

# Do International Students Benefit from Their US Study-Abroad Experience?

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The reasons why international students study abroad vary widely. Traditionally, the main drivers were access to high-quality academic programs overseas or limited higher education opportunities at home. Anglophone host destinations also provided an opportunity to master English, a skill widely perceived as critical to future prosperity.

However, what propels international students to look beyond national borders has shifted amid a globalized economy increasingly disrupted by technology. Certainly, the original influencing factors remain. But what students want from their study-abroad experiences has become more tangible and practical in nature, with expanded employment opportunities now number one.

There is much discussion about skills that students gain by studying overseas: critical thinking ability and creativity, among other so-called “soft skills,” in addition to harder tech skills from STEM-related academic programs. But, to a large degree, how the study abroad experience enhances employability remains mostly anecdotal. So, with students demanding concrete evidence of the benefits of an overseas education, what can the United States offer when recruiting new prospects?

## Perceived as More Welcoming, But That Alone Is Not Enough

The recent Open Doors data from the Institute of International Education indicated a 15 percent drop in international student enrollments in the United States in the academic year 2020–2021, with the total number falling below one million for the first time since 2016. Undoubtedly, the pandemic’s impact is largely behind the fall. However, perceptions that the Trump administration was unwelcoming to international students, together with personal safety concerns stemming from social turmoil, also contributed to dampening interest.

The election of a new president, widely viewed as friendlier to the international community, has infused the market with much-needed optimism. Indeed, in July of 2021, a landmark “renewed US [commitment](#)” made by the Departments of State and Education to promote the United States as a study destination for international students was

### Abstract

Increasingly, international students pursue study abroad to gain skills that will enhance their employment prospects upon graduation. Host destinations such as the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada not only offer pathways connecting education to a professional future, but data that quantifies how international graduates have benefited from their overseas study experiences. The United States comes up short in both those areas. Can it catch up?

both unexpected and wholly welcomed. The Biden administration's clarion bell of support alleviated fears that the Optional Practical Training (OPT) scheme, allowing international graduates to work for at least one year in the United States after graduation, would be rescinded.

However, a reprieve in sentiment alone is not enough. The United States still lacks an international education policy, like those of competitor countries such as Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Not only do those destinations offer clearer pathways to work opportunities and a professional future, they publicize graduate outcomes to underscore their universities' recruitment strategies. With technology disrupting industries across the spectrum and the workforce growing increasingly competitive as a result, there is an intensified need to map the career pathways of international students who graduate from US institutions. Adding to the pressure to do so is a proliferation of study abroad options in countries like Germany, Japan, and the Netherlands, which are cheaper and perceived to be safer.

### The Demand for Data-Based Outcomes to Support Recruitment Strategies

In *Career Pathways for International Students*, a [research paper](#) that I authored for the American Council on Education, I examined how little is understood about how international graduates of US universities actually fare in the job market. We simply do not know if their career trajectories are altered as a result of their study-abroad experiences. Universities largely fail to track their international graduates, either in the United States, their home countries, or elsewhere, in the same manner that they follow domestic alumni.

The reasons for the data shortfall are numerous. According to a survey of 100 universities conducted by Academic Assembly and the marketing firm Intead, 65 percent of respondents said that they did not dedicate staff time to track international alumni. Insufficient time and budgets and a dearth of data management systems were among the reasons given.

This contrasts with the United Kingdom, where efforts are being made to quantify the impact of the UK study-abroad experience. For example, on behalf of Universities UK International, the consulting firm iGraduate published a survey-based research report, *International Graduate Outcomes 2019*, which tracked the career outcomes of a large number of international students who had studied in the United Kingdom. The report revealed, among other findings, that 69 percent of respondents said that they progressed more quickly in their careers than peers who had studied elsewhere; 82 percent said that the UK degree was worth the investment; and 83 percent said that their degree helped them get their first job.

### Where the United States Comes up Short, And What Is at Stake

The inability to optimally align international graduate outcomes with poststudy work and immigration policies keeps the United States well behind competitor countries that draw students with neatly packaged offers that address aspirations beyond education. For example, Canada's national strategy to attract international students is underpinned with pathways, not only to jobs, but to citizenship. The result? Between 2010 and 2017, there was a [119 percent increase](#) in the number of international students studying in Canada.

Further, universities are being increasingly viewed as gateways to global talent. A significant number of international students pursue STEM and related subjects at universities in the United States and elsewhere, and many have gone on to establish and lead tech companies. As technology continues to disrupt industries, demand for tech talent has increased accordingly. So, host countries originally eager to attract international students simply to capture tuition revenue increasingly value what these graduates can offer as members of their workforce.

There is a lot at stake. Incorporating international talent into a country's workforce, especially in the fields of high tech and artificial intelligence, is key to maintaining global competitiveness. Tech and science jobs in the United States outnumbered qualified workers by three million as of 2016, and by 2030, a global shortage of over 85 million tech workers is expected, representing USD 8.5 trillion in lost annual revenue.

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### What the United States Needs to Do to Stay Competitive

Despite the challenges, there are signs of promise. Surveys conducted by the American Physical Society in 2019 indicate that federal policies can reverse the downward trend, showing that making the F-1 visa “dual intent” and providing a clear path to a green card for international students who earn advanced STEM degrees from US institutions will help restore the United States as a competitive host destination.

It would be useful for a US-specific study to be undertaken to gather robust data from US universities. This could be done through a survey of current international students and recent alumni, to identify connections between overseas study and employability. Insights gained by such research would enable universities to integrate graduate employability into institutional internationalization and recruitment strategies. It may be trickier to measure the economic and innovative contributions of international graduates, but case studies of careers of international graduates, mapping their career trajectories and the levels of influence that they command, could provide much-needed data.

Overall, even with the lack of US data, it is fair to conclude that simply living and studying overseas requires students to extend themselves in a manner that they would not in their home countries. To build upon that foundation with quantifiable feedback from international students about how exactly the US study-abroad experience benefited them would be powerful. And while we assume that increased employability is the desired outcome, can we be sure there are no others? To better understand whether expectations are being met would ensure that we are equipped to address the evolving needs of students in an increasingly volatile world. ▲

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