



Fall 2017- Fall 2019 Results: International Students

In September 2019, Rackham administered the Michigan Doctoral Experience Study (MDES) to entering Ph.D. students for the third year since Fall 2017. One question asked international students specifically to rate their transition to the United States on a scale of 1 (very difficult) to 5 (very easy). Additionally, students were asked to elaborate on anything that could have been done to ease their transition.

A total of 738 international students rated their ease of transitioning to the U.S. (263, 209, and 266 students for 2017, 2018, and 2019, respectively). These cohorts exhibit similar response patterns and thus are pooled together in this analysis. The analysis indicates that 19% of students have significant difficulties making a transition (responded very difficult or difficult to the question). The predominant challenges these students faced are feelings of isolation, navigating administrative bureaucracy, and financial concerns. To address these concerns, many students suggested providing mentors, facilitating connections, and offering more information regarding American culture and logistics when settling in.

Transitioning to the United States

The majority of international students rated their transition to the U.S. as being either a neutral, easy, or very easy experience (see Figure 1). There are, however, an additional set of categories that help contextualize these findings. There is a relationship between reported financial resources and transition difficulties. Students in the low and low-medium income quartiles are more likely to experience a very difficult or difficult transition than those in the high and medium-high quartiles (Figure 2). In addition, there appear to be disciplinary differences in how international students reporting transitioning into their doctoral work. Students in the Social Sciences and the Humanities rate their transition as much more difficult than those in Physical Sciences and Engineering (Figure 3).

Figure 1. Transition Ease for New International Ph.D. Students (n=738)

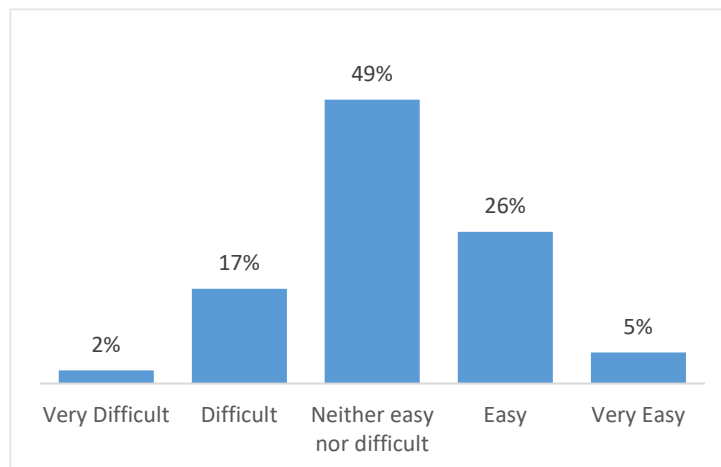


Figure 2. Transition Ease for New International Ph.D. Students by Income Quartile

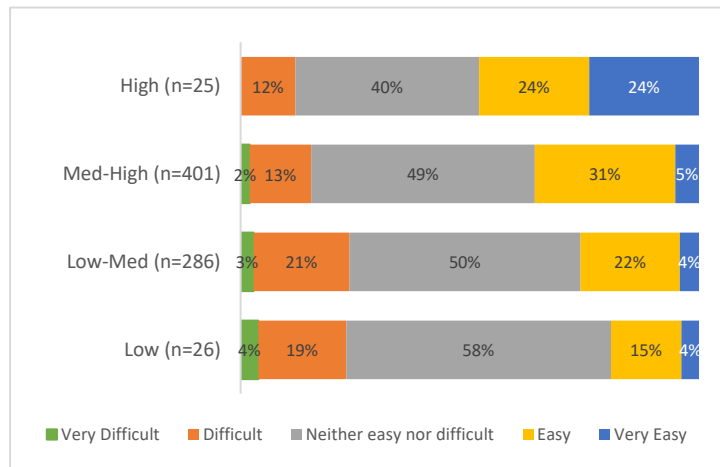
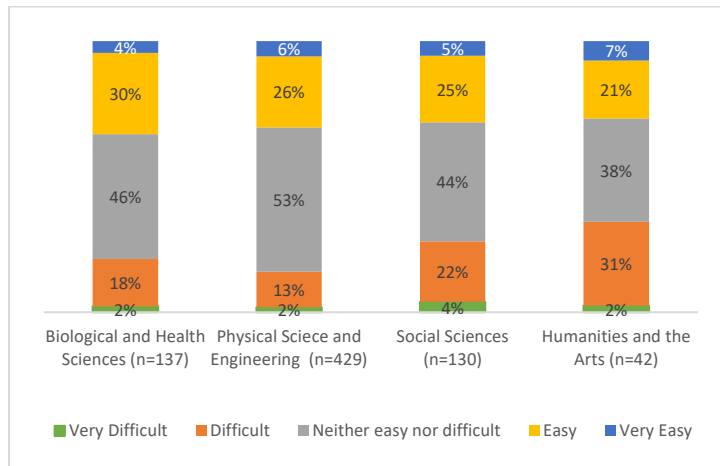


Figure 3. Transition Ease for New International Ph.D. Students by Division



International Students Respondents: Transition Challenges

In addition to the ratings provided by students, an open-ended question was posted prompting students to provide feedback on ideas for making their transition easier. As shown in Table 1, the most common concerns mentioned by international students was a sense of isolation (30%), with many referencing language barriers, cultural differences, and insufficient support networks. Nineteen percent of students noted logistical issues securing visas, transportation, employment, and getting settled into a new place. Twelve percent made references to housing, needing more information about Ann Arbor’s unique housing market, and assistance in securing housing. Fifteen percent mentioned financial issues which included taxes, the timing of their first paycheck, and travel costs. In addition, six percent of respondents mentioned not having adequate information regarding the campus or departments.

Improving Transitions for International Students

Students offered several suggestions for how the university could better support international students in their transitions to the U.S. Among the suggestions, as shown in Table 1, thirteen percent of students mentioned that the university could offer workshops or orientations on American culture, language, and logistics about to settle in. They also suggested that the university could connect incoming students with peers from their home country or from

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their own graduate program (9%) and that the university could connect them to faculty, peer or staff mentors who have navigated the same issues faced by incoming international doctoral students (5%).

Table 1. International Student Comments: Challenges Transitioning and Suggestions

Themes	%	Quotes
Challenges Transitioning		
Sense of isolation	30	My transition would have been easier if I had more American friends, friends who genuinely cared for me.
Logistics and bureaucracy	19	To approve a 5-year (time period on I-20) visa rather than a 1 year visa. If I had a US driving license. That would definitely help the transition!
Financial	15	If the stipend could be disbursed within the first week of school starting, that would help because rent and other payments are due at the start of the month but our stipend won't come in until the third week of the month so that's a problem.
Housing information/support	12	As a prospective student, I had little information about on campus housing for graduate students with families.
Lack of information	6	A bit more of information about the transition process. For example, I arrived just one week before the beginning of the classes. It was difficult to me being alone start the coursework and set up a bank account, get a new phone number, etc. Maybe some advice about coming here early and a minimum funding would be great.
Faculty support	2	Studying in another language (homework, reading papers) takes much more time for international students at the beginning, and we need to deal with many different things to settle in a new country that faculty members may not know. But we don't want to express our hardships to our advisors fully.
Suggestions		
Offer informational programming	13	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. I think that check-in sessions in early Aug would be more helpful for international families to get a driver's license, buy a car, enroll a kid in a school.
Facilitate connections	9	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.
Provide mentors	5	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.
N	223	

Note: Answers to the question “What, if anything, could have been done to make your transition easier?” MDES 2017, 2018, 2019.