



International student sentiment survey 2025

Study in the US: Still worth it... For now.

Report by

Anna Esaki Smith, Co-Founder, Education Rethink
and Interstride



Introduction

For decades, international students have been drawn to the United States for its prestigious universities and world-class programs. Despite high tuition costs and limited financial aid for internationals, the country's academic reputation has remained a strong incentive. The ability to work after graduation, too, has added to the US's appeal as a host country, especially as student focus on gaining employability skills grows sharper.

Donald Trump's reelection as president has triggered concern over the country's ability to draw international students, considering how his promise to tighten immigration policy was a pillar of his campaign. The travel bans and unwelcoming rhetoric that characterized his first term are likely to make a repeat appearance, and within a context even more polarized than before. As a result, how international students regard the US has become a focal point for universities eager to recruit them.

Surveys conducted during times of change provide a clear snapshot of student sentiment. To gain deeper insight into students' perspectives, Interstride conducted a survey in late January and early February, covering a wide range of topics. With 304 responses, the survey offers valuable perspectives on students' concerns and experiences during a period of uncertainty.

About the authors



Anna Esaki-Smith is the author of a book for high schoolers about college admissions, **Make College Your Superpower: It's Not Where You Go, It's What You Know** published in April 2024 by Rowman & Littlefield. She is also cofounder of research consultancy **Education Rethink**, helping universities and edtech companies with their internationalization strategies.



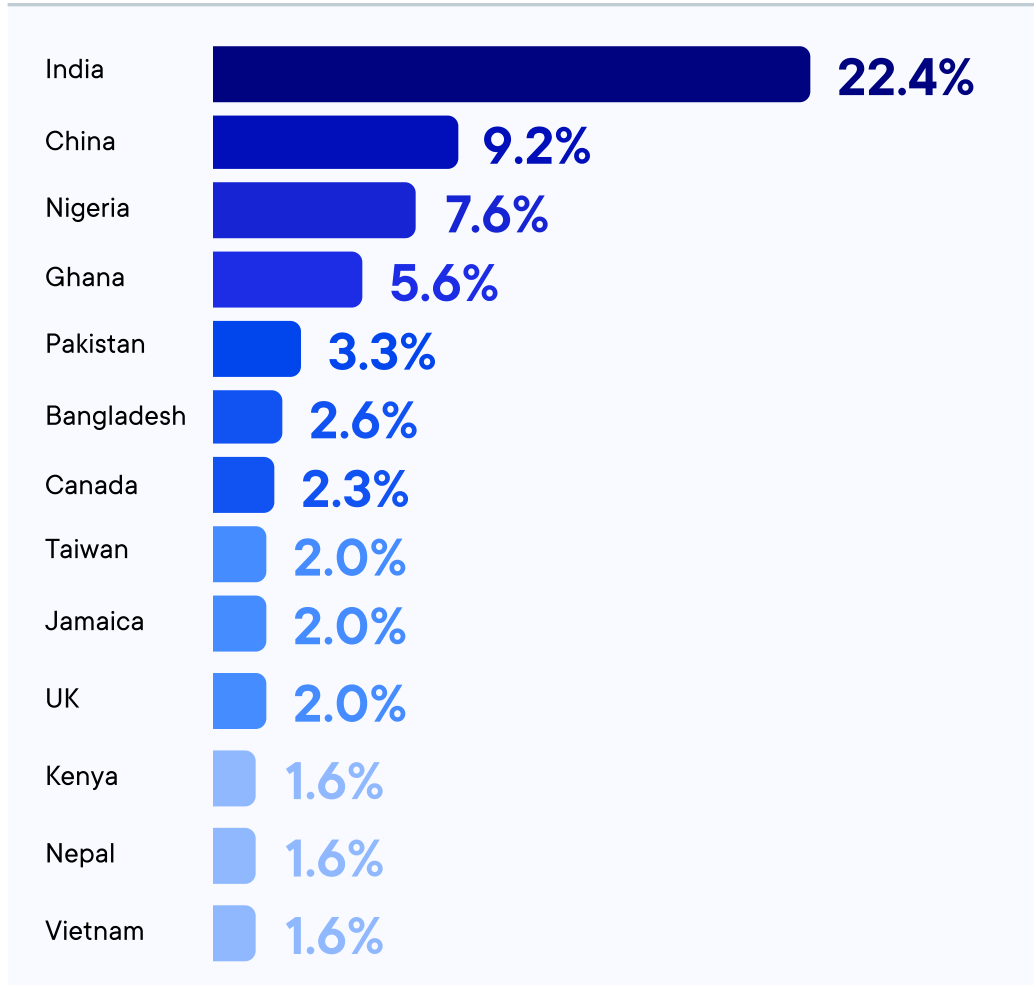
Interstride

Interstride is an ed-tech company that works with 300+ higher-ed institutions to support and engage their international students from their admissions journey to career success.



Demographics

Q: What's your country of origin?

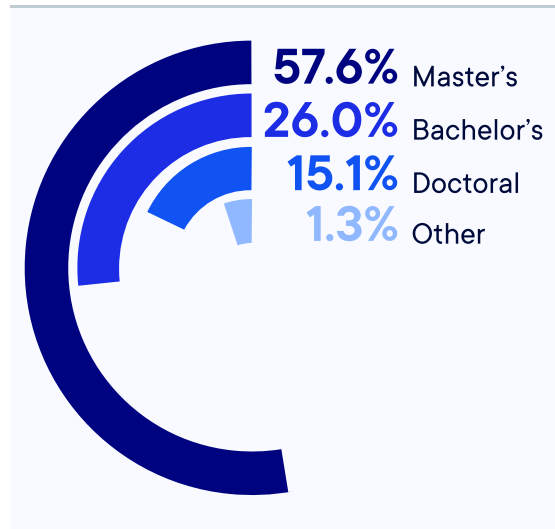


The survey group was diverse, representing a wide range of countries. The largest group was made up of Indian students, who accounted for 22.4% of the respondents. Indeed, India is the largest sending country to the US, and that is reflected in this proportion. Following them were students from China, making up 9.2%.

There was also a notable presence from Africa, with 7.6% of respondents from Nigeria and 5.6% from Ghana. According to [Open Doors](#), the US drew a record-high number of students from Ghana in 2023–2024, with students from Sub-Saharan Africa overall rising 13% after growing **18%** the year before. In addition, according to IIE's [Fall 2024 Snapshot](#), recruiting graduate students from Nigeria was a priority for 41% of surveyed institutions.

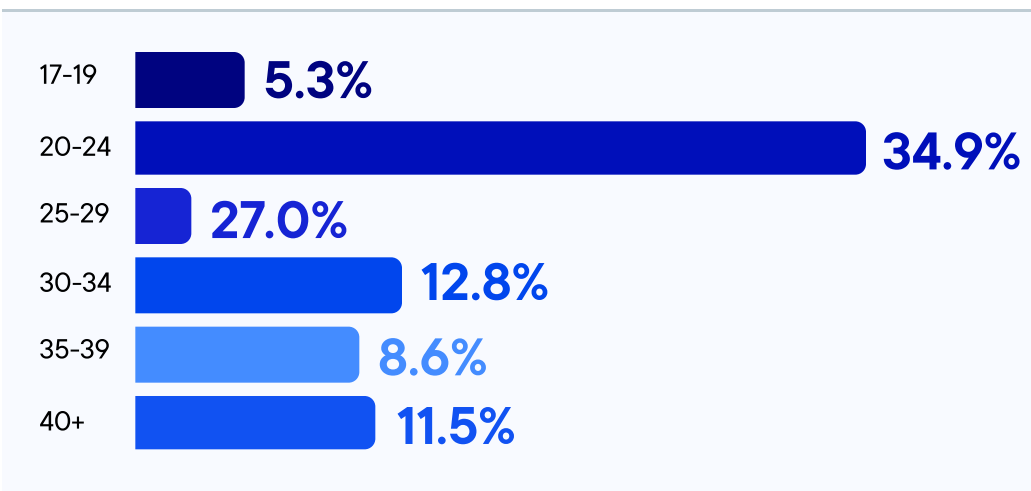


Q: What degree are you pursuing?



The survey results show that most respondents (57.6%) were master's students, followed by 26% pursuing bachelor's degrees. This reflects the fact that there are considerably more international students studying at the graduate level in this country than at the undergraduate level. Doctoral students made up 15.1% of the respondents, while 1.3% selected "other" as their academic level.

Q: What is your age?

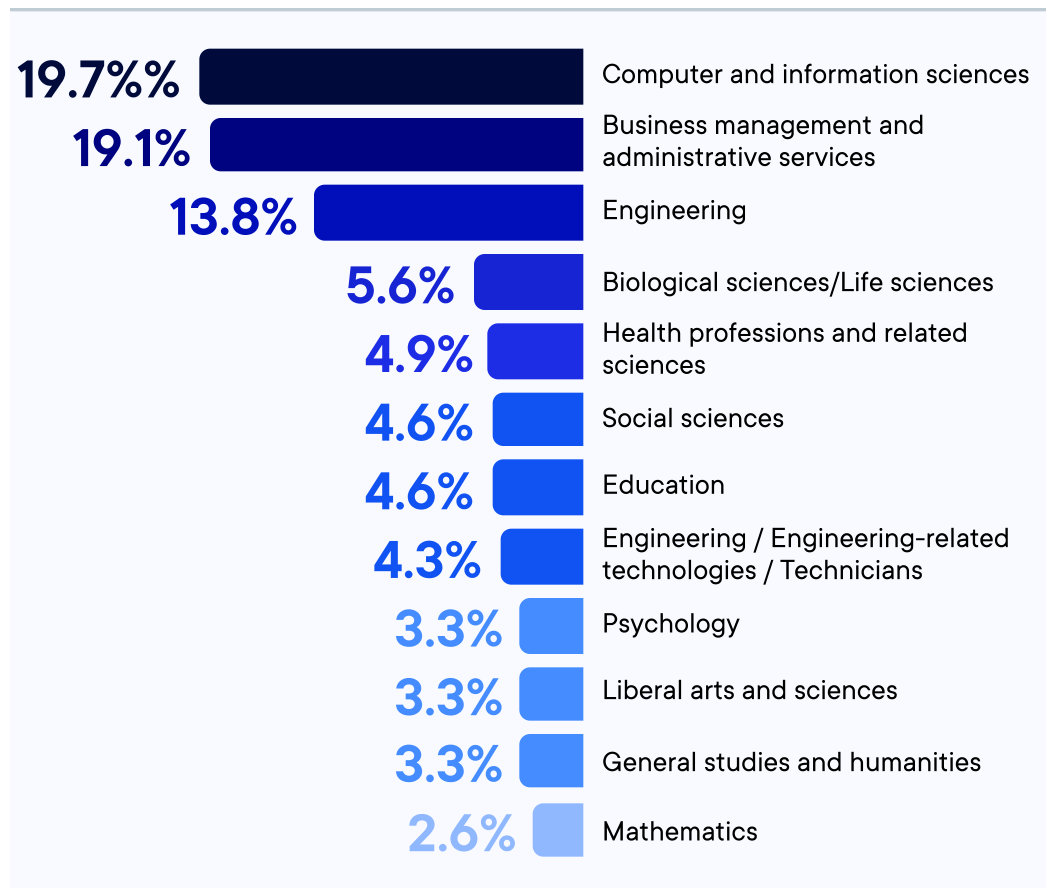


When grouped, 34.9% of survey respondents were 20–24 years of age, 27% were 25–29 years, 12.8% were 30–34, 11.5% were 40 and older, 8.6% were aged 35–39. Only 5.3% were aged 17–19.

The fact that nearly 60% of respondents were aged 25 and above indicates that the sentiment of older students, and how their concerns may differ from undergraduates, should be tracked closely by universities.



Q: What is your field of study?

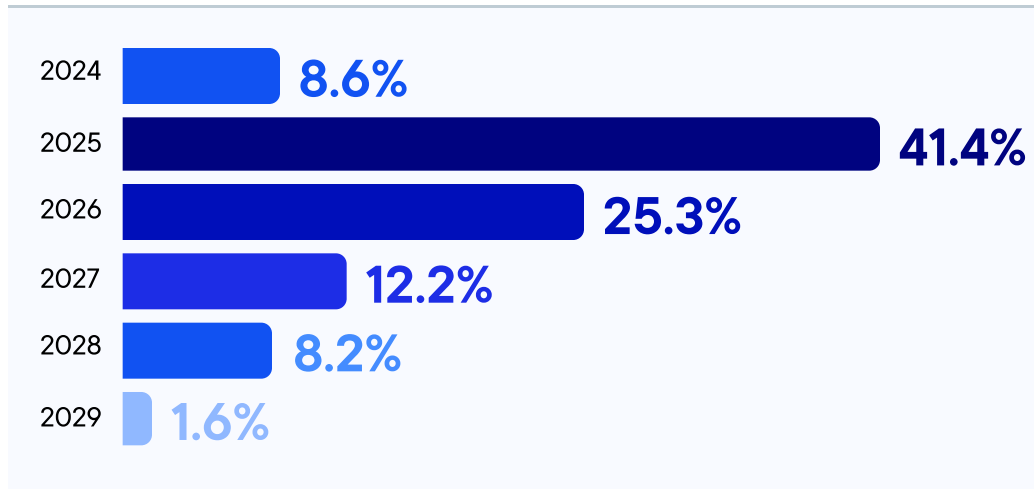


The surveyed students were pursuing a wide range of fields of study. The most notable major was Computer and Information Sciences, with 13.8% of students studying that subject. Following closely behind was Business Management and Administrative Services, with 13.2% of respondents in that field, and Engineering ranked third, with 9.5% of respondents focusing on that area.

It's important to note that those three majors are **the most popular** among international students. In terms of **Indian students**, 42.9% pursued a major in Math and Computer Science, 24.5% in Engineering and 11.2% in Business and Management.



Q: When do you expect to graduate?

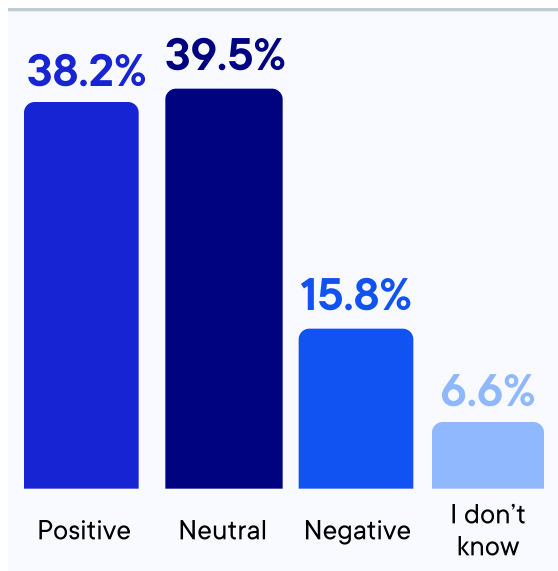


When asked about their graduation year, 41.3% said 2025, with 25.6% citing 2026. While undergraduates in third or final year of study might have responded with these answers, it's likely that master's-level students in one- or two-year programs are among the survey respondents.

For 11.7% of survey participants, 2027 is their graduation year, 2024 for 9.1% and 2028 was cited by 8.5%.

Sentiment towards the US

Q: How would you describe your sentiment towards the US as a study destination, post-presidential election?

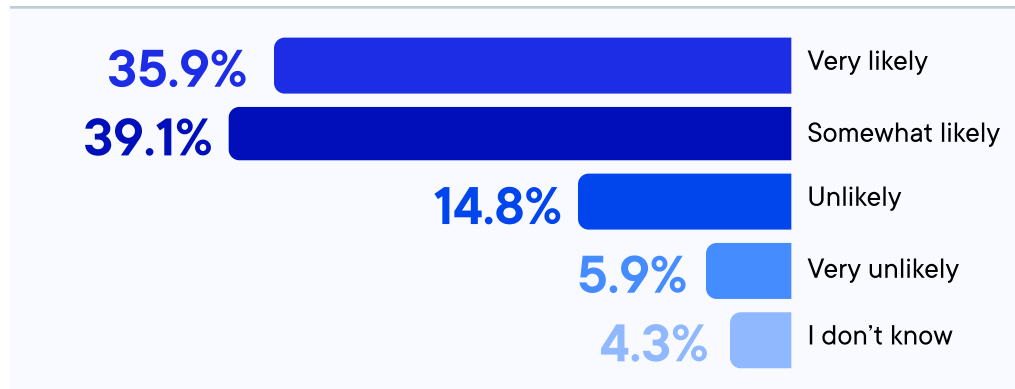


Highlighting the US's foundational strength as a study destination, survey responses regarding post-election sentiment revealed a balanced outlook that leans towards the positive. While 39.5% of respondents felt "neutral," towards the US, a nearly equal 38.2% viewed the country positively. That means that 77.7% of survey respondents did not feel negatively towards the US as a study destination, after the election.

Only 15.8% expressed "negative" sentiment, and 6.6% were unsure.



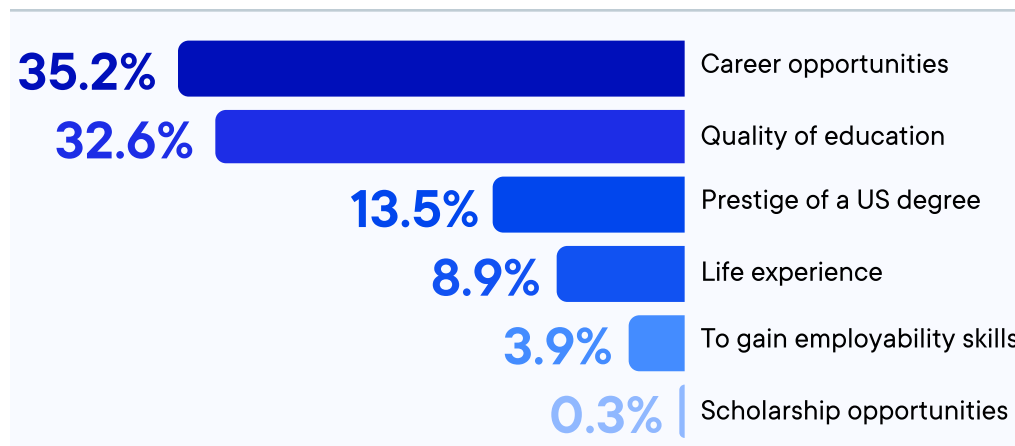
Q: How likely are you to recommend the US as a study destination to friends and family?



When asked if they would recommend the US as a study destination to friends and family, most respondents indicated an inclination to do so. A total of 39.1% said they were “somewhat likely” to recommend it, while 35.9% were “very likely.” If we combine the “somewhat likely” and “very likely” responses, a total of 75% of respondents would recommend the US as a study destination, in varying degrees of likelihood.

In contrast, 14.8% said they were “unlikely” to do so, and 5.9% were “very unlikely.” Another 4.3% of respondents did not know if they would recommend the US as a study destination.

Q: What is the primary reason you chose to study in the US?

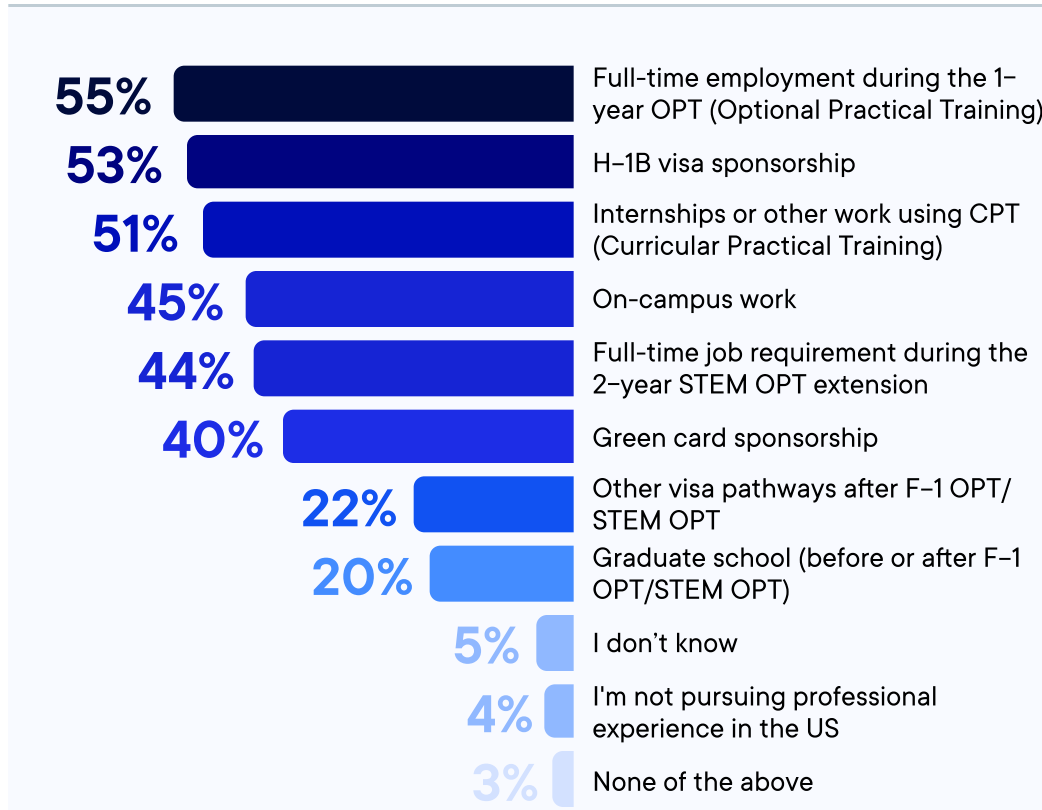


When asked why they chose to study in the US, the top reason among survey respondents was “Career opportunities,” selected by 35.2% of respondents. Close behind was the response, “Quality of education,” cited by 32.6%. “Prestige of a US degree” was chosen by 13.5%, while 8.9% mentioned “Life experience” as a main reason why they decided to study in the US.



Career and immigration concerns

Q: What types of professional experience or opportunities in the US are you planning (or have planned) to pursue?



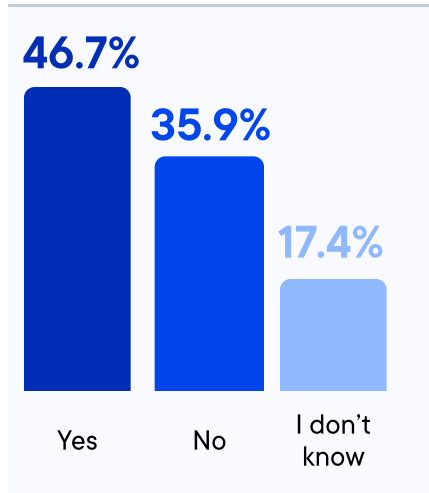
With the number of international students remaining in the US to gain practical work experience through Optional Practical Training (OPT) at a record-high, it's important to understand sentiment towards career opportunities. Students were asked about what professional experience or opportunities they were planning on pursuing in the US and could pick as many they felt were relevant out of eleven possible answers.

The most popular answer was "Full-time job during 1-year OPT," which was cited by 55% of respondents, followed by "H-1B visa sponsorship," with 53%. "Internships or other work using CPT" was noted by 51% of respondents, and the fourth-most cited answer was "On-campus work," selected by 45%. This was followed by 44% of respondents marking "Full-time job during 2-year STEM OPT extension" as their plan.

Going to graduate school was the eighth most-popular answer, cited by 20% of respondents.



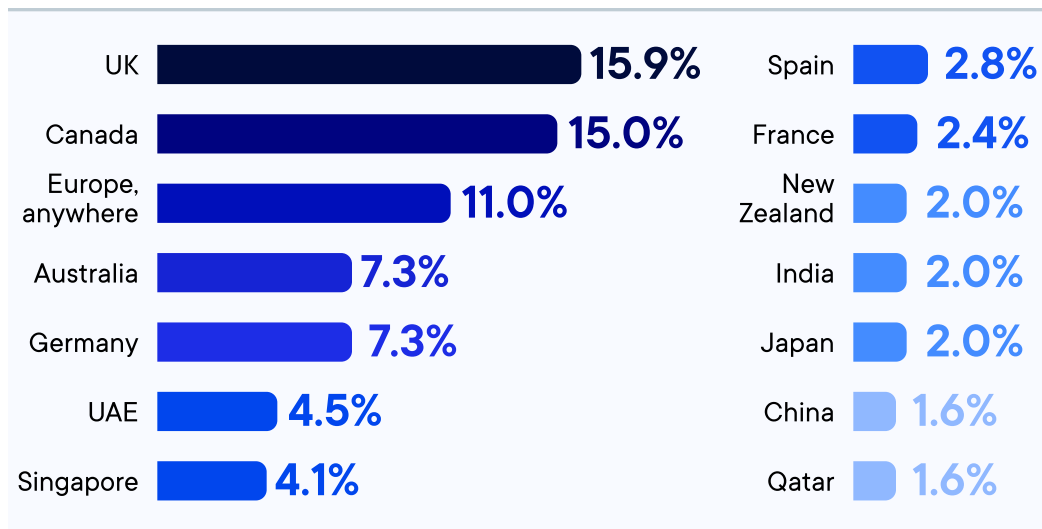
Q: Are you considering alternative countries for study or work due to potential visa or immigration challenges in the US?



Should there be immigration or visa regulatory changes that would make study in the US challenging, a significant number of student respondents have mitigating strategies. Nearly half of the respondents, 46.7%, indicated they were considering other host countries, while 35.9% said they were not.

Another 17.4% didn't know whether they were considering options. The reasons for students replying with uncertainty could reflect a lack of clarity about their future, their desire to see how their internship or job search in the US fares, or their waiting for an indication as to whether Trump will enact any regulatory changes.

Q: If you answered "Yes," which country or countries are you considering?



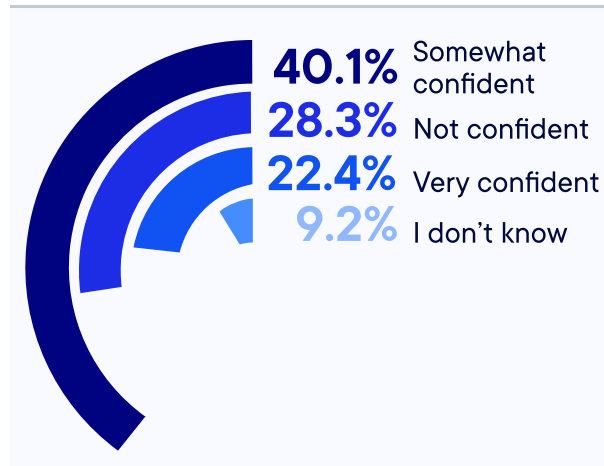
Students who were considering host countries other than the US focused on other major Anglophone destinations, with 15.9% weighing the U.K., 15% looking at Canada and 7.5%, Australia. It's important to note that, in 2024, the U.K. **restricted** the ability of international students to bring dependents to the U.K. In addition, Australia is mulling a **cap** on international students while Canada continues to **reduce** the number of international student permits.

However, 11% of survey respondents were considering Europe overall, with 7.3% looking at Germany, a country that has hit a record-high number of international enrollments. There was interest in UAE, with 4.5% of "Yes" respondents selecting that option, and Singapore was selected by 4.1% of student participants.



If we view these responses about non-US study options through a wider lens, 49.8% were looking at Europe, 22% at Asia and 15.9%, North America. With the exception of the U.K., study options in Europe are generally less expensive than in the US, and the same goes for study destinations in Asia.

Q: How confident are you about your ability to secure a full-time job in the US after graduation?

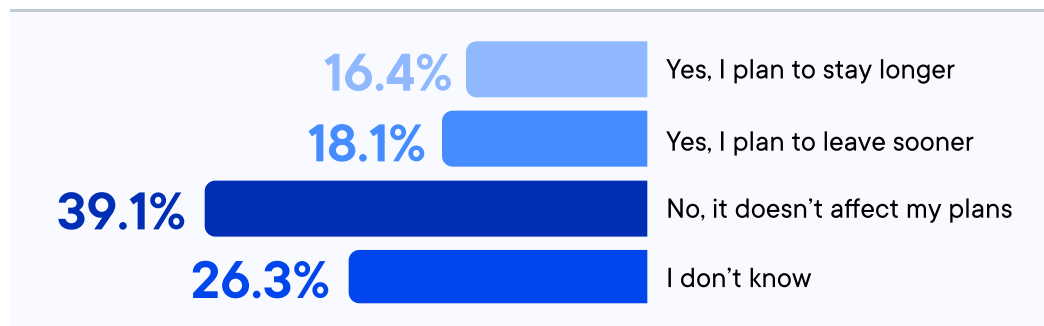


Despite the ongoing uncertainty surrounding post-graduation pathways for international students, there was notable optimism regarding their career prospects in the US. When asked about their confidence in securing a full-time job after graduation, 40.1% of respondents said they were “somewhat confident,” making it the most popular response. The third most-cited response, cited by 22.4% of respondents, was “very confident.”

If respondents who voiced any degree of confidence about securing a job in the US are combined, the total is 62.5%.

The second most-cited answer was “not confident,” with 28.3%, and 8.8% of survey participants said “I don't know.”

Q: Does the current political climate in the US affect how long you plan to stay after graduation?





Despite the potential for a repeat appearance of the travel bans and unwelcoming rhetoric introduced by Trump during his first term, students indicated optimism about their planned length of stay in this country. In response to a question about whether the current political climate affects how long they plan to stay in the US, the biggest percentage of respondents, 39.1%, said “No, it doesn’t affect my plan.” Another 26.3% said they didn’t know, while 18.1% planned to leave earlier because of the election.

Conversely, 16.4% said they planned to stay longer. The reasons for staying longer can be due to a number of factors that don’t necessarily reflect the political climate, including the securing of a job, going to graduate school, or even marriage.

Q: What do you want your university staff to understand about your experience as an international student?



Survey respondents were asked what they wanted university staff to understand about their experience as international students and could pick as many as they felt were relevant from ten response options. The most-popular item, cited by 30% of respondents, was “I need more networking opportunities tailored for international students.”

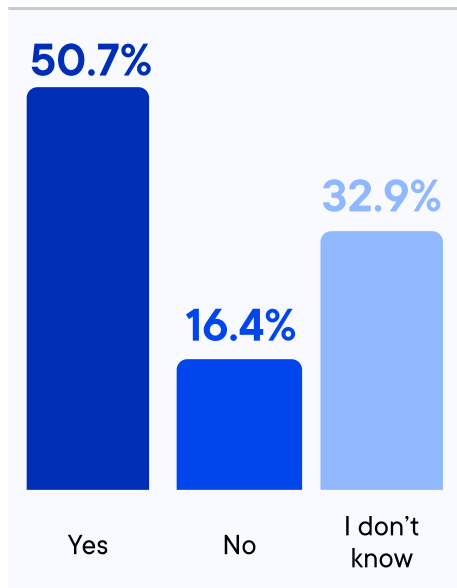
Tied for second were “I need guidance on finding internships and jobs that hire international students on CPT or OPT” and “I need guidance on finding jobs that sponsor work visas,” with each answer garnering 28% of responses.



The surveyed students were given the option to provide a free answer to this question, to further refine their sentiment. One student mentioned, “Need more guidance on health insurance and how everything works.” The cost of a US education was remarked upon by many, including one who wrote, “textbooks should not be as expensive as they are,” while another said, “The fact that US universities do not offer financial discounts to students who maintain a certain GPA is beyond me.”

In addition, the lack of guidance was also a focal point, with one student saying, “university professors do not help a lot in navigating non-academic markets,” while another said, “advisor mentorship is very weak.”

Q: Do countries like the US, UK, Canada and Australia value international students?



Amid ongoing discussions about how international students in major Anglophone countries are often seen more as sources of revenue than valued individuals, survey responses about whether these students feel valued by the US, U.K., Canada, and Australia revealed mixed views. Half of the respondents (50.7%) said yes, they felt valued. The second most-common answer was “I don’t know,” with 32.9%, while 16.4% believed these countries did not value international students.

Considering the gravity of the survey question, there is room for improvement in terms of making students feel like their contribution to university campuses goes beyond their tuition fees.



Conclusion

The landscape of international education has shifted in recent years. While the sector weathered the challenges that arose during Trump's first term and the disruption caused by the pandemic, when looking in the rear view mirror, those both can be interpreted as temporary obstacles. Those setbacks have since given way to deeper, more lasting changes.

Tightening immigration policies across Anglophone destinations, combined with the rise of populism, have made the environment for international students much more uncertain. Meanwhile, the emergence of affordable study options in Europe and Asia is presenting credible competition for students, as those countries contend with the impact of an aging population and seek to bolster their workforce with global talent.

While the US still holds strong appeal for international students with its high-quality programs and career opportunities, it is evident that students are much more mindful of their options than before. According to the survey, many have a "Plan B" in mind, signaling concerns over the potential for shifts in immigration or visa policies. This highlights the need for US institutions to clearly communicate their value and offer their more support in areas such as internships and post-graduation work opportunities.

Some might argue that the imperative to address the career-oriented needs of international students has been a priority for a while. But perhaps ensuring student needs overall are met should be elevated in importance. The foundational strength of the US as a host country should be rooted in what it offers academically and reputationally, and not solely due to what a student can do after graduation. The campus experience is outside the purview of the government, unlike visa and immigration policies.

Surveyed student opinions about whether international students were valued by major host countries like the US were mixed. While it's heartening to know that half of survey participants believed that they were, it's equally concerning that half either did not feel valued, or didn't know. Students study abroad for a number of reasons and making them feel valued can be an amorphous task. But our current situation requires that the sector make a concerted effort to take on that challenge.



contact@interstride.com | interstride.com