How Is COVID-19 Impacting International Higher Education in the United States?

A WES Survey of Prospective Students and U.S. Higher Education Professionals
World Education Services | July 2020
Contents

Part I: Executive Summary ........................................................................................................ 2
Part II: Profile of Respondents .............................................................................................. 5
Part III: Results ....................................................................................................................... 13
Part IV: Appendix .................................................................................................................. 29
Part I: Executive Summary
World Education Services (WES) is the leading provider of credential evaluation services in the United States and Canada. Each year, WES provides hundreds of thousands of international students, immigrants, and refugees with needed assessments of their academic achievement. These verified assessments enable internationally educated individuals to pursue and achieve their academic and professional goals.

In April 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic intensified, WES surveyed prospective international and immigrant students (hereafter referred to simply as "international students") and higher education professionals to understand how the novel coronavirus had so far affected international higher education in the United States. This report details the survey results of 615 prospective international students and 199 higher education professionals.
Most prospective international students say they are still interested in studying in the U.S.

International students are considering multiple contingency options for their education, including postponing their enrollment in the U.S., studying in their home countries, and pursuing their education in a different country abroad. However, the majority are still interested in studying in the U.S. Sixty-seven percent of prospective international students said the pandemic has had no impact on their interest in studying in the U.S. And while 20% of prospective students are less interested, 13% are more interested in a U.S. education.

Nearly a third of prospective international students would not enroll if courses were only offered online for Fall 2020.

More than one in three (38%) prospective international students say they would still enroll at a U.S. institution if courses were only offered online this fall. However, 32% say they would not enroll, and 30% of students remain unsure. Meanwhile, almost a third (31%) of higher education professionals predict that remote learning will continue for Fall 2020. Conversely, 30% of professionals think classes will resume in person, and more than one in four (39%) are unsure. However, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement announced July 6 that international students would not be permitted to take all their classes online and remain in the U.S. The Trump administration retracted the announcement on July 14, after swift backlash. It is unclear the extent to which such a policy, even if rescinded, could impact student decision-making.

More than half of higher education professionals predict that institutions will make changes to bolster enrollments.

Higher education professionals predict that, over the next two academic years, institutions are likely to try and attract international students by offering more flexible admissions deadlines (60%) and by making some or all standardized tests optional (54%).

About half of prospective international students expect COVID-19 to negatively impact Curricular Practical Training (CPT) and Optional Practical Training (OPT).

More than half of international students predict that the pandemic will have a negative effect on CPT (53%), and just under half (48%) expect the same for OPT.
Part II:

Profile of Respondents
Part II: Profile of Respondents

International and Immigrant Students
Snapshot of WES U.S. Applicants

Most individuals who apply for a WES credential evaluation for use in the U.S. plan to use it for educational purposes. Others use their reports for employment, licensure, immigration, or other purposes.

- 85% of applicants used their evaluation for education
- 7% - Employment
- 6% - Licensing
- 1% - Immigration
- 54% reside outside of the U.S.
- 46% reside inside of the U.S.

Highest Level of Education

- 71% - Undergraduate
- 20% - Graduate
- 5% - Associate
- 2% - Doctorate
- 2% - Secondary
Stage in Application Process to Attend a U.S. Higher Education Institution

The majority of prospective students who responded to our survey had already received an admissions decision or sent in their deposit. Another 33% planned to apply or were awaiting a response to their application at the time of our survey.

The survey included both international and immigrant students. Hereafter, we will refer to this group simply as “international students.”

Note: Those currently enrolled at a U.S. institution were disqualified from the survey. Those not planning to study in the U.S. were included in the analysis.
Part II: Profile of Respondents | International Students

**Gender of Respondents**

- Male: 43%
- Female: 57%

**Top 10 Countries of Residence**

- United States: 14%
- China: 19%
- India: 20%
- Nigeria: 8%
- Ghana: 3%
- Taiwan: 3%
- Korea: 3%
- Canada: 2%
- Bangladesh: 2%
- Japan: 1%
- Other: 24%

Note: Gender data are drawn from linked WES data. Gender data are missing for 28 respondents.
Part II: Profile of Respondents

Higher Education Professionals
Part II: Profile of Respondents | Higher Education Professionals

Higher Education Professionals

More than half of the higher education professionals who responded to our survey are responsible for international admissions, marketing, or recruitment. An additional 17% work in international student and/or scholar services.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International Admissions, Marketing, or Recruitment</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Student and/or Scholar Services</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Credential Evaluation</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Institutional Linkages/Partnerships</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Part II: Profile of Respondents | Higher Education Professionals

**Total Student Enrollment**
- <3,000: 27%
- 3,000–9,999: 29%
- 10,000–19,999: 18%
- 20,000–30,000: 11%
- >30,000: 16%

**Funding Structure**
- Private for-profit: 4%
- Private non-profit: 43%
- Public: 53%

**Carnegie Classification**
- Doctoral University: 49%
- Master’s College or University: 27%
- Baccalaureate College: 13%
- Associate College: 7%
- Special Focus Institution: 5%
Part III:

Results
Part III: Results

Concerns and Impact on International Student Enrollment
How Will COVID-19 Affect Fall 2020 Enrollment?

Two-thirds of prospective international students to the U.S. say the COVID-19 pandemic has had no impact on their interest in studying in the U.S.; however, 20% are less interested.

The majority of international education professionals at U.S. higher education institutions expect declining international student enrollment at their institutions for the coming academic year.

Note: "Not applicable" responses were excluded from analysis. Percentages have been recalculated to reflect this change.
Concerns About CPT and OPT

About half of prospective international students expect COVID-19 to negatively impact CPT and OPT. Likewise, almost a third of higher education professionals are extremely concerned that employers will be less willing to hire international students on CPT, OPT, or Academic Training.

Prospective International Students:
Expectation of COVID-19’s Impact on CPT and OPT

- Positively: 13%
- No impact: 23%
- I’m not sure: 11%
- Negatively: 53%

Higher Education Professionals:
Level of Concern about Employers Hiring International Students on CPT/OPT for Academic Year 2020/21

- Not at all: 8%
- Slightly: 19%
- Moderately: 27%
- Extremely: 31%
- I’m not sure: 14%

Note: “Positively” is a combination of “Positively” and “Very Positively.” “Negatively” is a combination of “Negatively” and “Very Negatively.” “Not applicable” responses were excluded from analysis. Percentages have been recalculated to reflect this change.
Many students that will graduate this May left the U.S. (following U.S. and home country directives) and will not be able to apply for post-completion Optional Practical Training, and [are] therefore ending their professional development tied to their academic career earlier than expected.”

HEI Professional
HEI Professionals: Concerns About Visa and Travel Challenges

Seventy percent of higher education professionals are extremely concerned that new international students may not be able to get a visa to study in the U.S.

Additionally, 64% are worried that travel restrictions will impede international student movement.

New international students may not be able to get a visa to study in the U.S.
- Not at all concerned: 1%
- Slightly concerned: 8%
- Moderately concerned: 19%
- Extremely concerned: 70%
- I’m not sure: 3%

Current international students may not be able to maintain compliance with U.S. government policies.
- Not at all concerned: 6%
- Slightly concerned: 26%
- Moderately concerned: 31%
- Extremely concerned: 29%
- I’m not sure: 8%

Travel restrictions may impede international student movement.
- Not at all concerned: 9%
- Slightly concerned: 24%
- Moderately concerned: 24%
- Extremely concerned: 64%
- I’m not sure: 4%

Note: “Not applicable” responses were excluded from analysis. Percentages have been recalculated to reflect this change.
Concerns About the Financial Impact of COVID-19

More than a third of professionals are extremely concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on their institution’s budget for employing staff and faculty (37%), the overall financial health of their institution (35%), and the financial health of their office or department specifically (35%).
Part III: Results | Concerns and Impact on International Student Enrollment

Expectations Regarding Impact on Personal Finances and the Openness of U.S. Society

Four in ten (43%) prospective international students expect COVID-19 to negatively impact their ability to afford studying in the U.S.

Half of all prospective international students expect the pandemic to negatively impact the openness of U.S. society to international students.

Note: “Positively” is a combination of “Positively” and “Very Positively.” “Negatively” is a combination of “Negatively” and “Very Negatively.” “Not applicable” responses were excluded from analysis. Percentages have been recalculated to reflect this change.
Prospective Chinese and Indian Students: Interest and Expectations regarding Studying in the U.S.

Prospective international students from China are more likely to say that COVID-19 has made them less interested (41%) in studying in the U.S. They are also more likely (68%) to expect that the pandemic will have a negative impact on the availability of post-graduation work programs.

Those from India are more likely (46%) to expect COVID-19 to negatively impact their ability to afford studying in the U.S.

*Note: “Negative impact” is a combination of those who answered “Negatively” and “Very Negatively.”

Note: “Not applicable” responses were excluded from analysis. Percentages have been recalculated to reflect this change.
Prospective International Students: Actions Being Considered as a Result of COVID-19

Fifty-three percent are considering postponing their enrollment at a U.S. higher education institution.

Far fewer prospective international students are contemplating alternative destination countries (23%), studying in their home countries (20%), or not pursuing higher education at this time (19%).

Note: “Likely” is a combination of “Likely” and “Very Likely.” “Unlikely” is a combination of “Unlikely” and “Very Unlikely.” “Not applicable” responses were excluded from analysis. Percentages have been recalculated to reflect this change.
Part III: Results

International Student Support and the Impact of Online Offerings
HEI Professionals: Projection of Increased Use of Specific Recruitment and Admissions Practices

Over the next two academic years, higher education professionals expect their institution to offer more online courses (85%) and online degree programs (68%).

Most respondents (64%) believe that their institutions will increase efforts to recruit international students already living in the U.S.

Note: Percentages reflect those who answered “Increase slightly” or “Increase significantly.” “Not applicable” responses were excluded from analysis. Percentages have been recalculated to reflect this change. “Backyard recruitment” refers to recruitment of international students already living in the U.S., such as those attending U.S. high schools or community colleges.
### Additional Steps HEIs Are Taking to Support International Students

The most typical supports include providing virtual learning support services such as online tutoring (70%), helping international students access and troubleshoot online learning platforms (67%), and expanding mental health and counseling services (60%).

Only 14% of professionals say their institution is offering partial or full tuition refunds to international students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Providing virtual learning support</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping access and troubleshoot online learning platforms</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expanding mental health and counseling services</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial or full room and board refunds</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergency housing for those unable to find alternate housing</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Designating additional funds for vulnerable groups</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual English language support</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free or reduced-price meals for food-insecure students</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expanding medical and physical health services</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial or full tuition refunds</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiring additional staff</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Respondents could select one or more options. “None of the above” was an exclusive choice.
Thoughts About Online-Only Courses for Fall 2020

Thirty-two percent of international students would not enroll in a U.S. HEI if the courses were only online for Fall 2020. About the same proportion of higher education professionals expect that their institution will continue with remote learning. Nearly four in ten (39%) are unsure.

Prospective International Students: Consideration of Enrollment at a U.S. HEI if the Courses Were Only Offered Online for Fall 2020

- **32%** No
- **38%** Yes
- **30%** I’m not sure

HEI Professionals: Expectation that Their Institution Will Continue Remote Learning in Fall 2020

- **30%** Unlikely
- **31%** Likely
- **39%** I’m not sure

Note: “Likely” is a combination of “Likely” and “Very Likely.” “Unlikely” is a combination of “Unlikely” and “Very Unlikely.” “Not applicable” responses were excluded from analysis. Percentages have been recalculated to reflect this change.
The Trump Administration and Online-Only Courses for International Students

On July 6, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) announced a new policy in which international students attending U.S. institutions with online-only courses in Fall 2020 would not be granted a visa or be allowed to stay in the U.S.\(^*\) There was swift backlash, including lawsuits, from the higher education sector, many states, and others.\(^**\)

As a result, the Trump administration retracted the policy on July 14. However, it is unclear if the administration will attempt a revised version of the policy or issue other restrictions on international students. The volatility surrounding such a policy may impact prospective student decision-making for this fall and beyond, as well as the plans of U.S. colleges and universities.


**Expected Changes in International Admissions and Recruitment Practices Over the Next Two Years**

More than half of higher education professionals think it is likely that their institution will offer more flexible international admissions deadlines (60%) and make some or all standardized tests optional (54%) over the next two academic years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expected Change</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Offering more flexible international admissions deadlines</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making some or all standardized tests optional (such as SAT, GRE, etc.)</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prioritizing recruitment of domestic students over international students</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruiting from a broader set of countries</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outsourcing of international admissions operations currently done in-house</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: “Likely” is a combination of “Likely” and “Very Likely.” “Unlikely,” “Very Unlikely,” “No impact,” and “I’m not sure” are not shown in the graph. “Not applicable” responses were excluded from analysis. Percentages have been recalculated to reflect this change.

*Refers to academic years 2020/21 to 2021/22.
Part IV:

Appendix
Survey Methodology

Sampling method:
- Stratified random sampling
- **Prospective International Students**: U.S. WES applicants with applications submitted and evaluations completed from June 2019 to early April 2020 for education purposes and WES applicant newsletter subscribers. The sample included some temporary residents (not on international student visas) and immigrants, including permanent residents, residing in the U.S.
- **Higher Education Professionals**: WENR subscribers, WES Training subscribers, Access WES users in the U.S., and other WES institutional clients.

Data collection period:
April 15, 2020 – April 21, 2020

Reporting:
- Only complete and qualified responses were included in the analysis. Students currently enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions and U.S. citizens were disqualified from the survey.
- Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.
- For some questions, certain responses (such as “Not applicable”) were removed from the analysis and reporting. These are noted in each case.

Number of questions:
- **Prospective International Student Survey**: 10
- **Higher Education Professional Survey**: 19
### Survey Metrics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Prospective International Student Survey</th>
<th>Higher Education Professional Survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Invitations</td>
<td>14,537</td>
<td>7,586</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Responses Collected</td>
<td>921</td>
<td>343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response Rate</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Complete Responses</td>
<td>778</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completion Rate</td>
<td>84.5%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete and Qualified Responses</td>
<td>615</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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World Education Services is a non-profit social enterprise whose mission is to foster the integration of internationally educated persons into academic and professional settings.

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