

# Destination: UK

**Discover the preferences  
and motivations of 68,353  
students looking to study  
at university in the UK**

A report on the QS International  
Student Survey 2024



## Executive summary

# What students say about the UK

The UK is one of the most popular destinations for international students – 49% of respondents to the QS International Student Survey 2024 are looking to study there, with 33% looking to study in the US. With four universities in the QS World University Rankings 2025 top 10, the UK has a near-unmatched prestige and international renown for providing high-quality education, research opportunities, and preparing students for their careers.

The UK offers an exciting and culturally varied study destination – top performing universities are located in cities throughout the UK. Immigration restrictions are presenting challenges for some international students looking to study in the UK. Early indicators show recent policy changes are causing dramatic decreases in applications from students in Nigeria and the Indian sub-continent. Despite this, the country remains a popular destination for prospective students around the world.

Holding a degree from a UK institution remains advantageous when pursuing international career opportunities. Global competition for international students continues to be fierce.

UK universities are truly able to differentiate themselves from universities in other markets. They should leverage the country's strong reputation for graduate outcomes, make use of the opportunity trans-national education provides, and champion and advocate for the many social and cultural benefits that international students bring to cities and campuses across the UK.



# Key findings

from 68,353 students interested in studying in the UK

## High-quality teaching a top priority

High-quality teaching is the most important factor when choosing a university and course. They said the best way to measure a university's teaching quality was that it was ranked well overall in independent ratings.

## Prospective students seek a welcoming environment

**76%** of students interested in studying in the UK say that a welcoming environment for international students is an important factor when choosing a town or city to study in – the most popular answer.

## Sustainability is important to student decision-making

**63%** of prospective students said environmental sustainability is very or extremely important to them.

## The next generation of students are using Generative AI technologies

**64%** of candidates looking to study in the UK have used Generative AI technologies. 30% agree or strongly agree that AI is affecting their career choices. 38% actively seek information into how higher education institutions use AI and technology when researching universities.

## Existing international students are a key source of information

**49%** of students looking to study in the UK said the ability to ask questions of existing international students was useful when making study decisions – the most popular answer. Despite this, few prospective students have managed to talk to current students.

# Recommendations for UK universities

# 1

Highlight and promote the credentials that evidence your institution's high-quality teaching. Embed this message across marketing channels and student communications.

# 2

Ensure student enrolment advisors and marketing collateral reflects the UK's welcoming nature, particularly focusing on any city-wide initiatives or accolades that can re-assure concerned students of a safe town, city, campus area and local community.

# 3

Effectively utilise employability messaging in your student marketing. Prospective students are already thinking about their career, as they choose courses because it leads to their chosen career, and seek information on work placements, graduate employment rate, and an institution's careers service.

# 4

Make the most of your international students on-campus, ensuring they're present in your marketing materials, and give prospective students a chance to contact them.

# 5

Show your institution's sustainable impact by using demonstrable, real-world examples of activity, such as on-campus initiatives and working with the local community.

# 6

Recognise the opportunity and risks arising from Generative AI usage. Consider how to embed AI-specific skill development into curricula, while adapting testing styles to minimise academic misconduct.

# Make smart choices, with real student insights

The QS International Student Survey is the largest global survey of its kind, and it has been guiding international recruitment strategies for over a decade.

**146,619**  
prospective student responses

**196**  
countries and territories

**68,353**  
interested in the UK

## Use QS International Student Survey data and insights to:

- Understand and fulfil evolving student priorities in the areas that matter most to them, like employability and sustainability.
- Identify growth opportunities.
- Refine brand positioning, adapt strategies, and showcase your difference.

Would you like help from QS experts? We will work with you to apply our insights and recommendations into your marketing and recruitment plans.

**Contact us today** and we will be happy to guide you towards recruitment excellence.



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## Did you know?

If you partner with us for the QS International Student Survey, you receive a bespoke report for your institution.

It's free to participate – we just ask that you invite your prospective students to complete the QS International Student Survey.

Register your interest in partnering with us for the QS International Student Survey 2025 today.



# The next generation of students are using Generative AI technologies



**64%**

of students looking to study in the UK have used or interacted with Generative AI technologies.

The potential Generative AI has to revolutionise higher education is already well documented. With a majority of prospective students already interacting with Generative AI, universities should expect students to use it in their academic work, as well as personal statements and application data entry. Limiting its use is likely to prove problematic but that's not to say that institutions shouldn't review their guidance, policy and marking procedures to understand and shape where AI is being harnessed well – and where it isn't.

In the classroom, adapting course structures to ensure students use these platforms in a way that enhances the learning experience will be more successful. Giving students the opportunity to showcase their true personality – through video interviews, for example – will also avoid negative impacts from students using Generative AI as an application aid.

The discussion around AI and its applications in higher education reinforces the importance of having up-to-date technology. More than half (55%) of all students interested in studying in the UK report that up-to-date technology is a priority when assessing a university's teaching quality. We discuss this in more detail in the "Applying to university" section.

Whilst Open AI GPT is the most widely used platform, the proliferation of platforms with embedded Generative AI functionality will fuel further competition and innovation. Universities should make students aware of which platforms are most suitable for them to use as part of their studies.

There is also an interesting difference in regional usage. Students from the Asia Pacific (APAC) region looking to study in the UK are the most likely to have used or interacted with Generative AI technology (67%). The region with the lowest usage is North America (45%).

## Students are altering their study and career plans because of the growth in Generative AI

There is clear evidence to suggest that the growth in AI is affecting study decisions of prospective students. Whilst a significant minority (16%) have reconsidered their course choice because of AI, this is considerably higher for those looking to study STEM fields with 30% of computing candidates, 19% of engineering candidates, and 18% of maths candidates all expressing this sentiment. This reiterates that AI has the potential to redirect student flows into different subject areas.

This is also reflected in the use of AI, with candidates from those subject areas also more likely to have used AI platforms as part of their studies – especially Open AI.

Beyond course choices, it's also impacting students' career decisions. 29% of candidates agree that AI is affecting their career choices. Only 16% of students agree or strongly agree that AI is impacting their destination selection, however.

Universities should consider being transparent with how they use AI technology.

# 38%

of candidates actively seek information about how universities use AI.

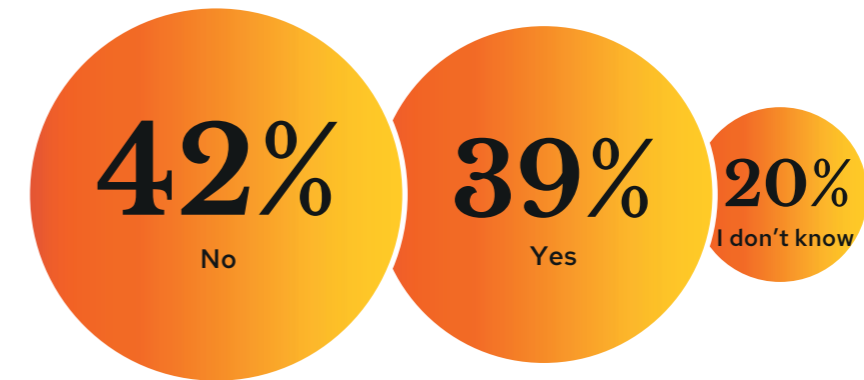
[Want more insights into Generative AI in higher education?](#)

Read "Universities, students and the Generative AI imperative".



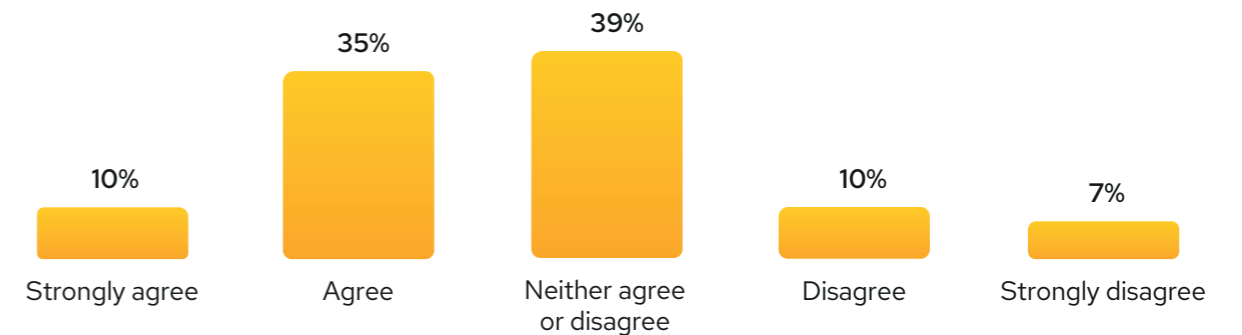
It should also be noted that there is an increasing focus on the environmental impact of Generative AI. The processors required to train the models and support requests take place in a data centre, and require energy to cool and operate them – one assessment from a University of Washington professor estimates the daily energy consumption of Open AI GPT is 1 Gigawatt hour, equivalent to 33,000 US homes. Universities should consider this when promoting their Generative AI strategy.

### Do you actively seek information about how higher education institutions utilise AI and technology when researching universities?



Source: QS International Student Survey 2024

### Including the use of Generative AI in the curriculum will have a positive impact on the teaching quality of the university



Source: QS International Student Survey 2024

However, older generations of prospective students are more likely to cite sustainability as an important issue. 57% of 17-18 year olds think environmental sustainability is very or extremely important, compared to 79% of 38-42 year olds, for example.

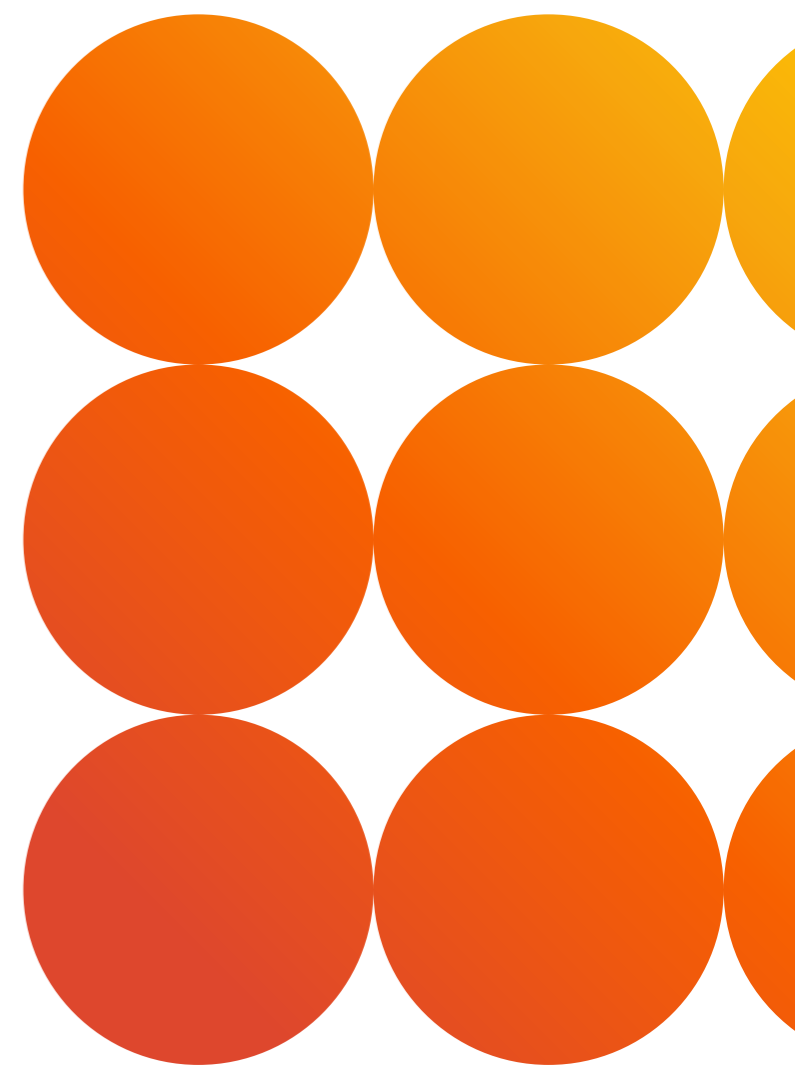
# Sustainability continues to be important to students, but other concerns impact study decisions too

Sustainability is an issue affecting all of us. Universities play key roles in addressing this critical global crisis, through innovative, impactful research and educating the next generation.

A majority of students looking to study in the UK (63%) say that environmental sustainability is very or extremely important to them. However, older generations of prospective students are more likely to cite sustainability as an important issue. It's imperative that universities continue to communicate their research efforts, and show the importance of driving sustainable development.

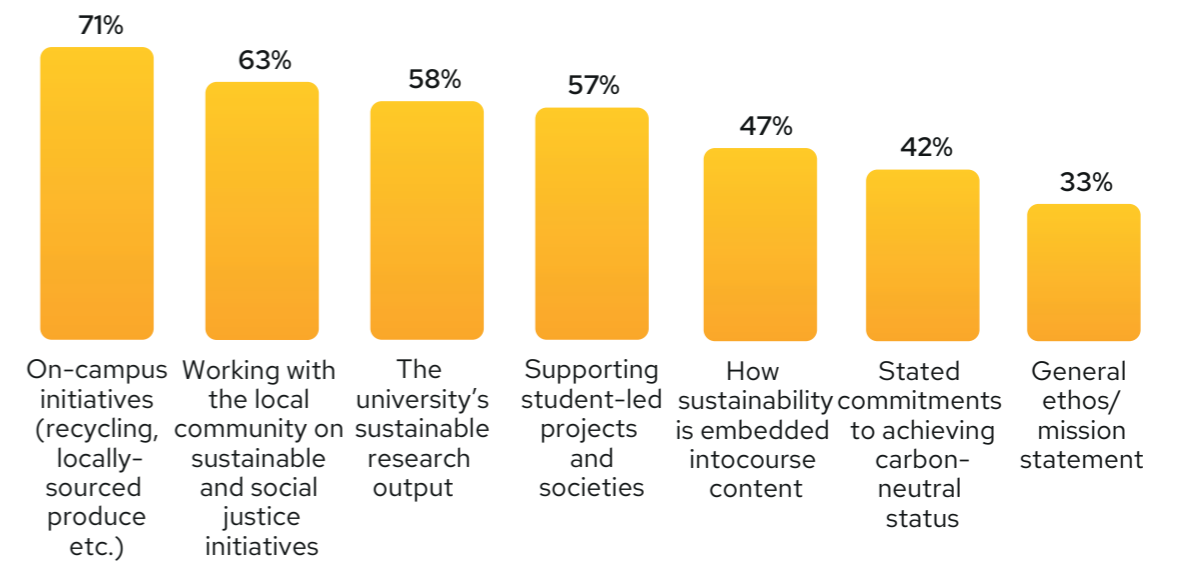


**Demonstrable, real-world change is likely to resonate most effectively with students.**



Tangible changes are the most important metrics for students when judging whether a university is sustainable or not. On-campus initiatives and working with the local community are the two most common measures – 71% and 63% of respondents said they were important respectively. Third is a university's sustainable research output. Demonstrable, real-world change is likely to resonate most effectively with students.

**What's most important to you when judging whether a university is environmentally sustainable?**

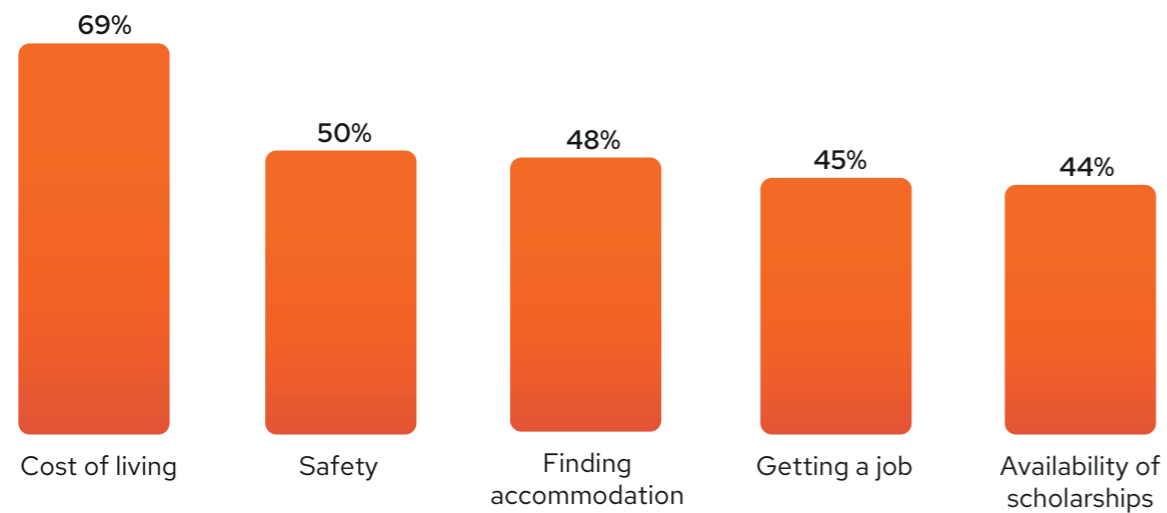


Source: QS International Student Survey 2024

## Cost of living is the top concern for students looking to study in the UK

Sustainability is, however, not the only important issue to prospective students. The cost of living when in the UK or at home, youth unemployment and other systemic issues are playing on students' minds too.

What worries you most about studying in a different country?  
(Top five responses)



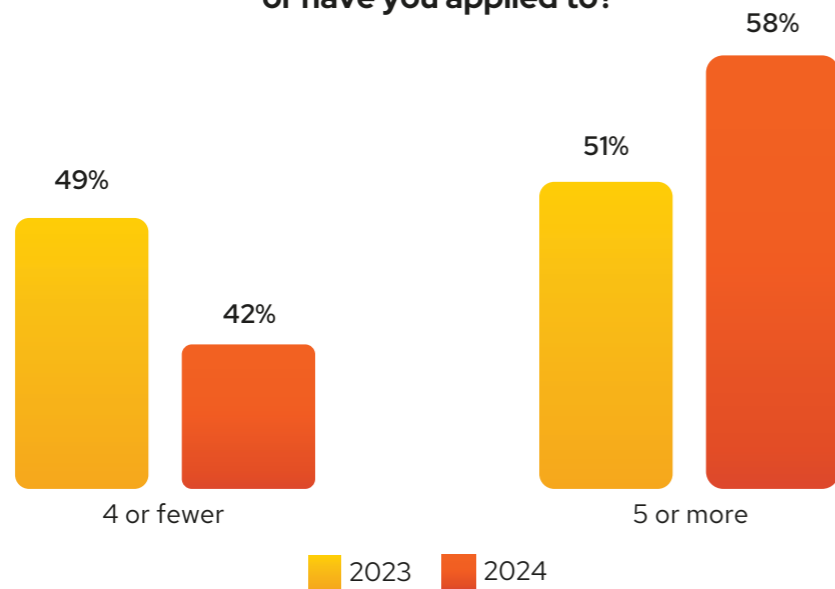
Source: QS International Student Survey 2024



Universities should continue to address these concerns in marketing and conversion activity. 49% of respondents said being able to ask current international students questions was useful when making study decisions – enabling current international students to talk directly to enquirers and offer holders is an effective tactic to share authentic study and living experiences.

# Prospective international students are applying to or considering more universities

How many universities are you considering applying to, or have you applied to?



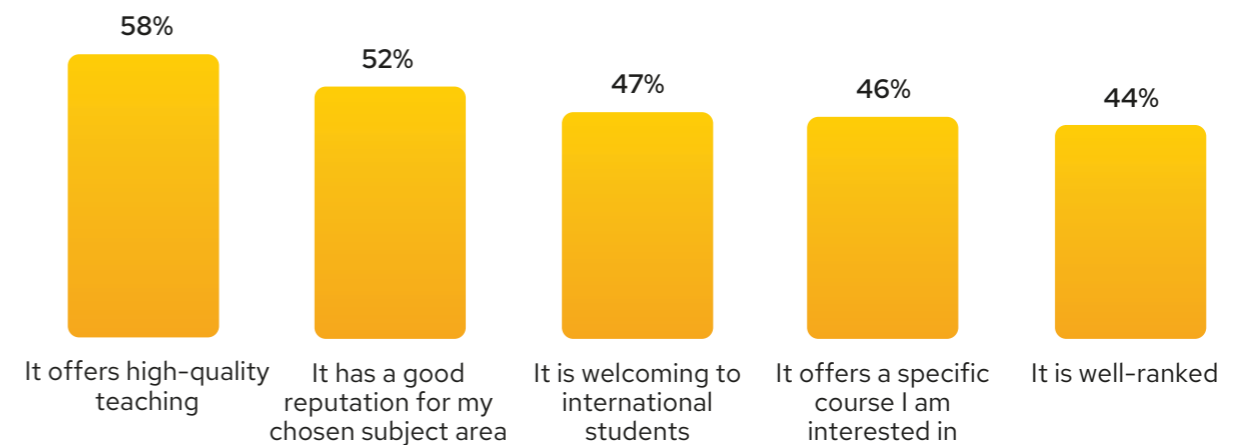
Source: QS International Student Survey 2024

2024 data shows a steady increase in the number of universities students are considering. While five remains the most common number of universities to be interested in, the percentage of students considering 6,7,8,10 and more than 10 universities has increased year-on-year. This further emphasises the need for UK universities to offer key points of differentiation to convert interested students.



## High-quality teaching remains the most important factor when choosing a university

What five things are most important to you when choosing a university?



Source: QS International Student Survey 2024

When asked what five things are most important when choosing a university, the most important factor for students looking to study in the UK is high-quality teaching, with reputation for their chosen subject following closely behind.

## While cost of living causes concerns, comparatively few students seek scholarships from UK universities

When we compare this to the 'big four' competitive international student recruitment markets, students interested in the UK seek similar things to those interested in other nations. Most interestingly, scholarships are only the seventh most important aspect for students looking to study in the UK, in stark contrast to other destination markets. This indicates less price sensitivity among prospective UK students.

	UK	Canada	US	Australia
1	High-quality teaching 58%	Scholarships 55%	High-quality teaching 55%	High-quality teaching 51%
2	Good reputation for chosen subject 52%	High-quality teaching 52%	Good reputation for chosen subject 52%	Welcoming to international students 51%
3	Welcoming to international students 47%	Welcoming to international students 51%	Scholarships 46%	Scholarships 51%

## Ranking well in independent ratings is how prospective students define high-quality teaching at universities

Which factors are most important to you when assessing a university's teaching quality?

**66%**

The university is ranked well overall in independent ratings

**65%**

The university has received recognition of its teaching quality via a country-wide measurement scheme

**61%**

The university's teaching staff

**59%**

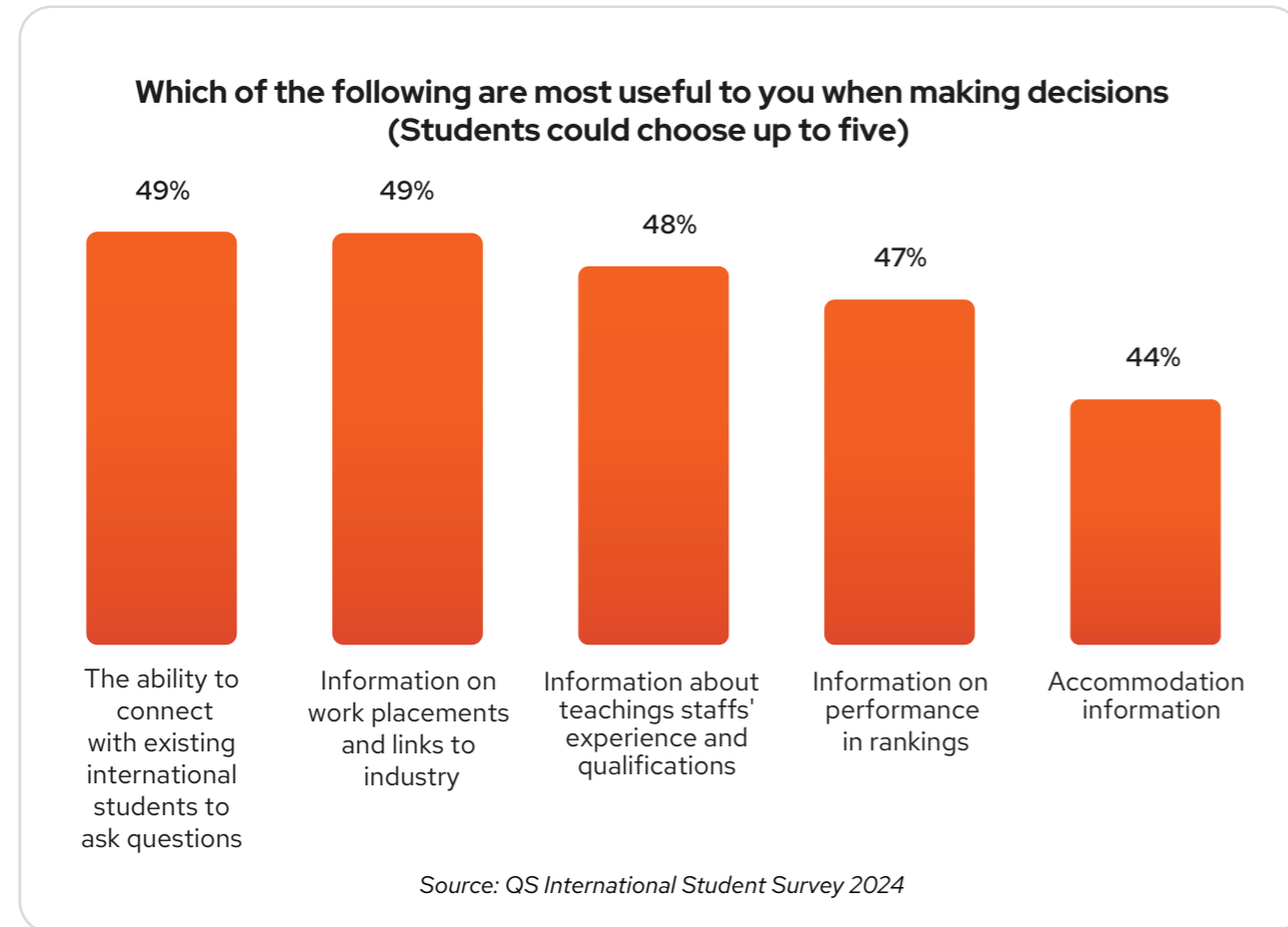
A high graduate employment rate

**55%**

Up-to-date technology

66% of students say that they associate well-ranked universities with high-quality teaching. Certification and accreditation is clearly key, as the second most popular measure of quality teaching is recognition from a country-wide measurement scheme. As we discussed earlier in the report, using up-to-date technology – such as Generative AI – is also important for students looking for quality.

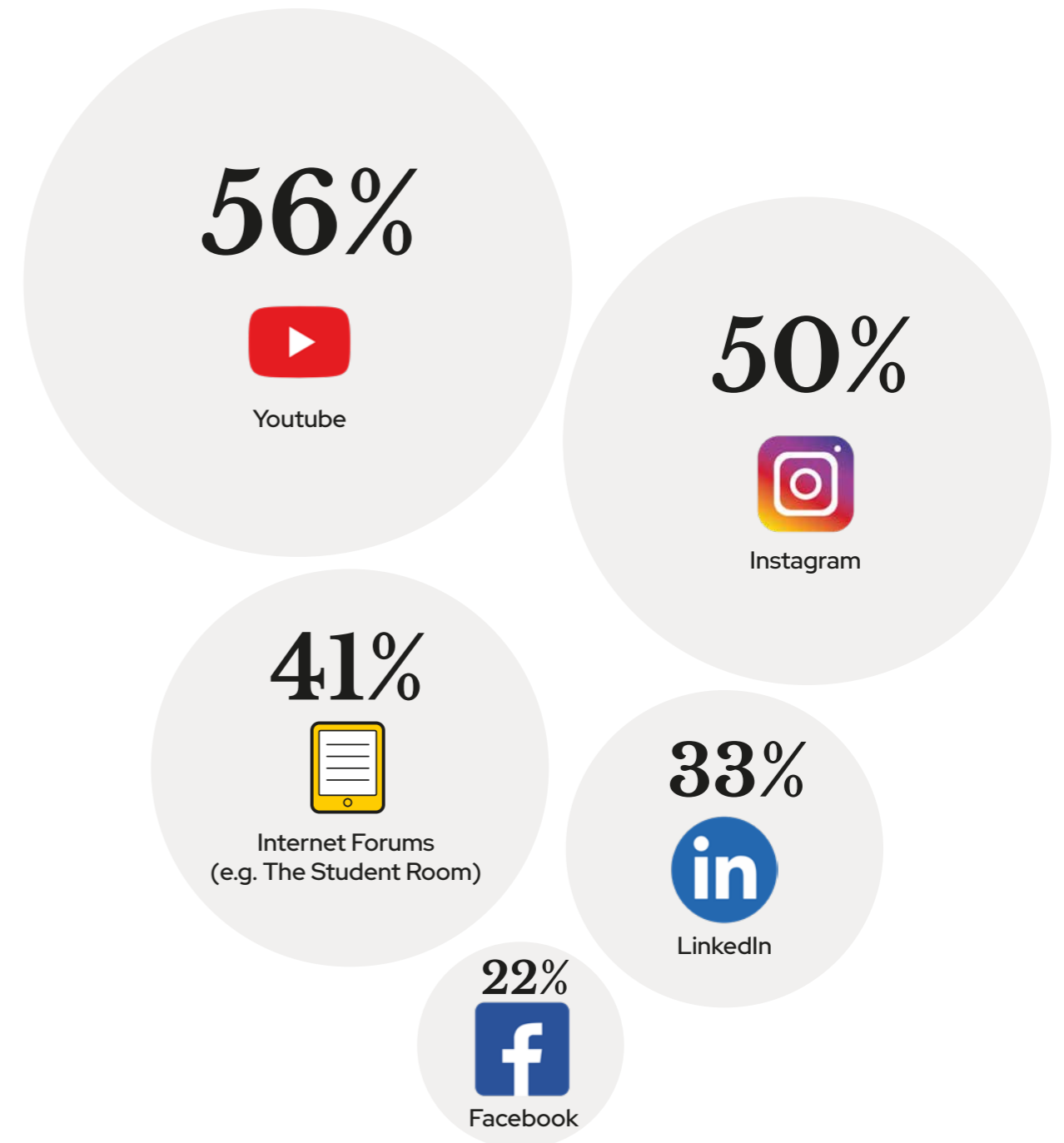
## Students find the ability to ask questions to existing international students the most useful source of information when making study decisions



When researching a university, students looking to study in the UK feel that the experience of international students and staff are the most helpful sources of information. However, as we discuss on page 31, prospective students do not often get the chance to connect with existing international students.

Indicating the career-driven nature of prospective students, information on work placements and links to industry is the third most useful piece of information when making study decisions. Universities should ensure this information is easily accessible to international students on the platforms they're using to research universities.

## YouTube is the most popular social media platform when researching study destinations



56% of students interested in UK study say that they use YouTube for research when making study decisions. With student-focused forums ranking third, this re-emphasises international students' desire to hear about the authentic experience of students, rather than marketing materials.

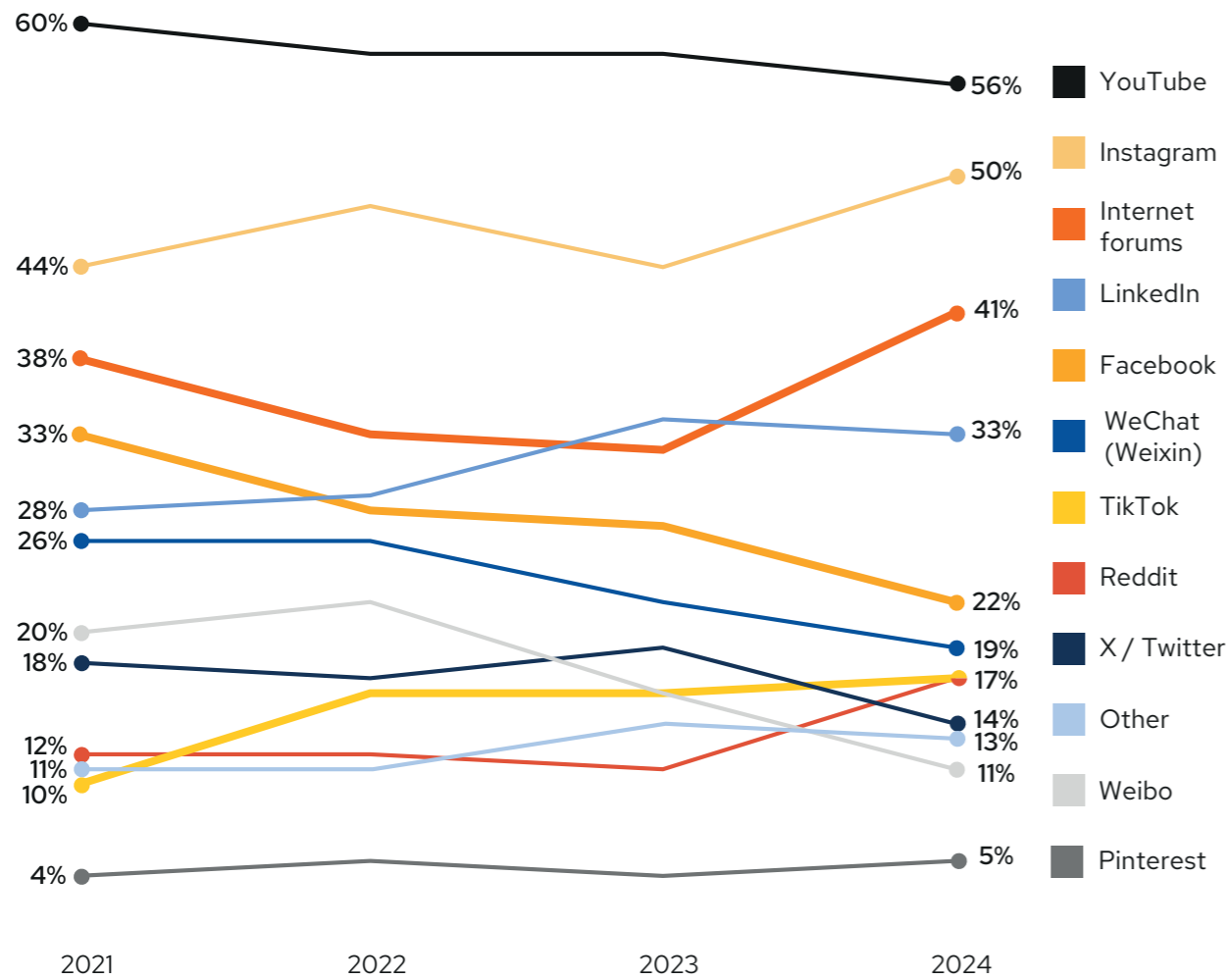
Facebook, while the fifth most popular social media option among global respondents, has seen an 11% decrease in popularity since 2021. This is more stark for students from Western Europe (dropping from 28% to 8%), and Eastern Europe (dropping from 46% to 16%).

# 12%

increase in TikTok use since 2021 reported by 19-20 year olds

Over a quarter of North American students looking to study in the UK are using TikTok to research study options. This has increased from 15% in 2021. Globally, female students have a larger increase in TikTok usage (+10%) than male students (+4%) since 2021. The largest increase in TikTok use since 2021 is among 19-20 year olds (+12%) – this suggests universities should target undergraduate students on TikTok.

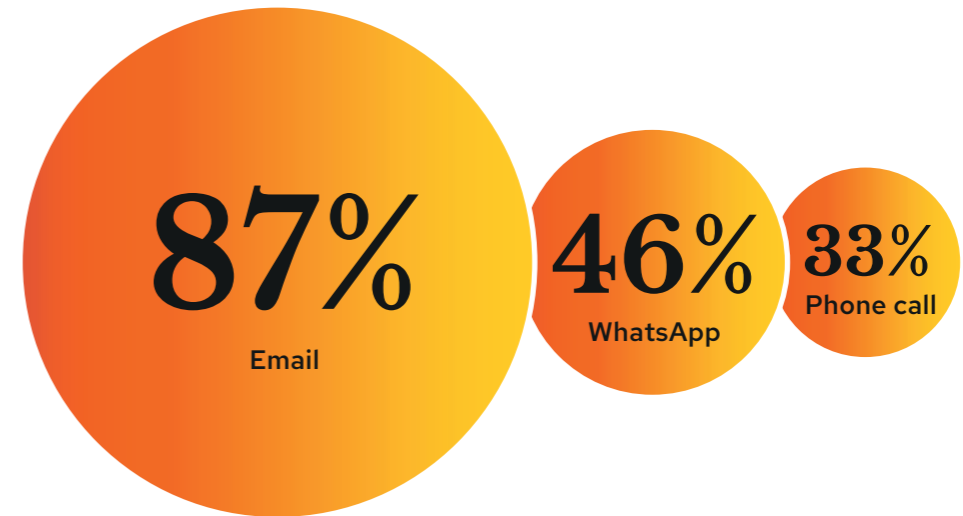
Which social media do you use for research when making decisions about studying overseas?



Source: QS International Student Survey 2024

## Email and WhatsApp are the preferred communication channels

Which of these would you like to use to communicate with a university you are considering studying at?



Source: QS International Student Survey 2024

Most students still prefer to communicate with prospective universities via the traditional method of email. WhatsApp continues to be an important channel, preferred to phone calls among prospective students. Students from Latin America (71%) and Africa & Middle East (63%) are more likely to want to communicate with UK universities using WhatsApp. North America has the lowest desire for WhatsApp, at 35%.

## Students expect a quick response to enquiries

# 88%

of students expect a complete and personal response to their enquiry within one week.

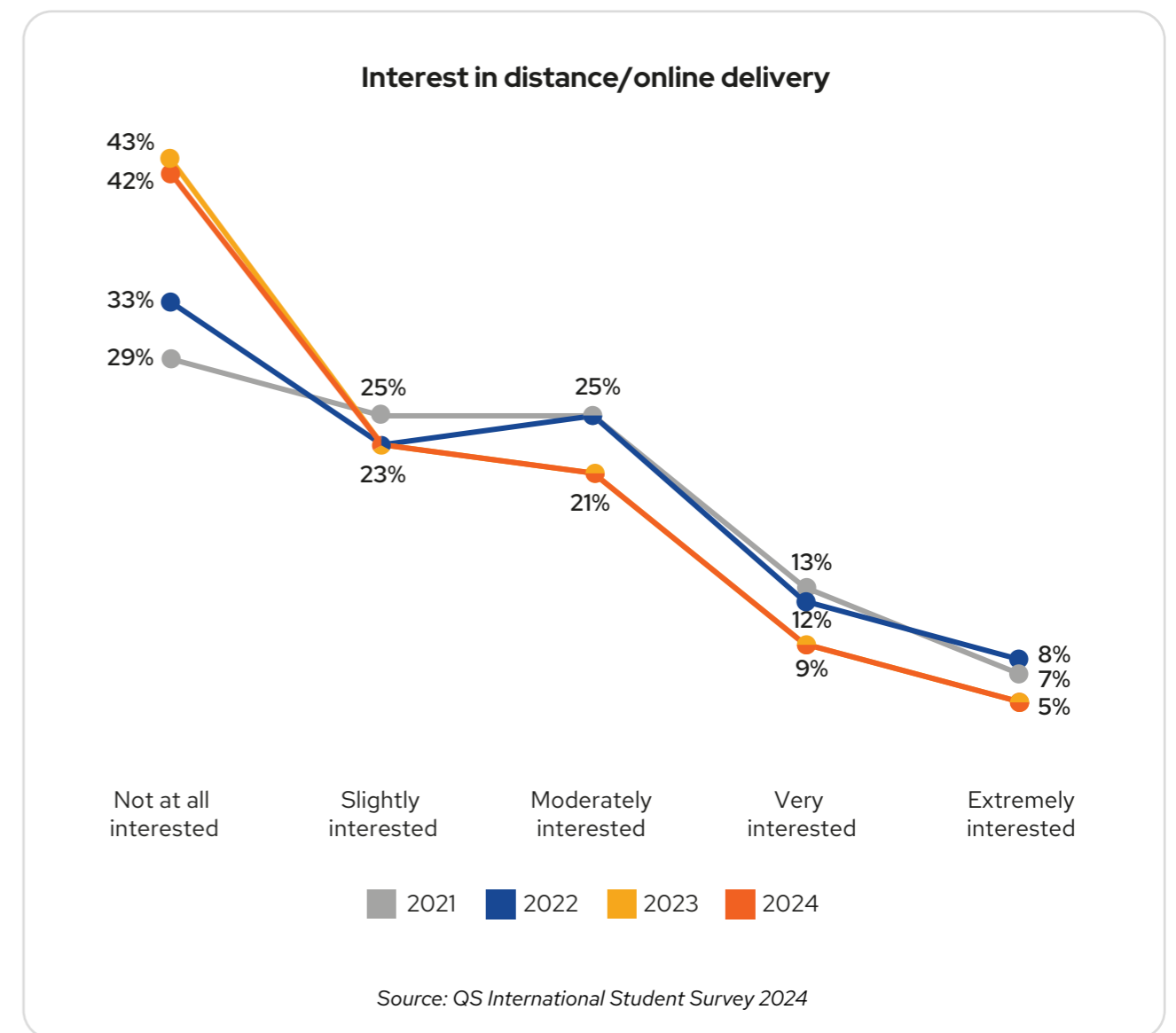
36% expect a response within three days. This timeline extends when students want to receive a notification on the outcome of their application – 35% expect a response in one month, while 16% are patient enough to expect a response within three months.



## Prospective students want face-to-face interactions

Whether it's before they enrol, or once they enter the classroom, students looking to study in the UK are seeking face-to-face engagements.

60% of respondents are extremely interested in in-person delivery, with a further 27% very interested. Comparatively, 42% are not at all interested in distance/online study, and 22% are slightly interested. Of those uninterested in studying for an online degree, 76% said they wanted to study in-person to access the facilities of a university, and 72% said they want to meet other students.



Comparing 2023 to 2024, the sentiments for distance/online study are nearly identical. Student interest in in-person study, however, has increased, with fewer students not at all interested in 2024, and more extremely interested.

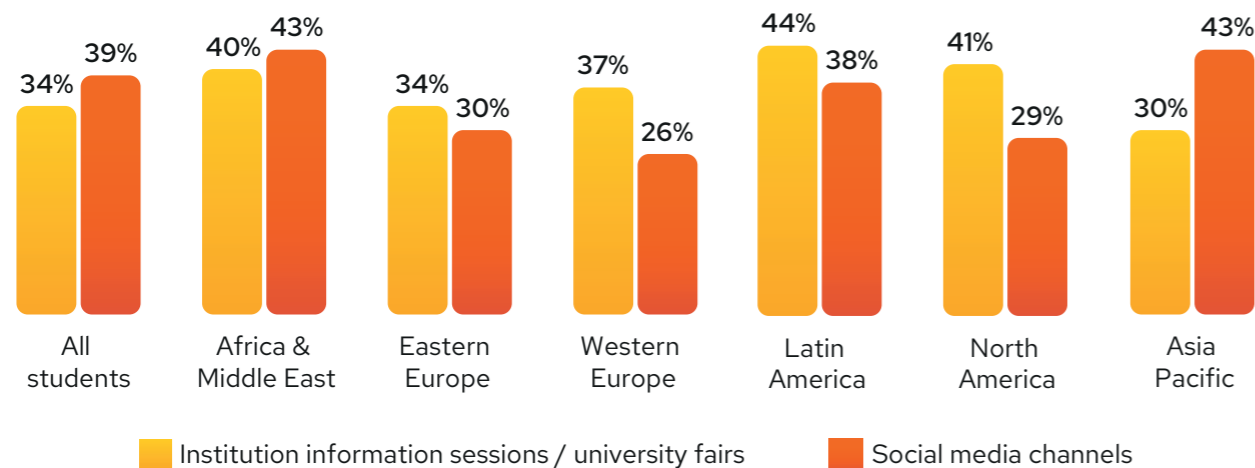
## Focus on student recruitment events

Student recruitment fairs still provide a valuable opportunity for prospective students. 51% of polled students said they'd been to a recruitment event, fair, or similar. Of those that attended, 67% did so in-person. Over a third of candidates cite university fairs as one of their most useful information sources when researching universities – the fifth most popular answer.

The relative usefulness of these fairs varies considerably across different source markets. For North American students interested in the UK, fairs remain a more useful resource than social media when researching universities.

Candidates continue to value face-to-face elements post-pandemic

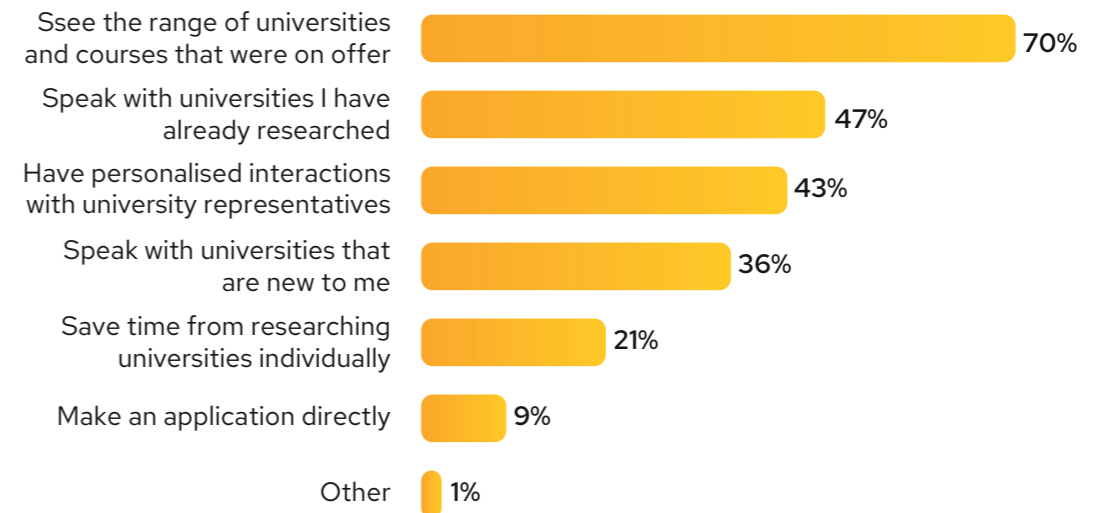
Which of the following are most useful to you when making decisions about your studies?  
(Students interested in studying in the UK)



Source: QS International Student Survey 2024

## Why do students attend student recruitment events?

Why did you choose to attend a student recruitment event?



Source: QS International Student Survey 2024

These results suggest that universities have an opportunity to make a first impression and can get new exposure from student recruitment events while also reinforcing positive relationships with prospective students.

The interactions prospective students have at recruitment fairs have a considerable bearing on candidate decision-making. 72% claim that these fairs had a lot or a fair amount of influence on their study choices. This reiterates the importance of (individual) interactions with students throughout their pre-enrolment journey.

Over  
**30%**

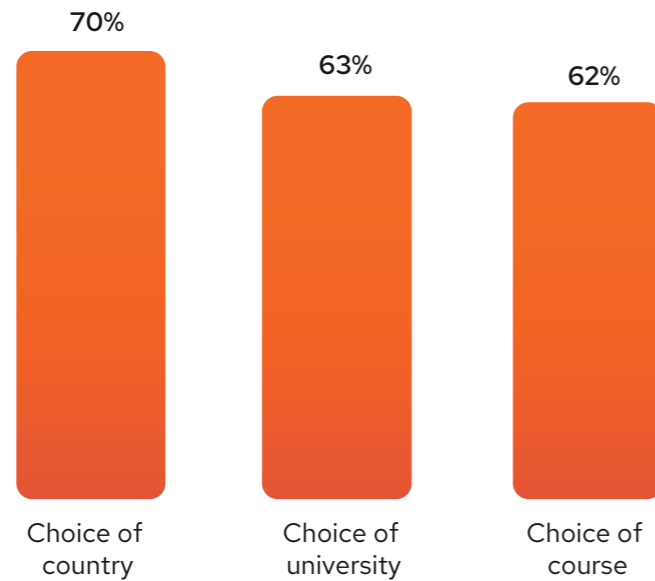
discuss their choice of course, country, or university with advisors at their current education institution

Advisors at their current education institution are the next most popular option, with over 30% discussing their choice of course, country, or university with them.

Interestingly, students are not discussing study decisions with universities' student ambassadors in great numbers.

## Parents continue to be a key driver in study decisions

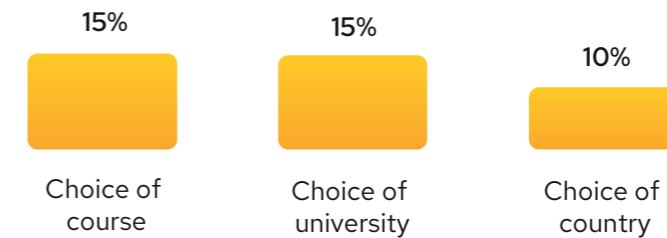
### What have you discussed with your parents?



Source: QS International Student Survey 2024

Well over 60% of students have discussed key study decisions with their parents. Only 2% of students said they had not discussed any of these options with their parents.

### What have you discussed with student ambassadors from a university you're interested in?



Source: QS International Student Survey 2024

This is in spite of prospective students saying that asking questions of current international students to be the most useful source of information. There is an opportunity for UK universities to ensure current students are visible to meet this demand.



# The importance of employability in student decision-making

Employability is undoubtedly an important factor when candidates make decisions about their studies. When asked what factors they prioritise when choosing a course, 49% cited that it led to their chosen career – the fourth most popular answer. Over the last four years, this has consistently been in the top five priorities for international students looking to study in the UK. In addition, 41% cited a high graduate employment rate as an important factor when choosing a course.

Similarly, 35% and 31% of candidates cite a high graduate employment rate and a good careers service as important factors when choosing a university. This all reiterates the extent to which candidates are already thinking about their future career paths prior to enrolment.

## 49%

of students said, when choosing a course, that it was important that it led to their chosen career.

## 48%

of students said, when making study decisions, that it was useful to have information on work placements and links to industry.

## 41%

of students said, when choosing a course, that it was important it had a high graduate employment rate.

It's vital that institutions can incorporate employability into their marketing communication strategies – 48% cite information on work placements and links to industry as a topic which they would find useful when making decisions about their studies.

The International Graduate Outcomes report 2024, which analysed data from over 10,000 graduates from UK universities, found that career support and placements was the top area their institution could improve on, with only 3% of graduate respondents in work finding a job through their university's career support services. To improve a university's graduate outcomes – and therefore be able to promote it in marketing materials – the report recommends improving career support services and "raising awareness of the breadth of services and support offered".

According to the QS International Student Survey 2024, the most important career consideration for candidates when choosing a course is that it helps them to learn new skills (58%). Universities should take a skills-based approach when designing their curricula to help graduates have a clear idea of the skills they've gained during their studies and how they add value to graduate employers.

Following the Migration Advisory Committee's Rapid Review of the Graduate route visa and the subsequent confirmation from the UK government that the visa would not be changed, universities can confidently use the Graduate route visa in marketing materials and conversion activity. Nothing in the Conservative or Labour Party manifestoes indicates that this stance will change following the 2024 UK general election.

# QS employability solutions

We are employability pioneers. The only rankings provider to recognise its critical importance. For students. For higher education. For the future.

## Our employability solutions: Your competitive edge

Our comprehensive suite of employability products and services help you stand out with a strong value proposition, streamline your strategy, and maximise your results.

1

Support your students' skill development from pre-departure to post-graduation with our industry-recognised micro-credentials.

2

From white labelled training portals to custom analytics dashboards – we help craft scalable solutions that align with your institution's unique goals.

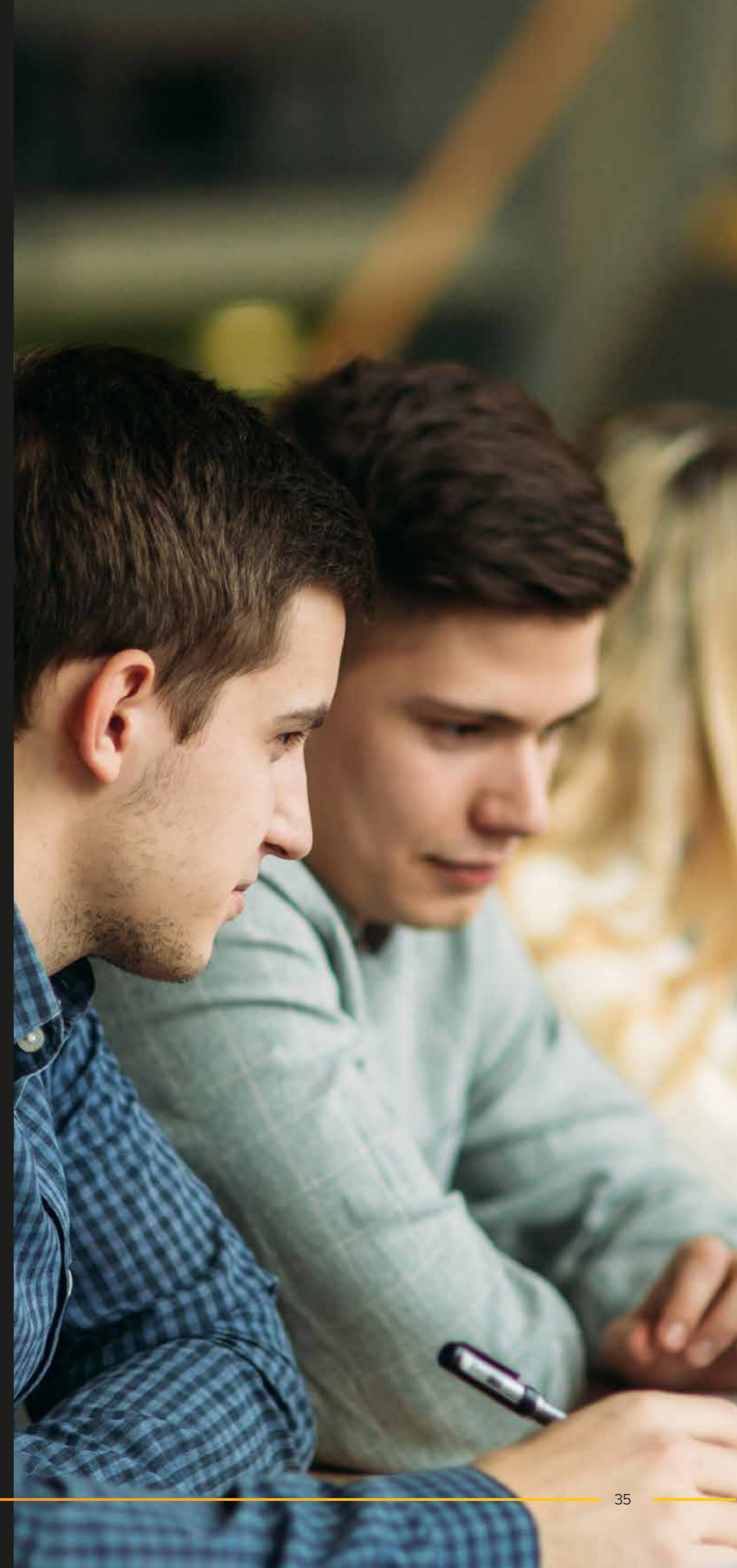
3

Gain crystal-clear visibility with real-world, real-time intelligence, like job market trends and employer perceptions.

4

Future-proof your careers teams with the very latest industry knowledge, AI-powered resources, and intuitive platforms to streamline operations and deliver exceptional student support.

[Find out more](#)





# The role of reputation in student decision-making

Reputation is a vital component of candidate decision-making and it's essential that institutions can effectively articulate their reputation in ways which are meaningful to prospective students.

**62%**

One of the most important things for me is that I can study the course I am interested in at a university with a good reputation for delivering that course

**44%**

One of the most important things for me is studying at an institution with a reputation for good teaching quality

**39%**

One of the most important things for me is to study at a highly ranked university in a prestigious country for international study

# 52%

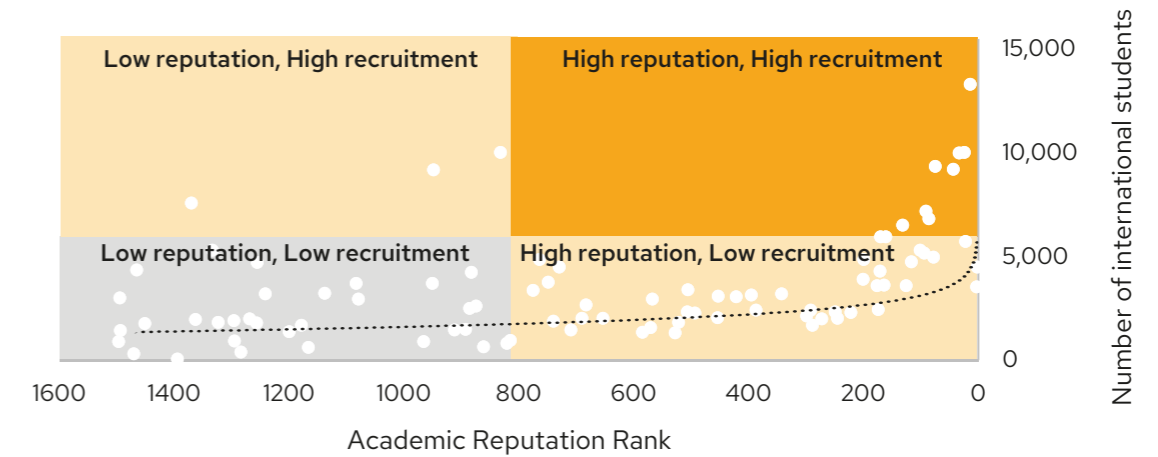
said having a good reputation in their chosen subject is an important factor when choosing a university to study at

As discussed on page 19, having a good reputation in their chosen subject is the second most important factor when candidates decide which university to study at (58%). Overall reputation is the sixth most important factor (38%), indicating that students recognise universities are not equally as strong across faculty areas. Universities can leverage this information to their advantage by promoting individual faculties.

Previous iterations of this report have highlighted the role of rankings in allowing an institution to communicate its reputation to a student audience. Reputation and rankings are closely interlinked in the minds of prospective students, making it essential for institutions to have a strong narrative grounded in their performance in the rankings.

Rankings are the single biggest indicator of a university's teaching quality - 66% of students placed it among the top five most important factors. This reiterates the importance of reputation when communicating their teaching quality credentials.

UK universities show a positive correlation between reputation and recruitment performance



Source: QS World University Rankings 2025

High reputation scores among academics and employers can be an effective lever to help recruit international students. As the data shows, there's a correlation between a strong reputation and strong international recruitment.

# How is the UK perceived as a study destination?

It's important to contextualise the findings of this report:

- On 1 January 2024, UK immigration policy changed to prevent international students from bringing family members with them on all but postgraduate research courses, and courses with government-funded scholarships.
- In May 2024, the Migration Advisory Committee review was released, advising the Graduate route visa should remain; this was followed by confirmation that the visa wouldn't be changed or axed.



The UK is clearly one of the most popular destinations for international students

## 49%

of respondents to the QS International Student Survey 2024 are looking to study in the UK – the most popular answer.

## 41%

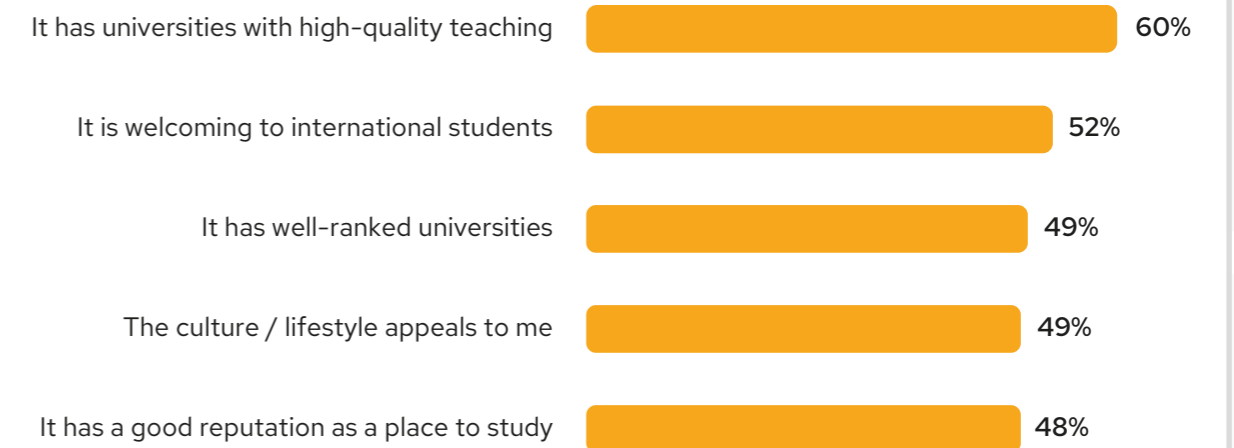
of candidates would consider the UK according to the latest QS pulse survey, conducted on TopUniversities.com. However, in data from the same pulse survey 36% of those who are looking to study elsewhere had previously considered the UK but rejected the notion of studying there.

The main reasons for this are the price of tuition fees as well as the competitive nature of the application process.

Only 30% of candidates were aware that the government was considering additional restrictions on international students, though for 29% of candidates the prospect of these did make them less likely to consider the UK.



**What is most important to you when choosing a country to study in?  
(Students could choose up to five)**



Source: QS International Student Survey 2024

Using QS International Student Survey 2024 data, we can see the top five most important things when choosing a country to study in. For students looking to study in the UK, high-quality teaching and a welcoming environment are the top two reasons.

As these students are looking to study in the UK, we can deduce that international students have assessed the UK to embody these positive attributes.



# Are you taking a data-driven and strategic approach to international student recruitment?

## A groundbreaking analytics and advisory solution

features our unique, comprehensive and live datasets to provide actionable insights and support institutional decision-making.

Designed in collaboration with five UK universities – Durham University, King’s College London, London South Bank University, the University of Southampton and the University of York – the all-in-one platform empowers you to:

### See the bigger picture

Gain complete visibility on your place within the student recruitment landscape with comprehensive data and insights.

### Make data-driven decisions

Leverage powerful QS analytics and predictive forecasting to optimise your recruitment strategies by source market.

### Achieve every goal

This isn’t a one-size-fits-all solution. With your expert QS advisor, you’ll develop personalised, results-oriented recruitment plans tailored to your institution’s unique needs.

## Ready to revolutionise your student recruitment?

Book a chat with our team today to be among the first to experience this sector-changing solution and discover how it can drive success for your institution.



# The 'big four' destination markets: how do they compare?

## What matters most when choosing a course?

	UK	Canada	US	Australia
1	High-quality teaching	Affordable tuition fees	High-quality teaching	Affordable tuition fees
2	University has a good reputation	High-quality teaching	University has a good reputation	High-quality teaching
3	Personal interest in the subject	University has a good reputation	Affordable tuition fees	University has a good reputation

## What matters most when choosing a university?

	UK	Canada	US	Australia
1	High-quality teaching	Scholarships	High-quality teaching	High-quality teaching
2	Good reputation for chosen subject	High-quality teaching	Good reputation for chosen subject	Welcoming to international students
3	Welcoming to international students	Welcoming to international students	Scholarships	Scholarships

## What matters most when choosing a country?

	UK	Canada	US	Australia
1	High-quality teaching	Welcoming to international students	High-quality teaching	Welcoming to international students
2	Welcoming to international students	High-quality teaching	Welcoming to international students	High-quality teaching
3	Well-ranked universities	I can get a visa to work after graduating	Well-ranked universities	The culture/lifestyle appeals to me

## The top ten source markets for the UK, Canada, the US and Australia UK – HESA | US – Open Doors | Canada – Open Gov't | Australia – Dept of Education

	UK	Canada	US	Australia
1	China	India	China	China
2	India	China	India	India
3	Nigeria	Philippines	South Korea	Nepal
4	Pakistan	France	Canada	Colombia
5	US	Nigeria	Vietnam	Vietnam
6	Hong Kong (SAR)	Iran	Taiwan	Thailand
7	Bangladesh	South Korea	Saudi Arabia	Brazil
8	Malaysia	Vietnam	Brazil	Philippines
9	France	Mexico	Mexico	Pakistan
10	Italy	US	Nigeria	Indonesia

## Demographics of those interested in the UK

Gender	
Female	55%
Male	41%
Prefer not to say or to self-describe	4%

Age	
17-20	43%
21-24	29%
25-31	18%
32 or older	9%

Funding	
Self-funded	59%
Loan	9%
Scholarship	16%
Not sure/ other	9%

Study level	
Foundation or vocational	1%
Undergraduate	42%
Postgraduate taught	37%
Postgraduate research	20%

Main subjects of interest	
Business and Management	19%
Engineering and Technology	12%
Computing	9%
Social sciences	8%
Law	5%

Household income	
Less than \$10,000	22%
\$10,001-\$25,000	13%
\$25,001-\$50,000	9%
\$50,001-\$75,000	6%
Over \$75,000 USD	13%
Don't know or prefer not to say	37%



## **Want to delve deeper into what your future students think?**

We provide bespoke reports for institutions which partner with us to encourage prospective students to participate in the QS International Student Survey.

Benchmark the needs and wants of your prospective students against other universities in the region and across the globe.

**Register your interest in partnering with us for the QS International Student Survey 2025.**

