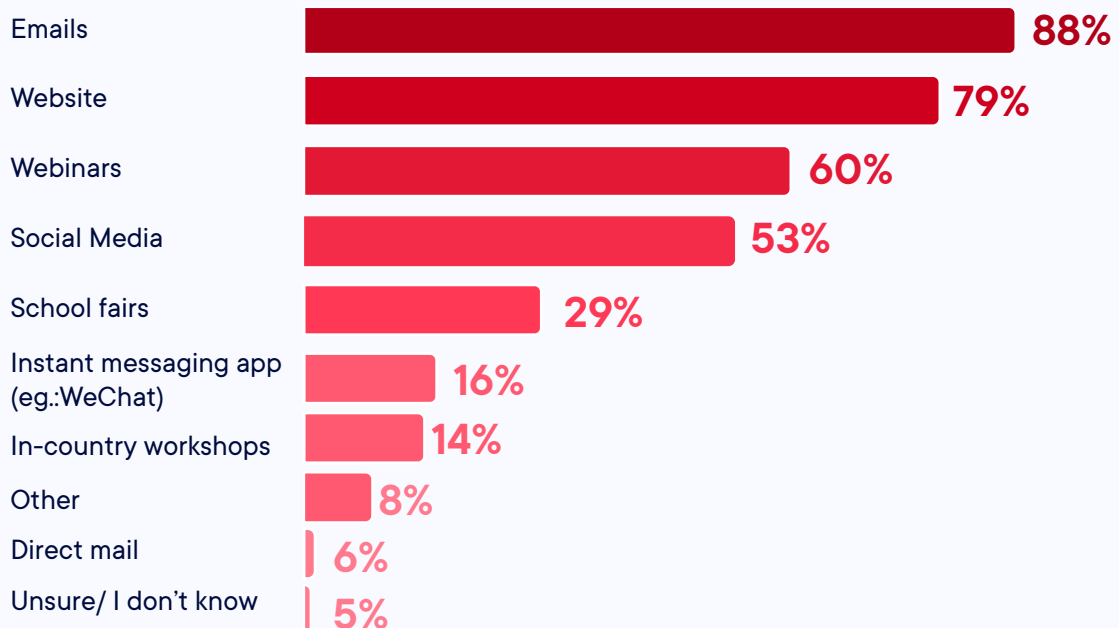
Before diving into what professionals think about international students' experience, we wanted to understand what they are doing to engage their international applicants currently.

How the responsibility of international admissions is handled also varies by school. 36% of respondents' universities had a dedicated staff for international admissions, but most (62%) do not.

GEM professionals rely on various channels to engage international applicants, with the most using email (88%), the university website (79%), and webinars (60%).

This ranking aligns with the results from the 2023. Almost all professionals use email (98%) and the university website (92%) to engage international applicants. Eighty percent (80%) of respondents report using webinars.

How are you engaging international graduate applicants?

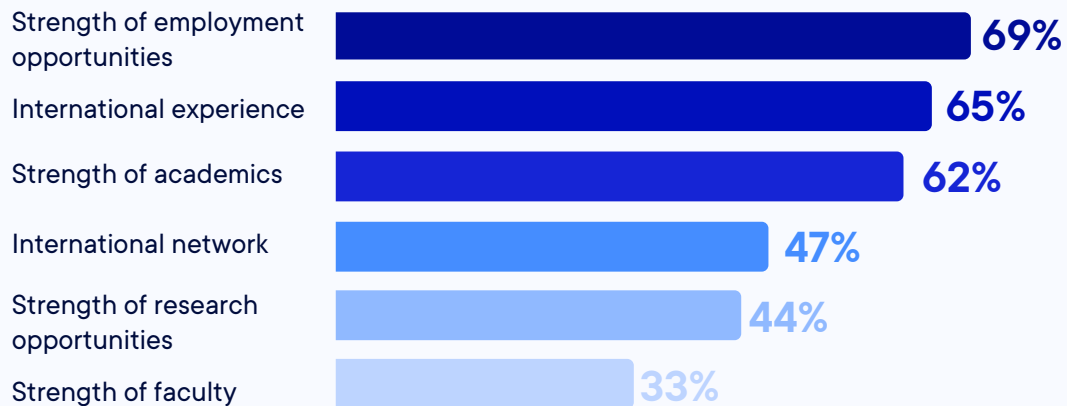




Why do international students pursue international education for their graduate degrees?

To understand graduate international students' experience throughout the admissions process, we wanted to first understand their motivations and goals for studying internationally in the first place.

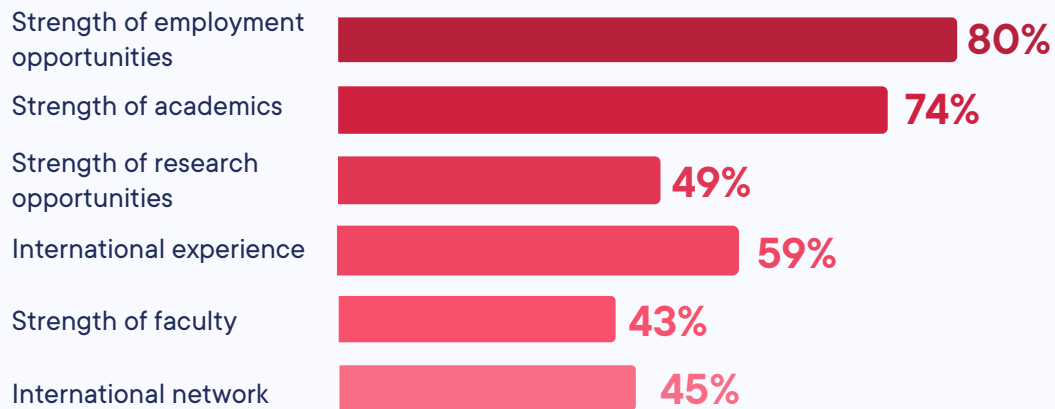
Why did you decide to pursue international education for your graduate degree?



Most students (69%) cite the strength of employment opportunities as a key motivator for pursuing international education. This is followed by gaining international experience (65%) and the strength of academics abroad (62%).



Why do you believe international graduate students choose to pursue international education for their graduate studies?



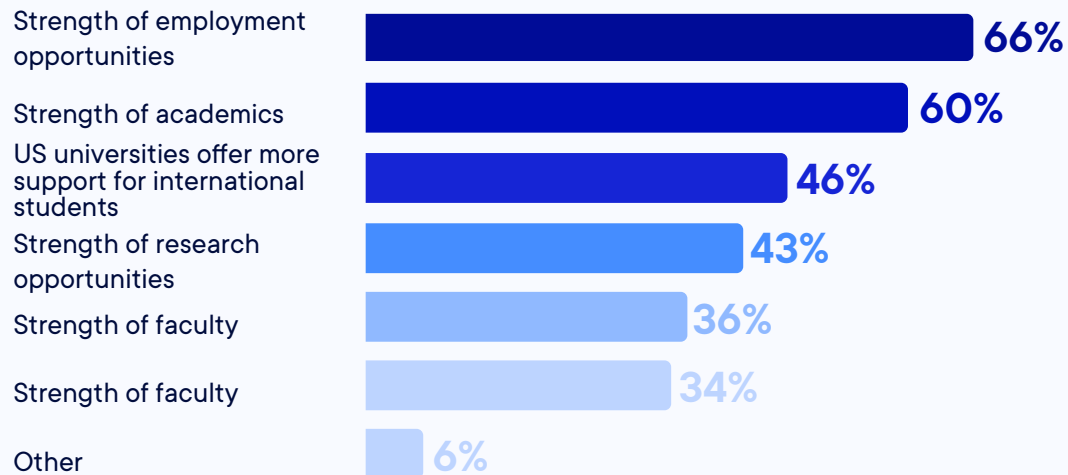
The primary driving force behind students' pursuit of international education is the promising realm of employment opportunities, with 80% emphasizing its significance. Close behind are the quality of academic programs, cited by 74% of students, and the enriching international experience, valued by 59%.



What factors lead international graduate students to choose the U.S. over other countries for higher education?

Knowing what motivates students to pursue education abroad, we wanted to know why they chose to do so in the U.S. in particular.

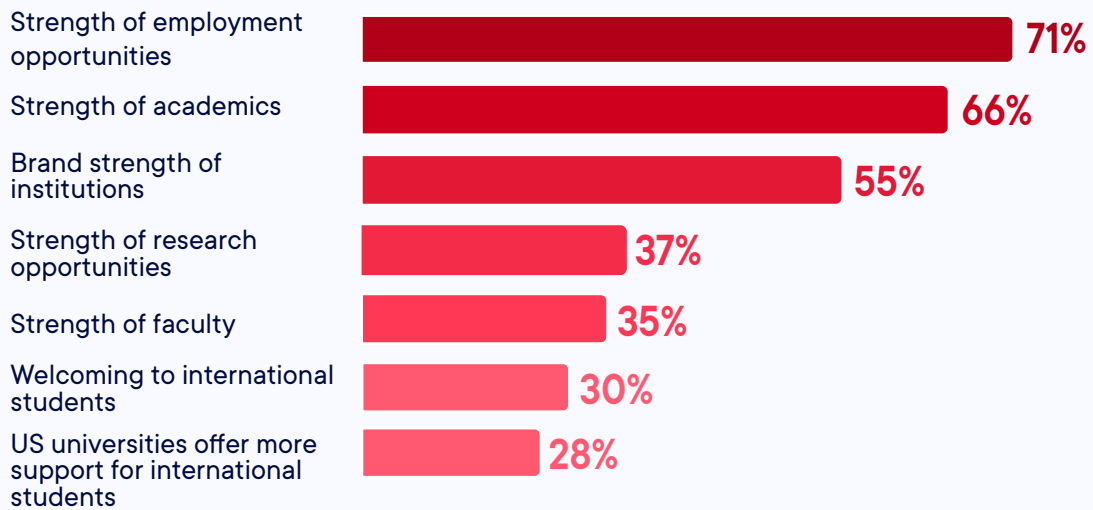
Why did you choose the US over other countries?



66% of students said the strength of employment opportunities drew them to the U.S. This is followed by 60% citing the strength of academics, and 46% citing that U.S. universities offer more support for international students.



Which of these factors lead international graduate students to choose the US over other countries for their higher education?



71% of professionals cited strength of employment opportunities, followed by 66% citing the strength of academics, and 55% citing the brand strength of U.S. universities.

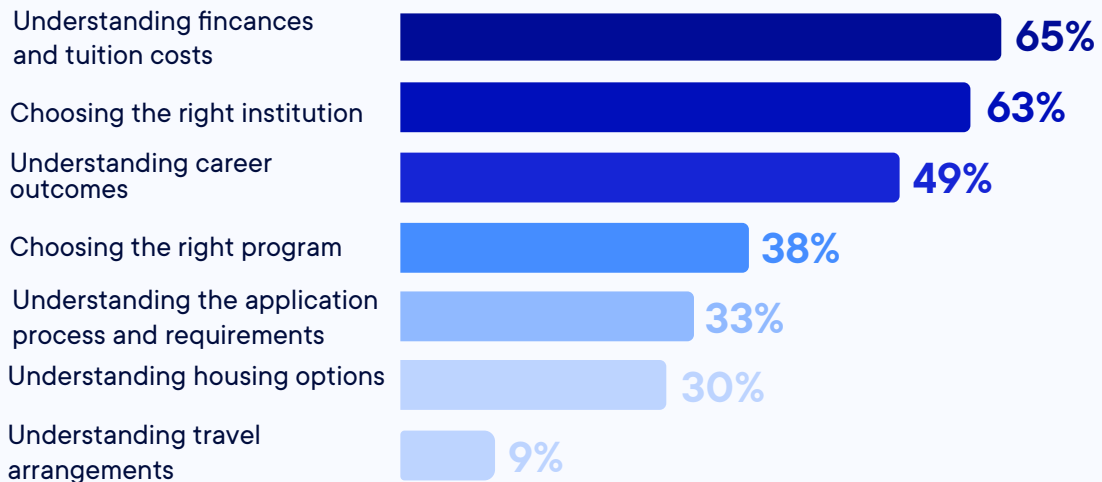
While students and professionals are aligned on the top two motivations, more professionals cite the brand strengths of institutions, at a 16% difference.



What are the most challenging aspects of the research phase of the admission process for international students?

International students face a host of challenges when navigating the admissions process. We wanted to know what those challenges were at different stages of the journey, starting from research.

When you were researching schools, what were the top challenges?



Navigating finances and tuition was a challenge for 64% of respondents, followed by choosing the right institution for 63%, and understanding career outcomes for 49% of students.

Some students elaborated on their responses:

Cost

“

Hidden costs

“

The tuition cost based on credit hours is not easy to understand

“

It was difficult finding estimates of tuition costs and financial aid to help with planning

Choosing the right institution

“

Very difficult to get a concise picture from at home

“

Too much information is floating on the internet. It's hard to segregate the noise to make an informed decision.

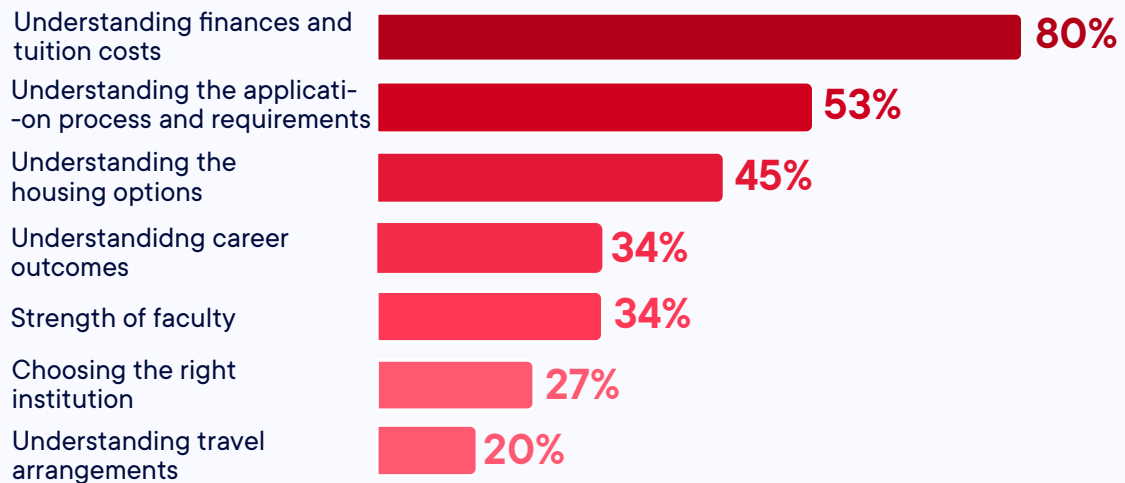


Understanding career outcomes



Programs: too many options with little career development information

What do you believe are the most challenging aspects of the research process for international graduate students?



On the other hand, for professionals, 80% cited understanding finances and tuition costs as the top challenge, followed by 53% saying understanding the application process and requirements, and 45% for understanding housing options.

While students and professionals are aligned on the number one challenge, their responses for the other challenges differ.

Choosing the right institution and understanding career outcomes are more challenging for students than professionals believe. 63% of students report the former as a challenge, compared to 34% of professionals. 49% of students report the latter as a challenge, compared to 34% of professionals.

Understanding the application process and requirements, and understanding housing options are less challenging for students than professionals believe. 33% of students cite the former as a challenge, compared to 53% of professionals. 30% of students cite the latter as a challenge, compared to 45% of professionals.

While the application process and requirements, especially for graduate programs, may be detailed and complex, it may be less challenging as it is explicit and less ambiguous.

A key misalignment between students and professionals is that more students relied on general internet search (43%) than professionals believed (22%). This remains consistent from the 2023 report.



Most helpful resources during the research phase

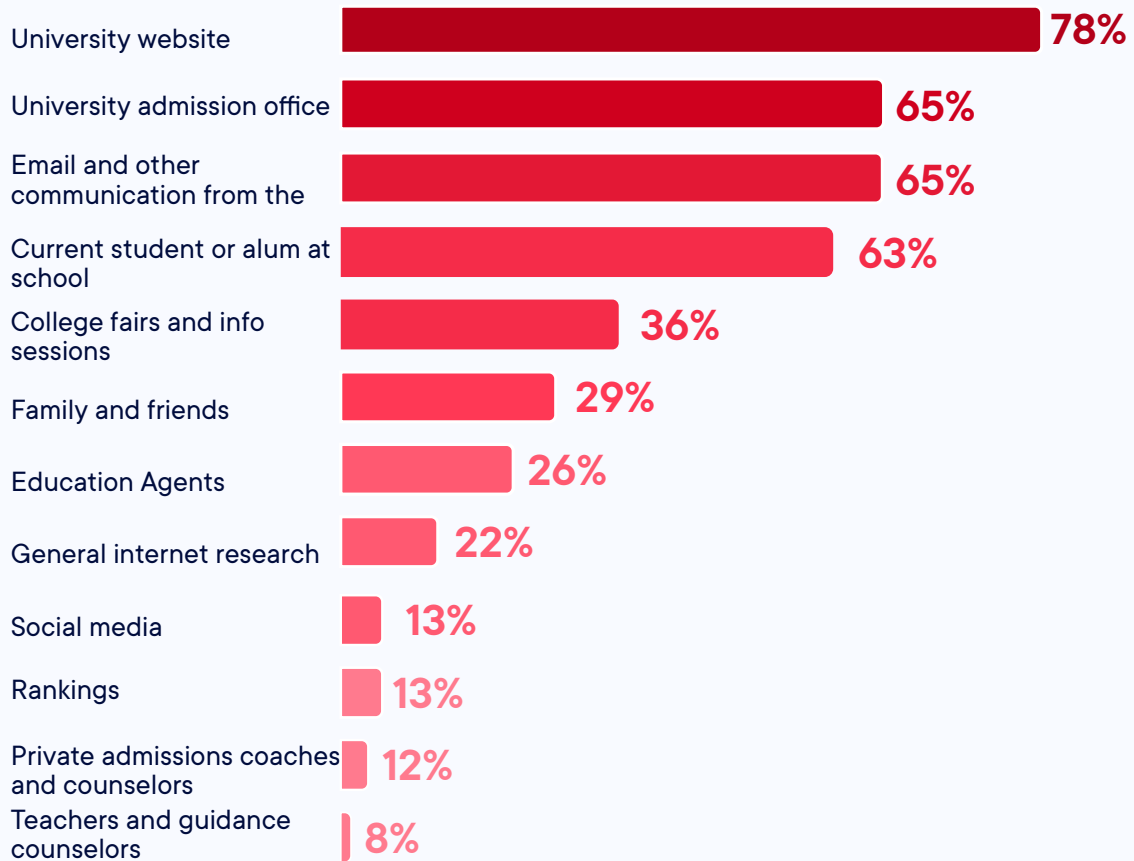
International students relied on a variety of resources to navigate the research phase.

What were the most helpful resources when researching schools?





What do you believe are the most helpful resources during the research process for international graduate students?



Seventy-eight (78%) of professionals also cited university websites as helpful resources, followed by 65% citing the university admissions office, as well as email and other communication from the school, and 63% citing current students or alumni at the school.

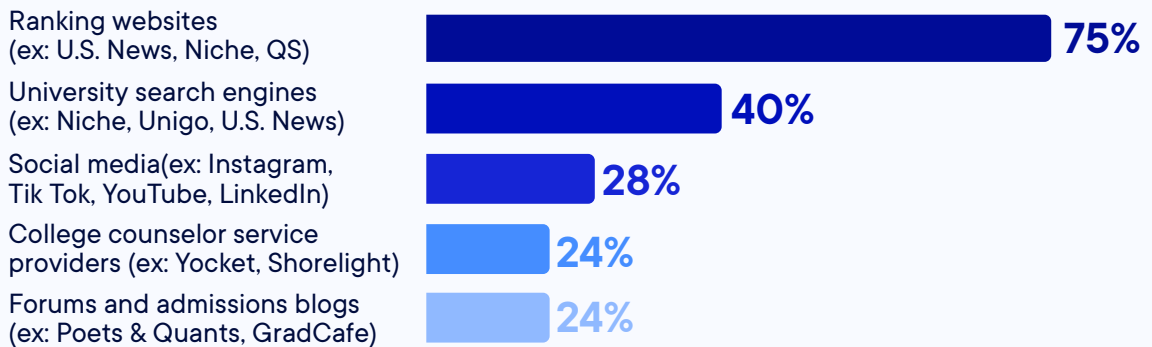
A key misalignment between students and professionals is that more students relied on general internet search (43%) than professionals believed (22%). This remains consistent from the 2023 report.



Most helpful online resources during the research phase

Since many graduate international students relied on general internet searches as a research tool, what online resources are they finding helpful?

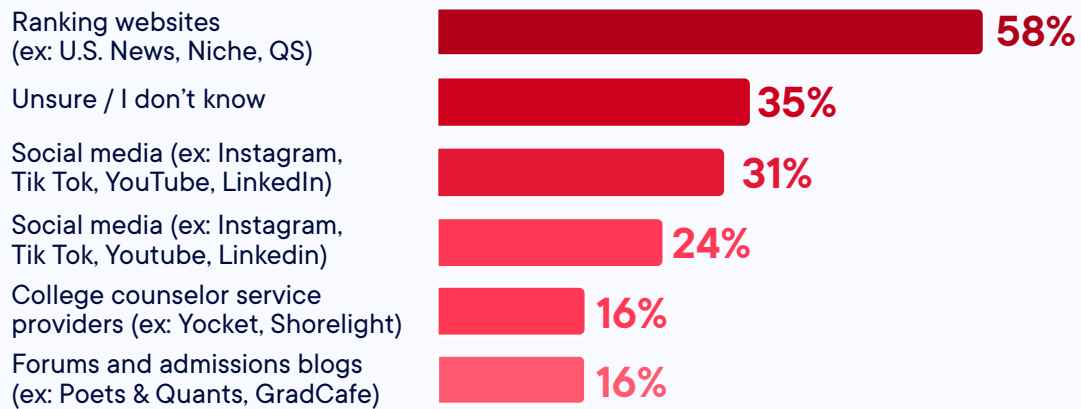
Which online resource did you rely on for admissions research?



Rankings are the most popular online tool that international graduate students relied on. 75% of students relied heavily on it, followed by 40% for university search engines, and 28% for social media.



What online resources do international graduates students rely on the most heavily for admissions research, besides university websites?



Students and professionals are very aligned. 58% of respondents cited ranking websites, followed by 31% who cited university search engines, and 24% for social media.

The survey distinguishes ranking websites from university search engines to identify the core use cases of websites that belong in both categories. That is, does a student using, for instance, US News, rely more on its ability to compare institutions, or gather information on institutions in the case of the university profiles?

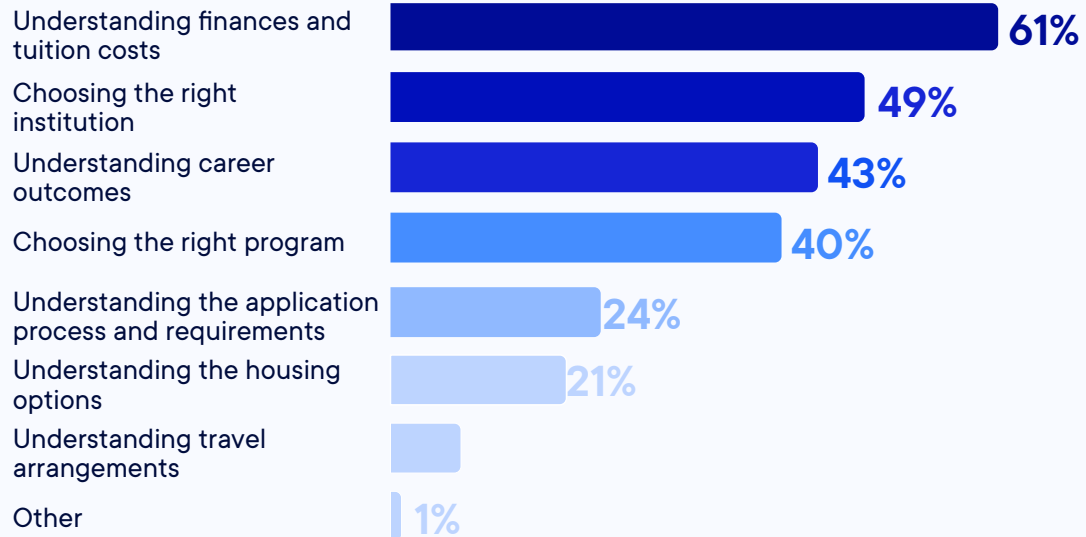
The results reflect the responses from the 2023 research, as well as reports from other organizations such as QS.



Challenges during the decision phase

Knowing the top challenges students face during the research phase, how similar or different are the key challenges during the decision phase?

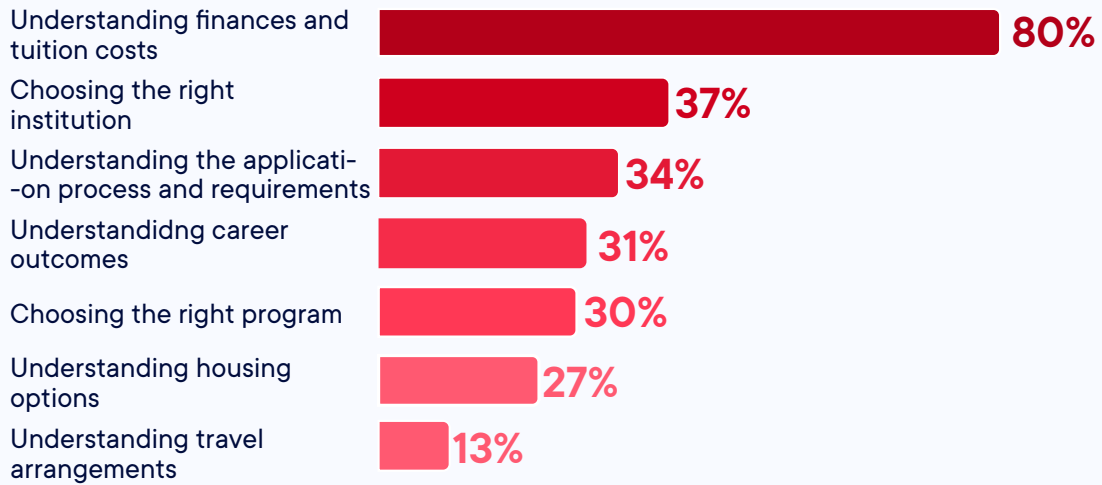
What was challenging when you were deciding which school/program to enroll at?



The top challenges when deciding remain the same as when researching schools. A majority (61%) continue to cite understanding finances and tuition costs to be a challenge, followed by 49% citing choosing the right institution, and 43% saying understanding career outcomes.



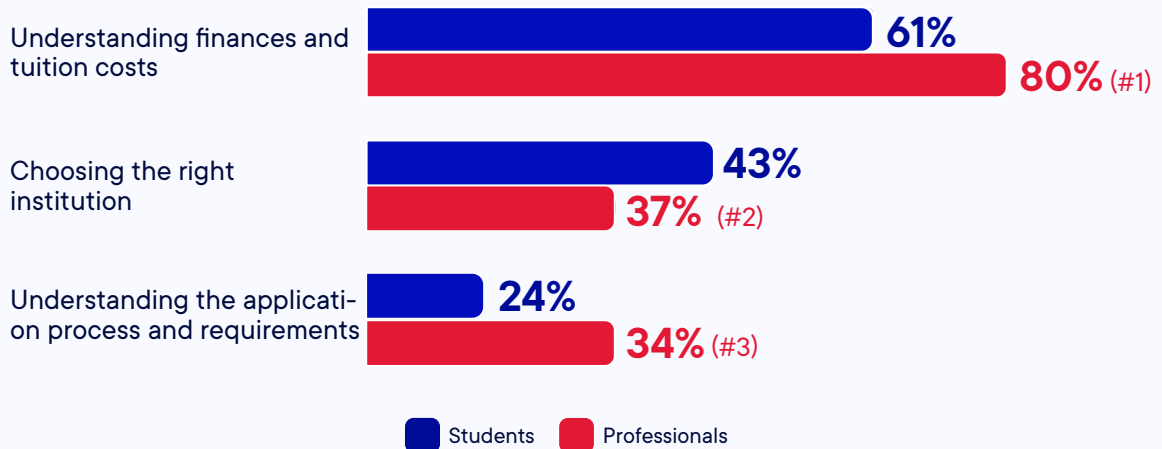
What do you believe are the **most challenging** aspects of **deciding** which school or program to enroll in for international graduate students?



For professionals, a majority (80%) cite understanding finances and tuition costs as a key challenge. This is followed by 37% who selected choosing the right institution, and 34% for understanding the application process/requirements.

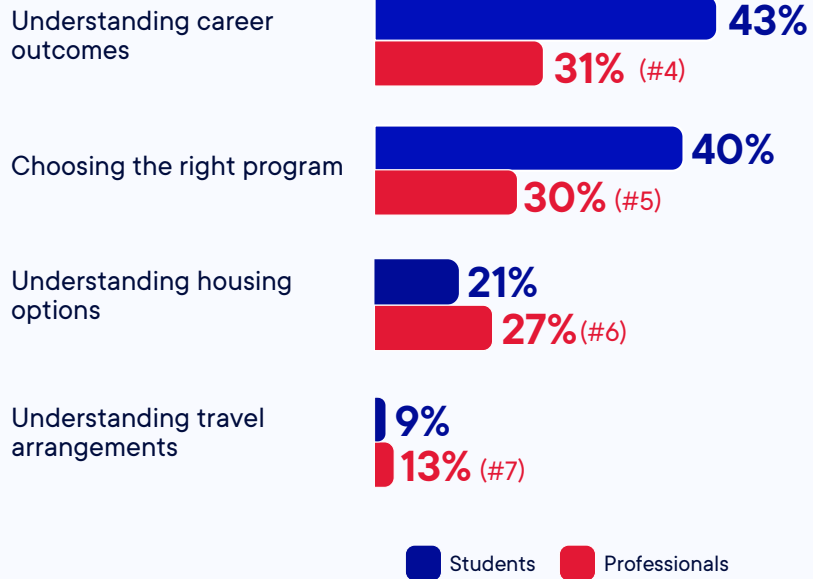
The top challenges are consistent across the research phase and decision phase. This suggests an opportunity to continuously educate students and relieve their concerns along the entire admissions journey.

What are the most challenges for graduate students?





What are the most challenges for graduate students?





Most helpful resources during the decision phase

Students shared the most helpful resources during the decision phase.

What was helpful when you were deciding which school/program to attend?



66% of students found university websites helpful, followed by 55% citing current students or alumni at the school, and 34% citing general internet search. These responses are also consistent with those cited for helpful resources during the research phase.



What do you believe are the most helpful resources for international graduate students when **deciding** on which school/program to attend?



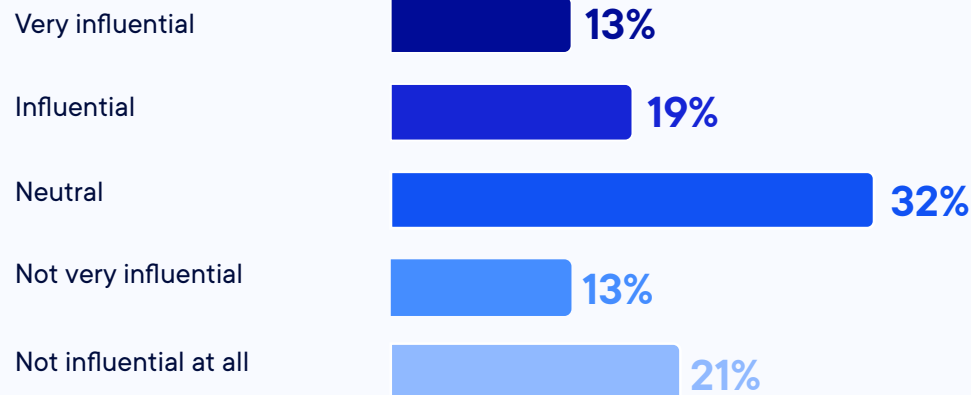
The responses are less consistent across phases for professionals. 64% of professionals cited email, 62% cited current student or alumni, and 60% cited university admissions office.



Parental influence

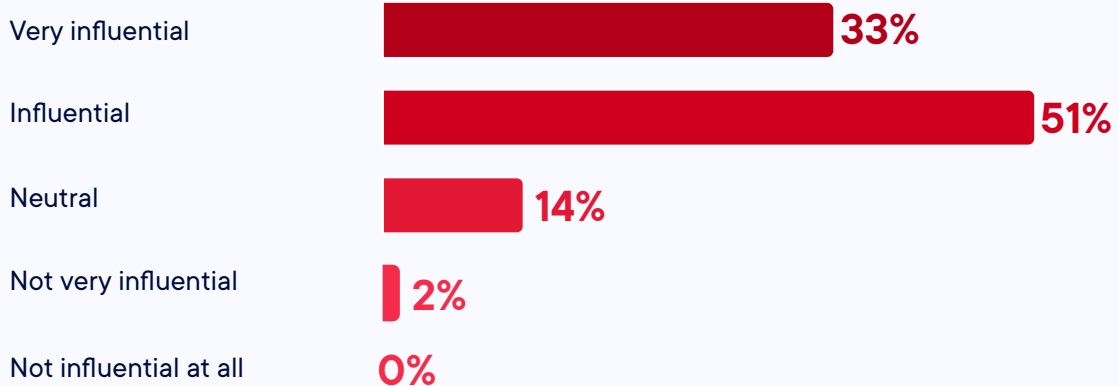
As young adults, graduate international students may still be impacted by parental influence.

How influential were your parents and family members in your choice of school?



Parental influence was largely neutral or not influential. 32% of students said it was neutral, with 34% saying it's not very influential or not influential at all. Only around a third of respondents (32%) said their parents were somewhat or very influential in their choice of school.

How influential do you think international graduate students' parents and family members were in their choice of school/program to enroll in?



In contrast, professionals largely thought (84%) parents were influential or very influential.

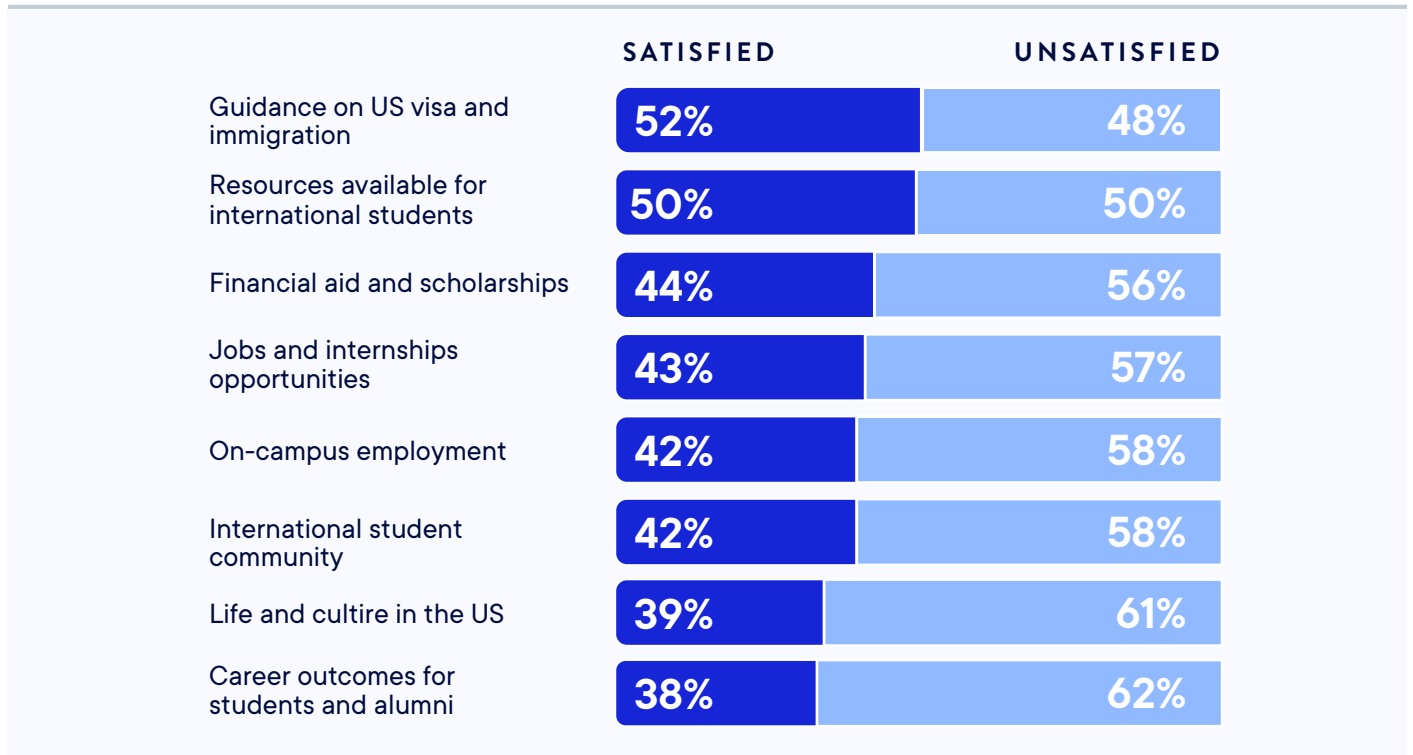
This suggests that graduate international students may be more independent in their decision making than professionals expect. That being said, a limitation to consider is that the student and professional respondents do not all come from the same institutions. Sampling and institutional differences must be considered.



Satisfaction with information

Keeping prospective international graduate students informed on key topics along the admissions journey is crucial.

Overall, did you receive satisfactory information from the admissions office on these topics?



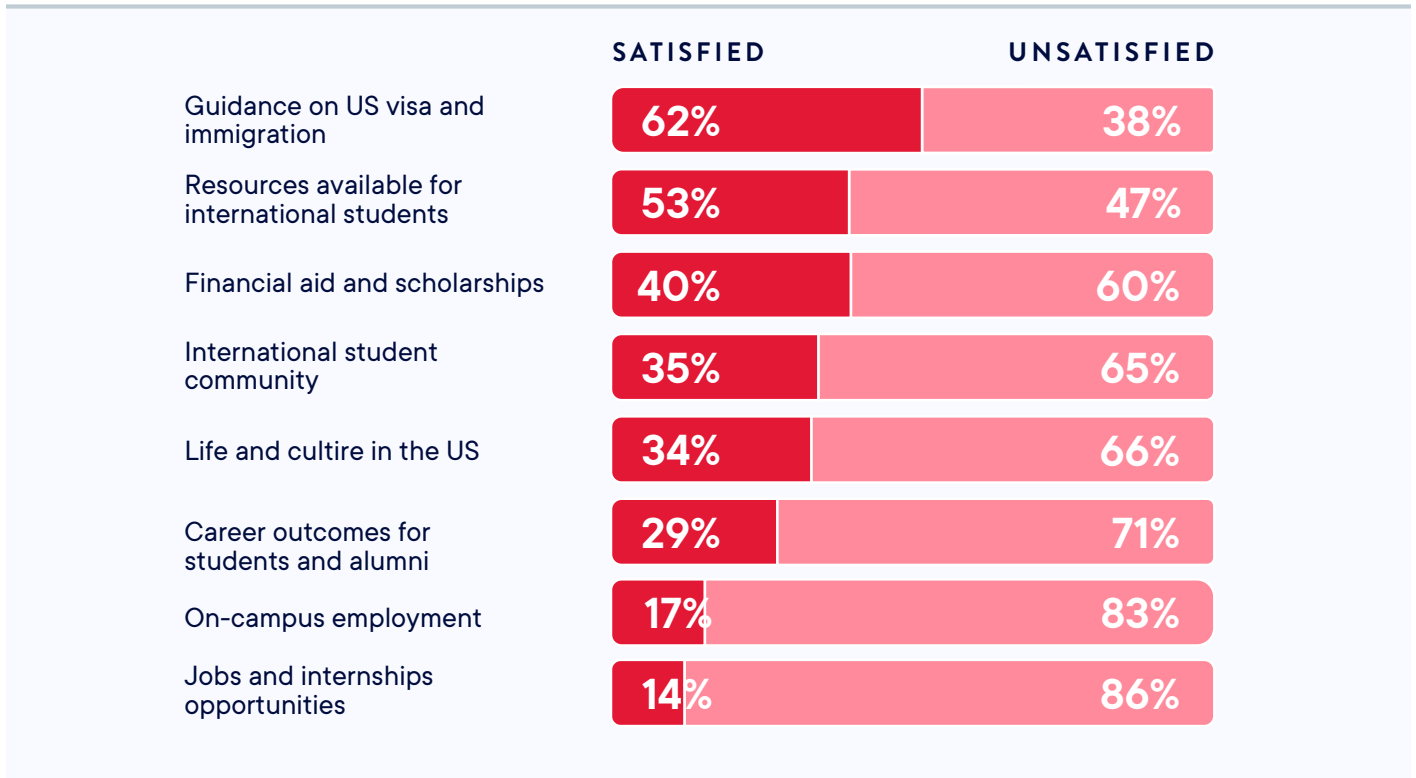
A majority (52%) of students cited guidance on visa and immigration as satisfactory, followed by 50% satisfied with information on resources available for international students, and 44% satisfied with information on financial aid scholarships.

The two areas where students are least satisfied are information on career outcomes for students and alumni (38%) and on life and culture in the U.S. (39%).

Understanding career outcomes has implications on other top challenges: choosing the right program or institution, and understanding finances and scholarships. With better employment opportunities being the top driver for international graduate students leaving their home countries and choosing the U.S. specifically, understanding career outcomes is a critical piece in calculating the true cost and return on investment of their education.



Which of the following topics do you think international graduate students receive satisfactory information on throughout the admissions journey?



62% of professionals cited guidance on U.S. visa and immigration as satisfactory, followed by 53% citing satisfaction with information on resources available for international students, and 40% citing satisfaction with information on financial aid scholarships.

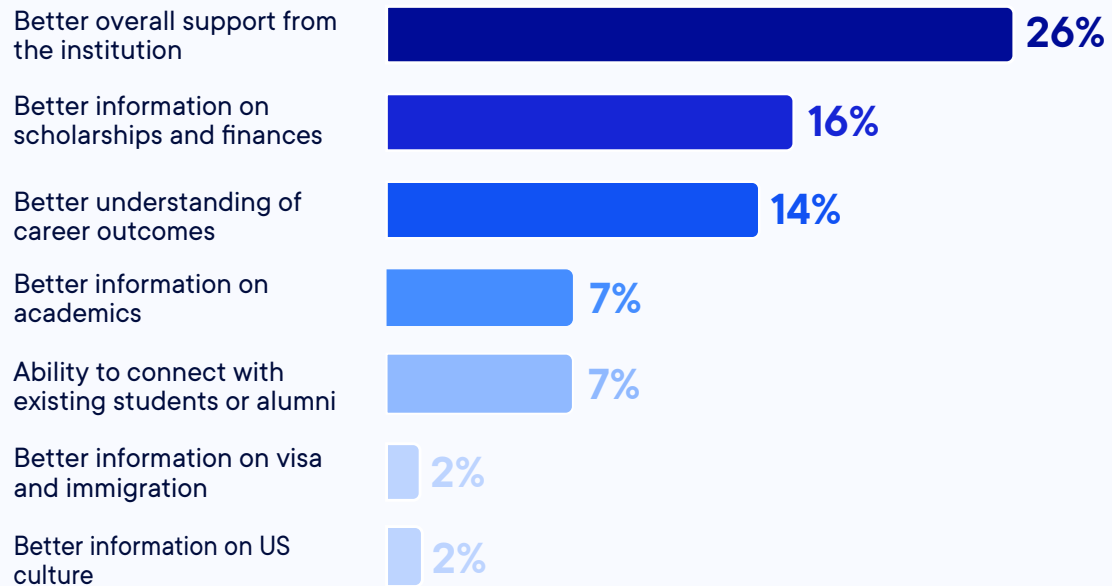
Professionals and students are aligned on the low satisfaction on information around information on internships and employment. This is interesting, because in earlier questions, professionals typically underestimated the challenge of understanding career outcomes.



Factors influencing international students' choice of institution

Ultimately, students will choose one institution to enroll at and institutions need to convert enough international students to meet enrollment goals. In making a decision, certain factors have more weight than others.

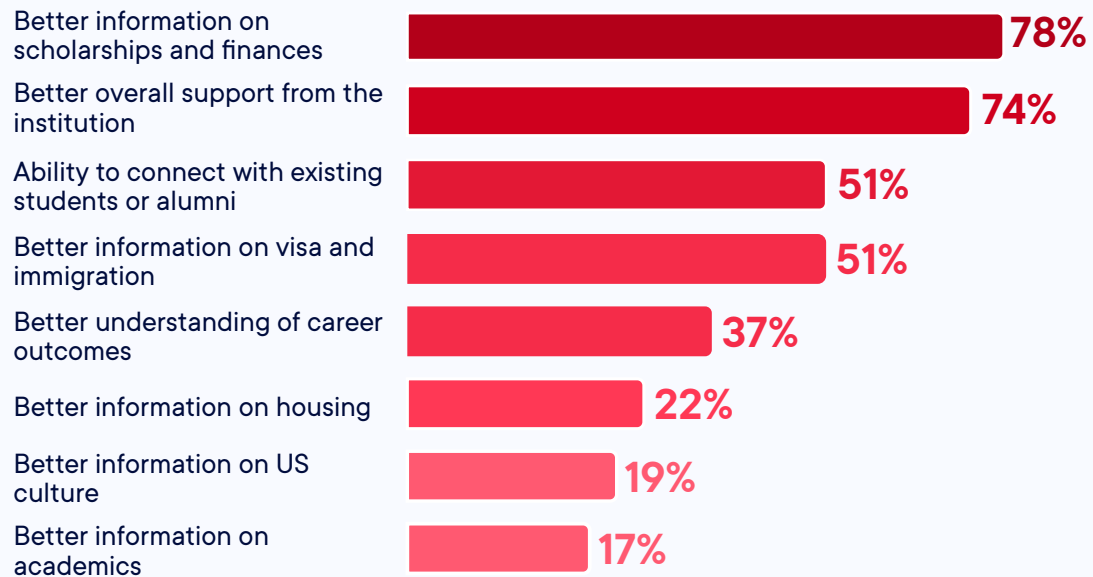
Which of the following would have influenced your choices of institutions during the admissions process?



26% of students cited better overall support from the institution as something that would have influenced their choice of institutions, followed by better information on scholarships and finances (16%) and better understanding of career outcomes (14%).



Which of the following do you consider as a factor that would influence international graduate students' choice of institution to enroll in?



78% of professionals cited better information on scholarships and finances, 74% cited better overall support from the institution, and 51% cited the ability to connect with existing students and alumni, tied with better information on visa and immigration.

Overall support for international students is an opportunity for improvement. Institutions may consider the international student journey holistically and a strategy for graduate international students specifically.

Another important area for improvement is sharing better information on career outcomes, especially given the misalignment between professionals and students. While it is ranked fifth by professionals, it is ranked third by students as a more important factor.



International student peer connections

Across the admissions journey, international graduate students report how helpful speaking with other students and alumni is. Helpful resources like university websites and official communication are no replacement for candid, peer connections to show a personal perspective to life at a program and institution.

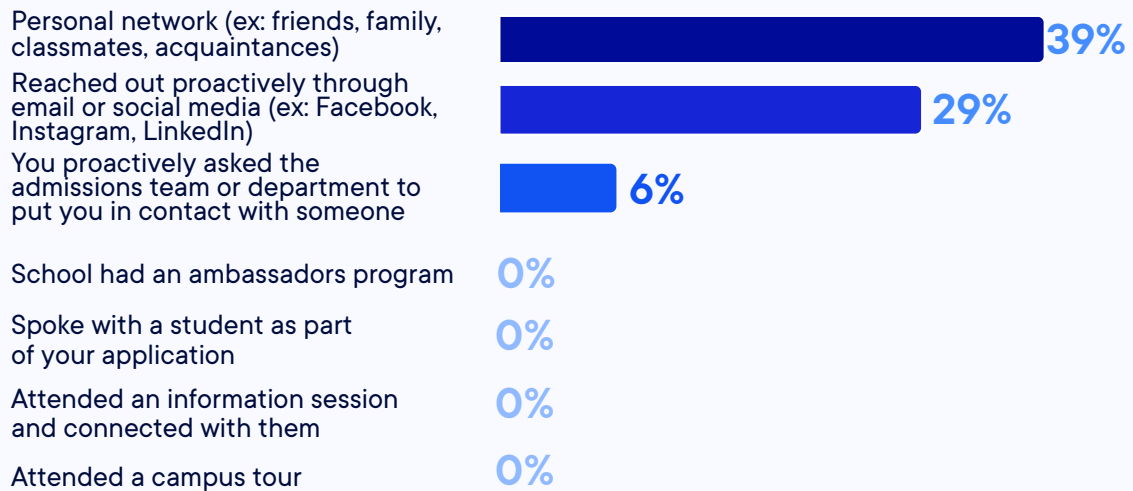
100% of student respondents reported having spoken to current students or alumni at universities. 89% of them were fellow international students, with 8% being domestic, and 3% not knowing.

Were those connections with fellow international students?





How did you know them?



Respondents connected with peers through their own personal network or initiative, rather than through university programming.

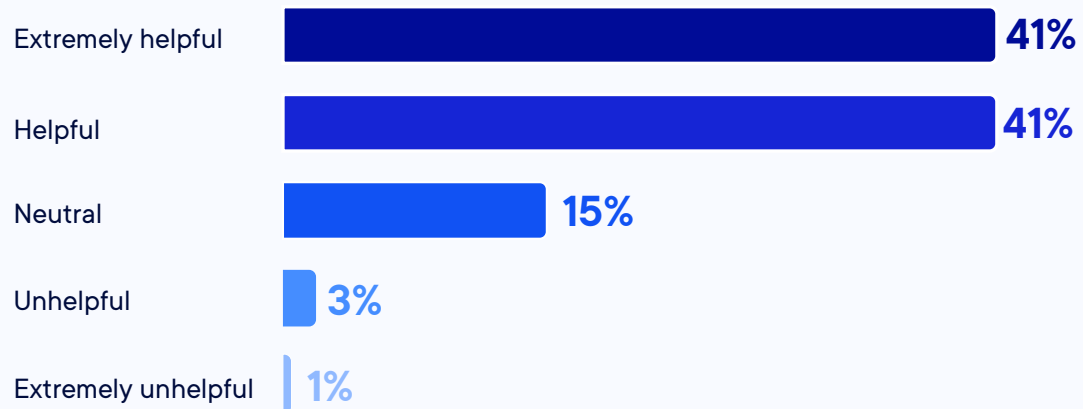
Does your school facilitate 1:1 connections between international graduate applicants or admitted students with enrolled international graduate students?



Among professional respondents, 45% work at institutions that facilitate one-on-one connections between prospective and enrolled international students.



How helpful was talking to a students or alum in your decision?



Speaking with students and alumni is overwhelmingly positive and influential in respondents' decision to choose a school they are enrolled at. Enrollment and admissions offices may consider implementing an ambassador program or another way to connect students.



How can the admissions experience for international students improve?

There are tremendous opportunities for universities and colleges to enhance the admissions experience for international students, and drive enrollment.

International students shared ideas on how the admissions experience could be improved.

Career outcomes



Give a true picture of employment prospects



Have more realistic job market reports for internationals.

Student Connections



They need to conduct more programs for students to connect and interact with each other



Build connection between candidates and alumni



I would like the University to emphasize the spread and awareness of student scholarships



More realistic funding information

Support



Every individual case is unique depending on their country and prerequisites, individual help should be offered for more specific information and advice



Professionals also shared initiatives they would like to see at their institutions.

Career outcomes

“

More guidance on OPT and CPT

“

We need to get better at keeping data on international graduate students that complete our programs, so that we can provide more solid information to prospective students on recent grad accomplishments (jobs, doctoral program admission, etc.)

Student Connections

“

Better current student to prospective student connections.

“

Having a way to connect international alumni with international prospective students is important.

Funding

“

Give resources to help students find housing and understand costs.

“

We need clearer available scholarships, GAs, TAs, and guidelines on how international students can obtain these

Support

“

I'd like to see continued growth of dedicated staff positions for international student support at the recruitment/ admissions/enrollment phases.

“

We need...first an Associate Director of Intl Grad Admissions. We need to take part in professional development so we can better understand international students, we need to be meeting students where they are, if possible.



Conclusion

With international enrollment numbers rising, and universities looking to graduate and international recruitment to brace against the demographic cliff, now is a critical moment to understand the admissions experience of international graduate students – and identify means to better attract and convert students.

The areas of alignment between students and universities suggest priority areas to focus and improve on. The areas of misalignment may encourage universities to reflect on the existing strategies and priorities on campus.

While there are many challenges that are beyond a GEM professional's, or even an institutions' control – such as challenges around funding or visa denials – what's key is to identify the scope of influence that GEM professionals can have.

From better guidance on finances to understanding career outcomes, there is a huge opportunity for schools to enhance their marketing and communication with international graduate students in mind.



Interstride

Success beyond boundaries

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