

# The international graduate student admissions experience

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

APRIL 2023





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## About Interstride

Interstride is an ed-tech company that helps higher education institutions attract and retain international students. Interstride has partnered with over 170 colleges and universities in the U.S., supporting 80,000+ students and alumni in their international journey.

Interstride is introducing a new Admissions platform to help institutions engage, support, and convert international applicants.





## 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

International admissions is becoming more competitive than ever, and international students face unique challenges in pursuing higher education in the U.S. With students' needs and behaviors constantly evolving, graduate enrollment management (GEM) professionals must stay in touch to recruit and support them adequately.

**Do admissions leaders understand the issues with which international applicants and prospective students are struggling?** To answer this question, we compare and contrast admissions leaders' perceptions of international students' challenges with what international students themselves report.

The admissions journey is long, including researching schools, completing applications, and pre-arrival preparations regarding visas, finances, and more. For international students and their families, this is one of the most important decisions they will make. By identifying alignments and misalignments between GEM professionals and international students, possibilities emerge on how to better support international students.

The report aims to:

1. Understand the needs of graduate international prospects and applicants throughout the admissions journey.
2. Compare and contrast GEM professionals' perceptions of international students' admissions journey with their actual experiences.
3. Identify ways to support and engage international students better, and inspire action to make those changes.

With the rebound of international student enrollment to pre-pandemic levels, and the continued growth of graduate students in particular, **there has never been a more exciting or crucial time for GEM professionals to understand and support their students.**



## Key findings:

### 01

Graduate international students found navigating finances and tuition (58%), visa and immigration (46%), and choosing the right institution (45%), to be their top challenges during the admissions process.

### 02

GEM professionals are mostly aligned, although more of them believe finances (89%) and immigration (79%) to be top challenges than international students themselves cite. 48% also believed understanding the application process to be a top challenge.

### 03

GEM professionals **overestimate** the challenge of understanding the application process and **underestimate** the challenge of choosing the right institution and program.

### 04

Graduate international students relied on university websites (61%), general internet searches (48%), and the university's admissions office (47%), as their top resources during the admissions process.

### 05

GEM professionals predominantly use online channels such as emails (98%), websites (92%), and webinars (80%) to engage international applicants.



## 06

University professionals **overestimate** the reliance on college fairs and **underestimate** the reliance on the internet.

## 07

Students overwhelmingly (40%) relied on ranking websites for admissions research.

## 08

Better information on a few key topics, such as scholarships and finances, and overall support, may have an influence on students' choice of institutions.

## 09

Graduate international students and university professionals both have vested interests and ideas on how to improve the admissions process.

## Recommendations

- Offer more resources and support for international students on navigating finances and tuition, and visa and immigration.
- Offer students a vision of their education from beginning to end. This means painting a picture of their international education journey from before they apply, to their educational experience, to career outcomes and life after the program.
- Make international students' admissions experience a strategic priority. Delegate someone to own that experience.

# Methodology

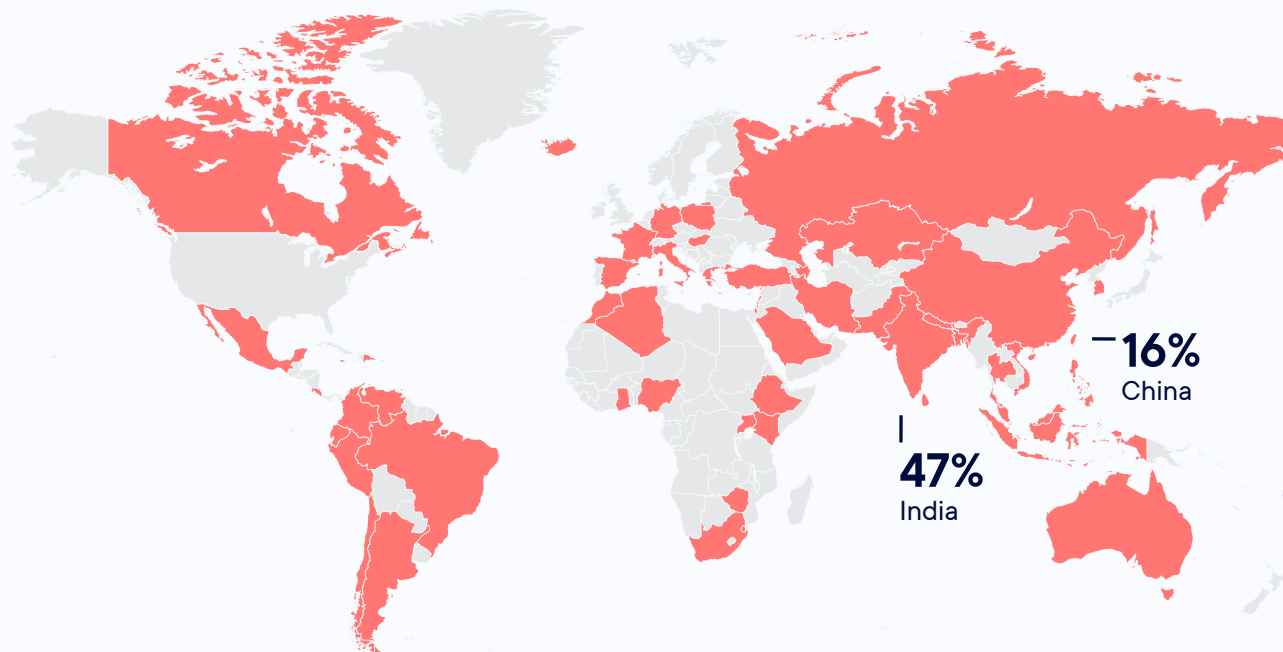
To understand graduate international students' admissions experience and GEM professionals' perception of that experience, we gave both cohorts the same survey questions.

In August 2022, Interstride surveyed 345 international graduate students studying in the U.S. about their admissions experience. In December 2022, Interstride surveyed 84 NAGAP members who are GEM professionals about their understanding of the admissions experience for international students.

The student respondents come from 56 unique countries, with the most representation from India (47%), followed by China (16%), Taiwan (4%), Nigeria (3%), Mexico (2%), and South Korea (2%). Most of the respondents are master's students (82%), with the remainder pursuing doctoral degrees (18%).

What is your nationality?

**345** Students **56** Countries



**82%**  
Master's

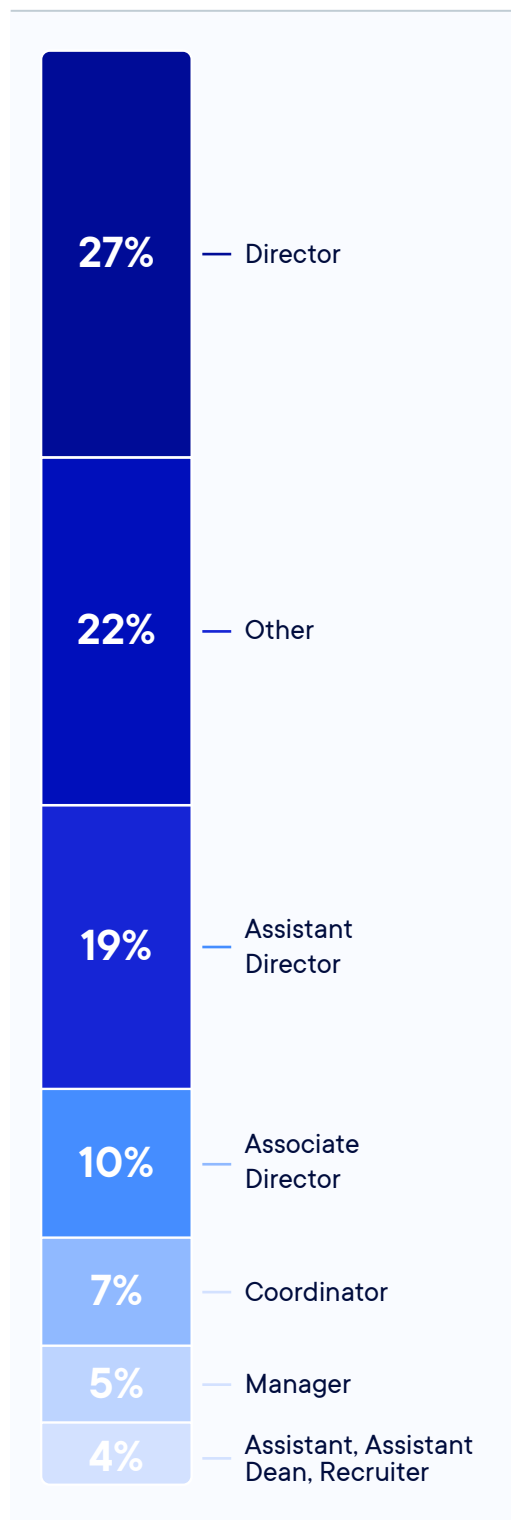
**18%**  
Doctorate



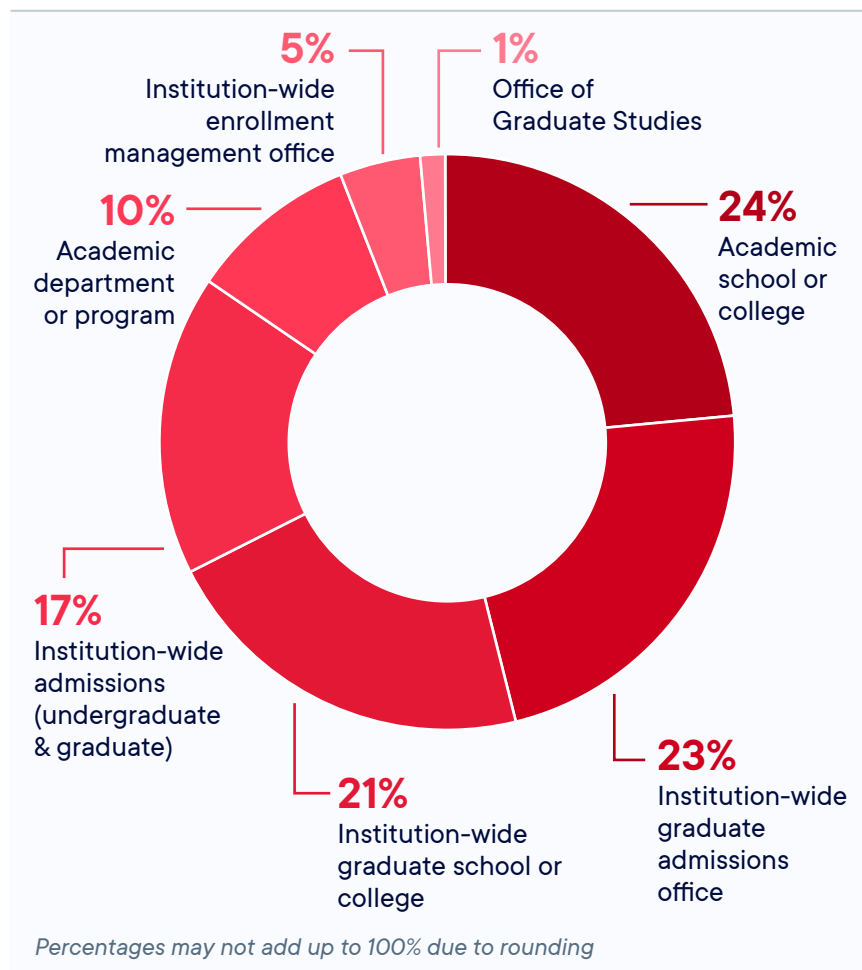


NAGAP GEM professional respondents reported working primarily in recruitment, admissions, and enrollment (91%). Within those functions, they presented a diversity of roles, come from a variety of offices, and work at a mix of private (54%) and public universities (46%).

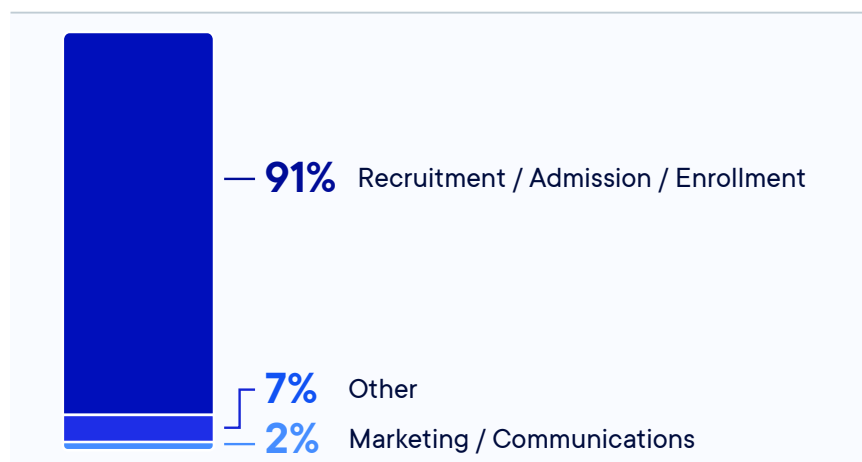
### What is the level of your role?



### In which office or unit on campus do you work?



### In which office or unit on campus do you work?



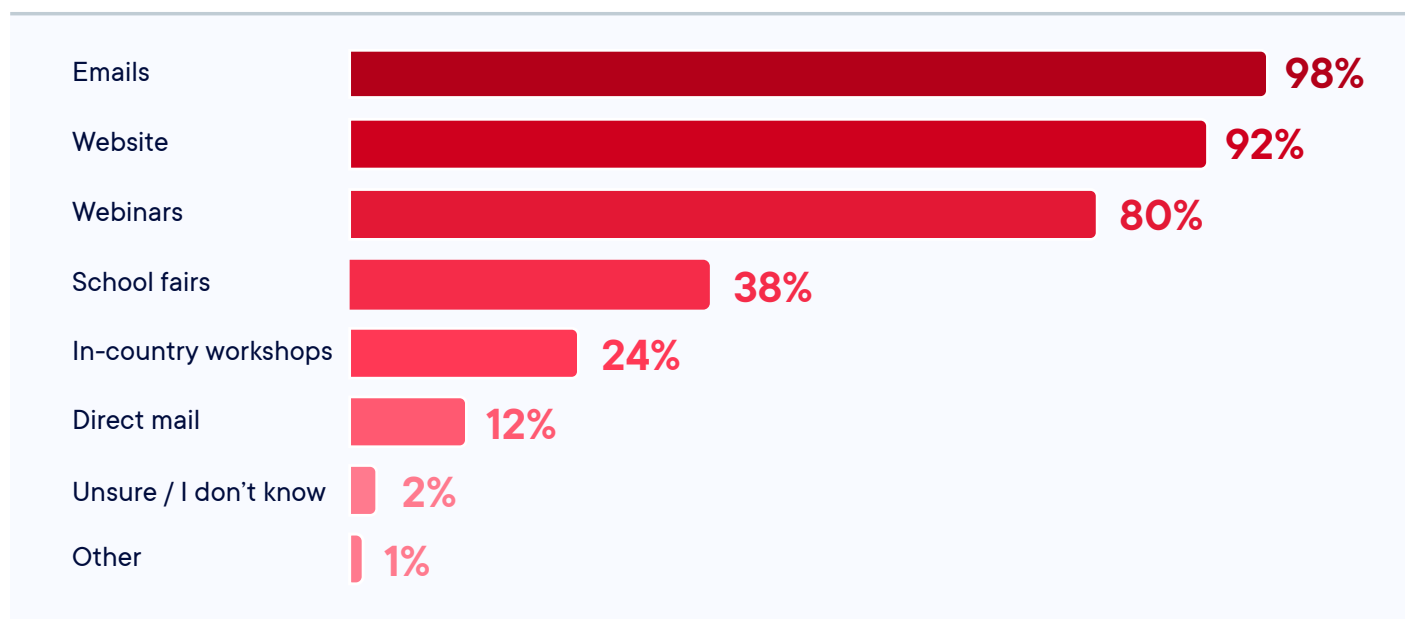
# Research Results

## How are you engaging your 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. GEM professionals rely on a number of ways to engage international applicants, but only a few truly stand out. Almost all professionals use email (98%) and the university website (92%) to engage international applicants. Eighty percent (80%) of respondents report using webinars.

The top three channels are all online, allow students to self-serve, and offer direct communication between students and the university. In contrast, the three methods that trail behind – school fairs, in-country workshops, and direct mail – rely on in-person presence.

How are you engaging your international applicants?

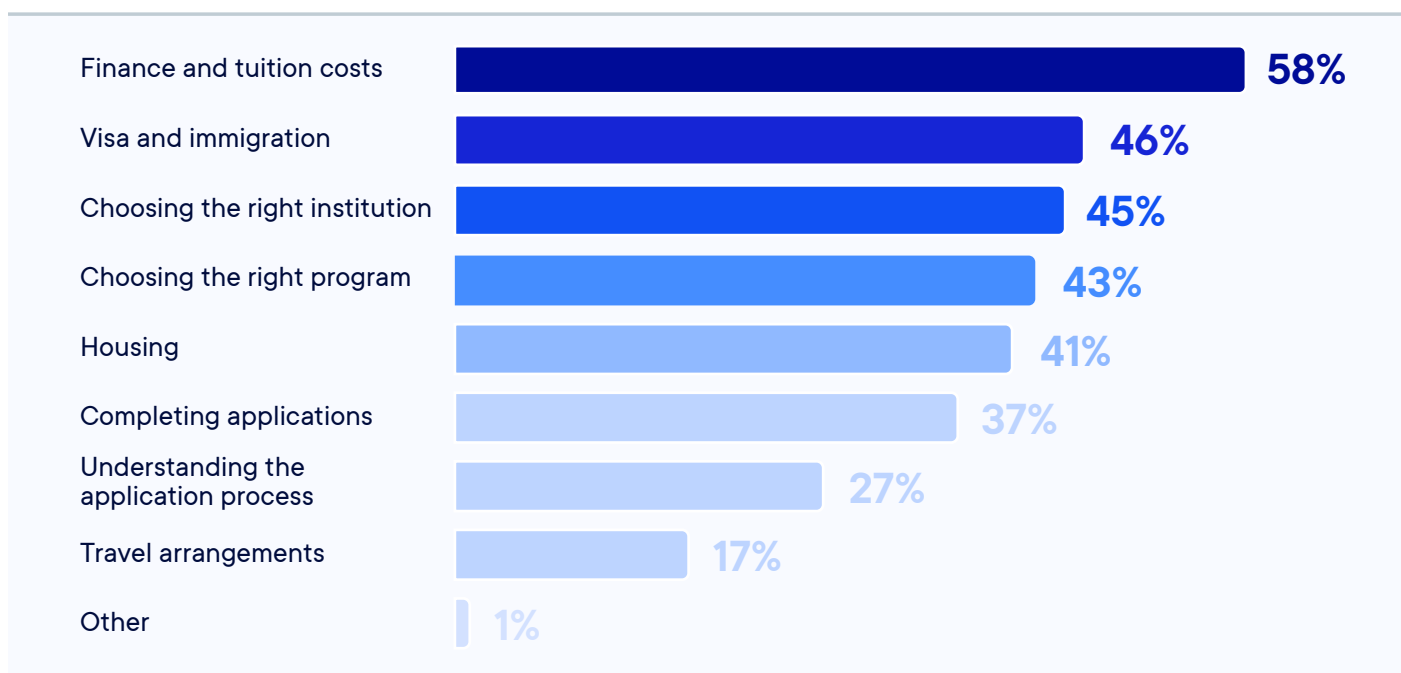




## What were the most challenging aspects of the admissions process?

International students face a host of challenges when navigating the admissions process. It is a lengthy process that starts from when they begin to research institutions and continues all the way to preparing for matriculation.

What were the most challenging aspects of the admissions process?



**The top three challenges revolve around logistics and finding the right fit.**

Navigating finances and tuition was a challenge for 58% of respondents, followed by visa and immigration for 46%, and choosing the right institution for 44% of students.

Some respondents elaborated on **navigating school finances**:

“ Difficulty in locating funds for tuition.

“ Finding tuition support as an MS student is the most challenging part.

“ Tuitions are very expensive since there is no funding for master's students.

“ Most difficult was getting my finances as there were not many options available. I am currently on 40% scholarship with 60% student loans which makes me nervous especially as we are heading toward a recession.

“ Applications are overly expensive specifically for international students. Plus the cost of taking and sending GRE/TOEFL scores to each university adds an additional expense of ~200\$ per university.



### Some elaborated on **navigating visa and immigration**:

“ Visa interview is the most challenging. It is uncertain and unpredictable even with legit I-20. I feel like visa officers can refuse to grant visa regardless of my doctoral degree pursue.

“ Visa process gave me goosebumps. Getting an appointment was really difficult.

“ The worst problem was the visa process during COVID and after the Ukrainian war started. The embassies in Russia are closed, so I had to travel for a visa to Kazakhstan in 2021. There were only two countries that accepted non-residents at the time, Kazakhstan and Thailand. It was expensive: apart from travels costs, I had to pay the agency to find an interview spot, it was absolutely impossible to find it myself. The whole process costed more than \$2000 for me and my spouse, and we weren't reimbursed by Harvard, even though I explicitly asked for that, since I am a first-gen student.

“ Visa appointments and understanding the finances associated with it.

### Some respondents elaborated on **choosing the right institution**. For many, selecting the right institution is intricately tied to the ability to finance their education, and the ROI and outcomes of that education:

“ Initially it was really challenging to narrow down all the colleges and then are thousands of [courses] being offered by every [institution].

“ With so many institutions it's really hard to decide which program is best suited and adds value based on the cost of the program.

“ Different [universities] had different [criteria] for applications, and their [website's] UI was not good either.

“ Finding the right program which matches the market value and my interests was the most important and difficult process.

“ Figuring out if the program would work best for my interests and if it will be a career that could lead to a good-paying job.

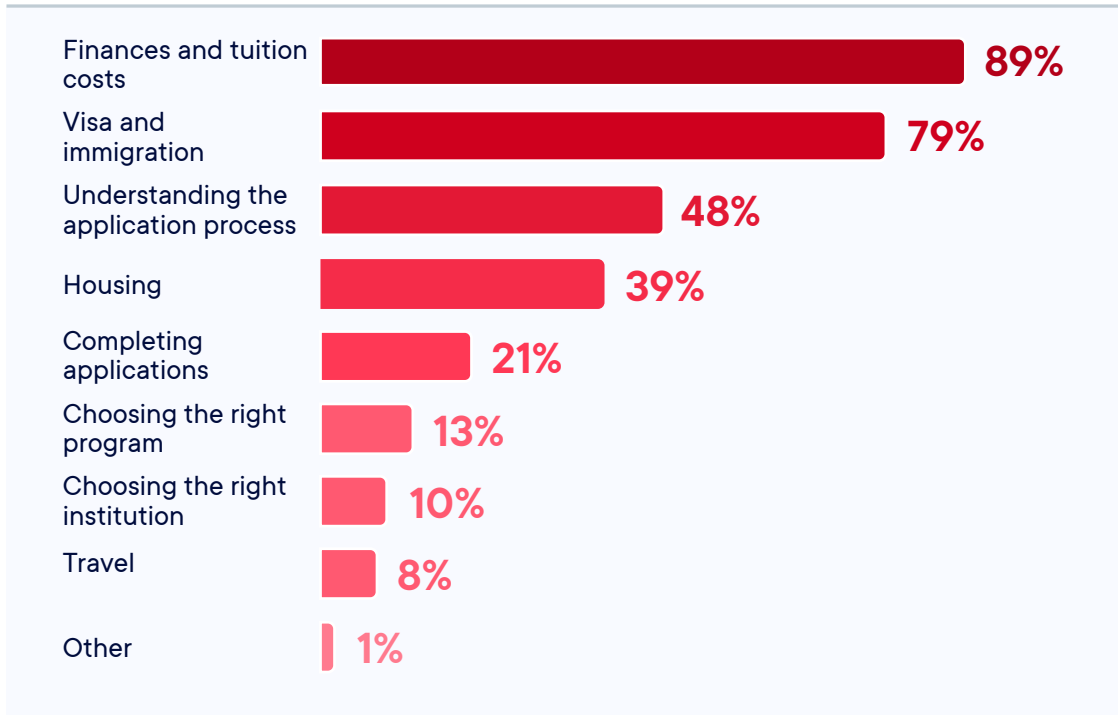
“ As an international student, I was looking for a program that will give me an advantage to stay back after program completion.

“ It's hard to accumulate information from different schools.

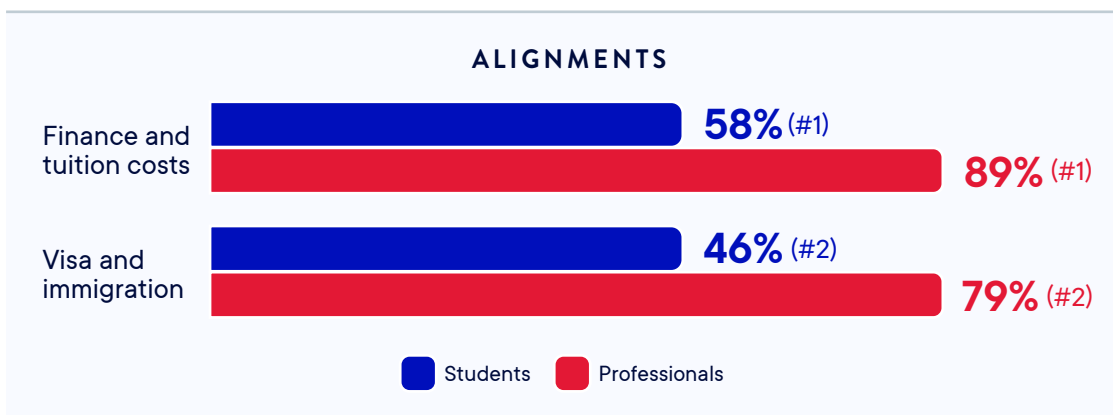
“ Don't know the program detail and [students'] feedback

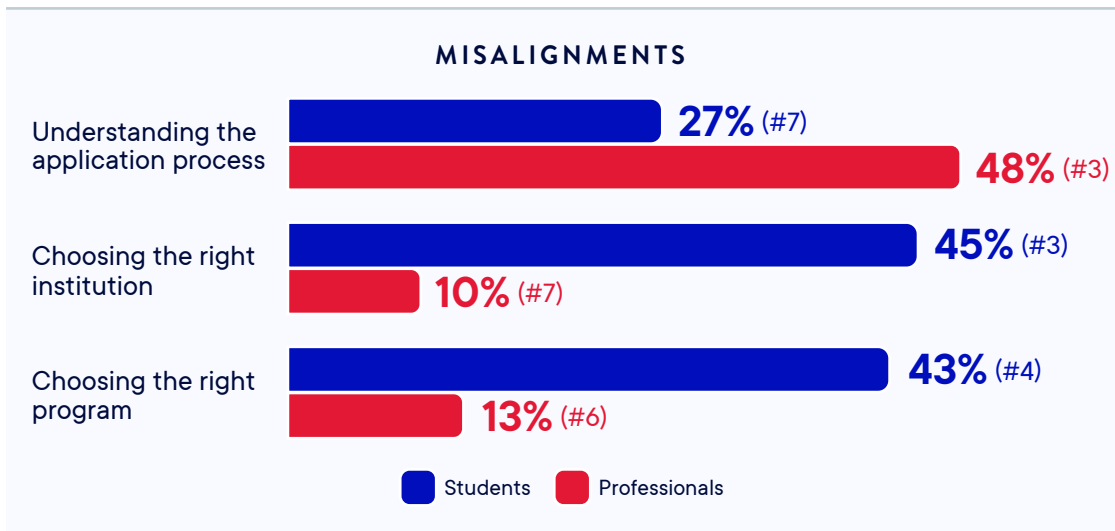
“ The major factor of my school search was scholarships. So, I struggled [with] finding one that suits me.

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



Students and professionals are aligned on the top two challenges, though more professionals than students cite them.





With the abundance of stellar universities and programs in the U.S., choosing the right fit can be challenging. The sheer amount of information to process and compare, and the importance of the decision, can be daunting. Financial challenges add to those for finding a school, such as its affordability and availability of financing for international students.

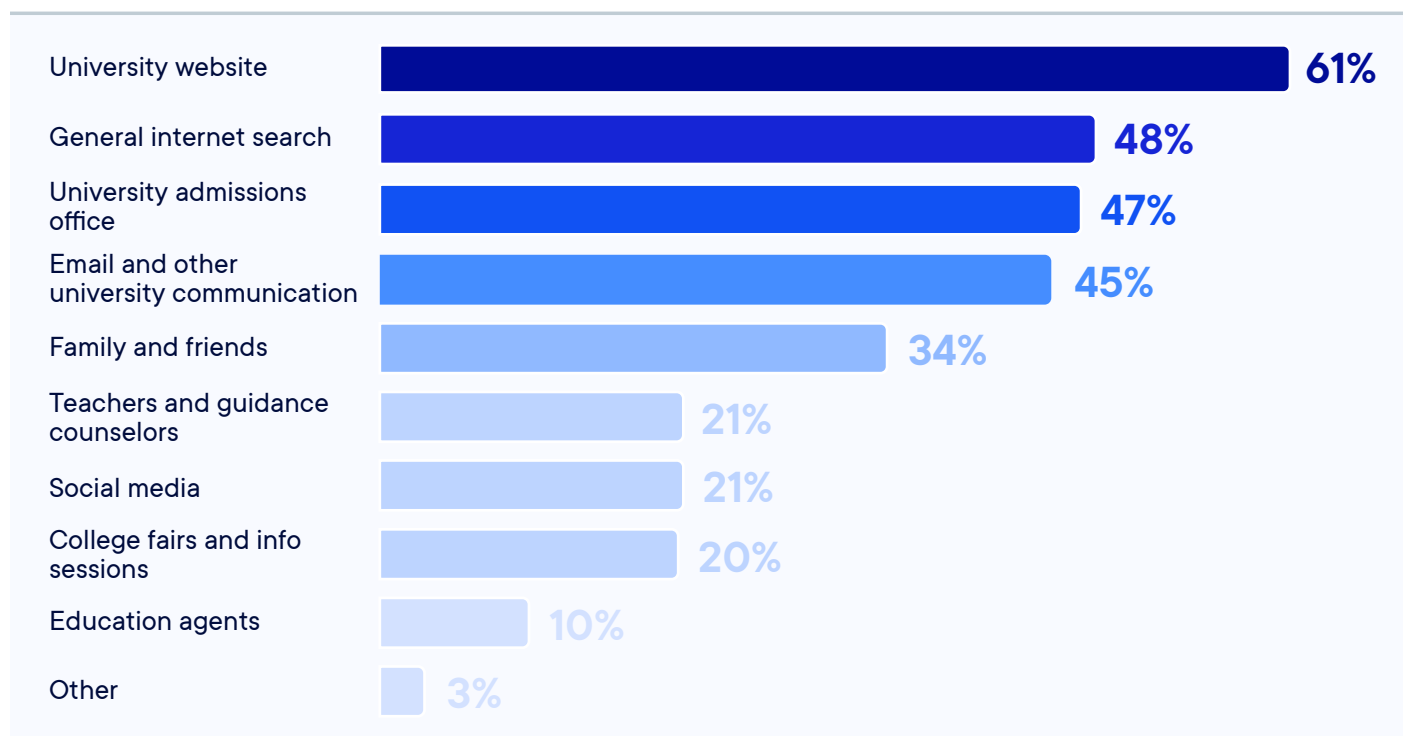
While understanding and completing the application process may be challenging, the process itself is relatively straightforward. Unlike other challenges, such as navigating finances or immigration, it has less ambiguity.



## What were the most helpful resources during the admissions process?

Faced with wide-ranging challenges, respondents rely on a variety of resources throughout the process.

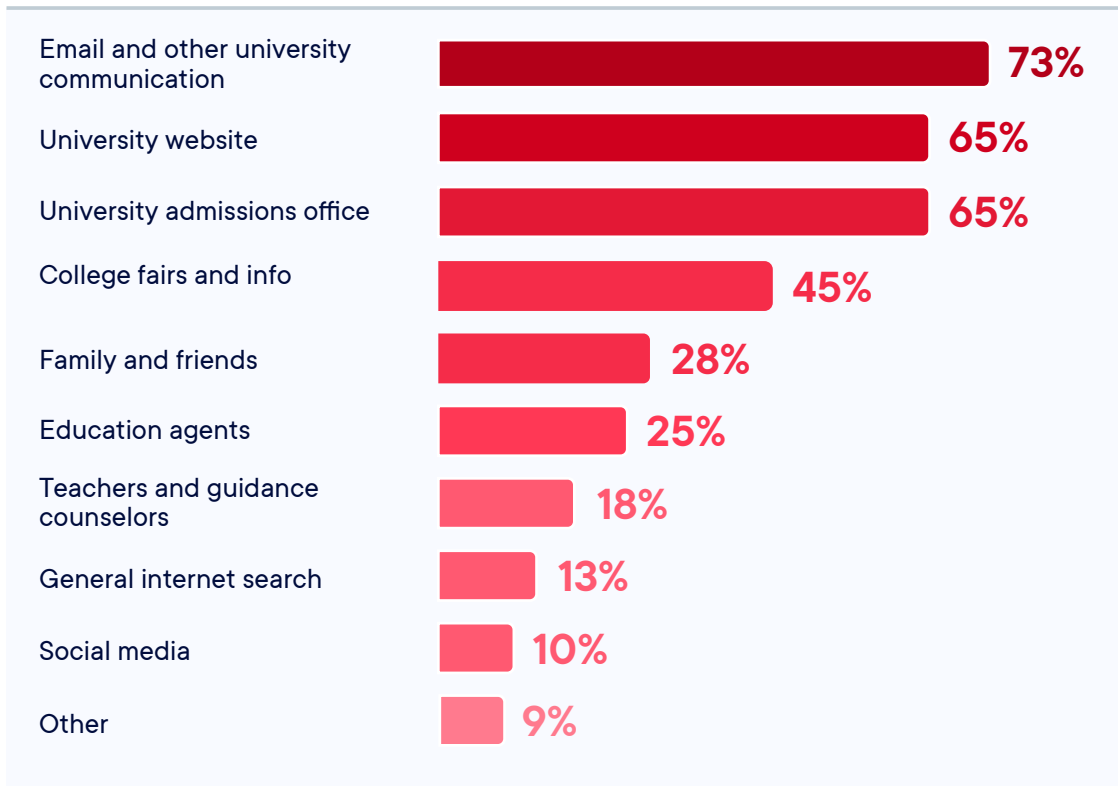
What were the most helpful resources during the admissions process?



Sixty-one percent (61%) of students cited university websites as helpful resources, followed by 47% citing general internet searches, and 47% citing the university's admissions office.

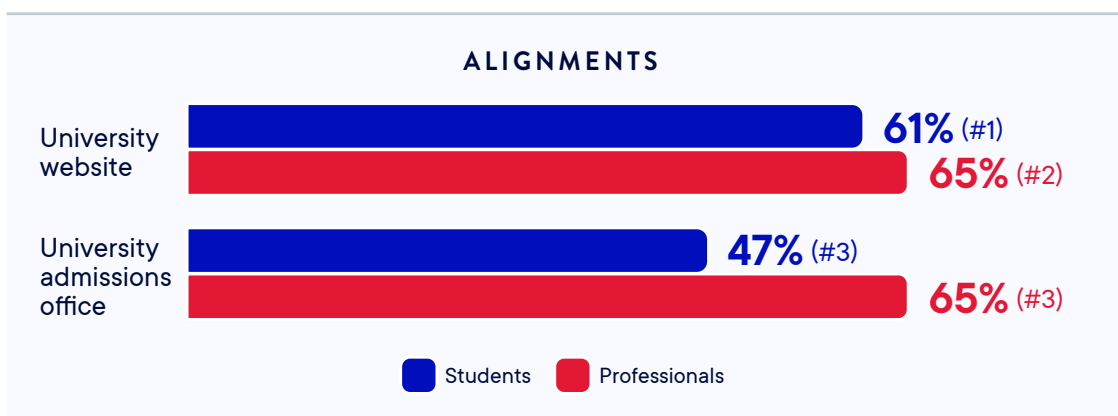


What do you believe are the most helpful resources during the admissions process for international students?



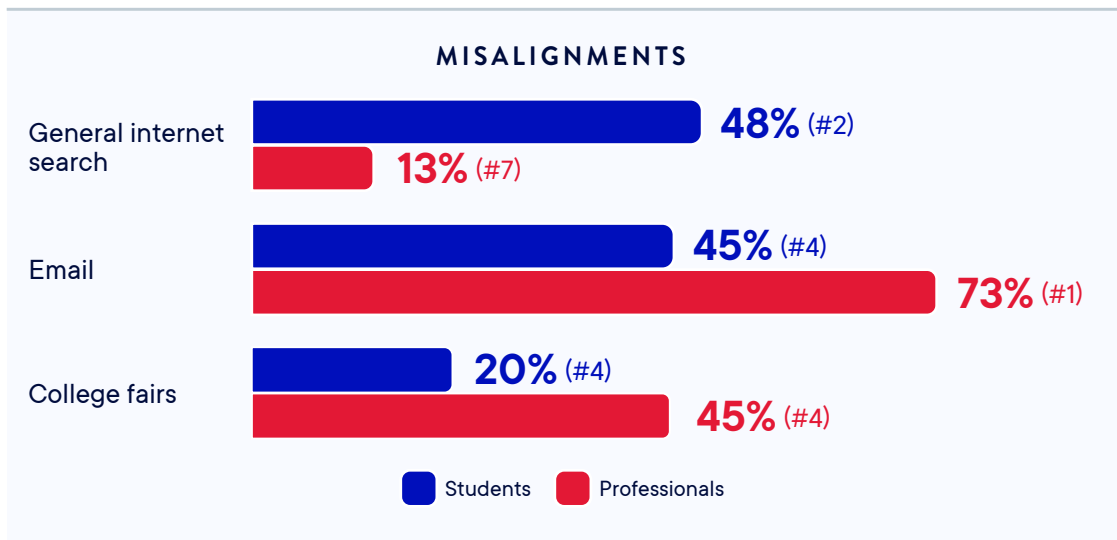
On the other hand, 73% of professionals cited email and other communication from the university as a top resource, followed by 65% citing the university website as well as the university admissions office, followed by 46% citing college fairs.

#### ALIGNMENTS





Students and professionals are aligned on the helpfulness of university websites and university admissions offices. This is consistent with research from QS which shows that international students overwhelmingly rely on university websites as the primary source of information.



Professionals underestimate students' reliance on the internet by a 35% difference. Despite GEM professionals mostly engaging international applicants digitally, they underestimate international students' reliance on online resources. International applicants are resourceful and rely on themselves and other sources to seek the information they need.

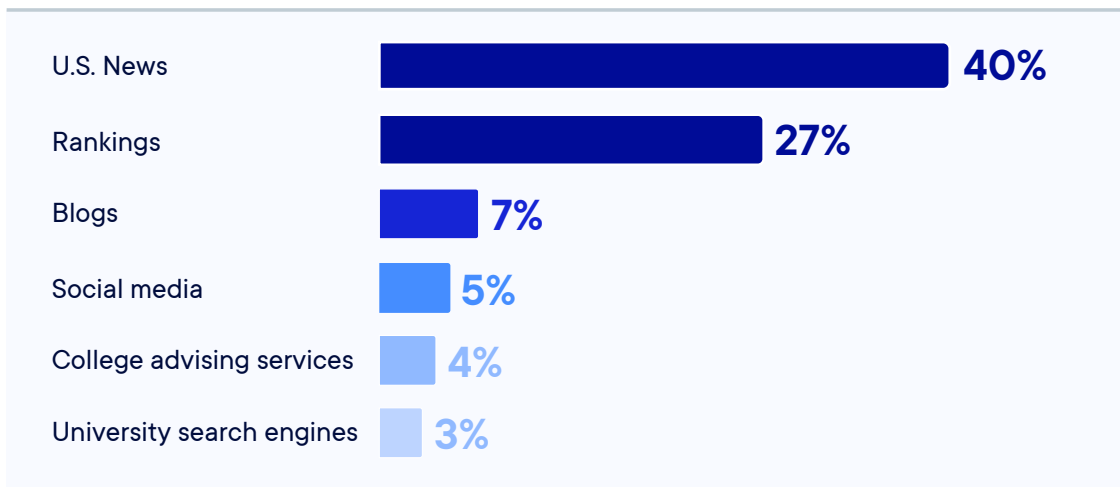
Professionals overestimate the reliance on college fairs by a 25% difference. While college fairs are a crucial component of recruitment and marketing, they offer a broader and more general view of the school. International students may be looking for more specific information, as evidenced by their top challenges.



## Which online resource did you rely most heavily on for admissions research?

Given students' reliance on the internet in general, what websites are they most likely to find helpful besides university websites?

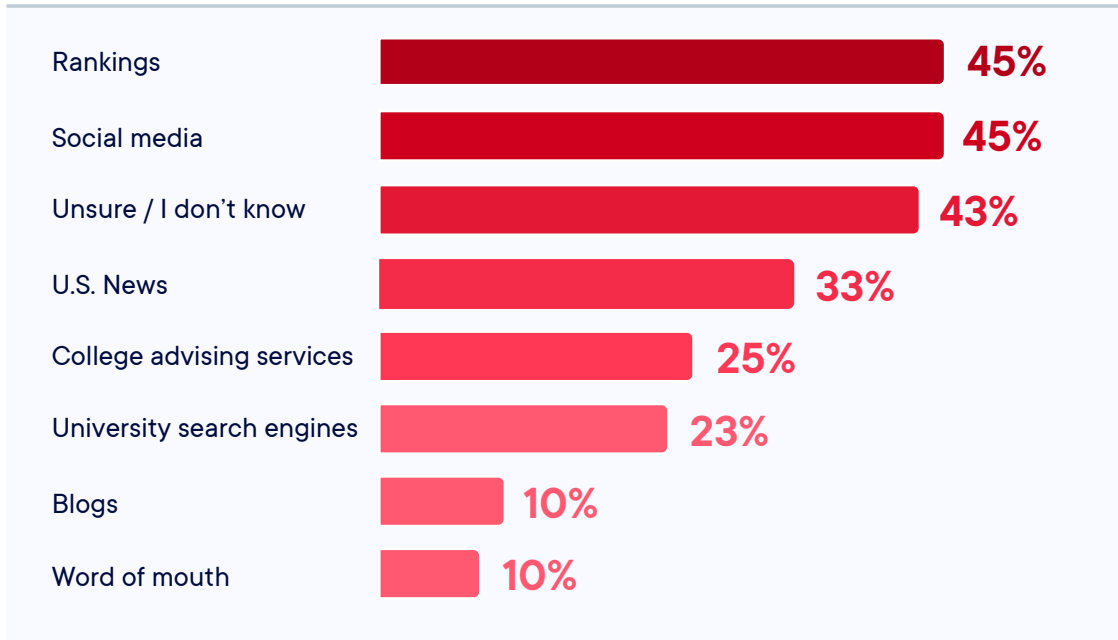
Which online resource did you rely most heavily on for admissions research?



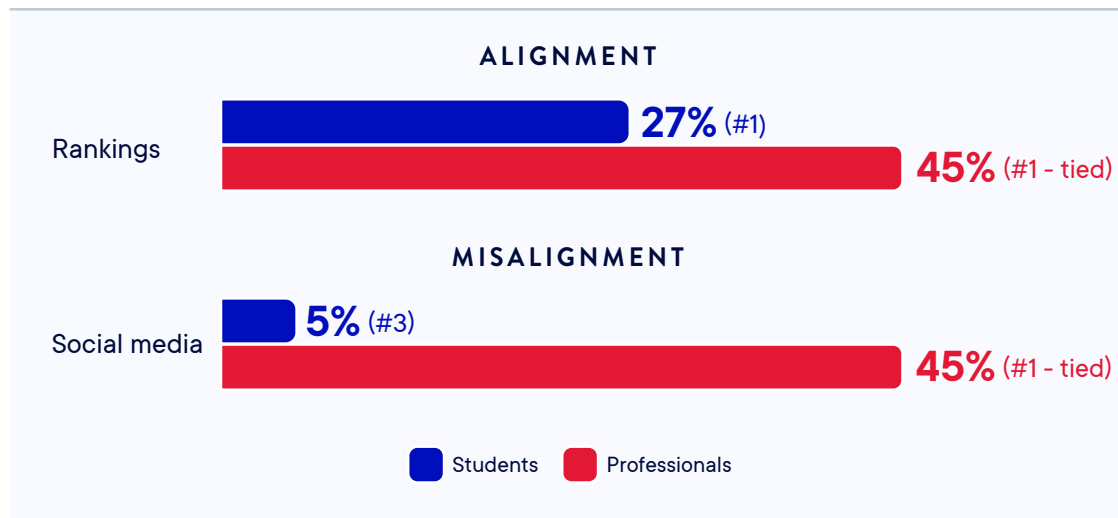
Students overwhelmingly relied on ranking websites, with 40% specifically citing U.S. News. Besides rankings, a small percentage of respondents relied on social media, and blogs like Poets&Quants.

Ranking websites may be helpful to students in researching and comparing institutions and programs, which are some of the top challenges. However, none of the top online resources address other important challenges that students report facing, including navigating financing, and visa and immigration. Students may be finding this information directly from the university's website and admissions office. It may also suggest a dearth of alternative, reliable information.

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



Rankings (45%) and social media (45%) were the top two resources that professionals identified as being relied on by students. Forty-three percent (43%) indicated they were unsure.





Professionals are aligned with students on the reliance on rankings, but overestimate the reliance on social media.

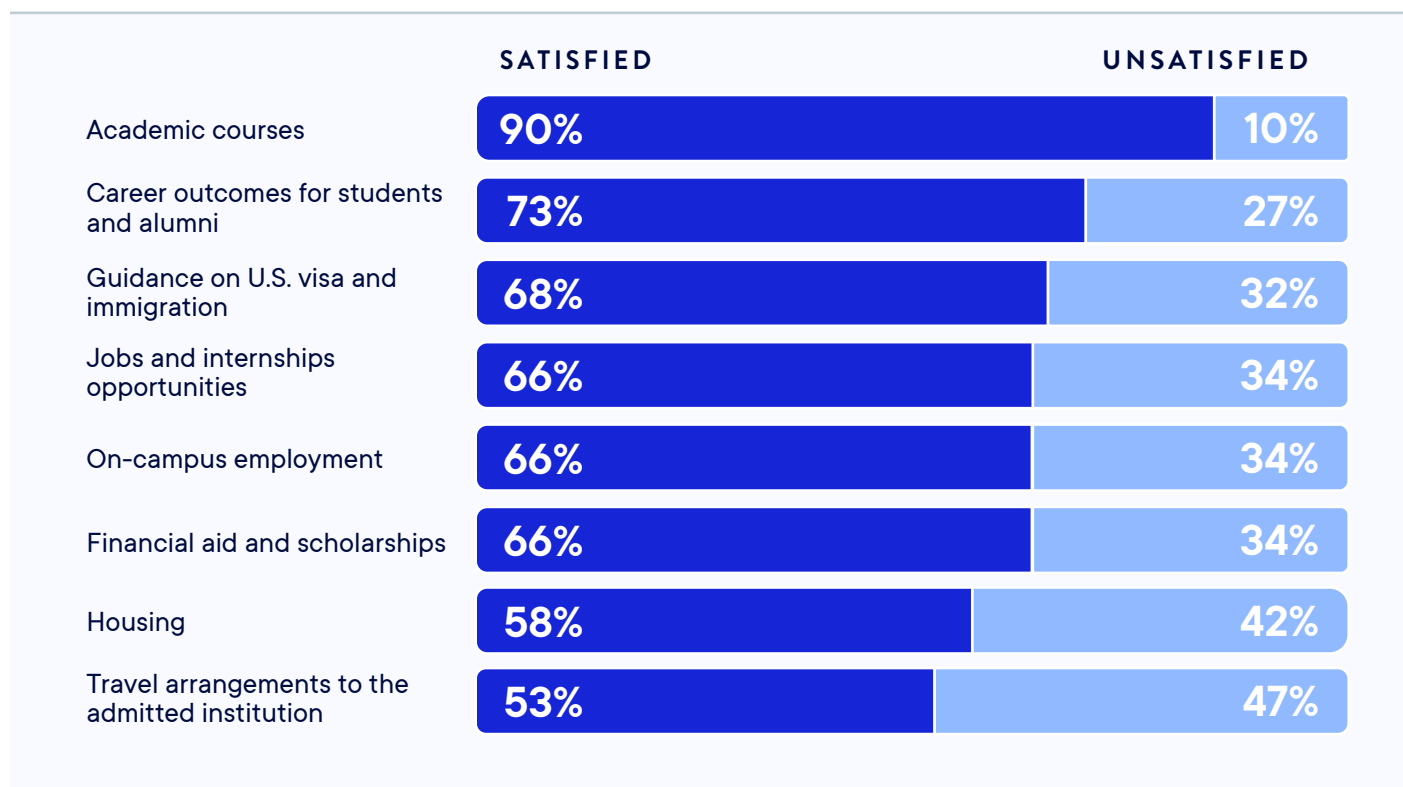
According to the **QS International Student Survey 2019**, 85% of the prospective international students polled use social media as part of the research process. Professionals understand the importance of social media, especially for Gen Z. The open-text nature of the question where social media was not explicitly listed as an option, the pervasiveness of social media, and the age difference for graduate students, may explain the discrepancy.



## Did you receive satisfactory information from the admissions office on the below topics?

International students were asked about their satisfaction with the information they received in a few key areas.

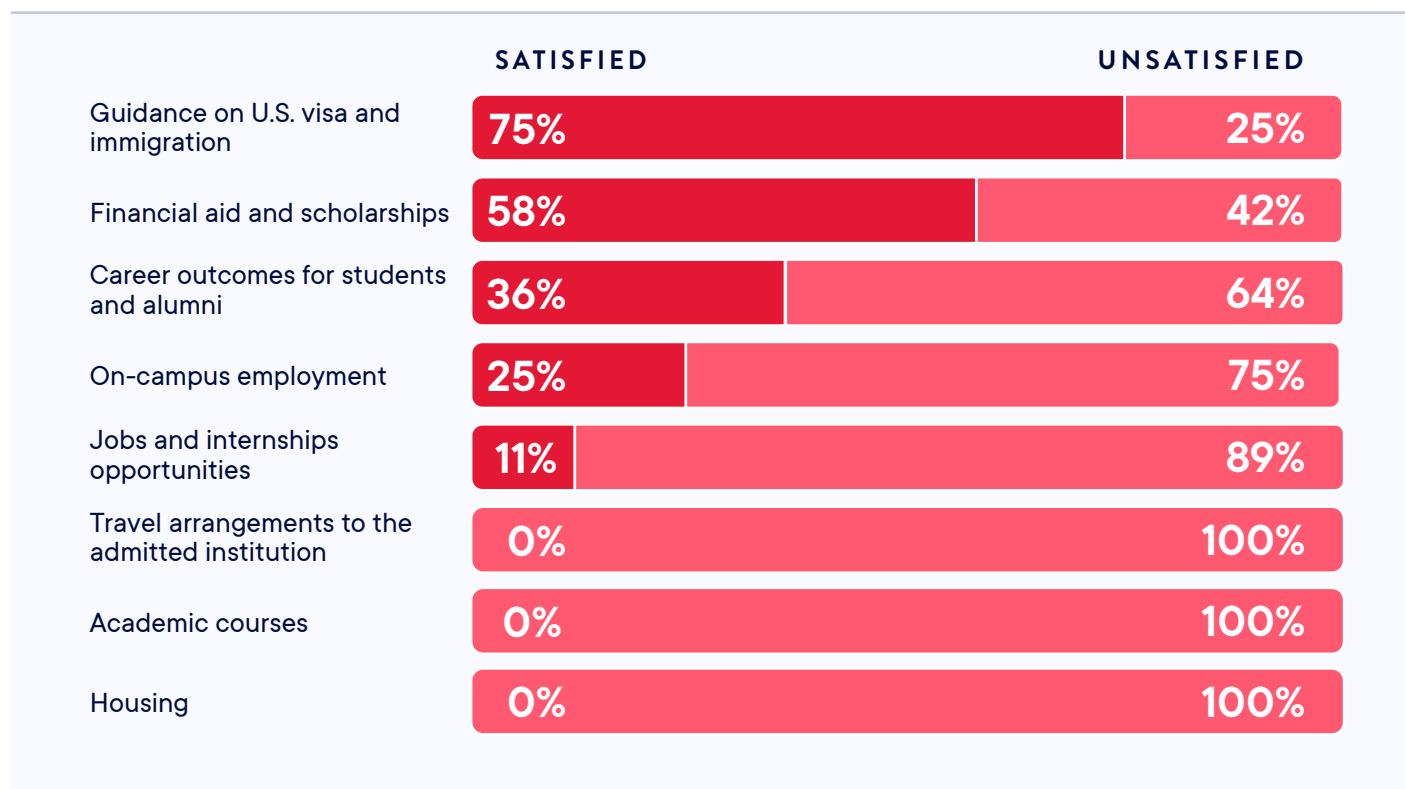
Did you receive satisfactory information from the admissions office on these below topics?



**Student satisfaction is generally positive.** Students are most satisfied with the information on academics (90%), followed by career outcomes (73%) and visa and immigration (68%). They are least satisfied with information on housing (58%) and travel arrangements (53%).



Which of the following topics do you think international students receive satisfactory information on from your admissions office?



Seventy-five percent (75%) of professionals think that international students are satisfied with information provided on visas and immigration, 58% think information on financial aid and scholarships is satisfactory, and 36% report satisfaction with information on career outcomes.

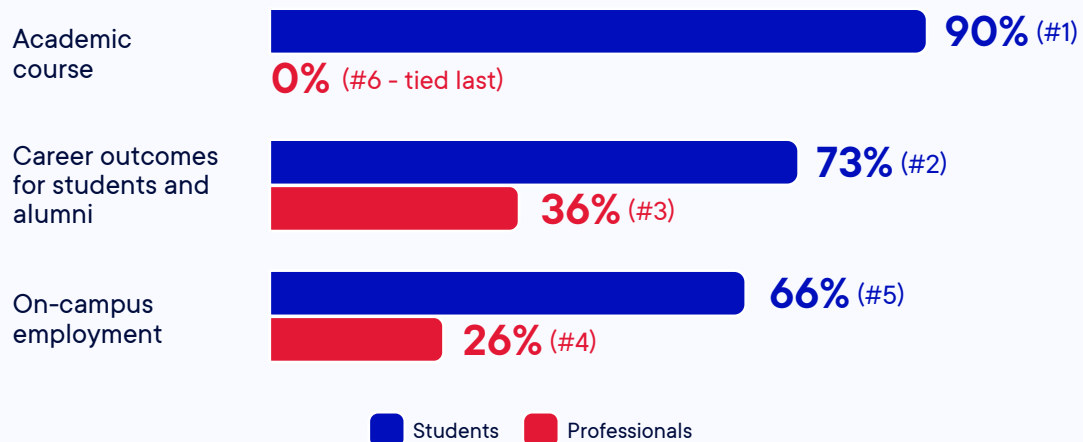


### ALIGNMENT



It is encouraging that most international students are satisfied with the information and support provided by universities on the topic of U.S. visas and immigration, which is one of their top challenges.

### MISALIGNMENTS



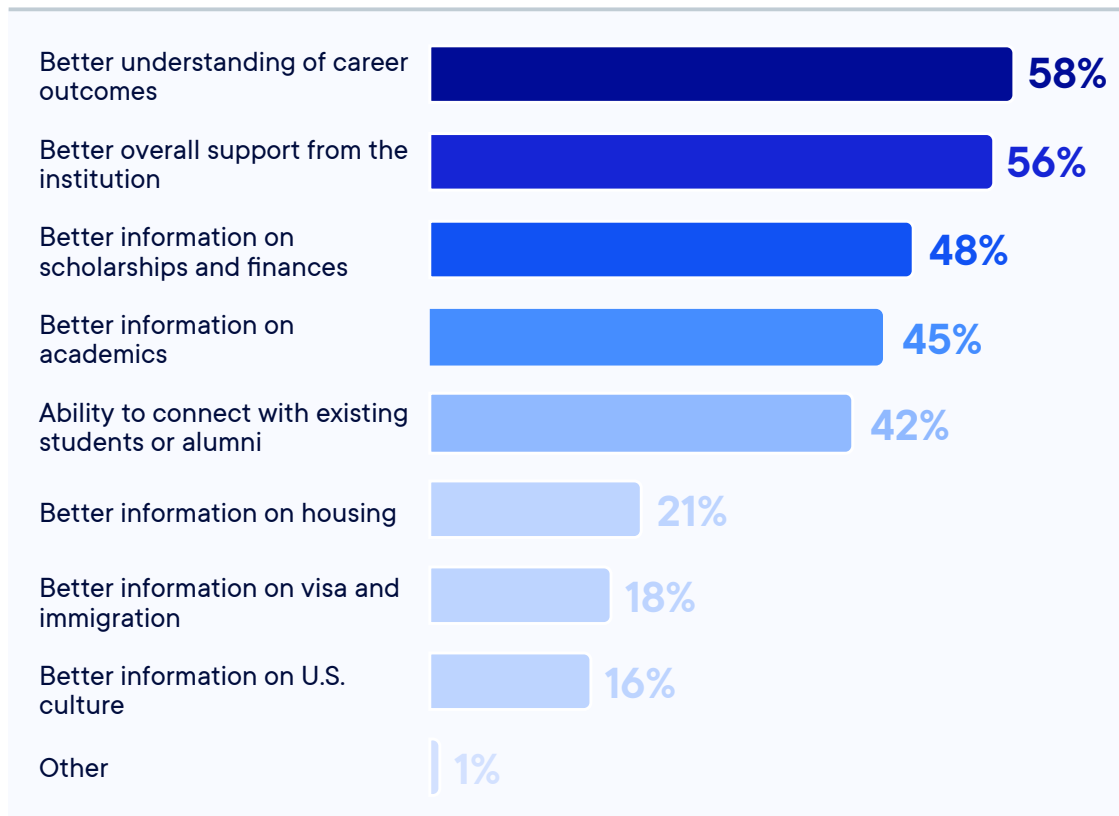
**The biggest difference lies in satisfaction with academic courses.** Almost all international students were satisfied with the information, and no professionals thought so. Promisingly, students are more satisfied with the information on career outcomes and on-campus employment than professionals expect.



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

How might international student engagement during the admissions process have a tangible impact on how they choose institutions to which they apply, and ultimately attend?

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

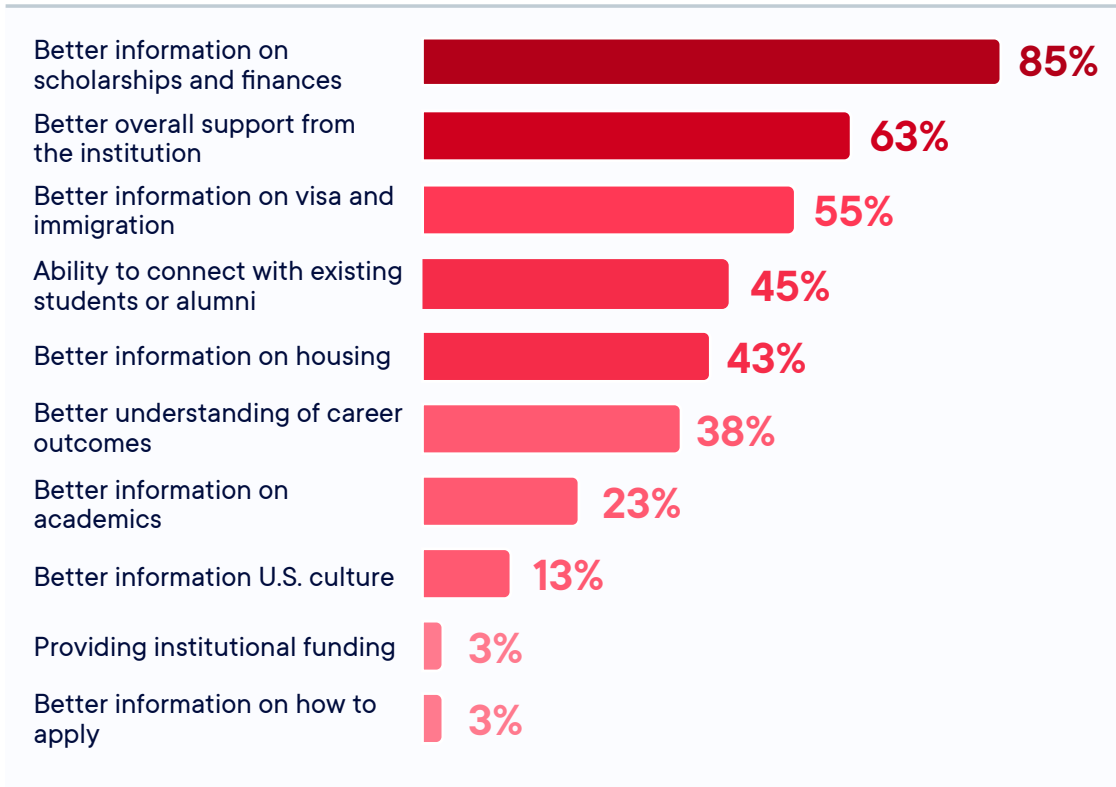


Fifty-eight percent (58%) of international student respondents said a better understanding of career outcomes would have influenced their choice of institutions. This is followed by 56% who cited better overall support from the institution, and 48% who said better information on scholarships and financial aid.





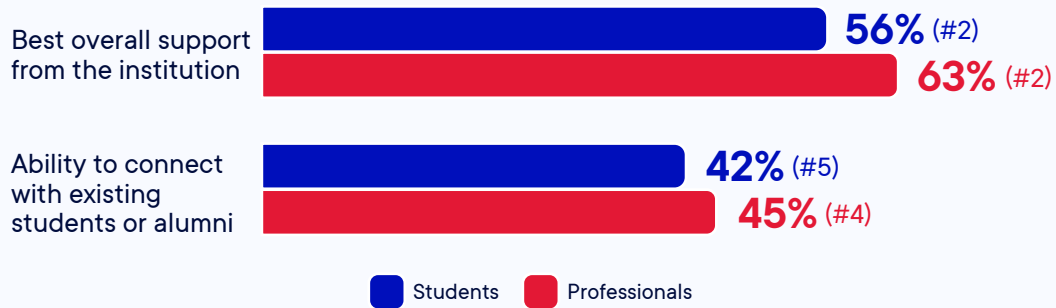
Which of the following do you consider as a factor that would influence international students' choices of institutions during the admissions process?



Eighty-five percent (85%) of professionals believe better information on scholarships and financial aid would influence international students' choice of institutions. This is followed by 63% who cited better overall support from the institution, and 55% who said better information on visas and immigration.

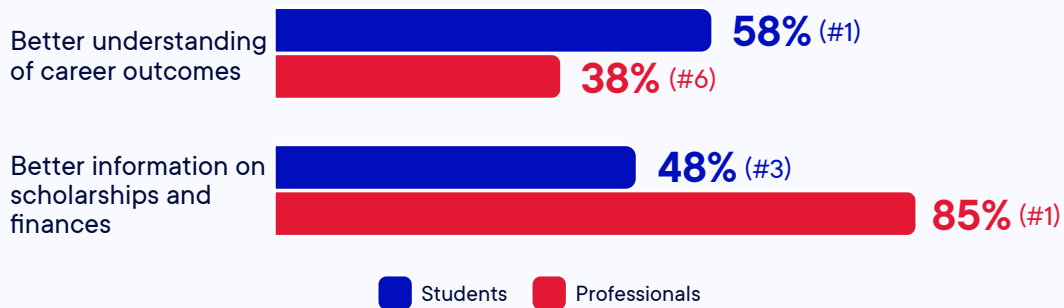


### ALIGNMENTS



Students and professionals agree that better overall support from the institution would be influential. They also agree that the ability to connect with existing students or alumni would be helpful. This may address the challenge of finding the right program or institution. Some students have revealed going out of their way to connect with enrolled students through publicly listed emails or social media to learn more about their experiences.

### MISALIGNMENTS



Notably, career outcomes are much more top of mind for international students than our professional respondents considered. Research from ICEF shows that international students cite employment outcomes as one of their main goals for studying overseas. Career information is not just a helpful service when one's a student, but an important admissions consideration for international applicants.

Interestingly, more professionals (85%) than students (48%) think better information on scholarships and financial aid would have an influence on the choices of schools. This may be surprising, given that finances are one of the top challenges for international students. Great information on this topic alone will not solve the key structural challenges of affordability, such as the need for increased funding for financial aid for international students.



## How can the admissions experience for international students improve?

Students shared thoughts on how better and clearer information, timely communication, and better overall support could improve the admissions experience:

“

Provide more financial benefits and visa assistance for international students, especially from third-world countries. Create a travel fund provided to newly admitted international students to cover the costs of moving countries and visas.

“

Better explain the visa process and the new international students loans as Discovery.

“

Being clearer with processes and checklists for specific cases. Being transparent with the financial requirements of studying and living on campus as an international [student].

“

Information on loans, tie up with companies to support international loans, scholarships for students

“

International students are second-class citizens and are made to feel like so. For the most part, all support systems are superficial. Real issues are not looked at.

“

The admissions office was slow to respond, I risked to not get my visa on time. With help of the department faculty I was able to get the documents on time.

Professionals also shared some thoughts on how they would like to support international students better:

“

Having separate marketing specifically for international students in each individual program and individual outreach from faculty and students.

“

Undergraduate international student life is well-established, but GRADUATE international student life is not as formalized. I'd like to build that out more formally.

“

Better connecting between current/alumni and prospective students.

“

Better communicate career outcomes, including CPT, by program.

“

I wish there were more financial aid for international students, but our university has very little to offer.

“

More staff dedicated solely to international student support, ensuring timely resolution of concerns.

“

One place where they can connect for all information regarding their transition to the US

Importantly, some ideas require more institutional support and structural change, such as more financial aid for international students, funding for dedicated staff to support international students, and more resources that are designed specifically for international students.



## Conclusion

The report revealed that while international graduate students and GEM professionals have some shared perspectives, there are also critical ways in which they differ. The topics on which students' and professionals' perspectives were misaligned showcase an opportunity for universities and professionals to reflect on their strategy and action plans, and consider refining them to align better with what we now know is important to international students in their admissions experience. As every university and the students they attract are unique, this report also highlights the importance of continuous research and offers an example of how professionals may do so for their own teams and international students on campus.



**Interstride**

**Success beyond boundaries**

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