



# Destination: US and Canada

Discover the preferences and motivations of students looking to study in the US and Canada

41,667 interested in US 30,746 interested in Canada

A report on the QS International Student Survey 2024





# **Executive** summary

#### What students say about the US and Canada

The United States and Canada remain highly attractive destinations in the eyes of international students. Home to 19 universities in the top 50 of the QS World University Rankings 2025, the US is a research powerhouse offering excellence in teaching and student experience. Canadian universities offer some of the world's most impressive environmental sustainability credentials, lower costs and favorable post-study work rights.

As the global competition for recruiting international students intensifies, it's a critical moment for universities in the US and Canada. The domestic student marketplace continues to shrink and more universities from across the globe are competing to attract international students.

The findings from the QS International Student Survey 2024 show that those interested in studying in the US and Canada are looking for high-quality teaching, a welcoming environment for international students and affordable programs with scholarship opportunities. The rising cost of living means that students are increasingly having to factor

affordability into their decision-making. Universities in the US and Canada have an opportunity to reassure students that these countries offer affordable opportunities with strong ROI when it comes to graduate job prospects.

Holding a degree from an American or Canadian institution remains a gold standard when pursuing international career opportunities, and this message should enable universities to clearly differentiate themselves from universities in other markets.

# **Key findings**

# Over half of respondents have used ChatGPT to support their studies

69% of students looking to study in Canada and the US have used or interacted with Generative AI technologies. ChatGPT is the most used platform for 56% (US) and 52% (Canada) of prospective students.

#### It's action that matters most when it comes to environmental sustainability

It is by researching on-campus initiatives that prospective students gauge a university's commitment to environmental sustainability and two thirds say that environmental sustainability is very or extremely important to them.

# High-quality teaching is crucial for students interested in the US and Canada

Teaching quality is the most important factor when choosing a course for those interested in studying in the US and the second most important factor for those looking to study in Canada.

#### A high graduate employment rate is most important when thinking about employability

Around 60% of students interested in studying in America and Canada feel that a high graduate employment rate is the most important measure when evaluating how their studies supported their career choices.

# Growing numbers of students are applying to 10 or more universities - and they're expecting quicker responses

Over 60% want a complete and personal response to their enquiry within three days.

Over half expect to receive notification of the outcome of their application within one week.

#### YouTube is the top social platform for university research – with LinkedIn entering the top three

60% of those interested in Canada (56% in the US) use YouTube. The second most popular is Instagram with LinkedIn now the third most popular (44% in Canada and US 41%).

# Recommendations for American and Canadian universities

Universities should be transparent about how they use Al technology and how students will engage in the technology on their course. With increasing focus on the environmental and social impact of Generative Al, universities should consider this when promoting their Generative Al usage and teaching.

Universities should ensure that sustainability features as a key part of student recruitment marketing activity, detailing the specific strategies, research, on-campus initiatives and support for students who want to work on sustainability projects. Where environmental and social sustainability is embedded within the curriculum, this information should be made clear and should emphasize the skills and benefits of what will be learned.

Be sure to emphasize the credentials which showcase high-quality teaching, ensuring this is a prominent message across all your marketing channels. If you're promoting online course provision, ensure you're taking students' key concerns about studying online into consideration: missing out on meeting other students, the experience of living overseas and access to facilities.

Half of respondents interested in the US and Canada feel that connecting with existing international students to ask questions would be helpful when making decisions about their studies. **Invest in high-quality and authentic video content** as a key part of your marketing strategy, involving current international students where possible.

Consider how machine learning and other technological solutions might enable you to scale your enquiry, admissions and offer management to deliver the response times applicants expect.

# Make smart choices, with real student insights

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

146,619

prospective student responses

196 countries and territories

**41,667** interested in the US\*

30,746

interested in Canada\*

\*Respondents may be double counted if they indicate interest in the US and Canada

# 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 quide you towards recruitment excellence.





Coming soon to US and Canadian institutions



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What do prospective students want and expect from

universities in the US and Canada

Receive a bespoke report for your institution

when you partner with us for the QS International Student Survey.

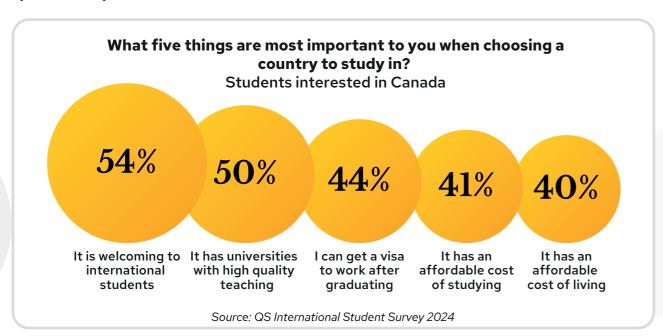
It's free to participate – we just ask that you invite your prospective students to complete the survey.

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

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Over half of respondents looking to study in Canada feel that the most important thing when choosing where to study is that it's welcoming to international students (54%). High quality universities and the ability to get a work visa after graduating were also in the top five list, followed by affordability.



Cost of living is the biggest worry for prospective students looking to study in Canada

73% of respondents cite cost of living as the biggest worry when considering studying in a different country. The availability of scholarships is the second biggest worry (57%), showing that funding and finances are a vital consideration for students.

73%

thinking about studying abroad.

the majority of students aren't worried about feeling welcomed.

Only 33% said that being made to feel welcome is a worry when

cite cost of living as the biggest worry when considering studying in a different country **57**%

57% cite availability of scholarships as the biggest worry when considering studying abroad – the second most popular answer



#### What five things are most important to you when choosing a country to study in? Students interested in the US **58**% **50**% 47% 45% 45% It has universities It is welcoming to It has The culture / It has a good with high quality international well-ranked lifestyle reputation as a universities students teaching appeals to me place to study

Source: QS International Student Survey 2024

# Cost of living is the biggest worry for prospective students looking to study in the US

**68%** of respondents cite cost of living as the biggest worry when considering studying in a different country. Safety is the second biggest worry (53%), followed by getting a job.

68%

cite cost of living as the biggest worry when considering studying in a different country 53%

cite safety as the biggest worry when considering studying in a different country – the second most popular answer

# Students look to the US for its high-quality study experience

Over half of respondents looking to study in the US feel that the most important thing when choosing where to study is the **quality of teaching** (58%). This is followed by a **welcoming environment** for international students and well-ranked universities. Affordability is much less of a consideration for those interested in the US compared to Canada.

Though a safe and welcoming place to study becomes more important when choosing a town or city to study in (77%).

#### Recommendations

- To reassure students worried about the safety and welcoming experience of your town or city, use the opportunity to build these messages into your recruitment marketing campaigns.
- Half of respondents interested in the US and Canada feel that connecting with existing
  international students to ask questions would be helpful when making decisions about
  their studies. Provide prospective students with the opportunity for current students to
  reassure them about the cost of living and safety of your study destination.
- Over 60% discuss their choice of country with their parents. Universities should be aware of these influences when marketing to prospective students overseas.

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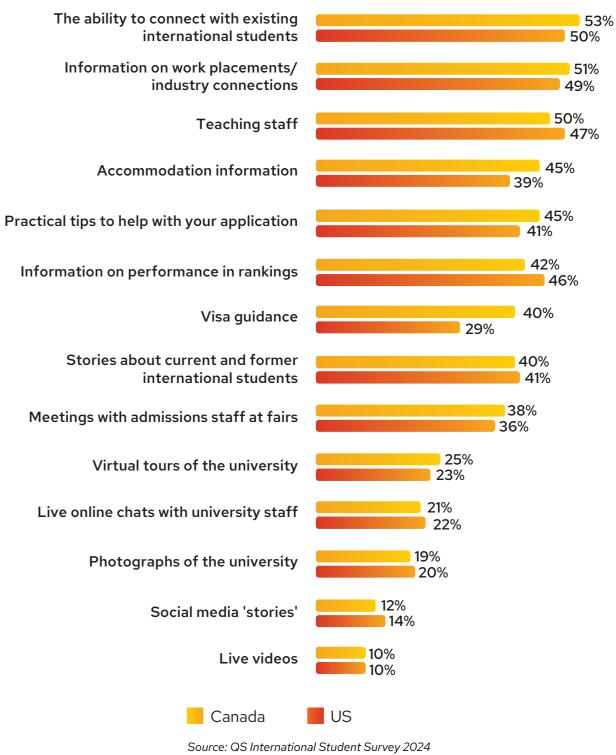


# Students applying to 10 or more universities is increasing

While most students interested in the US and Canada apply to 3-5 universities, there is a growing number of students choosing to apply to 10 or more institutions. In 2023, 21% of prospective students looking at the US said they were considering or had applied to 10 or more universities. In 2024, that figure has increased to 27%. For those interested in Canada, the percentage has grown from 17% in 2023 to 21% in 2024.

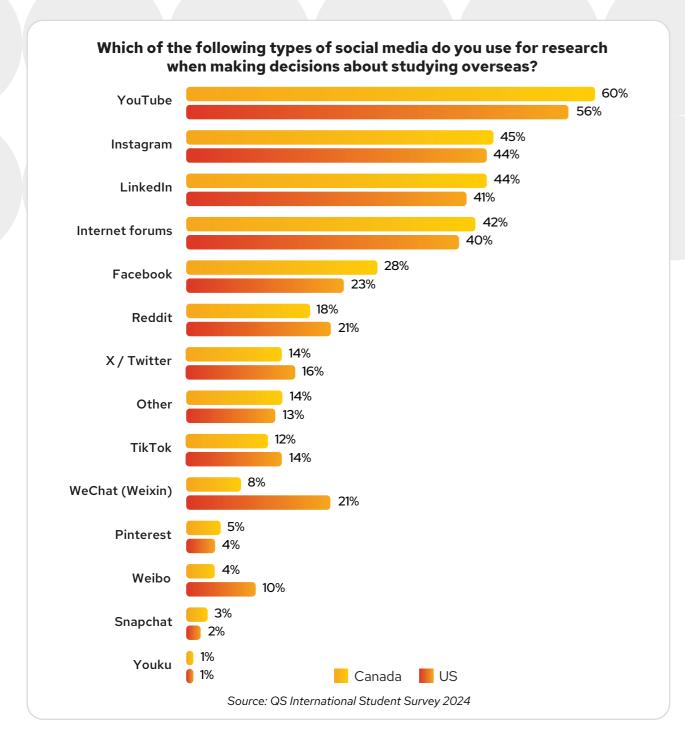
When researching a university, students feel that university websites, online search and rankings are the most helpful sources of information. Two large differences between US and Canada bound students are found in those seeking out visa guidance and accommodation information. One driver of these differences is the top source market for each country – India for Canada, and China for the US – with Indian and Chinese students responding in alignment with these differences. However, these students' responses only account for 30% of the total sample, meaning 70% of respondents answered similarly. This indicates that it's also more holistic factors, such as visa policies and news about the challenge of finding accommodation in Canada, that also drive these differences.

# Which of the following are most useful to you when making decisions about your studies? The ability to connect with existing



Applying to university

# The top social media platform when researching universities? YouTube



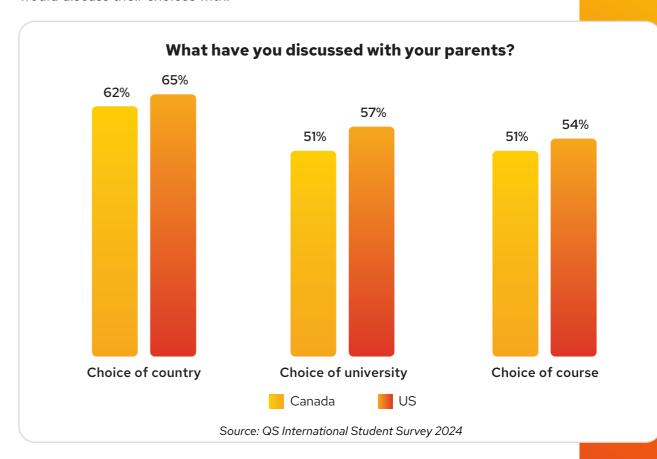
of prospective students interested in Canada and 56% of those interested in the US say that they use YouTube to research overseas study – the most popular answer.

Instagram follows closely behind (Canada 45% and US 44%) and LinkedIn is the third most popular platform (Canada 44% and US 41%).

With a larger source market in China, the US sees a significantly higher percentage of prospective students using Weibo and WeChat when researching US universities, compared to Canada.

## Parents have a significant influence over **student decision-making**

More than two-thirds of students looking to study in the US and Canada say they have or plan to discuss their study options with parents. Around half of respondents also cited advisors at school, college or university as people they would discuss their choices with.



The influence of agents, however, is significantly lower with only 18% of prospective students interested in Canada and 17% of those interested in the US citing agents as someone they have discussed their study options with. As a point of comparison, 32% of students bound for Australia say they will discuss their study options with an agent.

It's a similar story for those interested in Canada with 42% claiming they are not planning on using an agent. Around 20% of prospective students interested in the US and Canada are unsure and a similar percentage have used an agent.

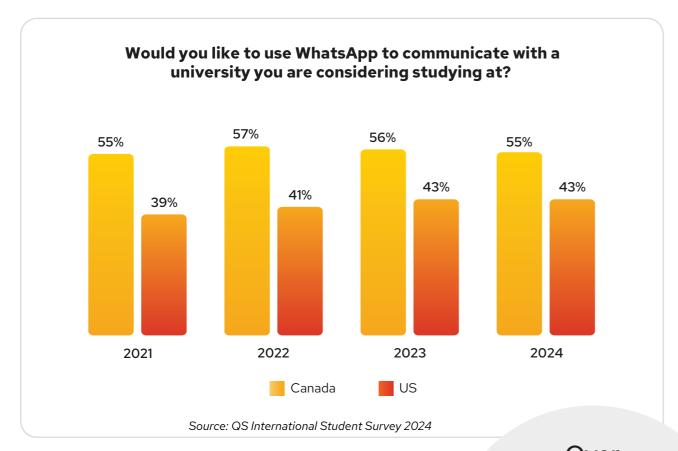
68% of students looking to study in Canada say that agents are useful in helping to study overseas, but they don't influence decisions. That figure is similar for those looking to the US (65%).

45%
of students
looking to study in
the US are not
planning on using
an agent

### Email and WhatsApp

#### remain the most preferred communication channels

Over 80% of respondents interested in the US and Canada would like universities to communicate with them via email, and phone call is the third top communication channel, indicating that the traditional methods of communication are still best. Though in recent years, communication via WhatsApp moved into second place. For those interested in the US, the channel has grown in prominence, but for those interested in Canada there has been a decrease in use of WhatsApp for communicating with universities, since 2022.



More than 70% of respondents said that it's very or extremely important that they don't have to wait long to hear back from a university.

63% of those interested in Canada and 61% of those interested in the US say they expect universities to respond to their enquiries within three days.

58% of prospective students looking to study in Canada expect to receive notification of the outcome of their application within one week. That figure is slightly lower for those interested in the US (50%), but still significant.

Over

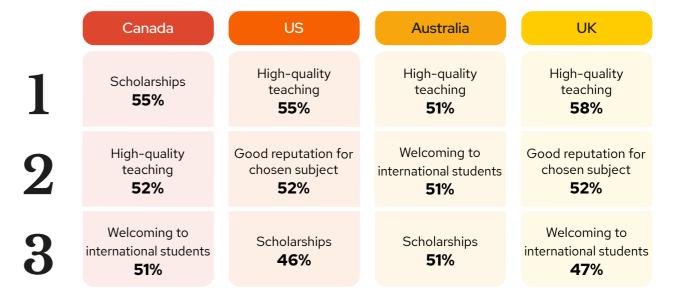
60%
want a complete and personal response to their enquiry within three days

## Affordability

## is highly important to students interested in the US and Canada

When asked what five things are most important when choosing a university, the most important factor for students looking to study in Canada is scholarships. 55% of respondents chose this as the most important factor, and 61% said affordable tuition fees were most important when choosing a course. For those interested in the US, scholarships and affordable tuition fees feature lower down on the list in third place but are still important. The reason scholarships are such an important factor for Canada bound students is the nation's primary source market – India. Indian students continue to be more price sensitive than Chinese students, which increases the desire for scholarships.

When we compare it to the 'big four' competitive recruitment markets, scholarships are important for those interested in Canada, the US and Australia, though high-quality teaching and a welcoming environment for international students is higher on the agenda for the latter two countries.



#### Recommendations

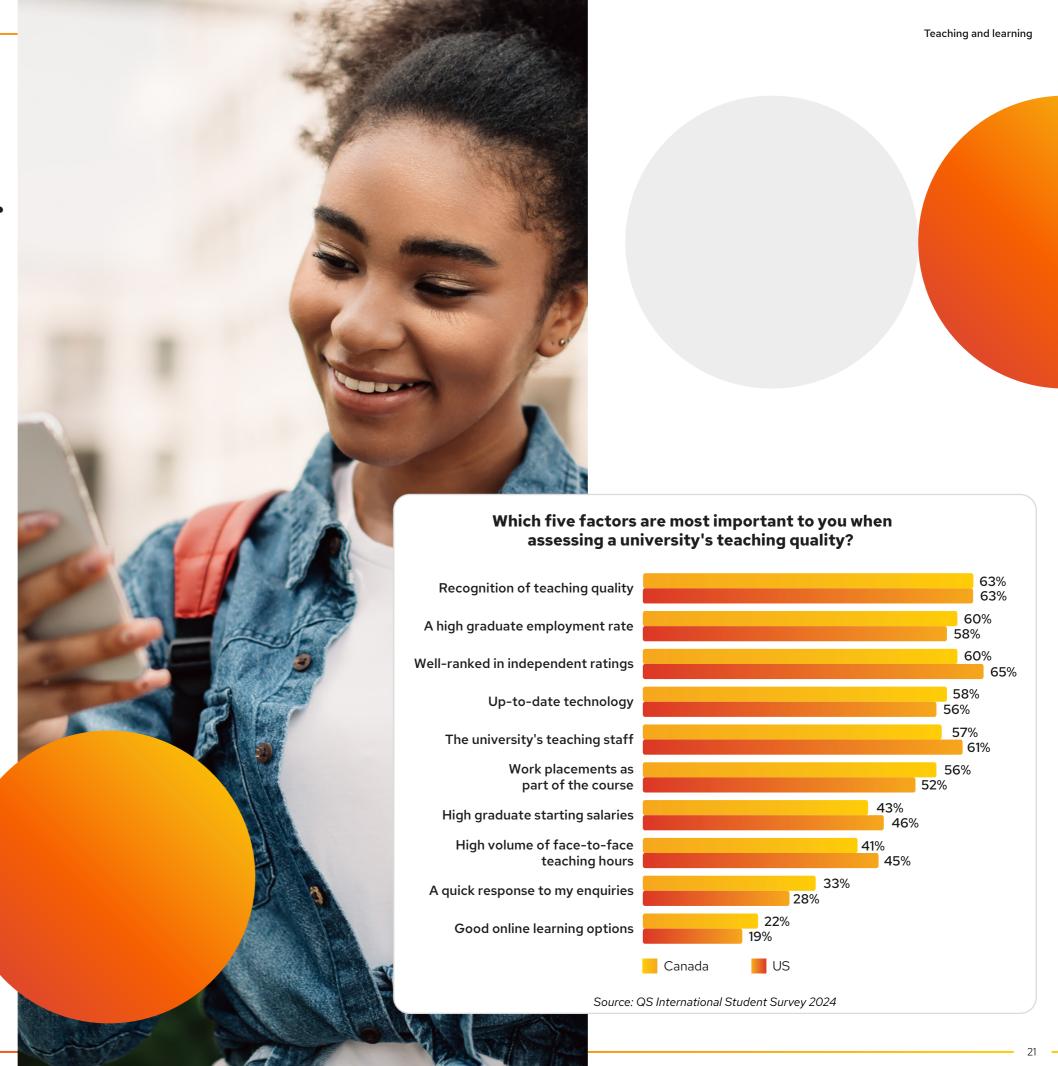
- Review your scholarship offer and the way your information about funding, part-time work and affordability is presented to provide much-needed reassurance to concerned students.
- Consider how machine learning and other technological solutions might enable you to scale your enquiry, admissions and offer management to deliver the response times applicants expect.
- Invest in high-quality and authentic video content as a key part of your international recruitment marketing strategy and connect applicants with existing student content.

# Teaching and learning

#### High-quality teaching is vital for students looking to study in the US and Canada

It's the most important factor when choosing a course for those interested in studying in the US and the second most important factor for those looking to study in Canada (behind affordable tuition fees).

When assessing teaching quality, **strong rankings** in an independent ranking system and r**ecognition of teaching quality** via a country-wide measurement scheme are among students' top priorities.

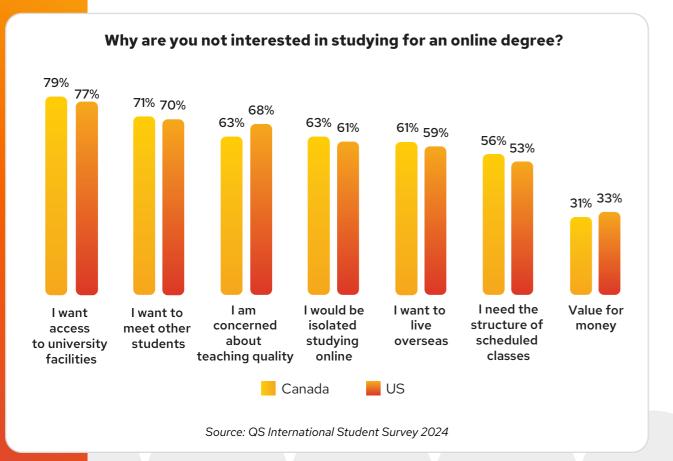


## Students are mostly interested in full-time, in-person study

84% of prospective students looking to study in the US want to study full-time, with 86% saying that they are very or extremely interested in in-person study. That's compared to just 16% who are very or extremely interested in online or distance learning.

In Canada, it's a similar story with 78% choosing full-time study, 85% saying they are very or extremely interested in in-person study and just 17% very or extremely interested in online or distance learning.

When asked why they aren't interested in studying online, the top reason for students interested in the US and Canada was wanting access to university facilities. That's followed by a desire to meet other students and concerns about the quality of teaching on online courses.



Over half of students looking to study in the US and Canada say that one of the most important things for them is that they can study the course they are interested in at a university with a good reputation for delivering that course.

### Reputation

### is an important factor in choosing a course

For prospective students looking to study in the US and Canada, a good reputation features in the top three important factors when choosing a course.

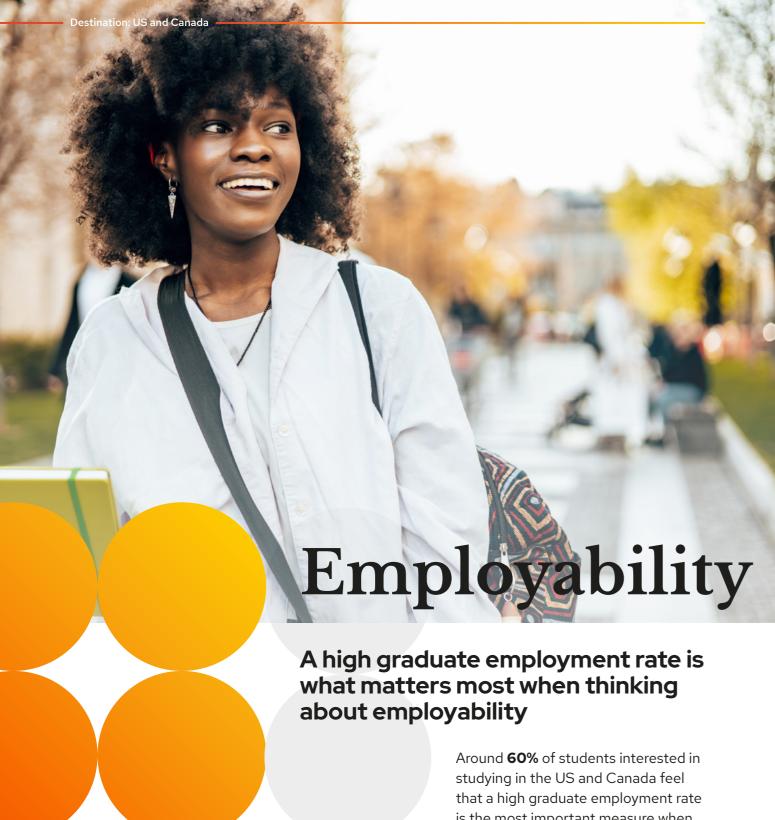
	Canada	US
1	Affordable tuition fees <b>61%</b>	High-quality teaching <b>66%</b>
2	High-quality teaching <b>60%</b>	University has a good reputation <b>55%</b>
3	University has a good reputation <b>50%</b>	Affordable tuition fees <b>51%</b>

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



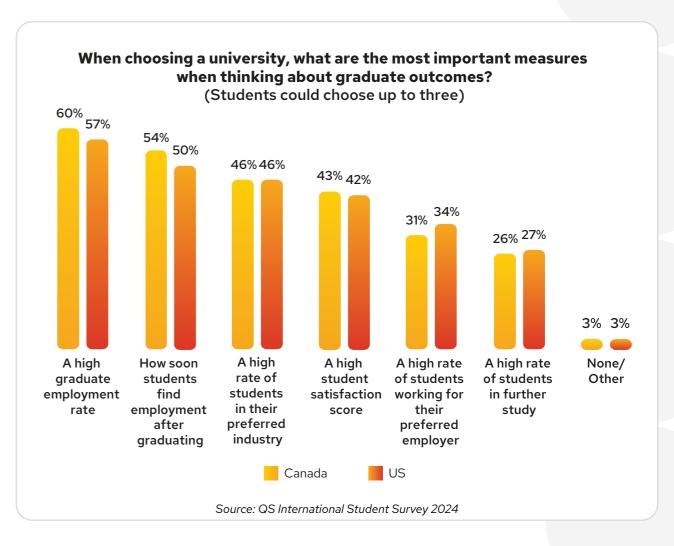
#### Recommendations

- Be sure to emphasize the credentials which showcase high-quality teaching, ensuring this is a prominent message across all your marketing channels.
- If you're promoting online course provision, ensure you're taking students' key concerns about studying online into consideration: missing out on meeting other students, the experience of living overseas and access to facilities.
- When working to improve your university's rankings, high reputation scores among academics and employers can help.



### is the most important measure when thinking about graduate outcomes. That's followed by how soon students

find employment after graduating and a high rate of students in their preferred industry.



Employability is undoubtedly an important factor when candidates make decisions about their studies. When asked what factors they prioritize when choosing a course, 48% cited that what's most important is that it leads to their chosen career.

In pursuit of their career goals, 80% of respondents looking to study in Canada said that a careers advice service is very or extremely important in their decision-making (78% for those looking at the US). Clearly, prospective students are already considering their future career paths seriously before they enroll.

80%

of respondents looking to study in Canada said that a careers advice service is very or extremely important in their decision-making

# Students aim to learn new skills and build professional networks at university

When thinking specifically about their future career, students were also asked to cite the most important considerations when choosing a course at university. For respondents of both Canada and the US, the top two choices were the same. Though the third most important consideration differs for those interested in each country.

### Canada

- It allows me to learn new skills
- 2 It will help me to build a professional network
- 3 It allows me to progress to a higher-level qualification

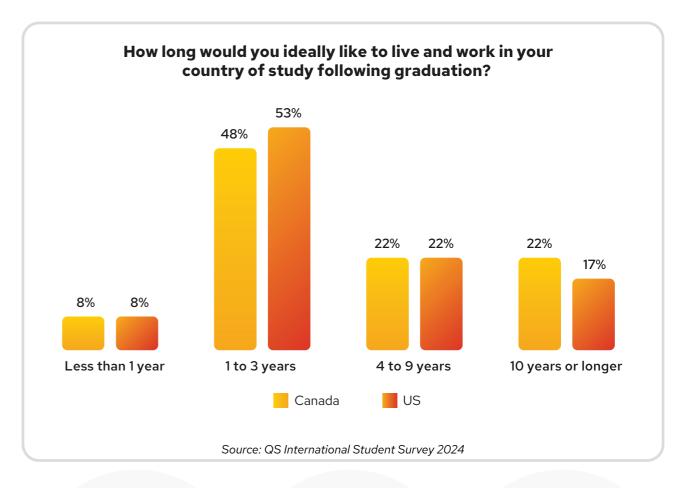
### US

- It allows me to learn new skills
- It will help me to build a professional network
- 3 It improves my employment prospects

"One of the most important things for me is to study at a university with proven graduate outcomes and a good record for getting students into the careers they want"

51%

of respondents looking to study in the US and Canada believe this statement best describes them



A majority of students looking to study in the US want to stay after graduation for between 1-3 years. But, two thirds of respondents say that they plan on returning to their home country eventually.

#### Recommendations

- It's vital that institutions work with their career advice service to provide the support students need to thrive in their careers after graduation.
- Universities should work with program leads to extract key skills from the curriculum and work with industry contracts to understand the in-demand skills students need to develop, and communicate these clearly with prospective students.
- Employability messaging should be a key element of any student recruitment marketing strategy half of students surveyed cite information on work placements and links to industry as a topic they would find useful when making decisions about their studies.

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# Sustainability

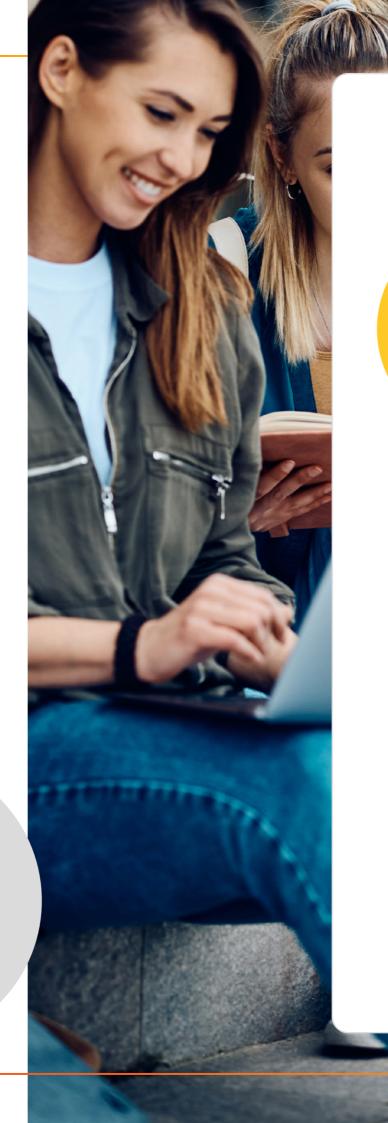
#### Sustainability is a major consideration in student decision-making

66% of prospective students interested in studying in Canada stated that environmental sustainability is very/extremely important. That figure is slightly lower for those interested in the US (58%), but illustrates that environmental issues are a major consideration for the majority of students.

It is imperative universities continue to communicate their research efforts and show the importance of driving sustainable development.

The percentage of students who say environmental sustainability is important to them increases with certain subject areas, especially those in the agriculture and geography fields.





#### How subject choice aligns with importance placed on environmental sustainability

% of students who say environmental sustainability is very or extremely important to them

Subject choice where environmental sustainability most important

91% Geographical and environmental studies 84%

Agriculture, Food & Related Studies 81%

General and other sciences

84%

environmental studies

77%

& Related Studies

77%

Sciences

Subject choice where environmental sustainability least important

Historical, Philosophical and Religious studies

Computing

**57**% Combined and

**General studies** 

**55**%

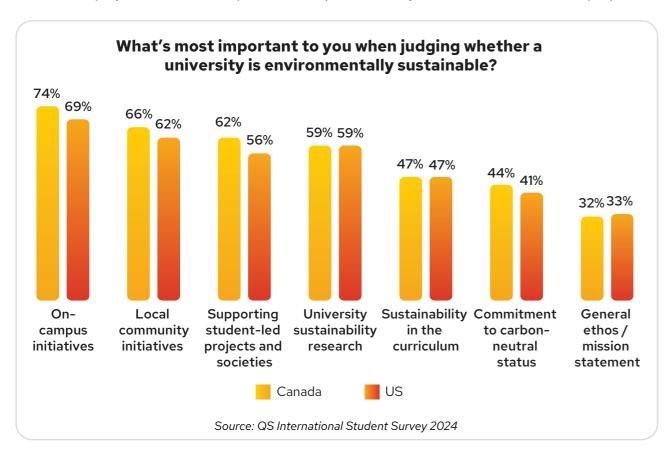
Historical, Philosophical and Religious Computing

Canada US

Source: QS International Student Survey 2024

## Students want to see on-campus sustainability initiatives

When asked what they found most important when judging whether a university is environmentally friendly, the top answer for both students looking to study in Canada and the US was on-campus initiatives. That is followed by working with the local community on sustainable and social justice initiatives. The third most important factor differs for those looking to study in Canada (supporting student-led projects and societies) and the US (the university's sustainable research output).



Prospective students looking to study in Canada hold the importance of environmental sustainability slightly higher than those looking to study in the US. Though, both countries are home to the world's most sustainable universities.

The University of Toronto

1st

QS World University Rankings: Sustainability 2024



University of California, Berkeley

2nd

QS World University Rankings: Sustainability 2024

#### Recommendations

- Universities should ensure that sustainability features as a key part of student recruitment marketing activity, detailing the specific strategies, research, on-campus initiatives and support for students who want to work on sustainability projects.
- Where environmental and social sustainability is embedded within the curriculum, this
  information should be made clear and should emphasize the skills and benefits of what
  will be learned.
- Universities in the US and Canada should look to the University of Toronto and the University of California, Berkeley for models of best practice in sustainability efforts.

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# Students are already familiar with using Generative AI both personally and in their studies

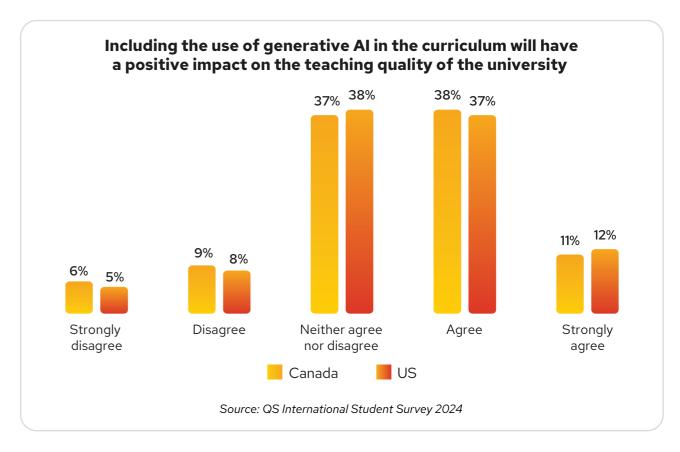
69% of students looking to study in Canada and the US have used or interacted with Generative AI technologies.

The potential that AI technology has to revolutionize higher education is already well documented and the data shows that most prospective students are already interacting with Generative AI both personally and in their studies. Higher education institutions are beginning to understand that limiting the use of Generative AI is problematic and are instead coming to terms with the fact that students will use the technology in their academic work, as well as personal statements and application data entry.

In the classroom, adapting course structures to ensure students gain a better understanding of the responsible use of these platforms can enhance the learning experience, and give students the opportunity put more of their time and energy into learning materials and developing their thinking.

# Half of students think adding AI into the curriculum will have a positive impact

49% of students interested in Canada and the US agree/strongly agree that including the use of Generative AI in the curriculum will have a positive impact on the teaching quality of the university.

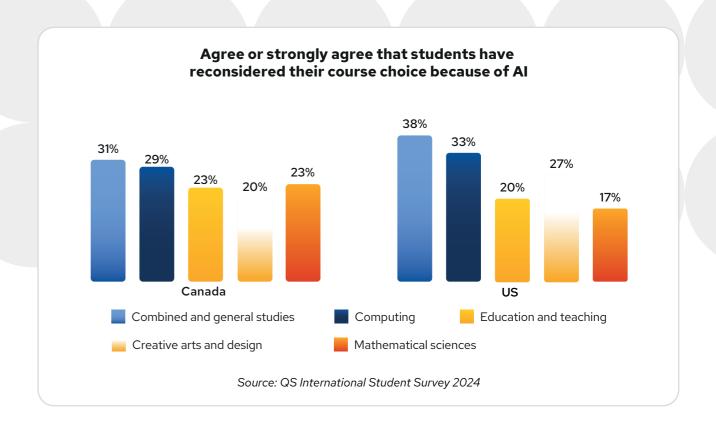


## The growth of AI is affecting study and career decisions



Whilst a significant minority (20%) have reconsidered their course choice because of AI, this is considerably higher for those looking to study computing (30% of respondents looking to study in Canada and 33% looking to study in the US) and combined and general studies (Canada 31% and US 38%). This reiterates that AI has the potential to redirect student flows into different subject area.

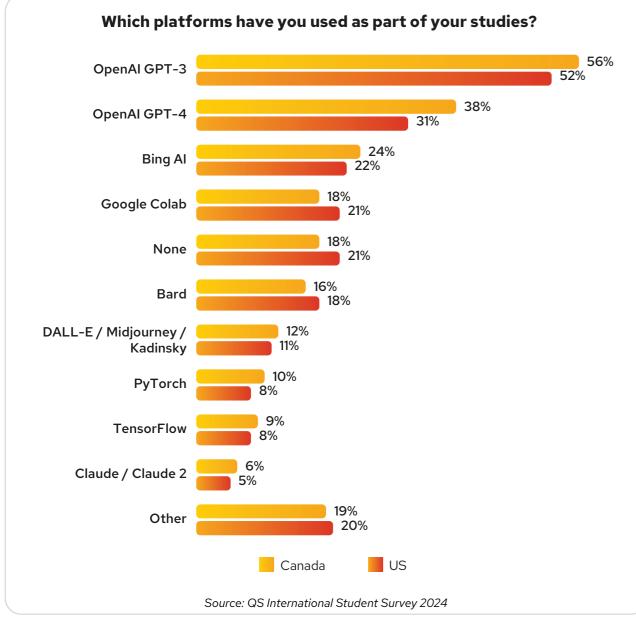
This is also reflected in the use of AI, with candidates from those subject areas also more likely to have used AI platforms as part of their studies – especially Open AI, the most used platform for respondents looking to study in the US and Canada.

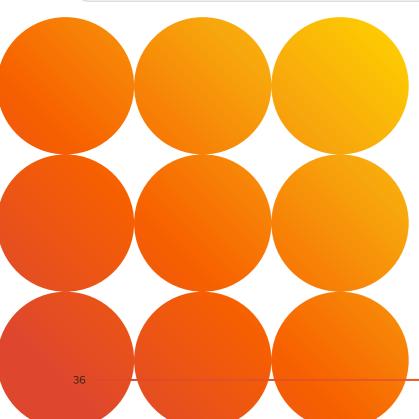


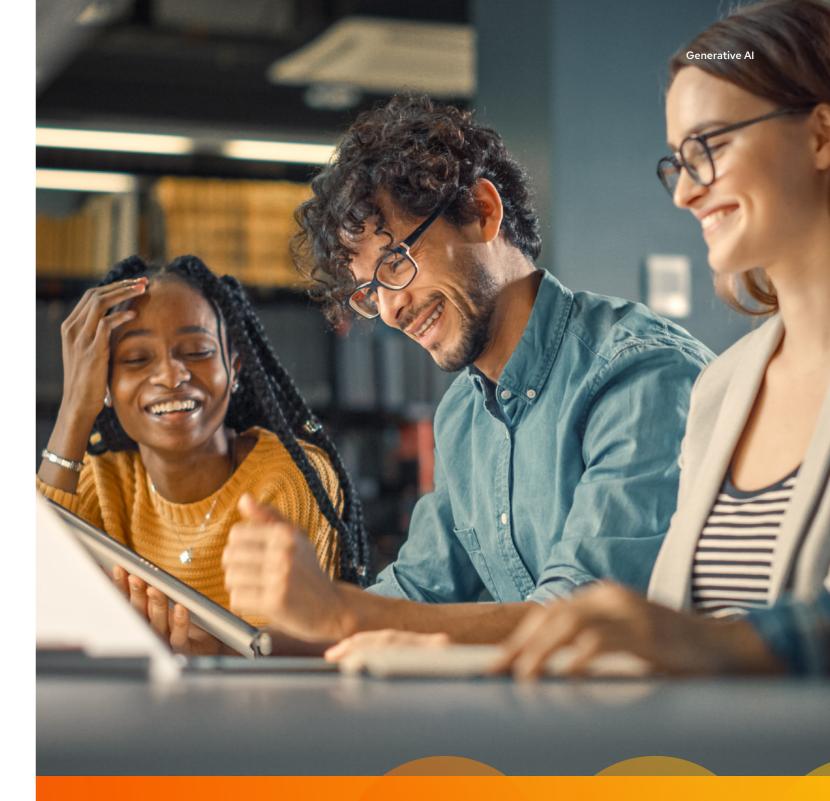
34%

of candidates looking to study in the US agree that AI is affecting their career choices. That figure is slightly lower for those looking to study in Canada (29%).









#### Recommendations

- Universities should be transparent about how they use AI technology and how students will engage in the technology on their course. 42% of candidates interested in studying in the US and Canada actively seek information about how universities use AI.
- With increasing focus on the environmental and social impact of generative Al, universities should consider this when promoting their Generative Al usage and teaching.
- Universities should also consider promoting training, workshops and talks provided to students to help them navigate the technology, as part of your student recruitment marketing activities.

# Join us in developing the QS AI Competency and Digital Maturity Framework

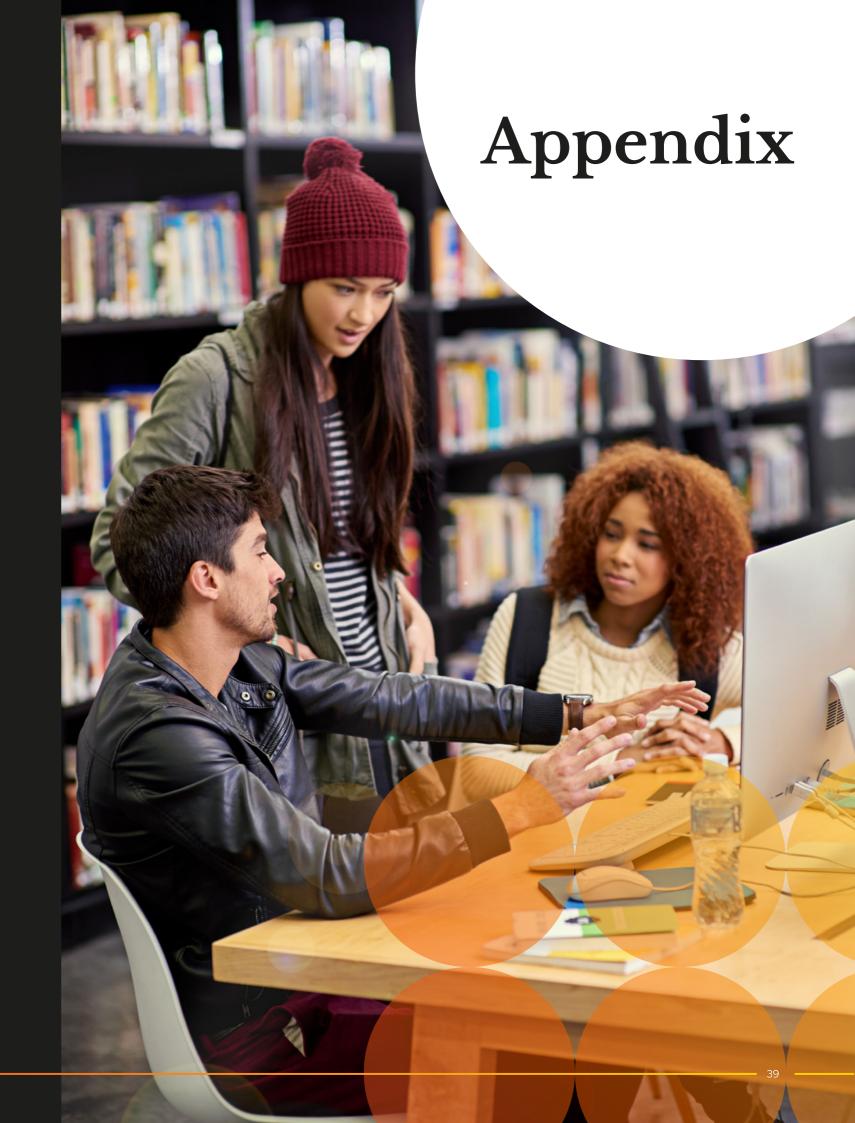
Higher education has an opportunity and a challenge to utilize digital innovation and Al responsibly, and to make high quality education accessible across the globe.

To maximize the opportunities that digital empowerment and AI bring, it's important that the right infrastructure, digital skills, connectivity and accessibility models are in place. Institutions face a plethora of options for AI implementation. They need to experiment but also choose a path that builds the right guardrails for digital and AI investment.

We are developing a **QS AI Competency and Digital Maturity Framework** to provide a roadmap, benchmarks and a quality standard to support the investment of effort and resources by institutions around the world. The framework will evolve with institutional innovators and industry partners as we continuously and collaboratively define excellence in digital and AI innovation in the global sector.

We are inviting institutions to be part of that journey, to **work with us as partners** in shaping Al and digital maturity in higher education





# US, Canada, the UK and Australia destination markets

### How do they compare?

Affordability is more important to those interested in Canada with the cost of living, availability of scholarships and the ability to get a job featuring in the top three worries when considering studying abroad. Those interested in the UK and the US hold teaching and reputation in high regard, with scholarships and affordability climbing into the top three for the US this year. The culture and lifestyle appeal only features in Australia's top three, but a welcoming environment for international students features for all the 'big four' international student destinations.

#### What matters most when choosing a course?

	UK	Canada	US	Australia & New Zealand
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 & New Zealand
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	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)	lran	Taiwan	Thailand
7	Bangladesh	South Korea	Saudi Arabia	Brazil
8	Malaysia	Vietnam	Brazil	Philippines
9	France	Mexico	Mexico	Pakistan
10	Italy	US	Nigeria	Indonesia

Source: UK - HESA | US - Open Doors | Canada - Open Gov't | Australia - Dept of Education

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Gender	
Male	50%
Female	46%
Prefer not to say or to self- describe	4%

Funding

Self-funded

Scholarship

Loan

Not sure/ other

Sponsorship

Age	
17-20	32%
21-24	29%
25-31	26%
32 or older	13%

48%	
29%	
10%	
10%	
4%	

Study level	
Foundation or vocational	5%
Undergraduate	32%
Postgraduate taught	32%
Postgraduate research	31%

Main subjects of interest		
Business and Management	18%	
Engineering and Technology	17%	
Computing	13%	
Medicine and dentistry	5%	

Household income	
Less than \$10,000	34%
\$10,001-\$25,000	15%
\$25,001-\$50,000	9%
\$50,001-\$75,000	5%
Over \$75,000 USD	8%
Don't know or prefer not to say	30%

Gender	
Male	51%
Female	45%
Prefer not to say or to self- describe	4%

Funding	
Self-funded	54%
Scholarship	23%
Loan	11%
Not sure/ other	8%

5%

Main subjects of interest	
Engineering and technology	19%
Business and management	18%
Computing	14%
Social sciences	6%

Sponsorship

Age	
17-20	34%
21-24	32%
25-31	25%
32 or older	9%

Study level	
Foundation or vocational	3%
Undergraduate	32%
Postgraduate taught	32%
Postgraduate research	34%

Household income	
Less than \$10,000	22%
\$10,001-\$25,000	16%
\$25,001-\$50,000	12%
\$50,001-\$75,000	7%
Over \$75,000 USD	14%
Don't know or prefer not to say	29%

42 - 43



# 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 preferences and motivations 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.

