

Student mobility and motivation:

Africa

Outbound student perceptions

Powered by the QS International Student Survey and Global Student Flows

2026

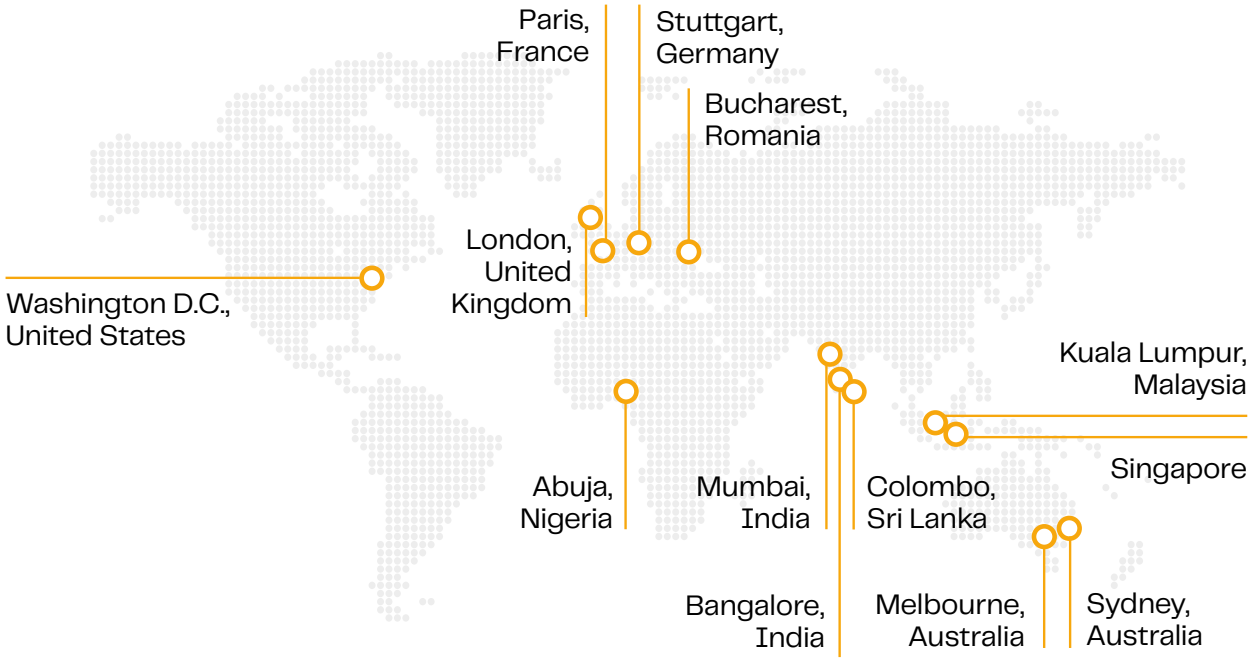
This report was developed with the support of the following QS team members, who contributed through research, analysis, content development, and expert review.

Alex Berka, Insights Manager

Louie Brand, Content Marketing Manager

Dr Ashwin Fernandes, Chair of QS India; Vice President, Strategic and International Engagement, QS

Global offices



Terms of use and disclaimer

This report is an executive briefing on global student flows. The report is owned and produced by QS UK Ltd (QS) and is for general informational purposes. The findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed herein are not guaranteed as to accuracy or completeness. The analysis and forecasts are subject to change without notice. All figures are in USD unless otherwise stated. QS does not accept any liability arising from the use of this report.

For more information and press enquiries please contact qspressoffice@qs.com.

Copyright © 2026 QS Quacquarelli Symonds. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, or otherwise without the prior permission of QS.

Contents

Contents	03
Foreword	04
Africa: Market overview	06
Executive summary	08
Outbound trends	10
Methodology	22

Foreword



Dr Ashwin Fernandes,
Chair of QS India; Vice President,
Strategic and International Engagement, QS

Africa is set to become one of the most important growth regions for international student mobility. Outbound student numbers have risen steadily over the past decade, surpassing 800,000 in 2024, as a rapidly expanding youth population meets limited domestic university capacity. This growing demand has implications beyond international recruitment, connecting higher education with the development of skills, economic opportunity and partnerships across borders.

This growth comes at a time when international education is being shaped by changing migration policies, financial pressures and competition for skilled graduates. For students and their families, choosing where to study is a significant investment in an uncertain environment. For institutions and governments, understanding those choices is essential to planning provision, building partnerships and sustaining confidence in international education.

The findings in this report offer a valuable perspective on how prospective African students are navigating these decisions. A welcoming environment remains the leading destination consideration, cited by 66% of respondents, alongside teaching quality, reputation and affordability. These priorities highlights how closely educational opportunity is connected to students' confidence in the place where they will live and the prospects available to them.

The wider question is how growing demand can support stronger education systems and greater economic opportunity across Africa. International mobility can deepen academic connections, develop expertise and support research collaboration. Alongside it, joint programmes and other forms of transnational education offer ways to extend access and strengthen institutional capacity. Evidence on student interests and mobility patterns can help universities and policymakers identify where these partnerships would be most valuable.

Africa's diversity is central to this picture, where language, educational pathways, financial circumstances and career ambitions vary considerably between countries. Meaningful engagement will require an understanding of those differences and partnerships that reflect local priorities.

By bringing together student perspectives and mobility data, this report provides a timely basis for that understanding. I hope it helps readers make informed decisions and develop lasting relationships that serve students while contributing to the continent's educational and economic ambitions.

Turn insights into recruitment results

Find, engage and recruit more of your ideal students

How we can help:

- Make confident market decisions
- Strengthen your recruitment pipeline
- Increase admissions resilience
- Convert interest into enrolments

1,500+
universities worldwide trust us to grow and diversify their student cohorts

14,000+
compliance checks delivered over the past five years

50,000+
students engaged through QS recruitment events

Discover what's possible with QS

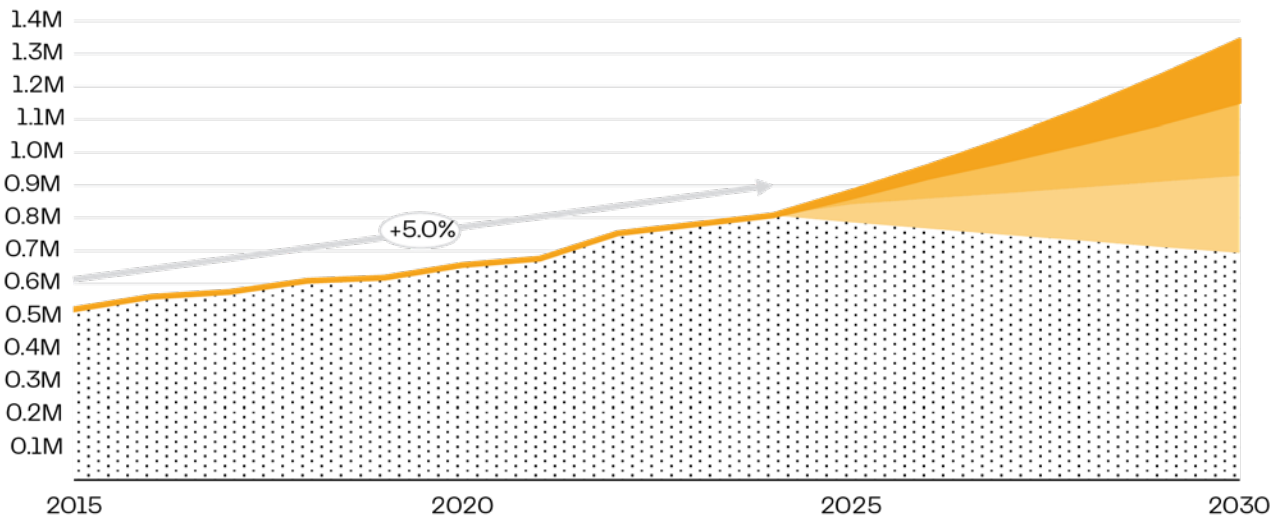
Explore our student recruitment solutions

Africa: Market overview

Africa is the fastest-growing outbound region in global student mobility. Outbound student numbers have risen steadily over the past decade, surpassing 800,000 in 2024, as a rapidly expanding youth population meets limited domestic university capacity. Nigeria remains the largest source market, with around 126,000 students abroad, followed by Morocco and Egypt. Together, these three account for roughly 31% of the continent's outbound total. France, China, the UK and the US are the primary destinations, with language and historical ties shaping much of the pattern. Students from North and Francophone Africa tend to choose France, while Anglophone students from East and Southern Africa increasingly opt for the UK and the US.

- Outbound students from Sub-Saharan Africa are forecast to grow by around 5% a year, reaching more than 1 million by 2030.
- Africa's share of the world's internationally mobile students is expected to rise from 12% in 2024 to 13% by 2030.
- The US is the fastest-growing major destination, with enrolments from Africa set to rise by about 7% a year through 2030, while numbers to Canada are expected to fall by around 0.7% a year.
- Intra-African mobility has weakened, with the share of outbound students choosing destinations within the continent slipping from 10% in 2022 to 8% in 2024.

Figure 1. Total international students outflows from Africa, 2015-2030F



Source: QS Global Student Flows, December 2025



Read more in Global Student Flows: Africa

Executive summary

African students choose study destinations first on welcome and teaching quality. In 2026, two-thirds (66%) selected a destination that is welcoming to international students, and 51% chose high-quality teaching. Reputation and affordability complete the top tier, with 44% citing a destination's reputation as a place to study and 43% identifying an affordable cost of living. The balance is shifting gradually. Well-ranked universities and culture and lifestyle have gained ground since 2022, while access to a post-study work visa has fallen by five percent.

Subject demand is broad and relatively stable. Business and Management remains the largest area of interest at 18%, followed by Engineering and Technology (12%) and Subjects allied to Medicine (11%). Health is the clearest growth story, with Subjects allied to Medicine and Medicine and Dentistry together accounting for 19% of interest in 2026, up from 17% in 2022.

The research journey is becoming more social and more personal. University websites (78%) and general online search (64%) remain the most used sources, but social media has risen to 52%, and education agents, university fairs and admissions staff have all grown in use since 2022. Rankings and course-finder websites have lost ground. Response expectations are high and tightening at the decision stage. Three-quarters (76%) expect a complete, personal reply to an enquiry within three days, and 74% now expect an application outcome within a week, up from 68% in 2022.



Outbound trends



Africa outbound trends at a glance

Sub-Saharan African students projected to study abroad by 2030

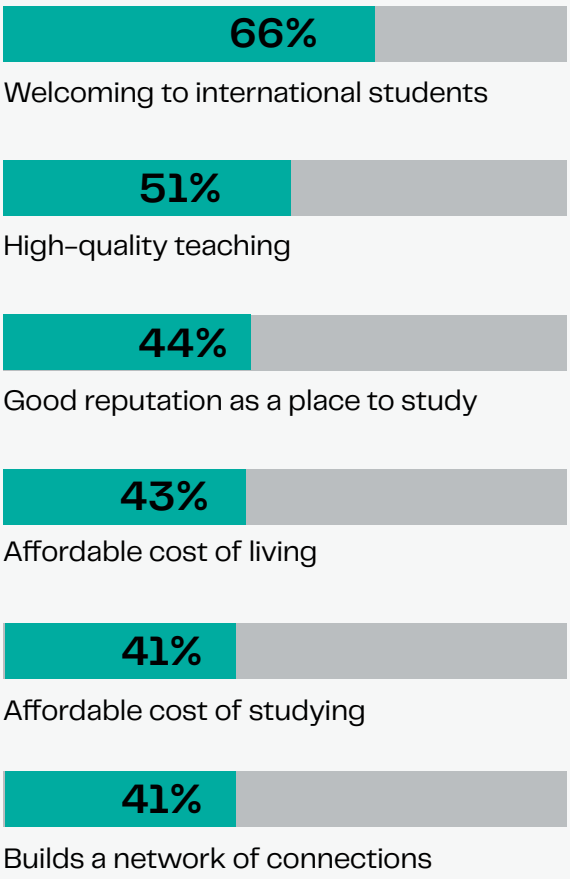
1 million+

Top destinations

- France
- China
- UK
- United States

What do African students seeking international study want?

Top decision drivers in 2026



Fastest-rising factors since 2022

- ▲ Well-ranked universities +4%
- ▲ Culture / lifestyle appeals +3%
- ▲ Good reputation as a place to study +2%
- ▲ Can improve language skills +2%
- ▼ Post-study work visa access –5%
- ▼ Affordable cost of living –3%

What do they want to study?

Top subjects in 2026

#1

Business & Management 18%

#2 Engineering & Technology 12%

#3 Subjects allied to Medicine 11%

#4 Computing 9%

#5 Medicine & Dentistry 8%

Biggest changes since 2022

▲ Education & Teaching +2%

▲ Medicine & Dentistry +1%

▲ Subjects allied to Medicine +1%

▲ Law +1%

▼ Business & Management –2%

▼ Social Sciences –2%

Most influential information sources

78% Official university website

64% General online search

52% Social media channels

45% Institution information sessions / university fairs

31% Course-finder websites

30% Discussions with admissions staff

Biggest changes since 2022

▲ Social media channels +5%

▲ Education agents +5%

▲ Institution information sessions / university fairs +4%

▼ Rankings –7%

▼ Course-finder websites –6%

How quick do students expect responses?

42% expect a complete and personal enquiry response within 24 hours

76% expect an enquiry response within three days or less

25% expect an application outcome within 24 hours

74% expect an application outcome within one week or less

25% Only 25% expect to wait longer than one week for an application outcome



Subject-level interest

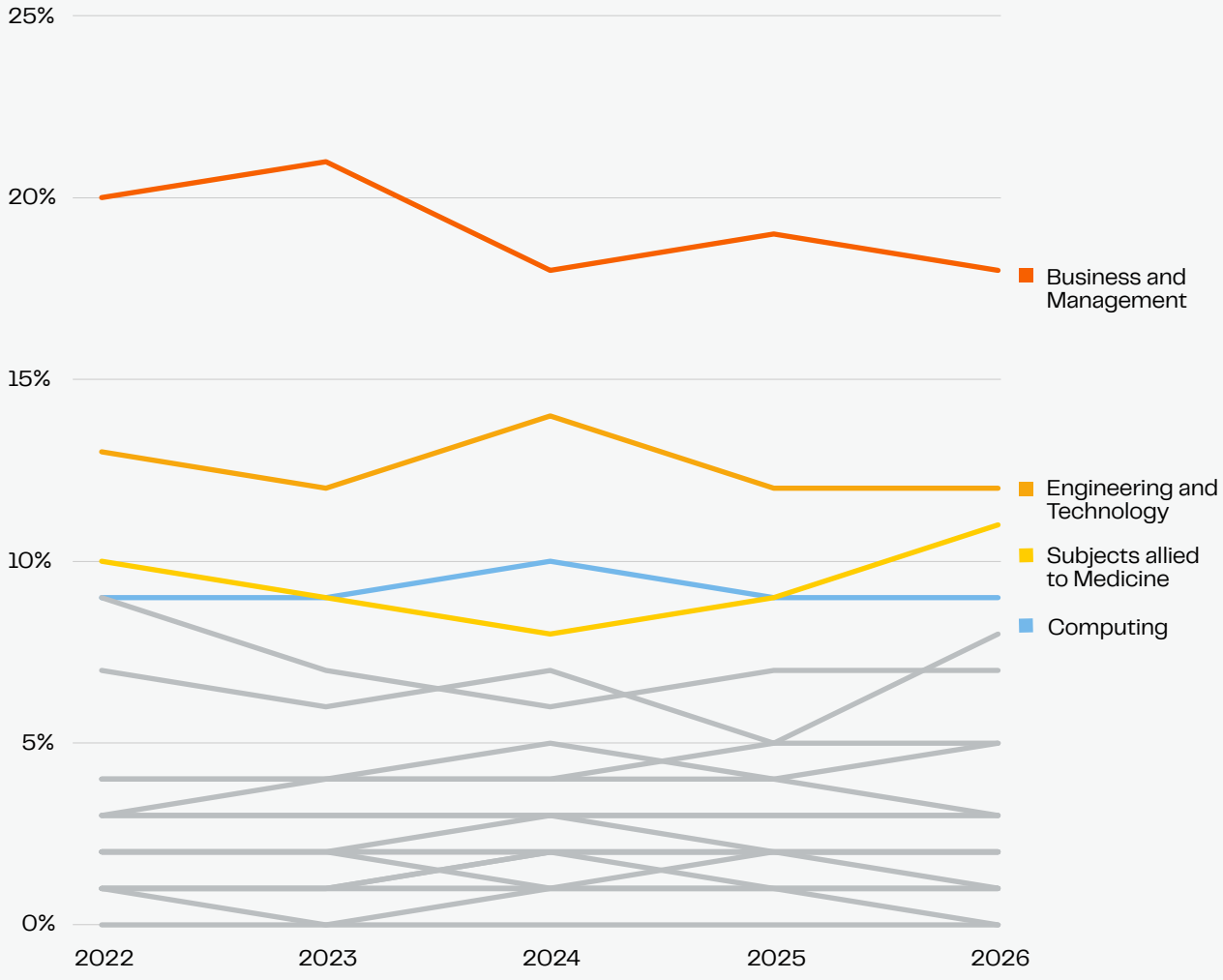
Business and Management remains the largest subject area among prospective African students, accounting for 18% of interest in 2026. Its share has stayed within a narrow range across the period, peaking at 21% in 2023 before settling at 18–19% from 2024 onwards.

Engineering and Technology and Computing continue to attract steady demand. Engineering and Technology accounts for 12% of interest in 2026, broadly in line with 13% in 2022, while Computing has held at 9–10% throughout. Stable demand also means a competitive environment, and institutions recruiting for STEM will need clear differentiators, particularly around employability, industry links and practical value, to stand out.

Health-related study is the largest growth area. Subjects allied to Medicine has risen to 11%, its highest level in the period, while Medicine and Dentistry has reached 8%, rebounding from 5% in 2025. Together, they now account for almost one in five prospective students. Education and Teaching has also grown from 3% to 5%, and Law from 4% to 5%. Social Sciences has moved in the opposite direction, falling from 9% to 7%.

Overall, African demand is spread across a wide range of disciplines, with health, education and law gradually gaining share alongside the established strength of business and STEM.

Figure 2. Africa outbound mobility: Subject-level interest



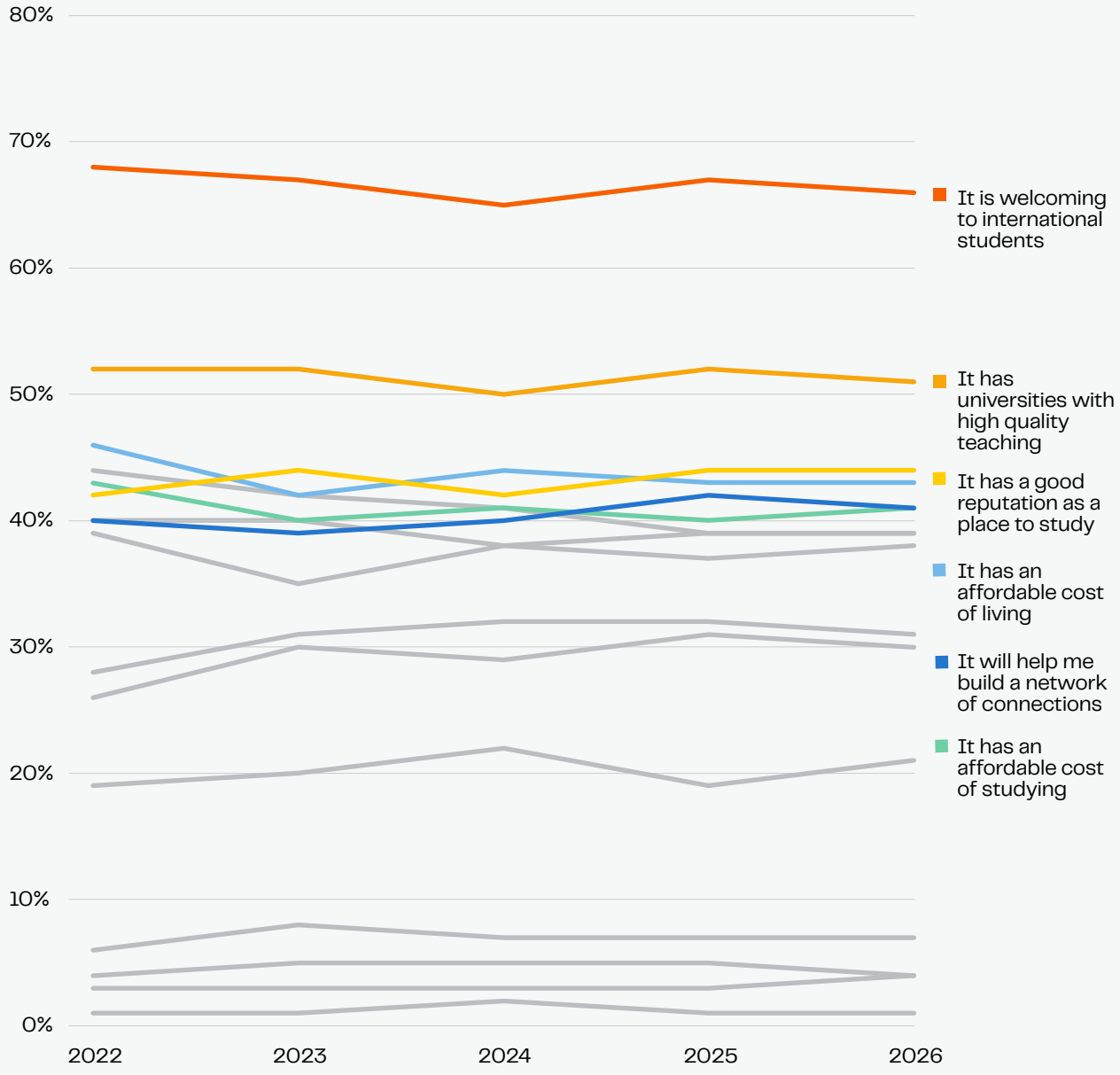
Source: QS International Student Survey

Key questions to consider:

- How differentiated is your Business and Management offer in a market where demand remains high but contested?
- Are your STEM recruitment campaigns doing enough to connect programmes to employability, specialisms and location-specific career outcomes?
- Where can health-related programmes be given greater prominence?
- Which growing subject areas, such as Education and Teaching or Law, offer opportunities for more targeted recruitment rather than broad-based awareness activity?

What drives outbound mobility?

Figure 3. Africa outbound mobillity: Important factors when choosing a country



Source: QS International Student Survey

A welcoming environment is the strongest pull factor for African students considering study abroad, and by a clear margin. In 2026, 66% selected “welcoming to international students”, 15% ahead of high-quality teaching at 51%. Reputation sits next, with 44% pointing to a destination’s reputation as a place to study.

Cost is a central consideration. An affordable cost of living (43%) and an affordable cost of studying (41%) both rank in the top five, although each has eased slightly since 2022, from 46% and 43% respectively. Outcomes-led motivations remain important, with 39% citing good graduate employment options and 39% access to a post-study work visa. The importance of getting a visa to work after graduation has fallen from 44% in 2022. The decline coincides with a period in which several major destinations have changed, or signalled changes to, post-study work rights and wider international student policy. Access to a study visa has stayed broadly steady at 38%.

Academic standing and experience-led factors are gaining ground. The share selecting well-ranked universities has risen from 26% to 30%, cultural and lifestyle appeal from 28% to 31%, and the opportunity to improve language skills from 19% to 21%. Building a network of connections remains important at 41%. Friends and family, and personal recommendations continue to play a small role in destination choice, at 7% and 4% respectively.

Overall, African students are weighing welcome, quality and cost together. Affordability and post-study outcomes remain prominent, while students are placing slightly greater emphasis on institutional standing and the wider experience. For institutions, the opportunity is to demonstrate a genuine welcome alongside academic credibility and transparent information on costs, funding and outcomes.

Key questions to consider:

- How clearly does your destination messaging combine teaching quality, institutional reputation and international student welcome?
- How transparently do you communicate costs, scholarships and funding options, and where do you need to rebuild confidence around post-study work and graduate outcomes?
- Are student experience, lifestyle and networking benefits visible enough across recruitment campaigns, web content, alumni stories and offer-holder communications?



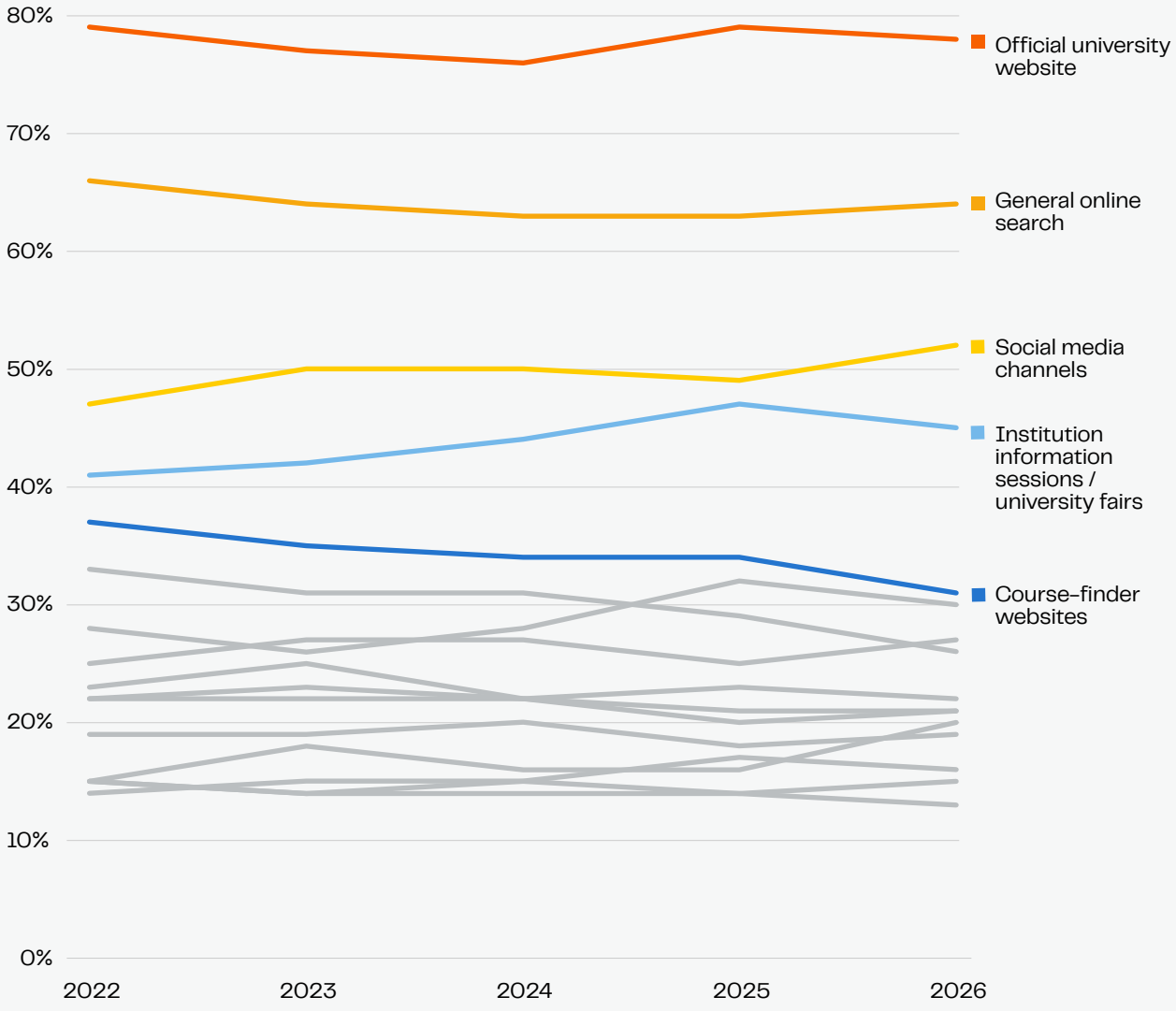
The sources of information students use to make decisions

African students rely most heavily on institution-owned and search-led channels when researching study options. In 2026, the official university website remains the leading source, used by 78% of prospective students, followed by general online search at 64%. Both have remained broadly stable since 2022.

The fastest-growing sources point to a more social and personal decision journey. Social media channels have risen from 47% in 2022 to 52% in 2026, making them the third most-used source. Education agents have grown from 15% to 20%, institution information sessions and university fairs from 41% to 45%, and discussions with admissions staff from 28% to 30%. Students are looking for reassurance and direct contact across a wider mix of touchpoints, as well as factual information.

At the same time, comparison tools are losing influence, with the use of rankings and course-finder websites dropping since 2022. The overall picture is a multi-channel research journey in which university websites remain critical but must be supported by search visibility, an active social media presence, agent engagement and consistent in-person or virtual recruitment activity.

Figure 4. Africa outbound mobility: Information sources



Source: QS International Student Survey

Key questions to consider:

- Is your official website structured to answer the questions African students are most likely to ask before they contact admissions or an agent?
- How visible is your institution in search and at the third-party discovery points where students validate their choices, as reliance on rankings and course-finder websites declines?
- Are education agents, consultants and admissions teams equipped with consistent, up-to-date messages about programmes, costs, outcomes and student support?
- How effectively are social media channels being used to provide reassurance, student proof points and practical guidance rather than only campaign visibility?

Student conversion and communication

African students expect universities to respond quickly and personally throughout their journey. In 2026, 42% expect a complete and personal response to an enquiry within 24 hours, and a further 34% within three days, meaning three-quarters (76%) expect a tailored reply within 72 hours. These expectations have held steady since 2022.

Expectations are tightening most at the application-outcome stage. The share expecting a decision within 24 hours has increased from 22% in 2022 to 25% in 2026, while those expecting an outcome within three days has risen from 19% to 22%.

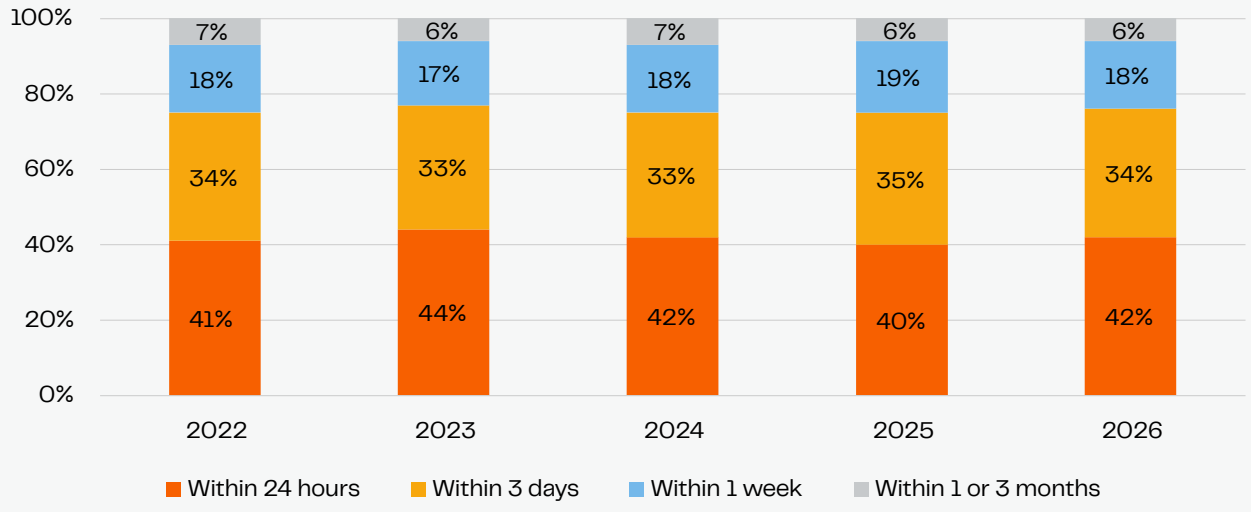
Overall, 74% of African applicants now expect an application outcome within one week or less, compared with 68% in 2022. At the same time, the proportion willing to wait up to one month has fallen from 27% to 21%.

Speed is a core part of the conversion experience. Slow or generic responses risk weakening confidence at precisely the point when students are comparing institutions, weighing destinations and looking for reassurance. The expectation is not only for faster communication, but for communication that feels complete, personal and coordinated across enquiry handling, admissions review and application follow-up.

Key questions to consider:

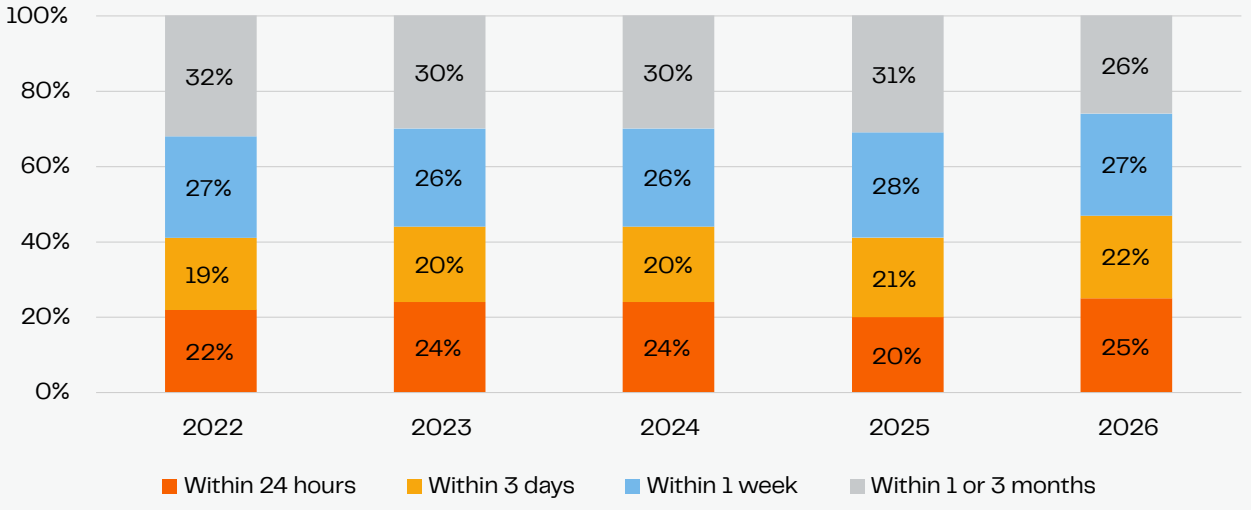
- Can enquiry response processes consistently deliver a complete, personal reply within 24 to 72 hours, especially during peak recruitment periods?
- Where can application-review workflows be accelerated without compromising decision quality, compliance or applicant confidence?
- Are automated acknowledgements, CRM workflows and staff responses working together to keep students informed while they wait for a full answer or outcome?
- How are response-time expectations being managed across admissions, recruitment, agents and international teams so students receive a coherent experience from enquiry to decision?

Figure 5. Africa outbound mobility: Expectation of time to receive a complete and personal enquiry response



Source: QS International Student Survey

Figure 6. Africa outbound mobility: Expectation of time to receive the outcome of their application



Source: QS International Student Survey

Methodology

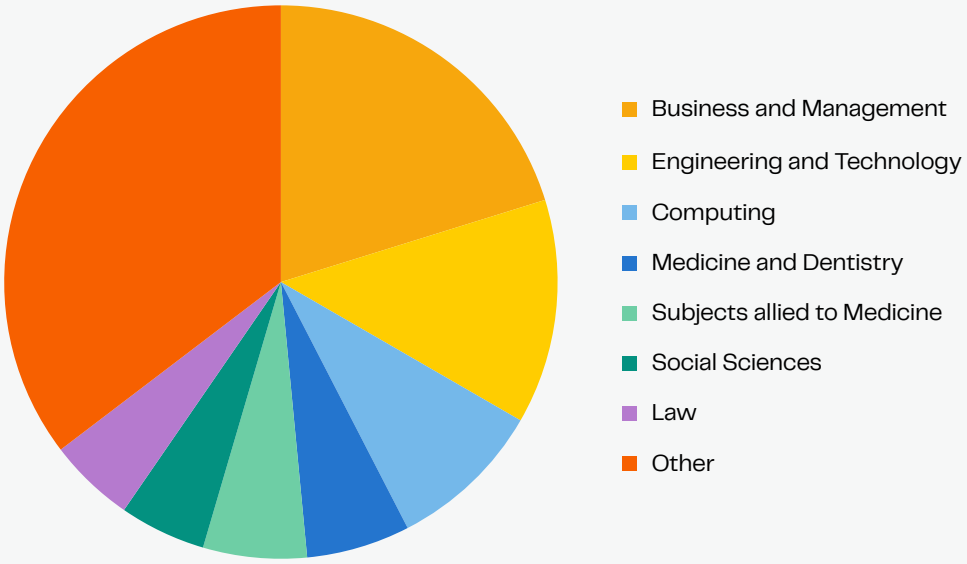
The QS International Student Survey offers an unparalleled view into pre-enrolled international students. The 2026 iteration draws on responses from over 42,115 students in 191 locations, and this report uses over 500,000 responses from the past 5 years.

The questions in the Survey are designed to enable higher education institutions to make sound decisions on recruitment and communication strategies. Now combined with Global Student Flows data, we offer a well-rounded view of where students are choosing to study, and how they make that decision. To understand what matters to students, we ask a wide range of questions about their pre-enrolment journey. We want to know what students prioritise when choosing a location, university and course, and we want to understand what they perceive as high quality teaching. We ask students how their family influence decision making, and we gather data on the social media and digital channels they use to find study information. The International Student Survey also benefits from its longevity – 2026 is our 14th edition. The consistency in our questioning allows us to see how students' answers change over time, and predict future trends and shifts. Its yearly format allows us to add new questions to get a snapshot of student perception.

The International Student Survey's robust methodology ensures we truly represent the perception of pre-enrolled international students. Respondents for the International Student Survey are collected in partnership with global universities. This year, we partnered with 82 universities globally, who were invited to share the Survey with their own prospective international students. Fieldwork for the Survey was conducted between January 5 and April 6 2026, via Qualtrics, an online survey management platform. The Survey contains 50 unique questions, covering a range of topics relating to prospective student decision making, from their study background to their priorities, marketing communication preferences, through to their principal information sources, career aspirations, and post-study plans. The 2026 iteration of the Survey also contains questions on candidate perceptions of different locations as study destinations. Each institution who took part received a tailored benchmarking report detailing the results of their own prospective students.

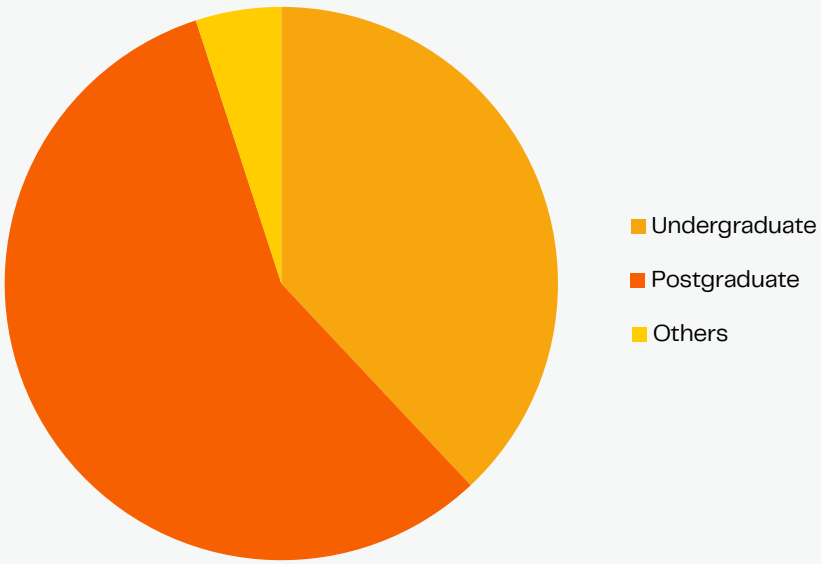
International Student Survey respondent demographics

Subject preference



Source: QS International Student Survey

Study level



Source: QS International Student Survey

QS, your higher education partner

In today's challenging times, universities are reviewing their strategies and preparing for a different future. We are the partner who can help.

With unrivalled data, global reach, and sector expertise, we have deep knowledge of higher education globally and how to drive performance, engagement and growth.

For more than three decades, we've worked in partnership with thousands of universities across the globe.

We help to:

- Transform complex data into clear, actionable intelligence
- Connect universities with the right students through our platforms, data and targeted engagement
- Support innovation, new models and market expansion for long-term institutional growth
- Provide sector-leading analytics and insights to enable global benchmarking and performance improvement
- Map in-demand skills needs to teaching, research, and employability for future workforce readiness

Explore more student recruitment insights