



# The recruitment edge: UK

Discover what 62,000 students say they want and expect from universities in the UK.



# Key findings from 62,000 students interested in studying in the UK

Prospective students interested in the UK rated high-quality teaching as the most important factor when choosing a university and course.

**78%**  
of students interested in studying in the UK say that a welcoming environment for international students is the most important factor when choosing a town or city.

**43%**  
of prospective students are actively researching universities' environmental sustainability strategy and efforts.

**43%**  
of candidates looking to study in the UK have no interest whatsoever in studying online, compared to 33% in 2022.

**60%**  
of students interested in the UK expect a complete and personalised response to an enquiry within three days.

## Executive summary

The United Kingdom is home to several prestigious and internationally renowned universities providing high-quality education and research opportunities. The UK offers an exciting and culturally varied study destination. Despite immigration restrictions making it more difficult for international students to choose the UK, it remains a popular destination for prospective students around the world. Holding a degree from a UK institution remains advantageous when pursuing international career opportunities. As the global competition for recruiting international students intensifies, it's a critical moment for universities in the UK: Australian universities are rebounding from the pandemic, China's research impact is now outperforming the rest, the US is seeing its strongest growth in international student enrolments since 2016 and countries across the globe have ambitious plans to grow student numbers. UK universities still have a lot to offer but it's essential that they clearly define and articulate their strengths to future students.

## Recommendations

- Emphasise the credentials which showcase high-quality teaching, ensuring this is a prominent message across all your marketing channels.
- Review the way information about international study at your institution is presented to provide much-needed reassurance to concerned students.
- Universities in the UK have strong credentials in environmental sustainability. Now that students are actively seeking information about the sustainable efforts of universities, it's essential to ensure that it's clear and easy to find.
- Consider how you can scale your enquiry, admission and offer management to deliver response times students expect, with machine learning and other technological solutions.
- 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.

# 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.

**116,412**  
prospective  
student  
responses

**194**  
countries and  
territories



**62,885**  
interested in  
the UK



## 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 support with refining your strategy? **Contact us today** and our student recruitment experts will be happy to guide you.





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# What do prospective students want and expect from universities in the UK?

**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.



# High-quality teaching

**65%** of students say that a high quality of teaching is the most important factor when choosing a course. It was the most influential factor in their choice of country and university too.

Official recognition or rating for teaching quality is the leading influencer for prospective students when assessing a university's teaching. **67%** feel it's important for a university to have received recognition of its teaching quality, and **64%** say it's also important to be ranked well overall in independent rankings.

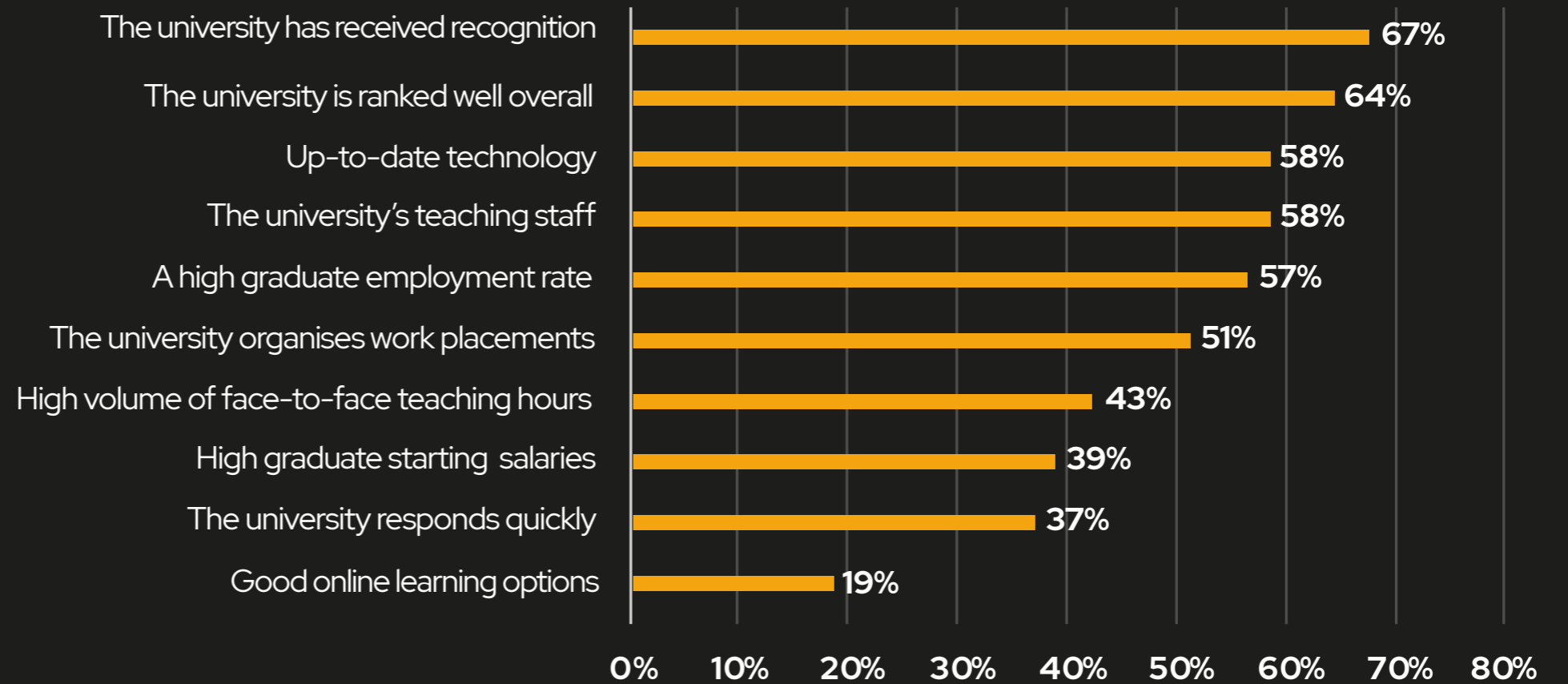
When assessing teaching quality, students also rate up-to-date technology, teaching staff and a high employment rate as important metrics for choosing the right university. For the past three years, UK universities have consistently ranked among the top 100 in the QS World University Rankings, with 17 institutions making the list. The UK comes second only to the US, with 27 universities in the top 100, and ahead of Australia and Canada for 2024.

## One student said



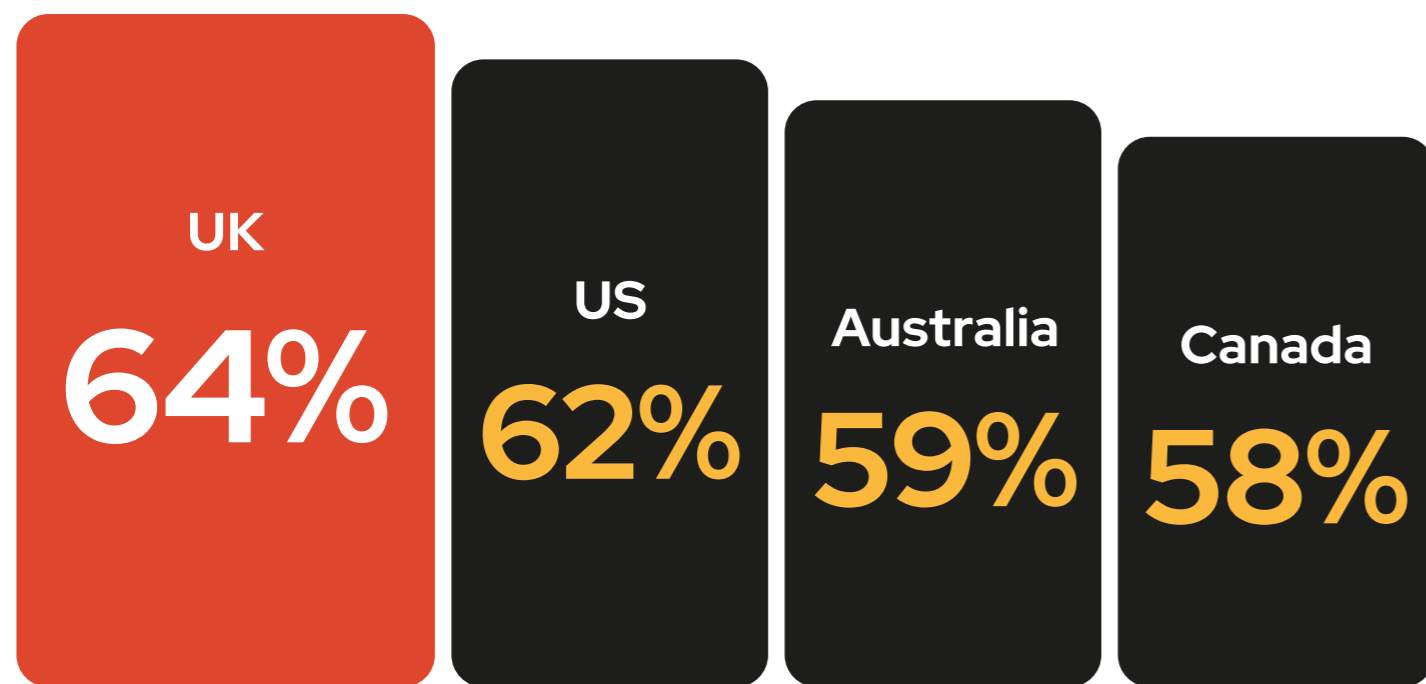
**"UK education is recognised by employers, universities and governments worldwide. Academic standards are of high prestige and the education system will provide me with a solid foundation to boost my potential for a higher salary."**

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



Compared with the 'big four', it is students looking to study in the UK who see more importance in a university being ranked well in independent ratings.

### The university is ranked well overall in independent ratings



## Spotlight on teaching

**43%** of candidates looking to study in the UK have no interest whatsoever in studying online, compared to 33% in 2022 and 29% in 2021.

**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 programmes are: **the convenience of studying from anywhere, flexibility and the opportunity to study while working.**



# Employability and career aspirations

58% of students interested in the UK say that a high graduate employability rate is the most important consideration when thinking of graduate outcomes.

Career outcomes remains a key driver in student decision-making with 58% of prospective UK students saying that it is the most important factor when choosing a university. About 50% say that the most important factor when choosing a course is that it leads to their chosen career. Students consider university reputation as a crucial factor in their decision-making process, believing that a degree from a reputable UK university will lead to better career prospects.

## One student said



"I've always dreamed of studying in the United Kingdom because of the well-established universities and the opportunities I'll have for work due to their good reputation."



## Top three career considerations when choosing a university



## Spotlight on post-study work and employability

17%

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

44%

hope to stay in the UK temporarily (between one and six years) with 13% hoping to stay permanently.

67%

say it's very important to have ease of access to work in their home country post-degree and 48% are looking for a clear path to permanent residency post-degree.

# Environmental sustainability

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

**65%** of those who researched the level of environmental action being taken by universities in the UK say they are somewhat or **extremely satisfied with the efforts being made**, compared to 58% for the US, 62% for Australia and matching the perceptions of institutions in Canada with 65%.

UK institutions could look to Canadian institutions for new methods to communicate their sustainability efforts and strategies for greater impact.



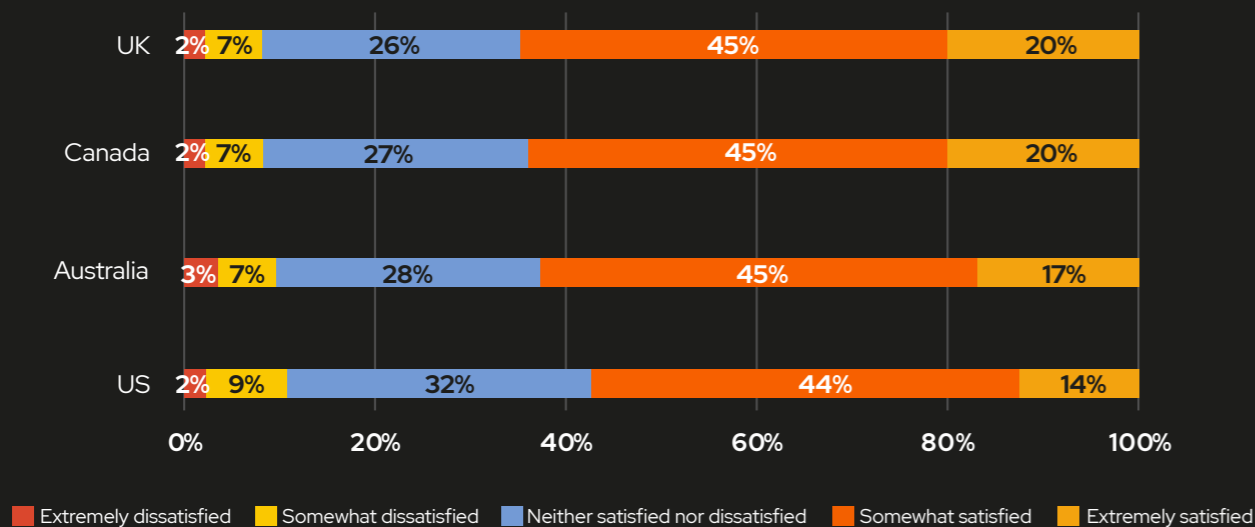
“Most of the schools I have researched are very conscious of the environmental impact of their activities, and strategies to reduce their impact are embedded in the policies of the institutions.”

“I was satisfied with the level of environmental action because the institutions I researched had clear and specific goals for reducing their carbon footprint and promoting sustainability. They also had a strong track record of implementing and achieving these goals, as well as regularly reporting on their progress to the public.”

“I found that many universities have a good level of environmental courses and modules and there’s a lot of research going into helping to sustain the future.”

## Student views on environmental sustainability

For the institutions you have researched, were you satisfied with the level of environmental action from these institutions?



# Spotlight on environmental sustainability

## 47%

Postgraduate research and postgraduate taught students are the most likely to research the level of action a university is taking on environmental sustainability (47% and 46%), followed by undergraduate (36%).

## 60%

Those planning to study geographical and environmental studies in the UK are the most likely (60%) to research a university's environmental sustainability strategy and efforts, closely followed by those planning to study agriculture, food and related studies (55%).

## 5

UK universities are ranked in the global top 20 in the QS World University Rankings: Sustainability 2023. The University of Edinburgh takes the highest spot in fourth place globally.

## Top five universities in the UK for sustainability

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

| University                  | Global rank |
|-----------------------------|-------------|
| The University of Edinburgh | 4           |
| University of Glasgow       | 13          |
| University of Oxford        | 16          |
| Newcastle University        | 18          |
| University of Cambridge     | 19          |

Source: QS World University Rankings: Sustainability

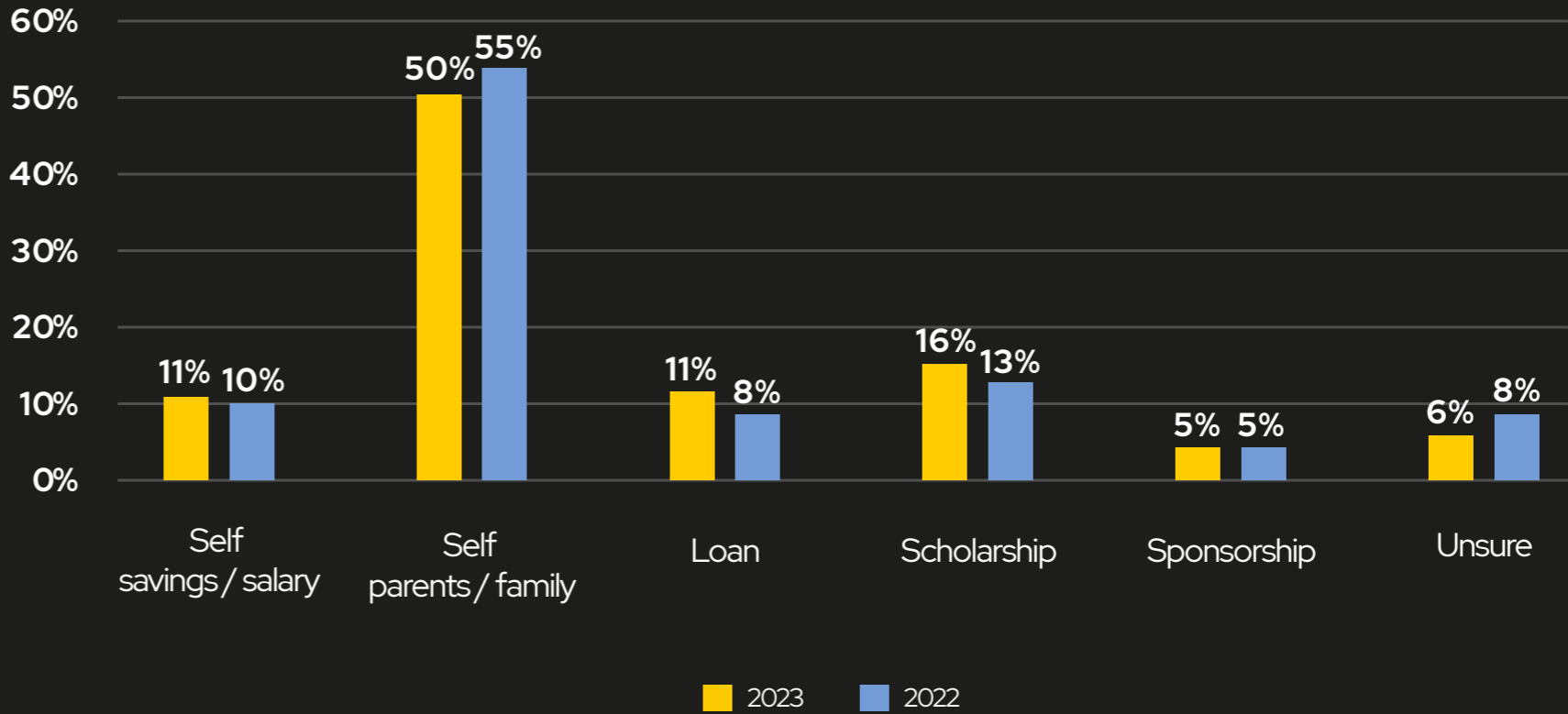
# Funding and affordability

For 68% of prospective students interested in the UK, their biggest worry about moving to a different country is the cost of living. 39% say that one of the most important things for them is to study at an affordable university which offers scholarships and is located in a city with a lower cost of living. 48% of prospective students think the most important thing about choosing a city to study in is the availability of affordable accommodation.

Of the 61% of prospective students who will self-fund their degree programmes, 50% will rely on parents or family for funding. This figure has decreased from 55% in 2022, with loans and scholarships making up a larger portion of the funding pool, but parents remain a strong influence on international student decision-making. Over 50% of students said they discuss their choice of course, country and university with their parents.

Those relying on loans to fund their studies make up 11% of the pool (up from 8% in 2022) and students looking to gain a scholarship, or in receipt of a scholarship, account for 13% (up from 10% in 2022).

What will be the main source of funding for your course fees?



While the UK, US, Australia and Canada aren't renowned for being the most affordable countries to study in, the UK does feature three cities within the top 100 QS Best Student Cities in the affordability indicator, compared to one for Australia, Canada and the US.

There's an opportunity for institutions within the UK to reassure students with messages around affordability, scholarship information and other financial aid opportunities.

## Spotlight on communications and channels

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



Almost  
**two thirds**

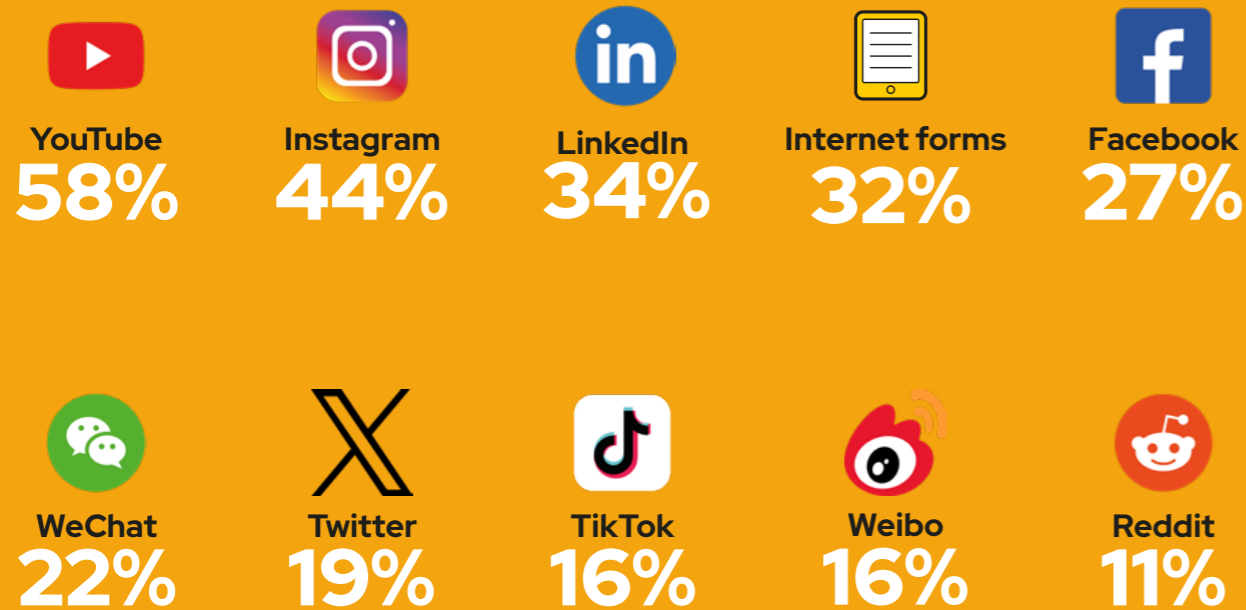
of prospective international students interested in studying in the UK want a personal and complete response to an enquiry within

**three days.**

# Spotlight on communications and channels



## Top ten social channels for researching universities in the UK



**30%** of respondents in Africa and the Middle East are using Facebook to research universities in the UK, the highest percentage of any region. Prospective students in Latin America and Western Europe are the highest proportion using Instagram at **57%**. Latin America is relying more on LinkedIn than other regions (at 46%) and respondents in the Asia Pacific region use WeChat and Weibo more than the rest of the world (at 32% and 24% respectively). When it comes to TikTok, it's North America taking the lead at **26%**.

**87%** of prospective students interested in studying in the UK still want to be communicated with via email. About **47%** want to be communicated with via WhatsApp and **35%** say phone call.

Over half of prospective UK students expect to be communicated with weekly once they've applied, and once they've received an offer.

**29%** of prospective UK students expect to receive notification of the outcome of their application within three days, that's compared with **25%** back in 2021.

For those planning to study in the UK, the number of students who expect their application turned around within one week has risen from **20%** in 2021 to **23%** in 2023.

## Perceptions of the UK

78% of prospective UK students say that a safe and welcoming place for international students is one of the most important factors when choosing a city or country to study in. For 46% of prospective students, the culture and lifestyle of the UK is also an important factor.

The concern that the UK won't be welcoming to international students has decreased over the past four years (from 38% in 2020 to 32% in 2023). Similarly, worries about feeling safe have also decreased (from 57% in 2021 to 52% in 2023).

Messages around the UK being a safe and welcome space for international students are still essential for UK institutions to convert diverse and quality students from overseas.

About 78% of prospective students feel it's very important for universities to have a dedicated service for international students and 54% want the ability to connect with existing international students to ask them questions directly.

About 62% of prospective UK students feel that the country is becoming more welcoming.

What words would you use to describe the UK?

**Safe 33% Modern 46%**  
**Beautiful 52% Artistic 27%**  
**Vibrant 30% Exciting 42%**  
**Clean 27% Welcoming 39% Affordable 17%**



Jamie Arrowsmith is Director at Universities UK International, one of the organisations leading the relaunch of the #WeAreInternational campaign this year, along with over 70 institutions in the UK.

He said:



“International students are hugely important to our universities and to the UK. As our research has shown, a single cohort delivers an economic contribution of £41.9 billion to the UK economy. The 679,000 international students who choose to study in the UK make an immense social and cultural contribution to our campuses and communities and bring a diversity of interests, experiences and insights that truly enrich our universities.

“As independent polling has repeatedly demonstrated, the UK public is overwhelmingly supportive of the international students hosted in our universities. However, it is vital that we continue to fully understand and respond to the needs and perceptions of current and prospective students, and that we continue to celebrate the vital contribution they make to the UK.”



# Student views on the UK



"The UK is home to some of the world's most prestigious universities and studying at one of these institutions would provide me with access to cutting-edge facilities and resources."



"Studying in the United Kingdom would broaden my career path and help me with international connections."



"I am excited about the opportunity to study in a different country and immerse myself in a new culture. I believe that studying in the UK would be an invaluable experience that would open up many doors for me in the future."



"The UK is welcoming to international students. Its university degrees are valuable and it presents a lot of opportunities for international students."



"Studying in the UK will widen my understanding of environmental issues and how they can be tackled using advanced practices. I can use my knowledge to give back to my country."

## 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 support with refining your strategy? [Contact us](#) today and our student recruitment experts will be happy to help.

# Appendix

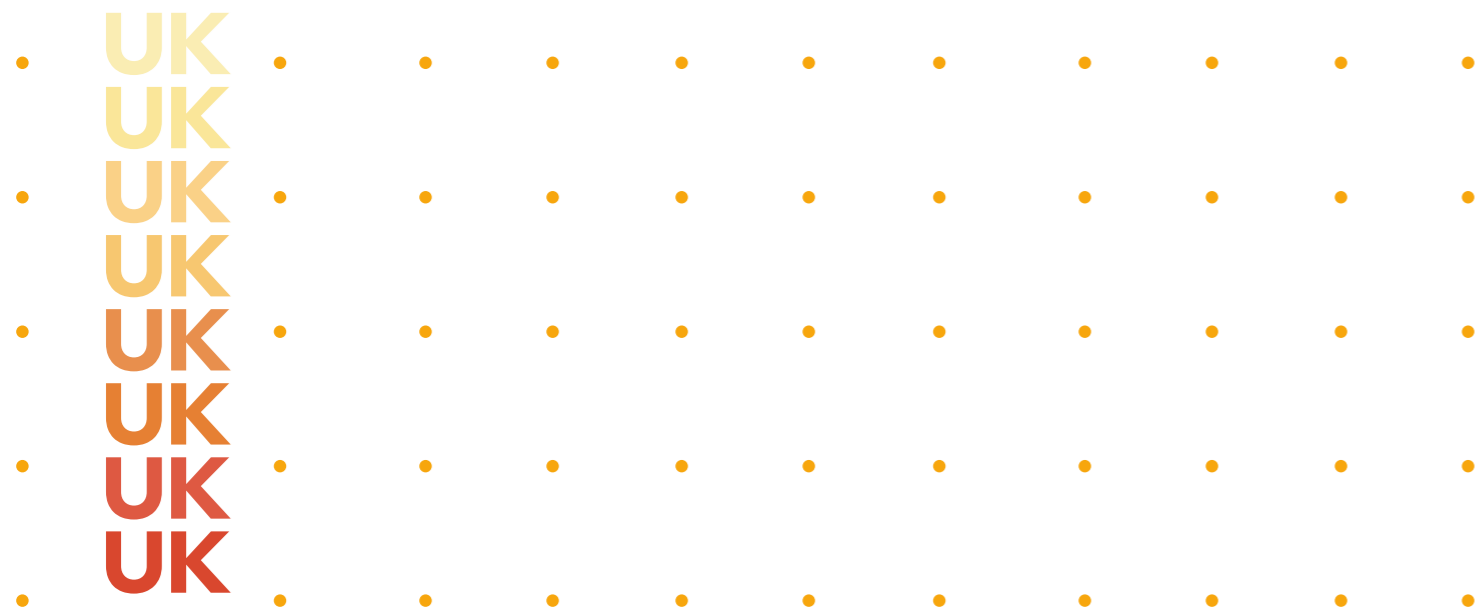
The current student recruitment landscape - 35

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• **The current higher education landscape in the UK** • • • •



The United Kingdom is tightening its grip on the elite echelon of global higher education, **boasting two of the world’s three top universities** and **17 UK universities** in the top **100** in the QS World University Rankings **2024**.

The University of Oxford rises one place to third, the University of Cambridge, which topped the table in **2010** and **2011**, retains second place. Imperial College stands strong in the **6th** position and UCL (**9th**) reaffirms its prestigious status among the world’s **top 10** institutions. UK universities continue to hold their prestige in the global higher education landscape.

The UK has successfully met the ambitious target set out in its International Education Strategy for two consecutive years, with **680,000** incoming students in **2021/2022**. This success is reflected in QS’ measure of International Students Ratio, the indicator in which the UK universities performed best in this edition of the rankings. 21 of the world’s top **50** institutions in this indicator are from the UK, more than any other country and triple that of the next top performer, Australia.

In total, UK universities boast an average **International Student Ratio score** of **78.39/100**, giving it the most international student cohort in the world among countries with **15** or more ranked institutions. The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) is the national leader in this indicator, placing 7th globally.

Jessica Turner, QS Chief Executive, commented: “UK universities have demonstrated their powerful global appeal, excelled as international education front-runners, and produced some of the world’s most employable graduates. Their commitment to robust international collaboration has transformed them into a global magnet, attracting bright minds from around the world.

“Despite this noteworthy success, it is important to recognise the increasingly competitive international education landscape. As students explore a wider range of universities across multiple countries, the UK must continue to innovate and uphold its world-class offerings to remain a preferred choice for students globally.”

## Comparison among the world’s ‘big four’ international student destinations

High-quality teaching is most important to those interested in the UK with good reputation for the chosen subject and feeling welcomed as an international student also 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, whereas those interested in Australia and Canada are looking for affordable tuition fees. 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?

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

## What matters most when choosing a university?

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

## What matters most when choosing a country?

|   | UK                                  | AUSTRALIA                           | CANADA                                    | US                                  |
|---|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | High-quality teaching               | Welcoming to international students | Welcoming to international students       | High-quality teaching               |
| 2 | Welcoming to international students | High-quality teaching               | High-quality teaching                     | Welcoming to international students |
| 3 | Good reputation as a place to study | The culture/lifestyle appeals to me | I can get a visa to work after graduating | The culture/lifestyle appeals to me |

# QS International Student Survey 2023

## Demographics of those interested in the UK

### Gender

**53%**

female

**42%**

male

**4%**

prefer not to say or to self-describe

### Age

–

17-20

**36%**

21-24

**23%**

25-31

**12%**

32 or older

### Funding

**61%**

Self-funded

**11%**

Loan

**21%**

Scholarship

**7%**

Not sure/other

### Study level

**3%**

Foundation or vocational

**30%**

Undergraduate

**51%**

Postgraduate taught

**17%**

Postgraduate research

### Main subjects of interest

**26%**

Business and management

**11%**

Engineering and technology

**9%**

Computing

**8%**

Social sciences

### Household income

**27%**

Less than \$10,000 USD

**15%**

\$10,000-25,000 USD

**10%**

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

**6%**

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

**10%**

Over \$75,000 USD

**33%**

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.

