

Internationalisation in the midst of slowbalisation

Results from the second Global Survey
of International Education Leaders



About the survey

Following the success of the inaugural Global Survey of International Education Leaders in 2022, Nous Group and Navitas have once again sought to understand the challenges and opportunities facing the university sector across Australia, Canada, and the UK. This year, the PIE also participated as a distribution and media partner.

This second survey was sent to senior operational and strategic leaders in public universities, with responsibilities for international education and global engagement, between September and October 2024.

Typical respondent roles included Deputy Vice Chancellor (International), Pro Vice Chancellor (International), Vice President (International), and Director (International). Survey results were supplemented by additional commentary and insight from Navitas and Nous Group consultants.

This report was made possible thanks to over 200 leaders from across Australia, Canada, the UK, and various other countries. We are extremely grateful for the time and expertise that was so willingly provided.



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Introduction

Over the past three decades, international students have played an increasingly important role in universities in the anglophone world.

They have enriched campuses with multicultural experiences, expanded the global influence of the academy, and bolstered financial stability through premium tuition fees. Institutions have become adept at navigating the inherent uncertainties of international recruitment, steering their institutions through challenges like geopolitical upheavals, currency fluctuations, and occasional policy backlashes at home.



Yet the past year has ushered in unprecedented challenges, even by this industry's standards. Amid ongoing economic instability and notable geopolitical tensions, the governments of three major English-speaking study destinations—Australia, Canada, and the UK—have each imposed significant restrictions on incoming international students. USA study visa rejections meanwhile hit record highs. While it's not the first time that international education has hit political speedbumps, never before have so many HE systems simultaneously found themselves moving in proscriptionary policy directions. The change in circumstances since our first iteration of this survey in 2022 is indeed stark.

The first Global Survey of International Education Leaders took place in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Following a period of closed borders and other constraints on global student mobility, university leaders were coming to terms with the impact of the pandemic on students, staff and partners. Australian and New Zealand universities were especially affected by more stringent and extended border controls.

At the time, there were signs of a v-shaped recovery in student numbers, but university leaders remained concerned. It was unclear if the recovery would be sustained, or sufficient to meet ambitious aspirations to return quickly to pre-pandemic enrolment levels.

As it turns out, the COVID-19 bust was followed by a significant post-COVID boom across most destinations. Record levels of student arrivals were driven in part by pent-up demand from students who had deferred or delayed while borders were closed, as well as the arrival of students who had commenced or continued study online in the interim.

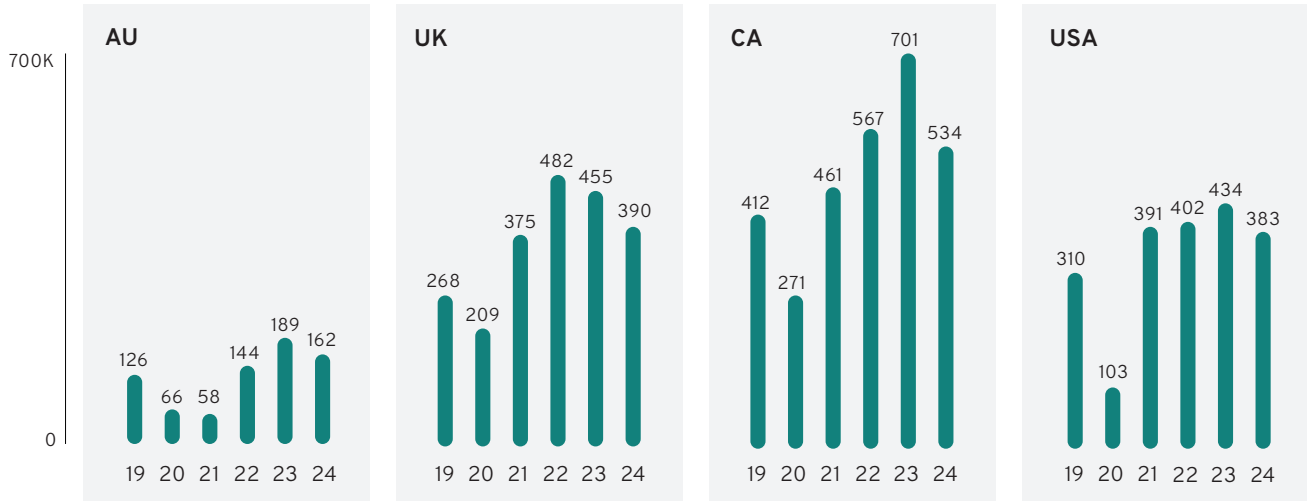
Robust labour markets in conjunction with generous government policies however were also significant drivers. The pause in migration resulted in record low unemployment rates and significant skills shortages. In response, many governments stimulated student returns with expedited visa processing and expanded post-study work rights. Australia and Canada turned the student visa into a de facto work visa by lifting the limit on how many hours students could work while studying.

International students were a material part of the rapid rise in net migration in many countries, and attracted the ire of politicians and their constituents as issues of housing affordability and congestion loomed large.

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1 Annual new student visas by country (in thousands)

Where the pandemic was a reminder of the importance of an open and integrated global economy, this represented a temporary reprieve from the reality of slowbalisation and deglobalisation agenda, which once again took centre stage.



Source: NAVITAS VISA Cube drawing on UK'S Home Office, Canda's IRCC, Australia's Dept of Home Affairs and USA'S Dept of State.

Many of the themes of GSIEL 2022 have not gone away, but have rather been eclipsed by new, harsher realities.

Themes from GSIEL 2022

The internationalisation agenda

Internationalisation remains a top priority for universities and a strategic imperative for leaders, but confidence in ability to successfully deliver is less certain.

Student Recruitment

International student recruitment remains at the heart of the international agenda, but new global delivery models are emerging among fierce competition.

Balancing Priorities

Leaders feel the pressure to return cashflows to pre-pandemic levels while balancing revenue and volume with quality and diversity.

Recruitment levers

The pandemic necessitated significant change to strategic positioning, while heralding rapid digital change. This provides new opportunities to leverage different recruitment mechanisms.

Risks abound

Intensifying competition, rapidly shifting markets and changing international dynamics present risks for universities globally.

Optimism remains

University leaders remain confident in their own strengths and in underlying demand for international education.

Context

University leaders will need to adapt their approach in the transition to a new ‘Managed Era’ of international education.

Navigating persistent uncertainty

The headwinds of COVID-19 may have passed, but international higher education remains in a period of upheaval and uncertainty. Government policy changes and global cultural, social, and economic challenges have fostered growing pessimism among university leaders, despite expectations of increased global demand.

As Figure 2 shows, university leaders identify a range of risks on the horizon, from “geopolitical and macroeconomic factors outside of our control” to the sector’s own “knee-jerk responses to government policy in the short-term, without longer term thinking and positioning.” Historical issues such as academic integrity, the acceleration of online delivery, and concerns around IP theft do not rate highly. A relatively small proportion also consider a future pandemic a significant risk.



Confronting 'Slowbalisation'

Our respondents' preoccupation with macroeconomic and geopolitical risks points to a broader trend of globalisation slowing, or perhaps reversing.

Slowbalisation refers to the deceleration or stagnation of global interconnectedness, where cross-border flows of trade, investment, and people grow more slowly or even decline. University leaders are increasingly concerned by the risks associated with this growing trend.

As Gideon Rachman predicted in 2014:

[I]t will become increasingly clear that nationalism is back. From Europe to Asia to America, politicians who base their appeal on the idea that they are standing up for their own countries will grow in power and influence. The result will be an increase in international tensions and an unpromising background for efforts at multilateral co-operation, whether on climate, trade, taxation or development.

**Gideon Rachman (2014), 'Nationalism is back,'
The Economist**

Rachman could have cited international education in that list. Anti-immigration sentiment and increasing nationalism – “continued anti-immigration rhetoric being used against international students for political gain,” as one participant put it – are fundamental drivers of slowbalisation, and one-in-five university leaders would rate this as an ‘extremely significant’ risk.

Geopolitical issues are very much also top of mind. Tensions particularly between China and the USA continues to simmer, while the outbreak of war – the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2022 and then the escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in 2023 – have reshaped international relations and students flows.

Transitioning to a new 'Managed Era' for international education

Notwithstanding the risks, demand for international education is expected to continue to rise in this decade, even as supply is increasingly managed. “International students will continue to be a significant contributor to the university’s overall revenue,” one leader told us. Another highlighted “continued high demand from students for international study” as a significant cause for optimism.

In this landscape, universities will increasingly need to adapt by shifting from broad, volume-driven internationalisation strategies to more targeted, policy-aligned, and sustainable approaches to global engagement—a move from the ‘Market Era’ to the ‘Managed Era,’ a new period in international education marked by greater government control and management of international student flows.

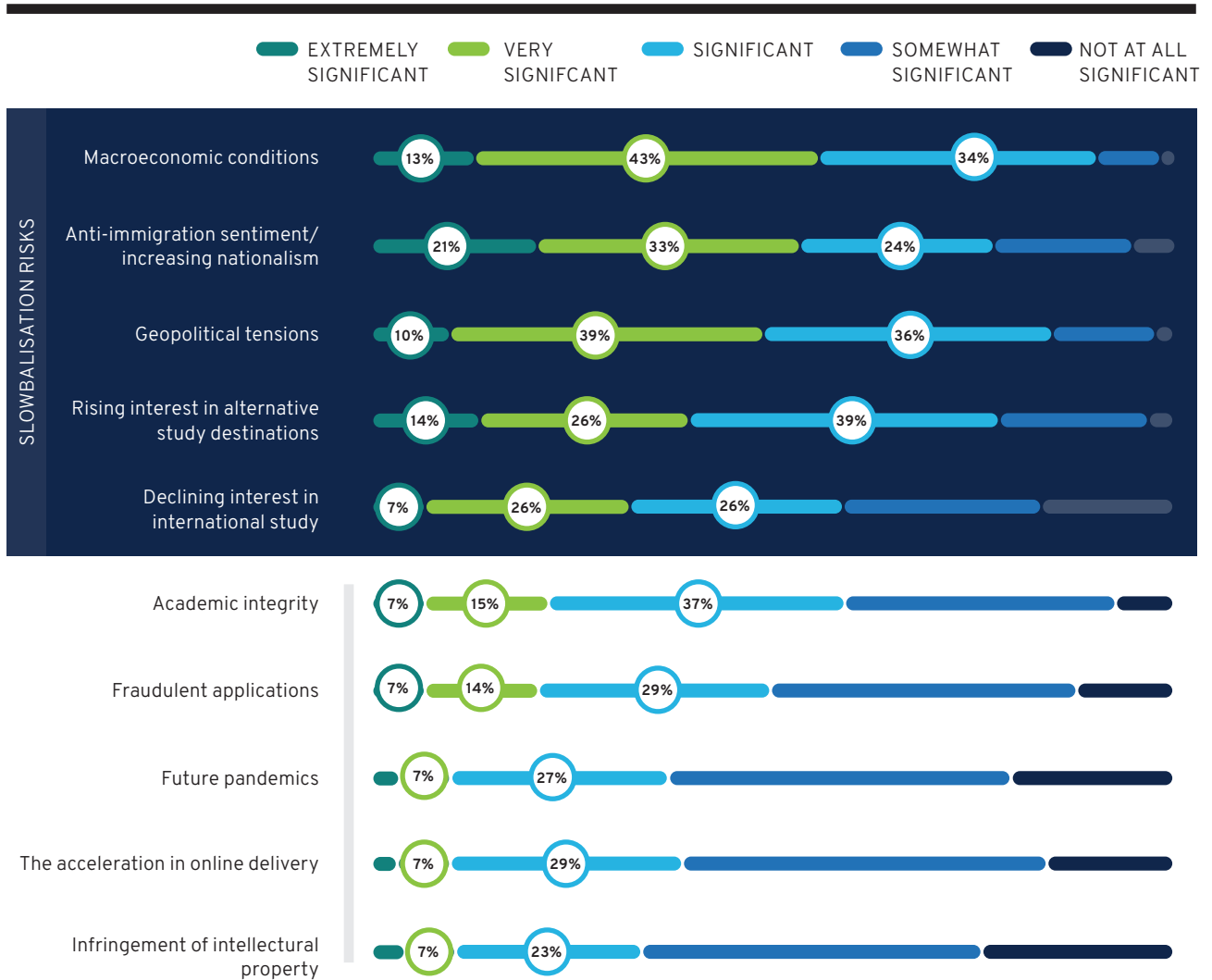
Recognising the need to navigate this complex environment, Nous Group and Navitas have engaged senior operational and strategic leaders with responsibilities for international education and global engagement at universities across Australia, New Zealand, the UK, and Canada. This report synthesises insights from these leaders, highlighting their internationalisation agendas, priorities, and assessments of future opportunities. For detailed information on the survey methodology and key themes, please refer to the appendix.

"continued anti-immigration rhetoric being used against international students for political gain," as one participant put it

78% of respondents are concerned by anti-immigration sentiment and increasing nationalism.

2 Risks to universities' internationalisation agenda, 2024

How would you rate the significance of the following risks to your university's internationalisation agenda?



91% of respondents agree that macroeconomic conditions pose a significant threat to their internationalisation agendas.

Our findings are distilled into six key themes:

These themes are discussed in the following sections

1 Internationalisation remains a high priority for universities but is increasingly influenced by government policy.

2 Revenue is front of mind for universities amid financial pressures and intensifying competition.

3 Universities expect to increase revenue through higher fees, reduced scholarships and, for some institutions, lower entry requirements

4 Universities are expecting to reduce investment across many areas of international student recruitment.

5 Transnational education is becoming an increasingly important strategy, though many institutions are not confident on their ability to execute.

6 While pessimism among university leaders is generally increasing, there is still cause for an optimistic outlook over the longer-term.

Theme 1



Internationalisation remains a high priority for universities but is increasingly influenced by government policy.

Internationalisation is still a strategic imperative, but priorities are shifting...

Across all jurisdictions, more than four-fifths (86 per cent) of international education leaders agree or strongly agree that internationalisation is/remains a high priority for their universities. This figure has dropped slightly since 2022 (95 per cent), which may indicate a rise in other priorities.

The decline in the level of support for internationalisation at senior levels—from 78 per cent to 63 per cent—may further indicate more competing demands in the chancellery. In the UK, declining research rankings have been a widespread concern, while Australia's tertiary sector has had to contend with declining domestic enrolments.

...and are heavily influenced by government policies.

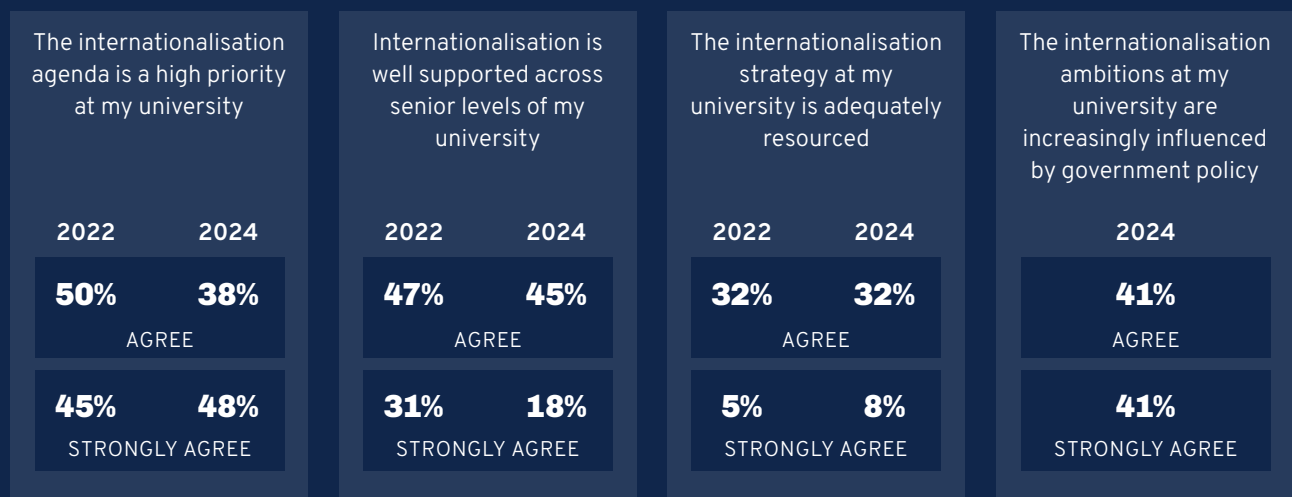
Consistent with the wider context of increasing government intervention and regulation of the international education sector, university leaders agree that the internationalisation agenda is increasingly shaped by government policies. A resounding 82 per cent of leaders agree that government policy decisions are increasingly shaping their university's internationalisation ambitions.

In Australia, the UK, and Canada, the overwhelming majority of respondents report that government policies have negatively impacted their ability to recruit international students and that future changes will either “turn international students away” or else “tie us up in red tape that will strangle all that is good about the international sector”. Described by one leader as “short-sighted government policies where politics takes precedence over good policy,” these policy shifts require universities to adapt their strategies to navigate new regulations and maintain their international presence.

If we were to follow the present political logic we would place more emphasis on the national and local mission, and less on global relations and rankings, research cooperation, and international students. In theory the local-national mission does not have to conflict with the global mission. They do conflict in the present system because neither are funded properly.

Simon Marginson (2024), 'The UK global research university in turbulent times', Drapers' Lecture

3 Proportion who agree or strongly agree with the following statements, 2022 – 24



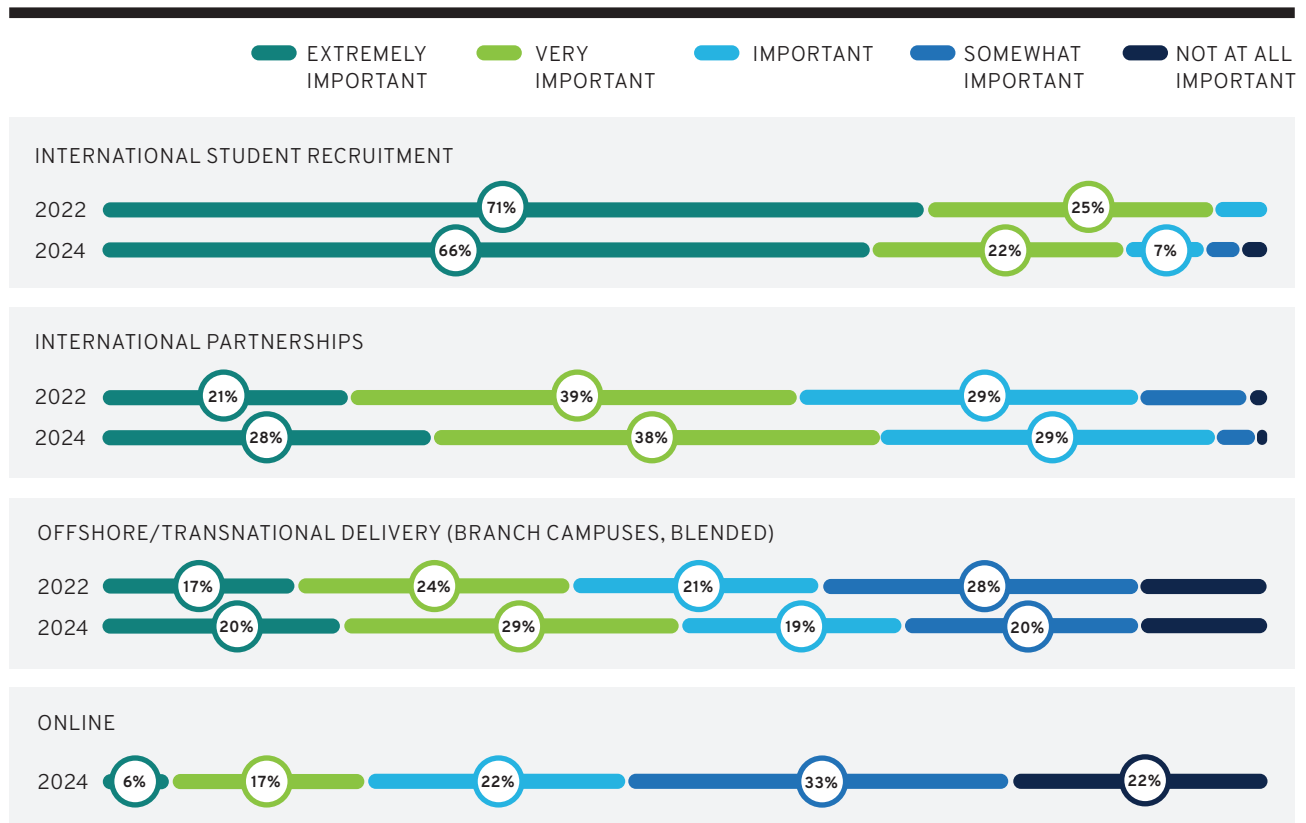
In response, universities are adapting strategies amidst policy shifts and limited resources.

At the same time, while internationalisation is well supported at senior levels, it still is not adequately resourced. While almost two-thirds (63 per cent) of respondents agreed that internationalisation is well supported across senior levels at their university, less than half (40 per cent) of respondents agreed that it is adequately resourced. This gap suggests that, despite strategic backing, there are significant operational hurdles in fully realising internationalisation ambitions.

As such, recruitment continues to dominate universities' strategies. International recruitment and study abroad are well-established strategies, but the pandemic and shifting policy landscape have necessitated that universities look for education delivery models that can overcome closed borders and campuses. Despite the renewed interest across these areas, international student recruitment remains the most important area of focus for international leaders, with almost nine-in-ten respondents (88 per cent) indicating it is very important or extremely important to their internationalisation strategy.

International student recruitment remains the most important area of focus for international leaders.

4 Areas of importance for universities' internationalisation strategy, 2022 – 24



Theme 2



Revenue is front of mind for universities amid financial pressures and intensifying competition.

The landscape of international student recruitment is becoming increasingly competitive. An overwhelming majority (89 per cent) of respondents suggested that recruitment will be 'extremely competitive' or 'very competitive' in the next 1-2 years, and most (79 per cent) rate 'rising interest in alternative study destinations' as a significant risk. Leaders in both UK and Canada appear to be bracing for intensified competition, more so than those in other jurisdictions.

Canada has jumped from the lowest proportion of leaders anticipating 'extreme' competition, at 31 per cent in 2022, to the highest, at 92 per cent, in 2024. This significant increase is likely due to the constrained international student environment in Canada, where traditionally high student demand has been rebuffed with newly implemented international student caps and stringent visa regulations. These caps have negatively impacted attractiveness of Canada as a study destination and restricted the growth of international student populations, leading institutions to fiercely compete for a limited pool of eligible students.

Similarly, UK leaders are bracing for a significant rise in ‘extreme’ competition, with 71 per cent in 2024 compared to 43 per cent in 2022. Declining research rankings and the post-Brexit immigration landscape have raised concerns among university leaders. The combination of increased visa restrictions and changes in post-study work opportunities may be deterring international student and contributing to the perceptions of an intensifying international student recruitment market.

As competition intensifies, university leaders are increasingly focussed on international student revenue with other aspects of student recruitment taking a back seat. As Simon Marginson recognises, UK universities face the acute double impact of declining international revenues as well as the erosion of domestic funding:

More immediately to the point, it’s terrible financial timing. While institutions’ international revenues are falling the 2012 funding system has gone belly-up—domestic student fees have lost 30 per cent in value since 2017. The £285 fee rise in the budget hardly touched this...

The compound result of this double dive, in domestic fee value and international students, is an out and out disaster for university finances. Some are hurting worse than others.

Simon Marginson (2024), ‘The UK global research university in turbulent times’, Drapers’ Lecture

5 Anticipated competition for international student recruitment, by jurisdictions, 2022 – 24

Compared to the last 2 years, I anticipate that in the next 2 years competition in the recruitment of international students will be:

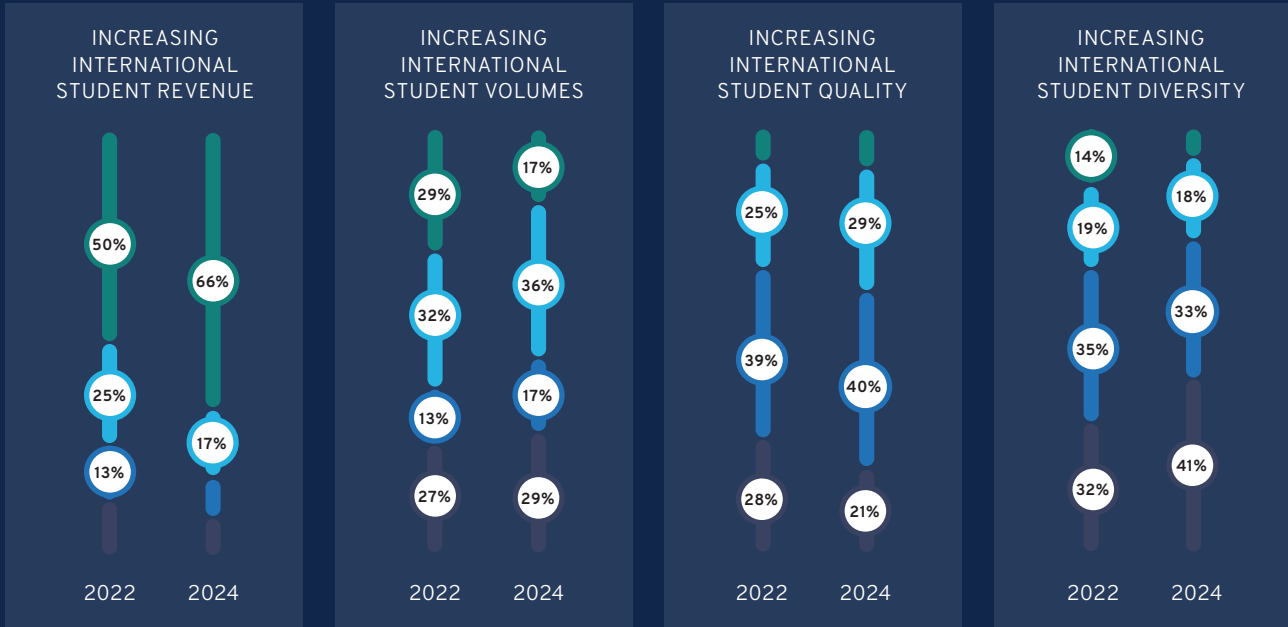


6

Focus of universities' international student recruitment strategy, 2022 – 24

How would you rank the level of importance of the following areas to your university's international student recruitment strategy?

1 2 3 4



Compared with the 2022 survey, a much higher proportion of leaders ranked 'increasing revenue' as their top priority (up to 66 per cent from 50 per cent). Conversely, the proportion of leaders that rated 'increasing student volume' as their top priority dropped (from 29 per cent to 17 per cent), and those that prioritised 'increasing diversity' also fell (from 14 per cent to 7 per cent).

All this pressure is taking its toll. Financial constraints are increasingly putting pressure on universities' ability to maintain high standards of student quality, experience, and outcomes. Although international leaders remain dedicated to these objectives, the proportion who rate the international student experience as "very" or "extremely important" has declined from 72 to 61 per cent. This drop suggests that financial imperatives are forcing institutions to make difficult trade-offs that may compromise the quality of education and student support services.

Financial constraints are increasingly putting pressure on universities' ability to maintain high standards of student quality, experience, and outcomes.

Theme 3

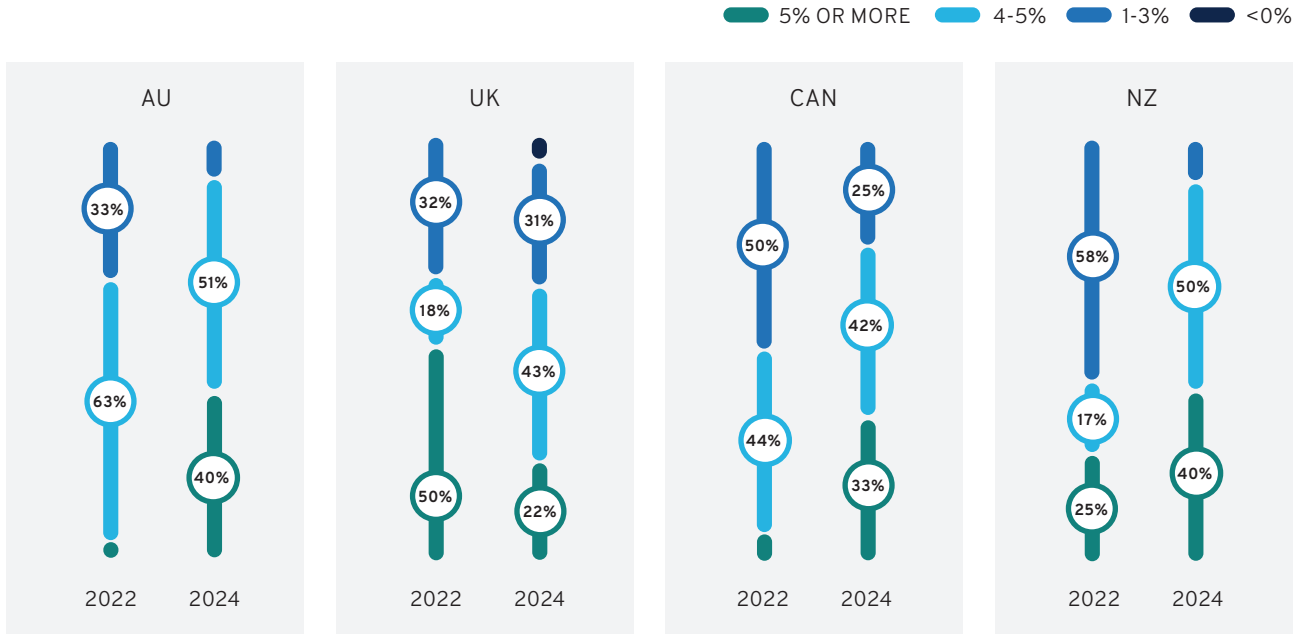


Universities expect to increase revenue through higher fees, reduced scholarships and, for some institutions, lower entry requirements.

7

Anticipated fee increases, by jurisdictions, 2022 – 24

Over the next 1-2 years, I anticipate that my university will implement annual international tuition fee rises for most programs in the range of:



In the main, universities expect to increase revenue by raising international tuition fees. Compared with our 2022 survey, more universities in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand expect to increase fees by '4-5 per cent' or '5 per cent or more' over the next 1-2 years. This trend stands in contrast to UK universities, where there appears to be less appetite for significant fee hikes.

Notably, the willingness to increase fees varies by institutional ranking. Over half (53 per cent) of universities within the top 100 anticipate raising fees by '5 per cent or more' in the next 1-2 years, compared with only one-quarter (28 per cent) of universities outside the top 100. This indicates that higher-ranked institutions may feel more confident in their ability to command higher prices, leveraging their reputational capital to boost revenue.

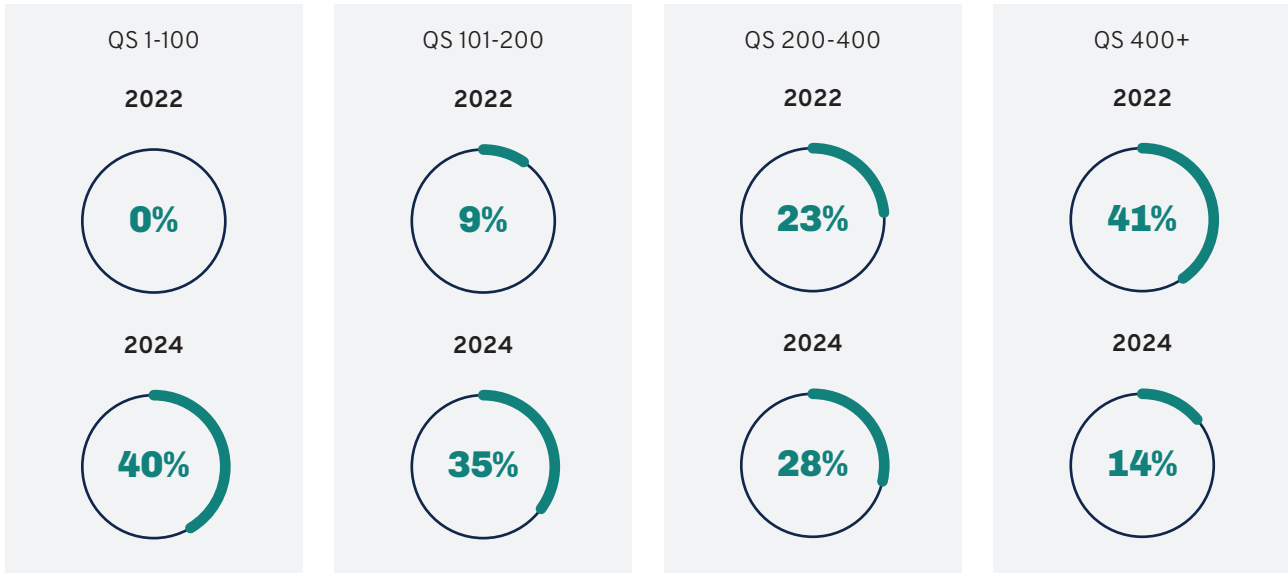
53% of universities within the top 100 anticipate raising fees by '5% or more' in the next 1-2 years.

8

Anticipated changes in scholarships, by ranking, 2022 – 24

Over the next 1-2 years, I anticipate that my university will implement scholarships/bursaries that are:

Percent indicated 'Much less generous' or 'less generous'



Aligned with the focus on increasing revenue, many universities anticipate being less generous with scholarships and bursaries for international students. Compared with our 2022 survey, a greater proportion of universities—particularly in Australia and Canada—expect to be 'less generous' or 'much less generous'. Among Top 100 universities, 40 per cent expect to reduce scholarship offerings, with only 20 per cent considering being 'more generous' over the next 1-2 years—a significant decline from 67 per cent in 2022. Outside the top 100, changes are less drastic, suggesting these universities are balancing the need to attract students with financial constraints by maintaining or modestly adjusting scholarship offerings.

Among Top 100 universities, 40% expect to reduce scholarship offerings. Outside the top 100, changes are less drastic.

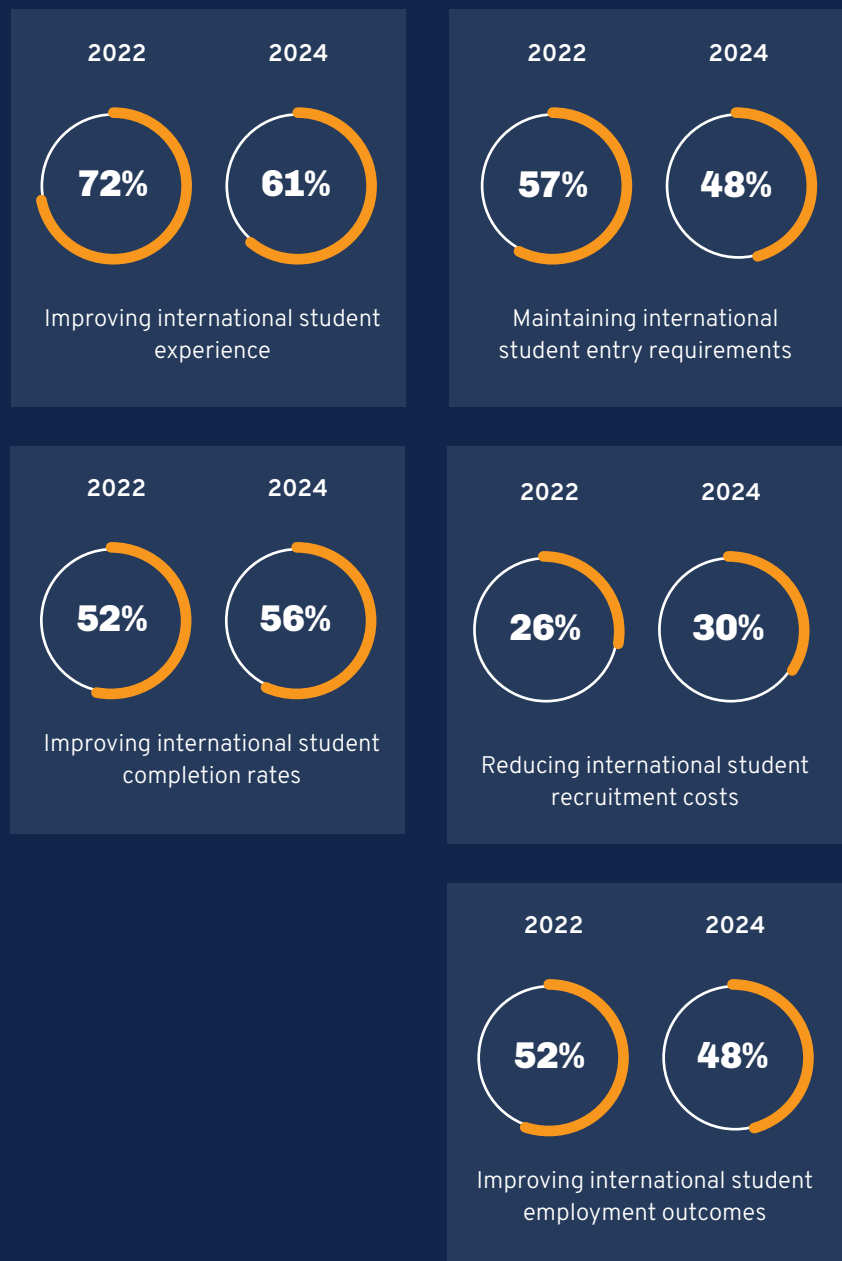
Despite the greater focus on revenue, universities need to continually be mindful of consumer behaviour and the factors that influence student choice, such as increasing affordability concerns. According to the Navitas Agent Perception Survey, the cost of study is now the top consideration influencing student choice of destination. To navigate this tension, universities are exploring revenue-generating strategies that minimise the financial burden on students. Two approaches stand-out. Firstly, universities may lower entry requirements to attract a broader range of applicants. Only 48 per cent of respondents indicated maintaining international student entry requirements as very important or extremely important, down from 57 per cent in 2022. This response varied significantly by university ranking. One-quarter (25 per cent) of institutions ranked between 100 and 400 on the QS rankings are considering lowering entry requirements, a significant increase from 2022. In contrast, more than a quarter of the top 100 institutions plan to increase entry requirements, perhaps showing confidence that high demand will allow them to maintain their academic selectivity.

Secondly, most respondents (56 per cent) identified improving student completion rates as very important or extremely important. Improved completion rates will be pursued despite a softening emphasis on the international student experience, with just 61 per cent of respondents classifying it as very important or extremely important, down from 73 per cent in 2022. This decline suggests that, while universities are still committed to enhancing completion rates, they may be reallocating resources and attention away from certain aspects of the international student experience in order to balance financial stability and academic outcomes.

The cost of study is now the top consideration influencing student choice of destination.

9 Areas of importance to international student recruitment strategy, 2022 - 2024

Percent indicated 'very important' or 'extremely important'



Theme 4



Universities are expecting to reduce investment across many areas of international student recruitment.

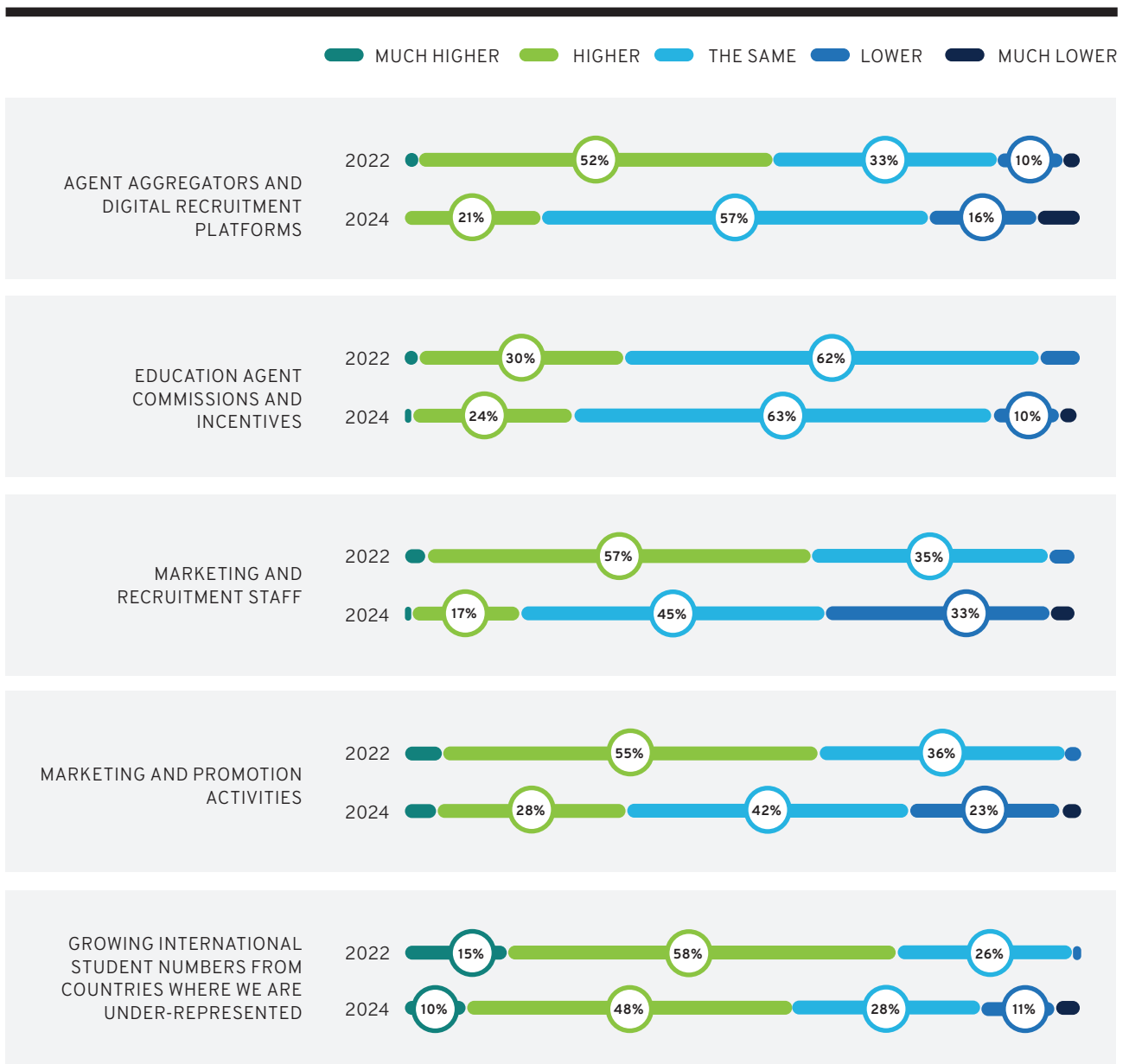
Facing growing financial pressures, many universities are pulling back investment across key areas of international student recruitment or are less inclined to increase investment compared with our 2022 survey. Respondents showed much weaker intentions to invest in agent aggregators and digital recruitment platforms than they did in the previous survey. The proportion of universities anticipating higher investment in agent aggregators and digital recruitment platforms has dropped sharply from 54 per cent in 2022 to 21 per cent in 2024. The reduction in digital platform investment may reflect more critical procurement processes as universities become more mindful of cost-per-click metrics and the overall return on investment for these channels.

Intentions to invest in marketing and recruitment staff have sharply reversed since our 2022 survey. The number of respondents who expected their universities to increase investment in marketing and recruitment staff plummeted from 61 per cent to just 17 per cent, whereas those expecting cuts soared from 5 per cent to 37 per cent. These trends suggest that universities are increasingly adopting a more cautious and strategic approach to managing their resources in an environment characterised by financial uncertainty and regulatory changes.

Despite these shifts, most universities continue to rely heavily on education agents for international student recruitment, particularly in Australia and the UK, with direct recruitment being the second most popular method. The preference for agents is rooted in their ability to provide localised expertise and reach diverse markets. However, this reliance comes with high commission costs, which place additional strain on already stretched budgets.

10 Anticipated investment in different areas of student recruitment, 2022 – 24

Over the next 1-2 years, I anticipate that my university will invest in [] at a level that is:



11 Student recruitment channels, by jurisdiction, 2024

Broadly speaking, what proportion of international students would be recruited through the following channels?

	EDUCATION AGENTS	DIRECT RECRUITMENT	ARTICULATION	SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT	TNE	EDTECH PLATFORMS	OTHER
AU	68%	13%	9%	5%	2%	2%	0%
UK	52%	22%	7%	6%	5%	6%	6%
CA	32%	28%	7%	12%	1%	15%	5%
NZ	49%	26%	11%	2%	7%	2%	1%
OTHER	29%	41%	4%	4%	1%	16%	6%

The challenging financial landscape necessitates a strategic rethink. Given the high costs associated with education agents and the financial pressures driving the need for cost containment, universities may need to diversify their recruitment channels over the long term. This could include leveraging alumni networks for referrals, strengthening partnerships with high schools and pathway providers, or exploring innovative approaches like virtual fairs and social media campaigns. Diversification not only offers cost efficiencies but also helps institutions mitigate risks associated with over-reliance on any single recruitment channel.

Given the high costs associated with education agents and the financial pressures driving the need for cost containment, universities may need to diversify their recruitment channels over the long term.

Theme 5

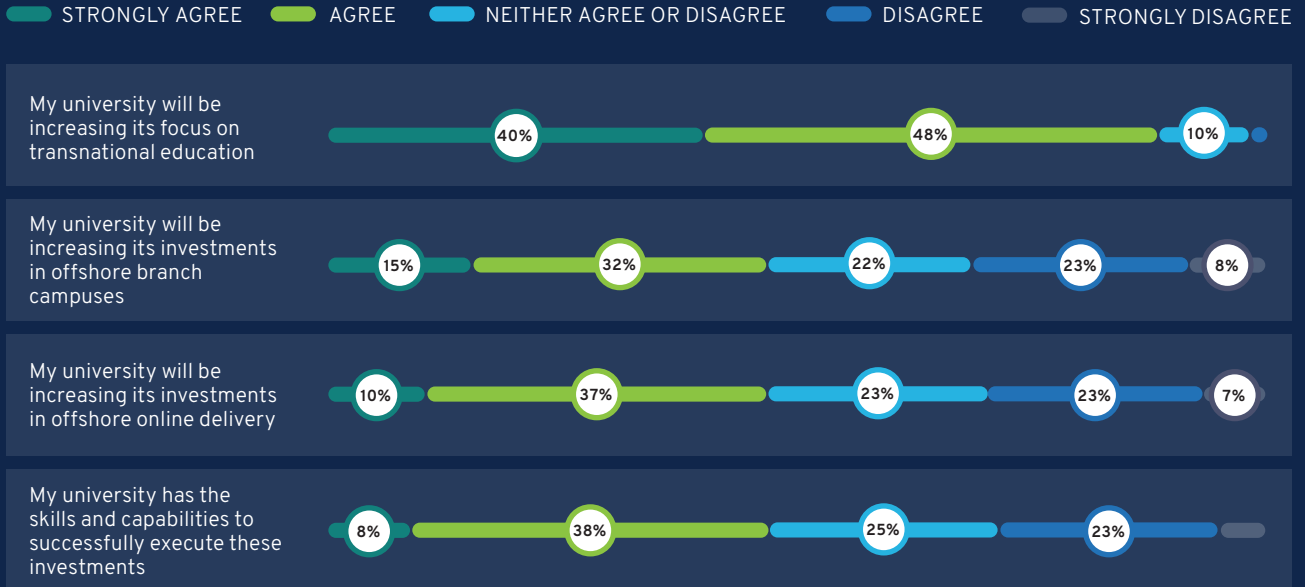


Transnational education is becoming an increasingly important strategy, though many institutions are not confident on their ability to execute.

Although student recruitment is still the most important strategy for most universities' internationalisation agendas, there has been an increase in the proportion of leaders reporting that transnational education is a priority. An overwhelming majority of respondents (88 per cent) agree or strongly agree that their university will be increasing its focus on transnational education, with several noting that “transnational opportunities” and “the potential for increased collaboration” are reasons for optimism. This enthusiasm is likely driven by recent policy changes, such as international student caps, which are encouraging universities to pursue alternative revenue strategies. In Australia, uncertainty about the implementation of student caps may influence the degree to which universities shift their emphasis toward transnational education.

12 Transnational education priorities and capability, 2024

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.

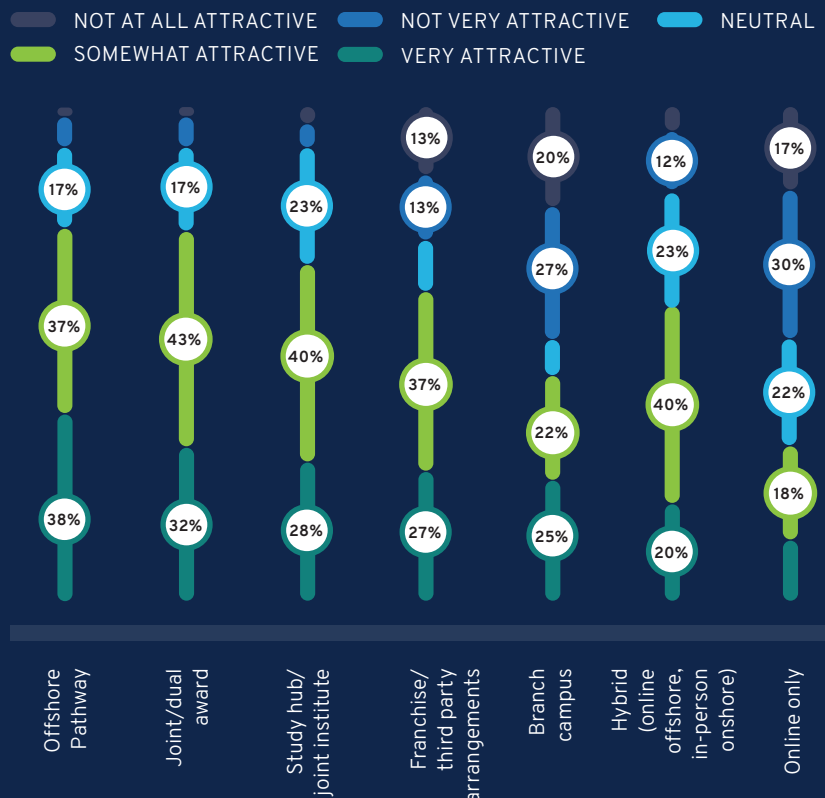


Despite the growing emphasis on transnational education, our survey found that most universities (53 per cent) did not agree that their university has the skills and capabilities to successfully execute these investments. Confidence in executing transnational education strategies is noticeably lower among universities outside the top QS100, indicating a disparity in perceived readiness based on institutional ranking and resources.

Interestingly, this greater focus on transnational education is reflected in universities' projected investments in offshore branch campuses or offshore online delivery. Over the next five years, universities expect to pursue a range of alternative transnational education models, most notably offshore pathways and joint or dual awards. These models may provide more flexible and less capital-intensive options compared to traditional branch campuses.

13 Attractiveness of transnational education models, 2024

Please rate the attractiveness of the following TNE models for your university over the next five years.



Theme 6



While pessimism among university leaders is generally increasing, there is still cause for an optimistic outlook over the longer-term.

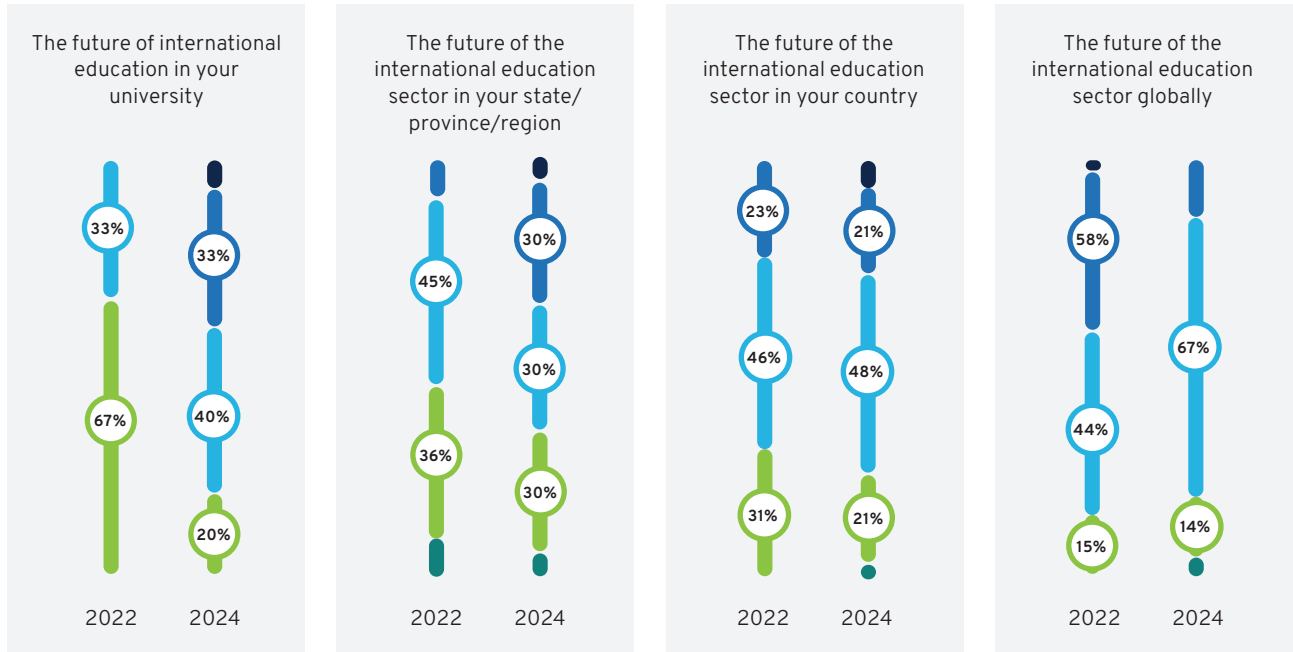
Compared to our 2022 survey, university leaders were more pessimistic about the future of international education, especially at a country and provincial or state level. A major driver of this sentiment is government policy changes, especially their impact on visa decisions and processing, as well as post-study opportunities. Respondents in Australia and Canada were the most pessimistic, which is unsurprising given recent announcements and the introduction (respectively) of international student caps. These sentiments were not only driven by government policy but also by broader macroeconomic, cultural, and geopolitical trends, contributing to the slowbalisation phenomenon.

14

Level of optimism about the future, 2022 - 2024

How would you rate your level of optimism about the future?

● VERY OPTIMISTIC
 ● OPTIMISTIC
 ● NEUTRAL
 ● PESSIMISTIC
 ● VERY PESSIMISTIC



Despite these challenges, many universities still have good reasons to be optimistic over the longer-term. “Despite the recent negative policy changes, there is an immense amount of opportunity in our international portfolio,” one leader shared. “[Higher] education is a stalwart endeavour,” said another, “and there will always be a need to offer courses and degree programs to a global audience.”

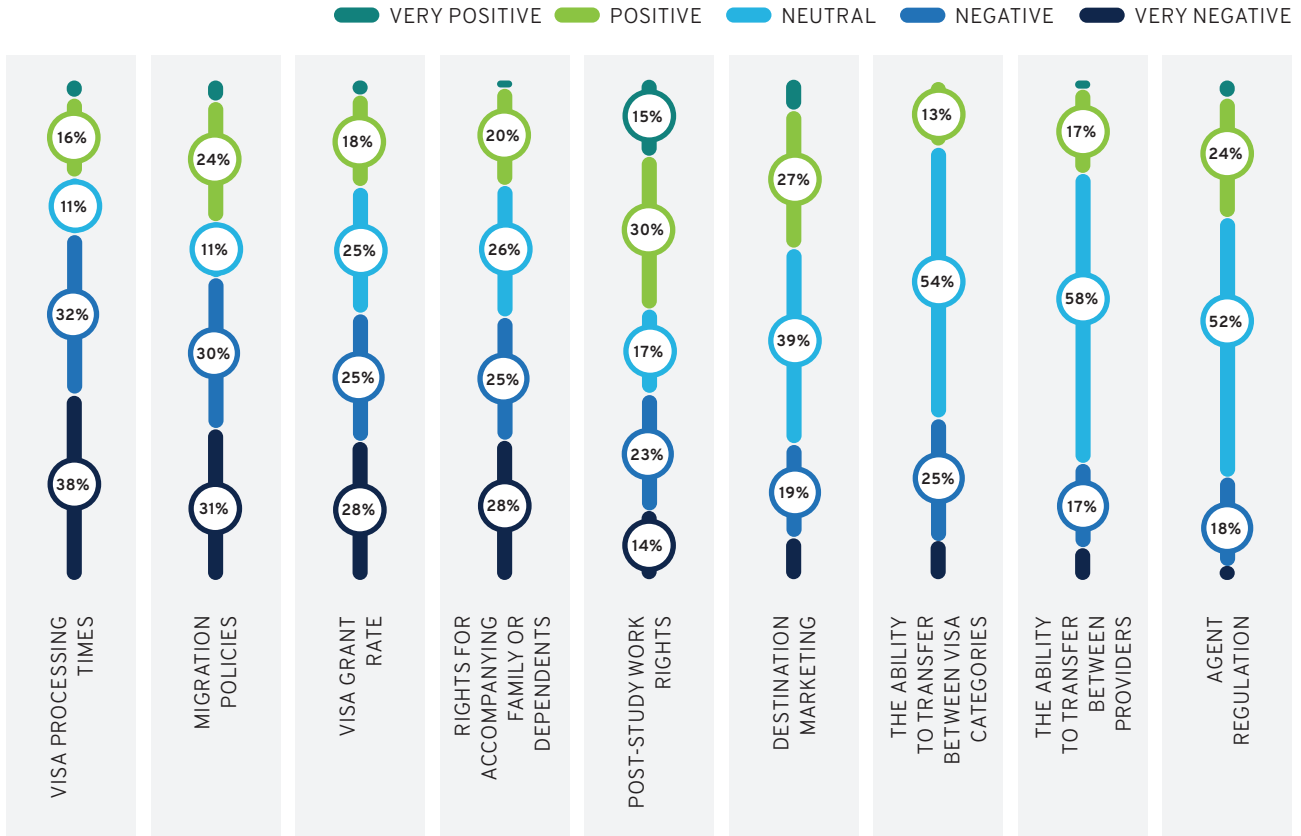
Indeed, global international student mobility is expected to continue growing on the back of economic and demographic factors. As one leader noted, “Global mobility continues regardless of individual country actions”. The Navitas Global Student Flows Model forecasts that there will be 8.5 million international students in 2030, up from 6.4 million in 2021, representing a 3.2 per cent compound annual growth rate. While this rate is lower than that of the first two decades of the twenty-first century, it still represents significant growth.

[W]ith the looming disruption of international student mobility, and the urgent need for national governments to address domestic economic and social challenges, these global-local tensions are likely to be amplified in the coming years.

Eric Knight, Andrew Jones, and Meric Gertler (2020), ‘The public university and the retreat from globalisation: An economic geography perspective on managing local-global tensions in international higher education’

15 Government policy impact on international student recruitment

What impact do the following areas of government policy have in supporting or restraining your international student recruitment ambitions?



76% of respondents feel changes in agent regulation times will have a positive or very positive impact.

Transition Conciliation



After 40 years of international education governed by free markets and open movement of students, we are now seeing greater government management and control of student flows.

In this new 'Managed Era', universities will move beyond rapid, volume-driven internationalisation and adopt a more nuanced, targeted, and integrated approach. During this transitional period, universities must adapt and refine their strategies amid mounting volatility, policy shifts, and emerging risks to preserve momentum.

In our experience, to navigate this changing landscape universities should consider the following strategic actions:

Pay closer attention to student acquisition costs.

Rising acquisition costs have resulted in increasingly thin margins in international recruitment. In some cases, universities we have worked with have seen margins all but vanish as they have pushed into unfamiliar markets and adopted increasingly aggressive discounting practices. The problem is that too few institutions understand their acquisition costs at a level of detail that can guide better decision-making. We suspect that this will change rapidly if current conditions persist. Leveraging digital tools and platforms can significantly reduce recruitment costs and enhance the overall student experience and lead to better conversion rates.

Invest more in student retention.

Since the start of the decade, we have seen growing problems with international student non-continuation. This is due to both pandemic learning loss, resulting in lower student readiness, and a shift to recruitment in more price-sensitive markets amidst rapid inflation in living costs in the study destinations. In a managed market, investment into early identification and intervention processes and technologies may prove more beneficial than financial and time investment in the recruitment of new students.

Reassess core skills for internationalisation teams.

As universities seek to reverse thinning margins on recruitment and manage rising visa compliance risks, they will require more specialised skillsets, including in marketing, conversion management, and market intelligence. For some, this will mean a rethink of how they deliver core recruitment functions, with exploration of new business models with greater emphasis on continuous in-country presence and business analytics skills at home.

Explore offshore opportunities, but with caution.

Transnational education is as hot a topic as ever, and rightfully so: the demand is well established and growing. Yet the outcomes of the ventures that emerged in the last decade should give institutions pause. Many have struggled to reach financial viability through either tuition fees or mobility to their home campuses. While there are also plenty of examples of success, most required long timelines to develop. Offshore ventures can be an important component in a university's strategic footprint, but they are typically a poor reaction to revenue shortfalls. Instead, institutions should see offshore operations as an investment in diversifying student cohorts, building reputation, and enhancing local capacity. Due to the substantial timeframes typically needed to operate offshore at scale, universities must take a long-term view of the market, investing in opportunities that will yield payoffs over time.

As one participant told us, their main fear was that "universities will continue to operate as they are now [...] we must change and we need to not just listen to the voices that want the status quo and be future-focused."

Despite the challenges and increasing pessimism about the new era, significant growth not only remains possible, but probable, though perhaps not at the rates we have seen in previous decades.

Indeed, if existing source country market share remains the same, all current major destination countries—the US, the UK, Australia, and Canada—will continue to experience growth in international student flows moving forward. While not all universities will benefit equally, especially if international students continue to be more discriminating consumers, the sector as a whole will continue to see growth. This is significant and worth celebrating. As is the fact that, as one participant noted, there remains a sustained and “continued commitment internationally to create an abundance of internationalisation opportunities for students worldwide.” However, competition is likely to increase over the coming years, making it crucial to manage expectations about what can realistically be achieved under the new policy settings. The past two decades are over, but the future still holds immense potential.

Appendix

About the survey participants

This survey was sent to senior operational and strategic leaders with responsibilities for international education and global engagement working in institutions across Australia, Canada, and the UK between September and October 2024. Leaders were identified through publicly available data, and for the institutions included, we contacted the specialist leaders of their international portfolios.

The subsection of institutions contacted for the survey included every institution ranked within the QS top 500 in those three areas. For the institutions contacted from outside the QS top 500 these were selected based on our targeting larger public universities with some engagement in international education, which had specialist leaders for international portfolios.

Respondents by country

2022				
32%	24%	28%	16%	
AU	UK	CA	NZ	
2024				
31%	35%	16%	8%	10%
AU	UK	CA	NZ	OTHER

Respondents by rank

2022					
11%	13%	15%	45%	16%	
QS	101-	251-	500+	OTHER	
1-100	250	500			
2024					
15%	19%	21%	15%	28%	
QS	101-	251-	500+	OTHER	
1-100	250	500			

Number of universities by rank and country

	QS 1-100	QS 101-200	QS 200-400	QS 400+	UNKNOWN
AU	68%	13%	9%	5%	2%
UK	52%	22%	7%	6%	5%
CA	32%	28%	7%	12%	1%
NZ	49%	26%	11%	2%	7%
OTHER	29%	41%	4%	4%	1%

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About Nous

Nous Group is an international management consultancy working with clients across Australasia, North America, and the United Kingdom. We are committed to partnering with higher education institutions to solve strategic challenges, drive performance and build capability so they can deliver on their mission.

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About Navitas

We work with universities, industry partners, and governments to transform lives through education. From pre-university and pathway programs to postgraduate and degree programs, English language and vocational training, we provide numerous study options across our global network of colleges and campuses to 50,000 aspirational learners each year. Our success is underpinned by our unparalleled international network and peerless commitment to student experience and outcomes. Our passion drives us to discover new teaching and learning models and technology to improve education, both now and in the future.

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About The PIE

The PIE is a trusted, leading voice in the international education sector, connecting the professionals, institutions and businesses that support hundreds of thousands of people who choose to study with an international provider each year.

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