

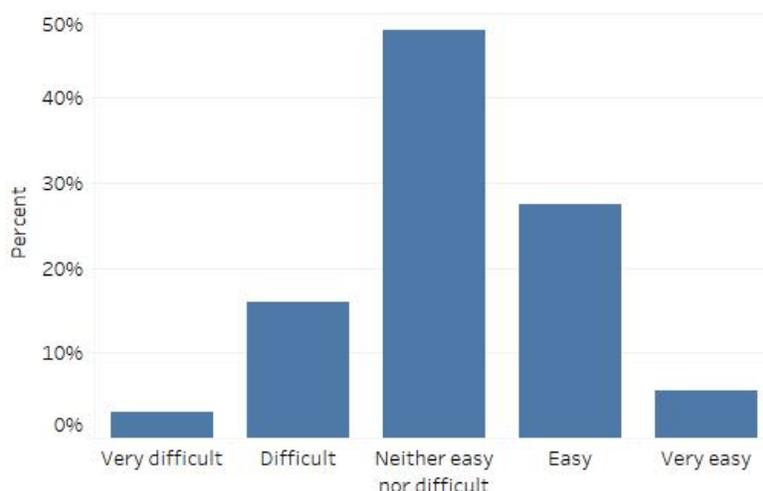
2017 Results: International Students

In September 2017, Rackham administered the Michigan Doctoral Experience Study to first-year PhD students. International students were asked to rate their ease of transitioning to the U.S. on a scale of 1 (very difficult) to 5 (very easy). Additionally, they were asked the following open-ended question: *“What, if anything, could have been done to make your transition easier?”*

How Was the Transition to the United States?

The vast majority of international students rated their transition to the US as being either a neutral, easy, or very easy experience (see Figure 1). Overall, only 19% of students rated their transition as difficult or very difficult. However, additional analyses (not shown) indicate students from lower-income backgrounds and students in the Humanities and the Arts tend to rate their transition ease as more difficult than students from higher-income backgrounds and students in the Physical Sciences and Engineering.

Figure 1. Transition Ease for New International PhD Students at UM



Transition Challenges

In answering the open-ended question, respondents mentioned areas in which their transition was especially challenging, as well as practices that UM could implement to improve international students’ transition experience. Table 1 presents the predominant themes that emerged from these responses.

Table 1. Main Areas in Which the Transition to the U.S. is Challenging

Transition issue	Percent reporting
Sense of isolation	41
Logistics and bureaucracy	22
Finances	13
Lack of information	5

Note. Percent reporting refers to the proportion of respondents mentioning a given transition issue out of all respondents who answered the open-ended question on transitioning to the US (N=78)

The most common issue mentioned by international students was a sense of isolation (41%). This isolation was due to language barriers, cultural differences, and insufficient support networks. Twenty-six percent of students discussed the logistics related to securing visas, housing, and employment. To a lesser extent, respondents were also concerned about their finances and a lack of information about American and university practices, including how taxes worked and the timing of their first paycheck.

How Could the Transition be Easier?

Students offered three main suggestions for how the university could better help them transition to the U.S. The common theme across the suggestions is that UM could better support international students by helping them connect to others and learn more about American culture and daily life *before* starting their doctoral programs.

Suggestion 1: Provide mentors. Mentors could be advanced graduate students or staff who have navigated the same issues faced by incoming international doctoral students. As one student suggested:

“It would be great if I could be assigned an advisor (either peer or non-peer would work) who would check in on me regularly...It was difficult for international students to learn how things in the US work (e.g. resources in the school/department, how to take buses, do laundry, buy groceries, order food in restaurants, go to doctors etc.) It would be good to have someone you could feel comfortable asking questions about these.”

Suggestion 2: Facilitate connections. Students suggested that the university could connect incoming students with peers from their home country or from their graduate program:

“Providing more opportunities to build community/ make friends with other international students and students within the cohort/program. It would have been nice if we were able to meet them in a more casual setting first few times before diving into the rigorous academic program/orientations.”

Suggestion 3: Offer informational programming. Related to isolation, another suggestion was for the university to offer workshops or orientations on American culture and language.

“Students may have culture shock which makes it difficult to engage with others or understand different mindsets/lifestyles. Maybe have an orientation on American culture to help international students understand the people and culture better.”

In sum, incoming international PhD students are seeking additional guidance in navigating American culture and are looking for ways to make meaningful connections with peers. Rackham can work with university programs and staff to identify resources that can help facilitate students' transition to the U.S. in these ways.