



The recruitment edge: North America

Discover what 47,279 students say they expect and want from universities in North America.





Key findings

Prospective students interested in the US rated high-quality teaching as the most important factor when choosing country of study, university and course.

70%

For about 70% of students interested in North America, their biggest worry about studying in a different country is the cost of living.

40%

Over 40% of prospective students are actively researching universities' environmental sustainability strategy and efforts.

60%

More than 60% of students interested in North America expect a complete and personalised response to an enquiry within three days.

38%

About 38% of candidates looking to study in the US and Canada have no interest whatsoever in studying online, compared to 32% in 2022.

Recommendations

- Be sure to emphasize the credentials which showcase high-quality teaching, ensuring this is a prominent message across all your marketing channels.
- 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.
- Universities in both the US and Canada have outstanding credentials in environmental sustainability. Now that students are actively seeking this information, it's essential to ensure that it's easy to find.
- 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.
- If you're considering launching 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.

Executive summary

The US and Canada remain highly attractive destinations in the eyes of international students. The US is a research powerhouse and home to many of the world's leading universities. Canadian universities offer some of the world's best 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 North American universities: Australian universities are rebounding from the pandemic, China's research impact is now outperforming the US and countries across the globe have ambitious plans to grow student numbers. Universities in North America have so much to offer but it's essential that they clearly articulate those strengths to future students and make sure their offer stands out.

Real voices, smart choices

With granular insights from more than 115,000 prospective students the QS International Student Survey – the largest global survey of its kind – has been guiding recruitment strategies for over a decade.

Stay one step ahead

You can use the 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 your brand positioning and showcase your differentiators.

Would you like help with applying our insights and recommendations to your marketing and recruitment plans? Or would you like help with refining your strategy? [Contact us today](#) and our student recruitment experts will be happy to guide you.

116,412
prospective
student
responses

194
countries and
territories

42,279
interested in
North America





Contents

What 47,279 students interested in North America say about:

- Environmental sustainability - 08
- High-quality teaching - 15
- Employability and career aspirations - 19
- Funding and affordability - 23
- Preferred communications and channels - 27
- Perceptions of the US and Canada - 31

Appendix

- Comparing the 'big four' - 40
- The current student recruitment landscape - 41
- Demographic of survey respondents - 42



Did you know

that if you partner with us for the QS International Student Survey you receive a bespoke report for your institution?

It's free to participate and we 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 2024 today.

What do prospective students want and expect from universities in North America?

Environmental sustainability

40% of prospective students are actively researching universities' environmental sustainability strategy and efforts.

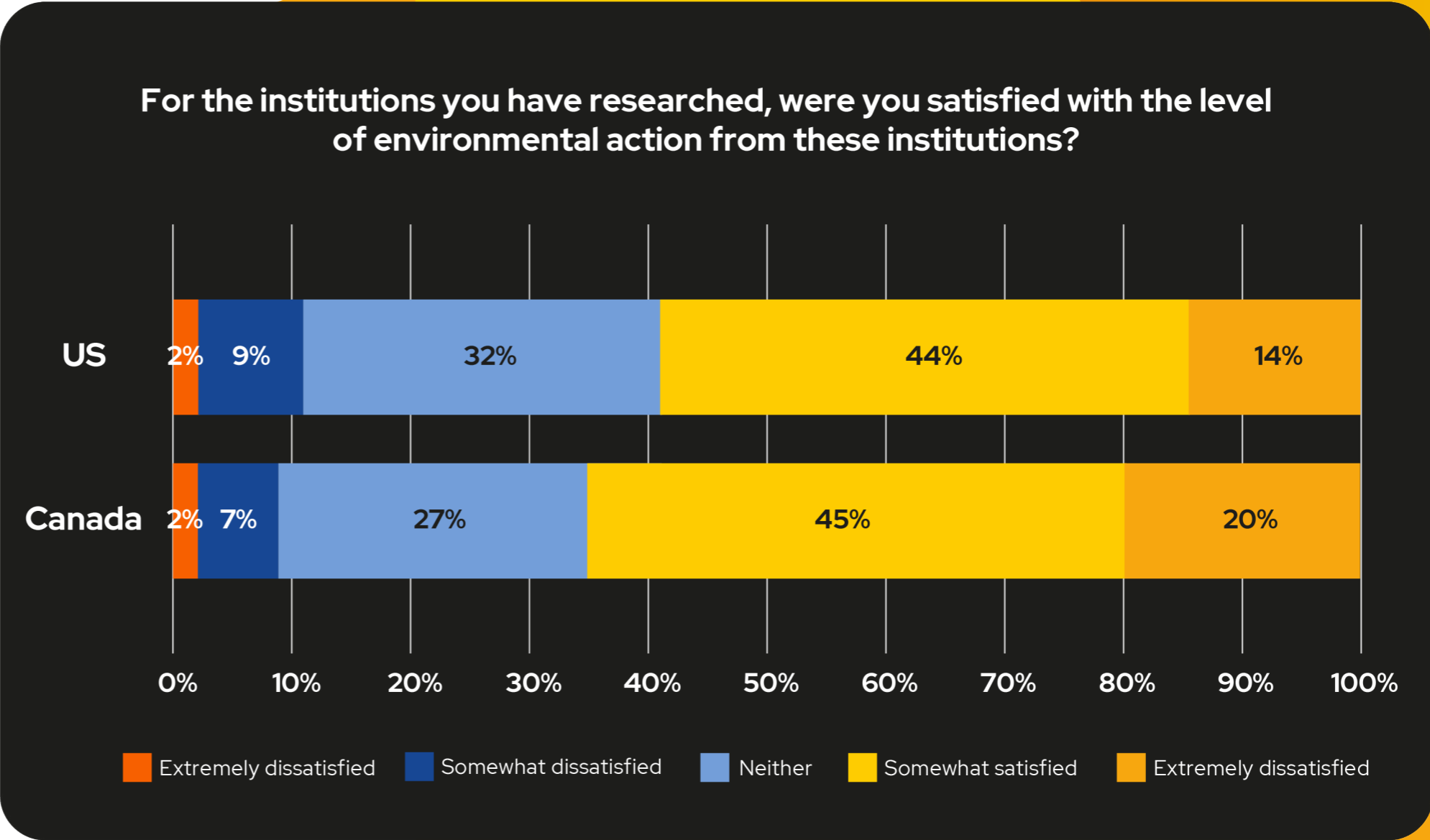
58% of those who researched the level of environmental action being taken by universities in the US say they are somewhat or extremely satisfied with the efforts being made, compared to **65%** for Canada. US institutions could look to their Canadian counterparts to learn how they might communicate their sustainability efforts and strategies to greater impact.

Student views

“A lot of schools are starting to focus on the UN’s SDGs, working on the ones which are particular to their community and students.”

“Many universities have volunteering groups and campaigns that focus on environment sustainability. The prospect or possibility of joining the volunteering groups to be able to contribute my quota to environment sustainability is very exciting for me.”

“Every place that I looked up is doing some kind of research about sustainability and seems to care about climate change.”



Success story: Penn State University

Ranked 83rd in the world in the QS World University Rankings 2024, scoring 95.1 out of a maximum of 100 in the sustainability indicator.



North America took the top three places in the QS World University Rankings: Sustainability 2023 and five spots out of the global top ten.



“This coming generation are certainly aware of the challenges around sustainability more than any other generation before them. They feel that burden. We also see the student interest in our societies. We’ve got around 180 different student-led organisations which focus on the topic of sustainability.”

Dr Catherine Watt,
Senior Director for Policy Analysis,
Penn State University

[Read our interview in full](#)

Spotlight on environmental sustainability

Postgraduate research students are the most likely to research the level of action a university is taking on environmental sustainability, followed by postgraduate taught and undergraduate.

	US	Canada
Postgraduate research	43%	46%
Postgraduate taught	41%	43%
Undergraduate	38%	39%

Those planning to study agriculture, food and related studies in the US are the most likely (53%) to research a university’s environmental sustainability strategy and efforts. For Canada, among the most active researchers of environmental sustainability are geography and environmental studies students (56%).

Top five

universities
in the US for
sustainability

Top five

universities
in Canada for
sustainability

30

US universities featured among
the world's top 100 in the QS
World University Rankings:
Sustainability 2023.

9

Canadian universities featured
among the world's top 100
in the QS World University
Rankings: Sustainability 2023.

University	Global rank	University	Global rank
University of California, Berkeley	1	University of California, Davis	14
University of Pennsylvania	8	Harvard University	20
Yale University	9		

University	Global rank	University	Global rank
University of Toronto	2	McGill University	=42
University of British Columbia	3	University of Waterloo	=42
Western University	17		

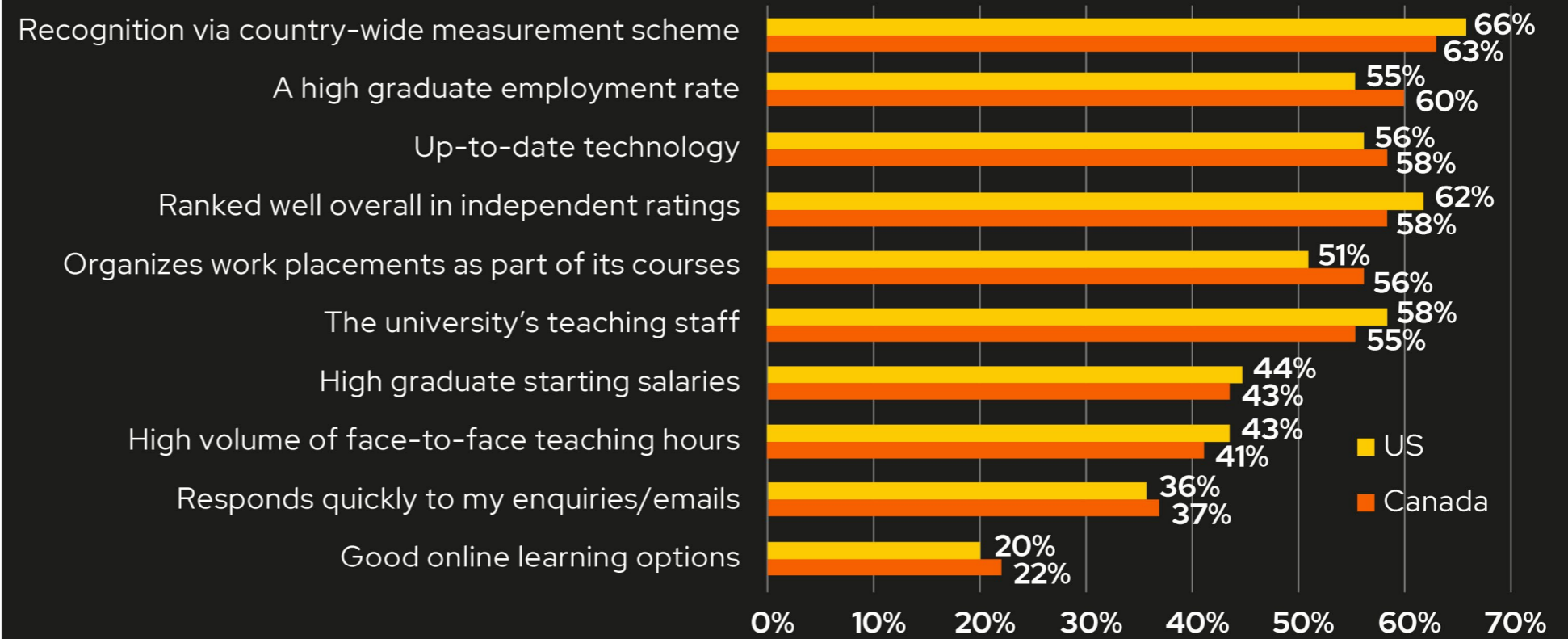
High-quality teaching

64% of prospective students interested in the US rated high-quality teaching as the most important factor when choosing a course. It was the most influential factor in their choice of country and university too.

For Canada, high-quality teaching is also among the most important factors and was rated the second most important factor for country, university and course choice. An official recognition or rating for teaching quality is the leading influencer on how prospective students assess an institution's teaching quality.

Those looking to study in Canada place a higher value on employability metrics - including a high graduate employment rate and work placements - when assessing teaching quality. This reflects the reputation that Canada has for offering more favorable post-study work conditions than the US.

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



Spotlight on teaching

Access to university facilities, the opportunity to meet other students, wanting the experience of living overseas and concerns that online study may mean lower teaching quality are the main reasons why candidates aren't interested in studying a degree online.

For those who are interested in online study, the main draw is flexibility, rather than cost.

In fact, the top three reasons to choose online programs are:

- The convenience of studying from anywhere
- Flexibility
- The opportunity to study while working.

About

38%

of candidates looking to study in the US and Canada have

no interest whatsoever in studying online,

compared to 32% in 2022.



Employability and career aspirations

Career outcomes remains a key driver in student decision-making with 48% of prospective US students and 46% of prospective Canadian students saying that the most important factor in choosing a course is that it leads to their chosen career.



Top three career considerations when choosing a course

US



Learn new skills (59%)



Help build a professional network (52%)



Give me international experience (47%)

Canada



Learn new skills (61%)



Help build a professional network (53%)



Give me international experience (54%)



Spotlight on post-study work and employability

US

13%

of those planning to study in the US intend to return home immediately after completing their studies.

44%

hope to stay in the US temporarily (between one and six years) with 15% hoping to stay permanently.

54%

felt that a clear path to permanent residency on completion of their course was extremely or very important.

Canada

43%

of prospective international students hope to stay in Canada temporarily (between one and six years) after they graduate, with 10% planning to return home immediately.

19%

hope to stay permanently in Canada after completing their studies with 71% saying that the ease of attaining a post-study work visa was very important.

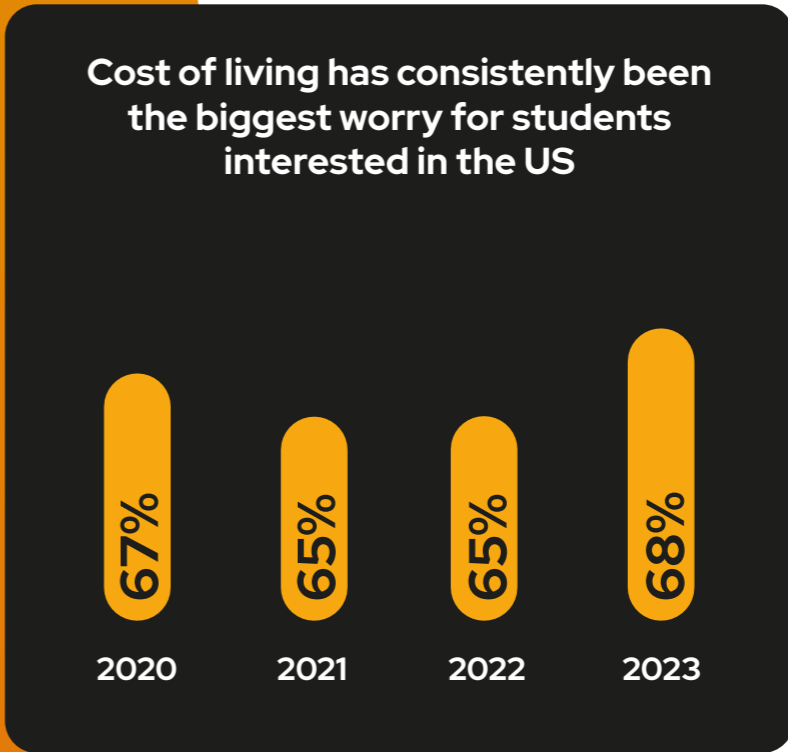
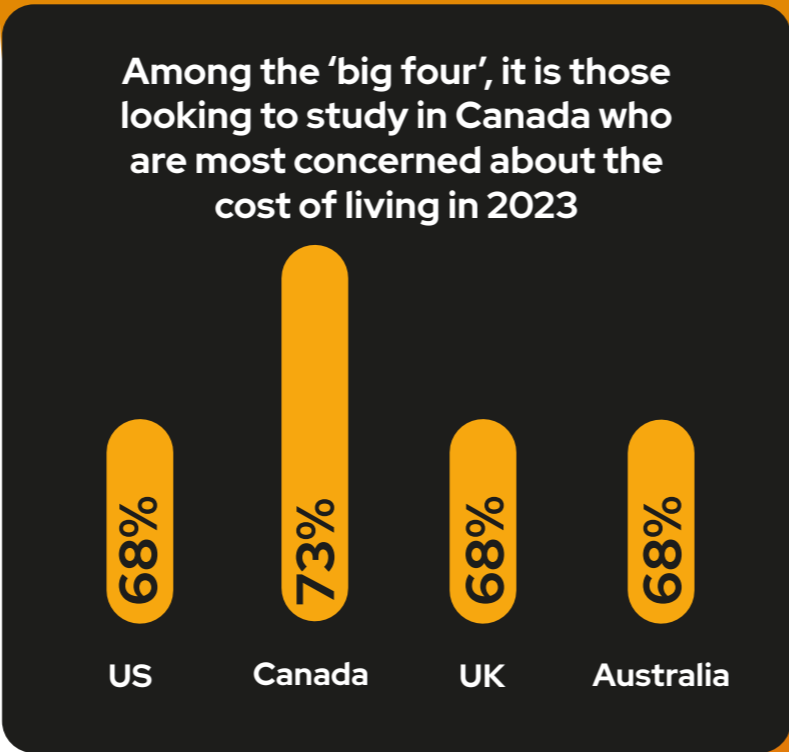
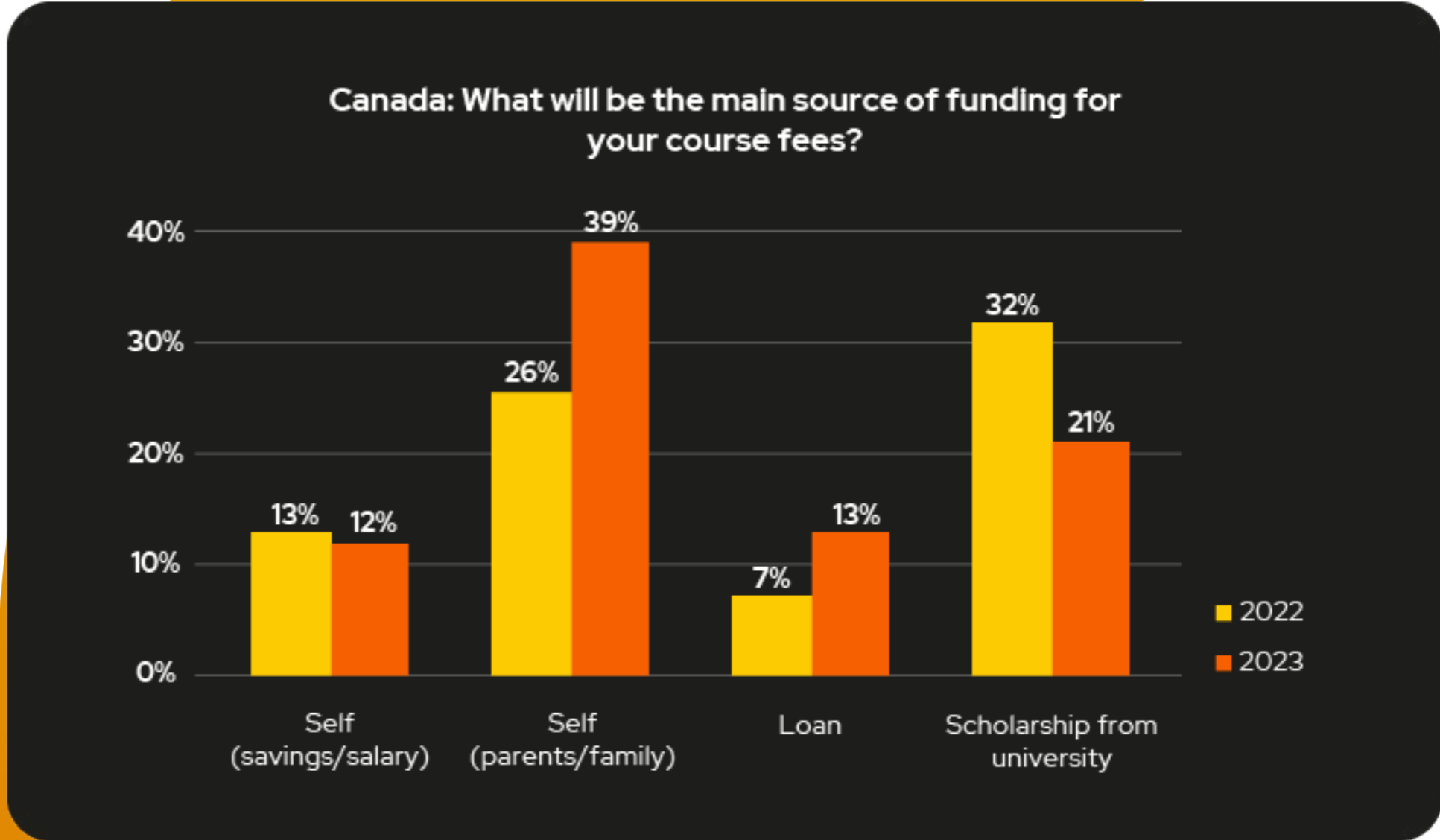
58%

felt that a clear path to permanent residency on completion of their course was extremely or very important.

Funding and affordability

For about three quarters of students interested in North America, their biggest worry about studying in a different country is the cost of living. The availability of scholarships and the ability to find a job are the second and third biggest worries so reassurance about affordability and financial aid remain essential messages.

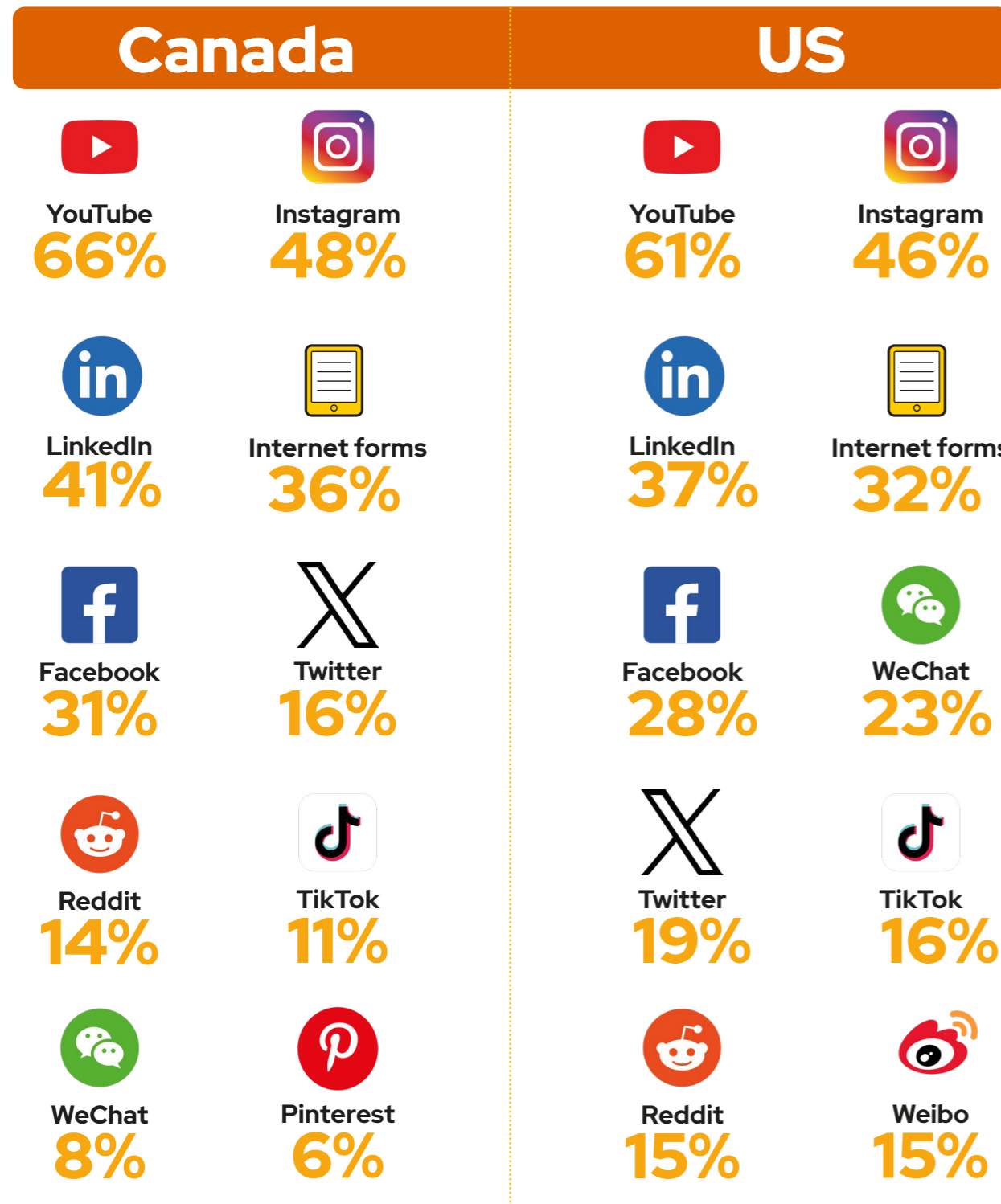
There is a growing reliance on financial support from parents and family. 26% of students interested in Canada said that parents or family would be their main source of tuition fee funding in 2022, compared with 39% in 2023. Reliance on loans has also almost doubled in 12 months. The same trend is apparent for those looking to study in the US, with support from parents or family growing from 40% of students in 2020 to 48% in 2023.



Preferred communications and channels

University enquiry teams are not currently meeting students' expectations when it comes to enquiry response times or application outcome communications. Institutions looking to grow student numbers must be prepared to manage higher enquiry and application numbers – without compromising on quality and personalisation.

Top ten social channels for researching universities



Almost two thirds of students interested in North America expect a complete and personalized response to an enquiry within three days.

15% of female respondents are using TikTok to research universities in Canada, compared to just 6% of men. This same gender difference also exists among US respondents but is less pronounced with 19% female and 13% male.

Over half of students interested in Canada and the US expect a complete and personalised response to an enquiry within three days.

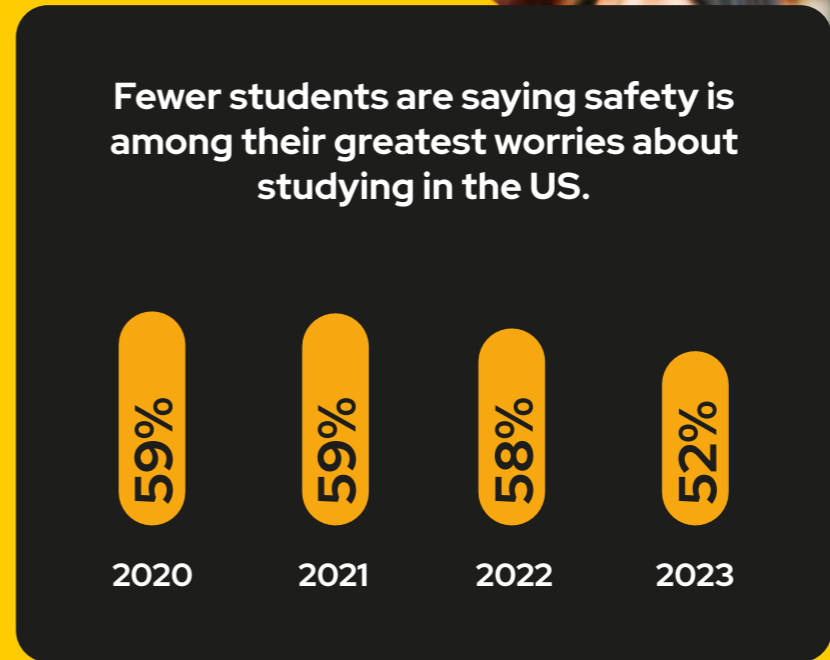
35% of those interested in the US and 39% of those interested in Canada want to communicate with a university via a phone call. The number one preferred method of communication is email.

36% (Canada) and 31% (US) expect to receive notification of the outcome of their application within three days.

About a quarter of North American students expect daily contact from a university once they've received an offer and half expect weekly contact.

For those planning to study in the US, the number of students who expect their application turned around within one week has risen from 49% in 2021 to 55% in 2023.

Perceptions of the US and Canada



US

46%

of those interested in the US say the culture and lifestyle is important when choosing a country to study in. The country being welcoming to international students is important to 49% of respondents when choosing a country and 76% when choosing a town or city.

Fewer students are now citing safety as what worries them most about studying overseas, which could be testament to the work of universities in the US to provide reassurance and support to prospective international students. Unsurprisingly, safety is the biggest concern of parents – with 34% of students saying that safety is their parents’ number one worry about international study.

What words would you use to describe US?



Student views

Why the US?



"I am interested in studying in the US because of the scholarship opportunities for international students as well as the flexibility of their academic curriculum which allows students to explore diverse interests."



"I want to be innovative and creative. I see the US as the country that has the latest features in tech. I believe if I study there I will have the greatest tech experience."



"Studying gives one opportunity in life, and the US is regarded as a powerhouse of the world."



"The US has some of the best universities in the world. Degrees from the US are internationally renowned and respected."

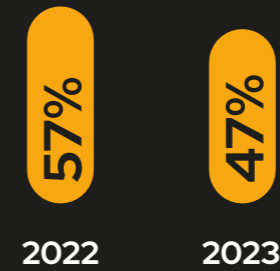


"I want to build my career reputation and I value the US as an epicenter of knowledge so I don't want to be left out."



Perceptions of the US and Canada

Number of students who say safety is among their biggest worries about studying overseas



Canada

53%

of those interested in Canada say that being welcoming to international students is among the most important factors when choosing a country and 78% say it's the most important factor when choosing a city or town.

As with the US, concerns about safety are reducing for students interested in Canada which is positive, with a drop of ten percentage points from 2022 to 2023.

What words would you use to describe Canada?

Artistic 11% **Safe 50%** Exciting 34%
Welcoming 62% Vibrant 26%
Clean 38% **Beautiful 55%**
 Affordable 27% **Modern 42%**

Student views

Why Canada?



"It's a country of many opportunities and I love how diverse it is."



"Canada has the best quality of life and offers a high-quality education with affordable tuition fees."



"Good schools and an accessible path to permanent residency."



"Because there are so many international students studying in Canada and as a result, newcomers can easily adapt to the new environment."

Want to stay one step ahead?

Would you like help with applying our insights and recommendations to your marketing and recruitment plans? Or would you like help with refining your strategy? [Contact us](#) today and our student recruitment experts will be happy to help.



Appendix

Comparing the 'big four' - 40
The current student recruitment landscape - 41
Demographic of survey respondents - 42



• **The current higher education landscape**

US
US
US
US
US
US
US
US
US

US universities continue to lead the world in higher education excellence with MIT ranked number one in the QS World University Rankings for an uninterrupted 12 years. The US is the most represented location in the 2024 edition of the rankings with 199 ranked institutions, compared to the UK (90) and China (71). 16 of the world's top 50 universities are in the US and University of California Berkeley (UC Berkeley) returned to the top 10 in 2024, as a result of exceptional commitment to environmental sustainability and social impact.

However, there are signs of challenges to the long-established pre-eminence of US universities. In this year's rankings – which included the most significant methodology changes in its history – 87 universities increased their position, while 110 dropped their position and two maintained their position. Speaking when the QS World University Rankings 2024 were launched in June 2023, QS Senior Vice President Ben Sowter said: "Despite its outstanding performance, the US higher education system experiences a decline across all QS metrics, signalling encroaching excellence from abroad."

The US is one of the world's best performing research hubs. According to Elsevier – our research partner – 36% of US research papers are published in the top 10% of academic journals by impact – 12% more than the global average. The US produced 3.5 million scholarly papers from 2018 to 2022, generating approximately 42 million citations. This makes it the world's second most productive research hub, behind China.

Ben added: "Indeed, China is more competitive than ever when it comes to high-impact research. The US should seek to supplement its scholarly output by fostering cross-border collaboration and global partnerships to reinforce its position as the world's pre-eminent research powerhouse."

"Nonetheless, the US's educational environment remains a beacon of inspiration, particularly in research and the advancement of collective knowledge. It continues to make significant contributions to global academia, shaping the future of higher education."

Canada
Canada
Canada
Canada
Canada
Canada
Canada
Canada
Canada

SUSTAINABILITY: World top 10			
INSTITUTION	LOCATION	SCORE	RANK
University of California, Berkeley (UCB)	United States	100	1
University of Toronto	Canada	99.9	2
University of Pennsylvania	United States	99.9	3
University of British Columbia	Canada	99.9	4
The University of Tokyo	Japan	99.7	5
The University of Edinburgh	United Kingdom	99.7	6
The University of Sydney	Australia	99.7	7
Western University	Canada	99.6	8
The University of Auckland	New Zealand	99.6	9
The University of New South Wales (UNSW Sydney)	Australia	99.6	10

The QS World University Rankings 2024 see the University of Toronto overtake McGill University as the country's highest-ranked institution. Sustainability represents Canada's highest-performing indicator by a significant margin. 11 Canadian universities are among the world top 100 for this indicator, including three in the world top 10 – more than any other country.

QS Senior Vice President Ben Sowter said: "Canadian higher education shines on the global stage, building on the success it achieved in last year's rankings, which brought to an end an extended period of moderate stagnation. Its remarkable focus on sustainability comes to the fore, with Canada's universities leading the way in environmental and social impact."

"Canada's commitment to internationalization is equally impressive, as evidenced by its results for international student and faculty ratios, and QS data which finds Canada one of the world's most appealing study destinations for international students. Furthermore, its dedication to student mobility is made even more commendable given in its success in attracting students from lower-middle-income nations."

How do the US and Canada fare among the 'big four' destination markets?

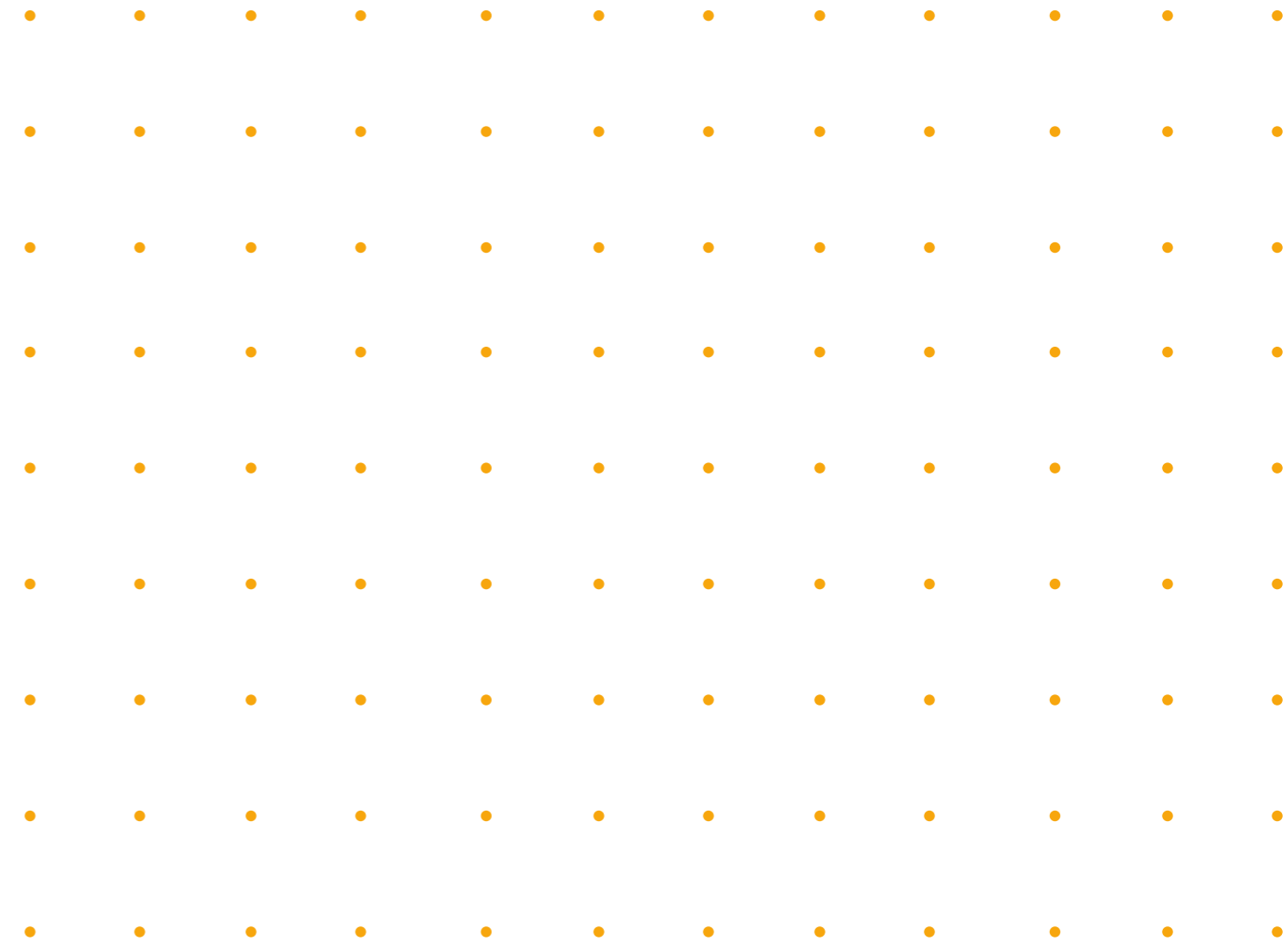
The "big four" study destinations include 178 (36%) of the QS World University Rankings top 500 universities and attract over 2,450,000 internationally mobile students, which represents approximately 37% of the total.

Top 10

source locations
for Australia,
the UK, the US
and Canada

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

Source: HSEA, OpenDoors, Erudera, Austrade



Comparison among the world's 'big four' international student destinations

Affordability is more important to those interested in Canada with tuition fees, scholarships and post-study work visas all featuring in the top three most important factors when researching where to study. Those interested in the UK and the US hold teaching, reputation and a welcoming environment in similar regard. High graduate employment rate for course choice only features in Australia's top three, though 'leads to my chosen career' is fourth for Canada, the US and the UK.

Source: QS International Student Survey 2023

What matters most when choosing a course?

	CANADA	US	AUSTRALIA	UK
1	Affordable tuition fees	High-quality teaching	Affordable tuition fees	High-quality teaching
2	High-quality teaching	University has a good reputation	High-quality teaching	University has a good reputation
3	University has a good reputation	Affordable tuition fees	High graduate employment rate	Personal interest in the subject

What matters most when choosing a university?

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

What matters most when choosing a country?

	CANADA	US	AUSTRALIA	UK
1	Welcoming to international students	High-quality teaching	Welcoming to international students	High-quality teaching
2	High-quality teaching	Welcoming to international students	High-quality teaching	Welcoming to international students
3	I can get a visa to work after graduating	The culture/life-style appeals to me	The culture/life-style appeals to me	Good reputation for chosen subject

QS International Student Survey 2023

Demographics of those interested in US

Gender

48%
female

48%
male

4%
prefer not to say or
to self-describe

Age

35%
17-20

33%
21-24

22%
25-31

10%
32 or older

Funding

58%
Self-funded

9%
Loan

25%
Scholarship

8%
Not sure other

Study level

3%
Foundation or
vocational

33%
Undergraduate

41%
Postgraduate taught

23%
Postgraduate
research

Main subjects of interest

23%
Business and
management

15%
Engineering and
technology

12%
Computing

3%
Subjects allied
to medicine

Household income

24%
Less than \$10,000 USD

15%
\$10,000-\$25,000 USD

13%
Over \$25,000 USD-
\$50,000 USD

6%
Over \$50,000-
USD-\$75,000 USD

2%
Over \$75,000 USD

30%
Don't know or prefer
not to say

QS International Student Survey 2023



Demographics of those interested in Canada

Gender

46%
female

49%
male

5%
prefer not to say or
to self-describe

Age

35%
17-20

28%
21-24

25%
25-31

13%
32 or older

Funding

51%
Self-funded

13%
Loan

27%
Scholarship

10%
Not sure other

Study level

5%
Foundation or
vocational

36%
Undergraduate

39%
Postgraduate taught

20%
Postgraduate
research

Main subjects of interest

23%
Business and
management

17%
Engineering and
technology

12%
Computing

4%
Subjects allied
to medicine

Household income

33%
Less than \$10,000 USD

16%
\$10,000-\$25,000 USD

9%
Over \$25,000 USD-
\$50,000 USD

4%
Over \$50,000-
USD-\$75,000 USD

7%
Over \$75,000 USD

31%
Don't know or prefer
not to say

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 2024.