

Fall 2017- Fall 2020 Results: International Students

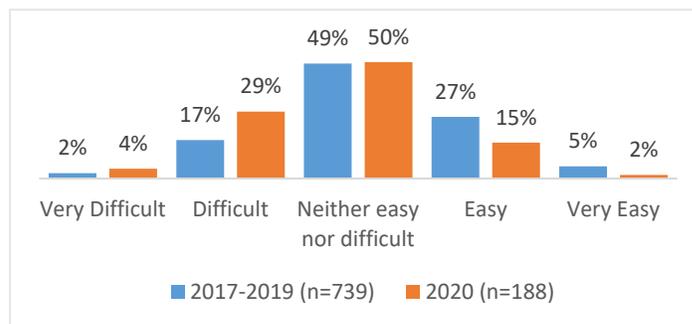
In September 2020, Rackham administered the Michigan Doctoral Experience Study (MDES) to entering Ph.D. students for the fourth year since Fall 2017. One question asked international students specifically to rate their transition to the United States on a scale of 1 (very difficult) to 5 (very easy). Additionally, students were asked to elaborate on anything that could have been done to ease their transition. Due to COVID-19 and the restrictions on movement across countries in 2020, a question that asked students whether they were living in or around Ann Arbor during Fall 2020 was added to the survey.

A total of 927 international students rated their ease of transitioning to the U.S. (263, 209, 266, and 187 students for 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020 respectively). The 2017 to 2019 cohorts exhibit similar response patterns and thus are pooled together in this analysis. However, the 2020 cohort exhibit a slightly different pattern, and therefore, data for this cohort are presented separately. The analysis indicates that, for the 2017-2019 cohorts, 19% of students have significant difficulties making a transition (responded very difficult or difficult to the question). In contrast, 33% of students in 2020 mentioned having difficulties making the transition. Of those that rated their ease of transition to the U.S., 34% mentioned that they were not living in or around Ann Arbor in Fall 2020.¹ The predominant challenges these students faced are feelings of isolation, navigating administrative bureaucracy, and financial concerns. In 2020, the U.S. unfriendly immigration policies were also mentioned as a challenge. 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 either a neutral, easy, or very easy experience (see Figure 1). There are, however, an additional set of categories that help contextualize these findings. For the 2017-2019 cohorts, 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, 2017-2019). However, this relationship is not found in the 2020 cohort (Figure 2, 2020). 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, 2017-2019). This relationship is not found in the 2020 cohort (Figure 3, 2020).

Figure 1. Transition Ease for New International Ph.D. Students



¹ There is no statistical difference in the transition to the U.S. evaluation between those that move to Ann Arbor and those that delayed their transition ($\chi^2(4)=1.52, p=0.82$).

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

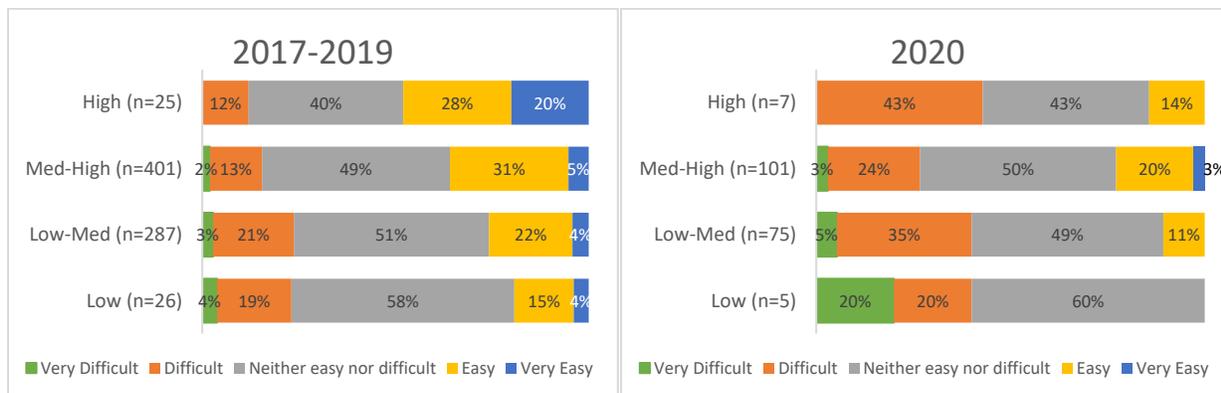
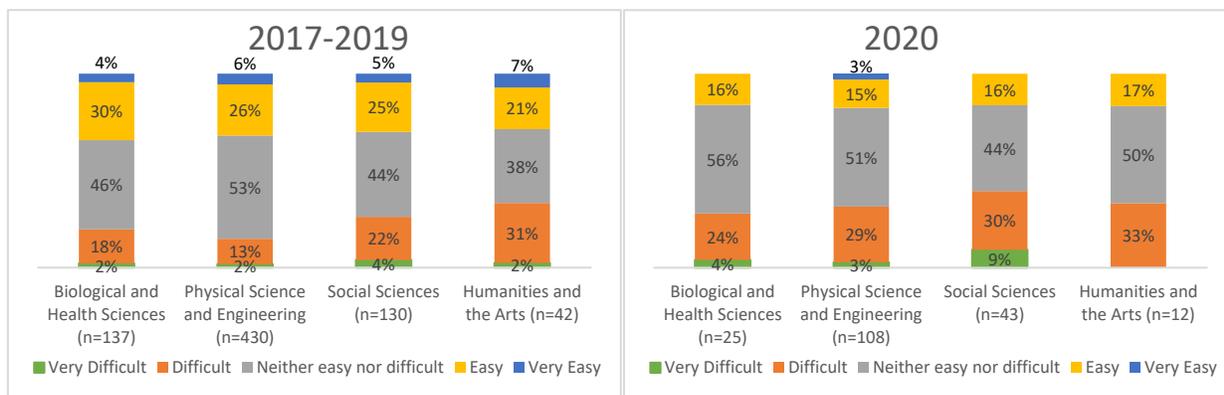


Figure 3. Transition Ease for New International Ph.D. Students by Division



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. Although most of the topics mentioned by students over the years under study are similar, there are differences in the proportion of students that mentioned those topics in 2020 compared to previous years. As shown in Table 1, in 2017-2019, the three most common concerns mentioned by international students were: a sense of isolation (30%), with many referencing language barriers, cultural differences, and insufficient support networks; logistical and bureaucracy issues (19%), which include issues regarding securing visas, transportation, employment, and getting settled into a new place; and financial issues (15%) which included taxes, the timing of their first paycheck, and travel costs. In contrast, in 2020, logistic and bureaucracy issues were the most cited challenge in their transition (28%).

Improving Transitions for International Students

Students offered several suggestions for how the university could better support international students in their transitions. As shown in Table 1, there are no substantial differences between the suggestions provided by the students in the different cohorts. Among the most cited suggestions, the students mentioned that the university could offer workshops or orientations on American culture, language, and logistics about settling in. They also suggested that the university could connect incoming students with peers from their home country or their graduate program. Furthermore, many cited that the university could connect them to faculty members, peers, or staff mentors who have navigated the same issues.

Table 1. International Student Comments: Challenges Transitioning and Suggestions

| Themes | % 2017-2019 | % 2020 | Quotes |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|-----------|---|
| Challenges Transitioning | | | |
| Sense of isolation | 30 | 8 | My transition would have been easier if I had more American friends , friends who genuinely cared for me. |
| Logistics and bureaucracy | 19 | 28 | To approve a 5-year (time period on I-20) visa rather than a 1-year visa. If I had a U.S. driving license. That would definitely help the transition! Covid19 constraints were hard. |
| Financial | 15 | 8 | 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. ...provide funding for at least five years of Ph.D. study. |
| Housing information/support | 12 | 8 | As a prospective student, I had little information about on campus housing for graduate students with families. |
| Lack of information | 6 | 5 | 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. |
| Unfriendly policies from the U.S. | | 6 | The increasingly unfriendly policy towards international students has posed mental stress to me . I am concerned if there would be more harsh policies that ultimately impair my educational opportunity during my Ph.D. study. |
| Suggestions | | | |
| Offer informational programming | 13 | 14 | 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 | 8 | 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 | 3 | 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 U.S. 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 . |
| Transition stipend | | 6 | Covering travel costs for some international students whose living standard is low |
| N | 223 | 64 | |

Note: Answers to the question *“What, if anything, could have been done to make your transition easier?”* MDES 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020.