

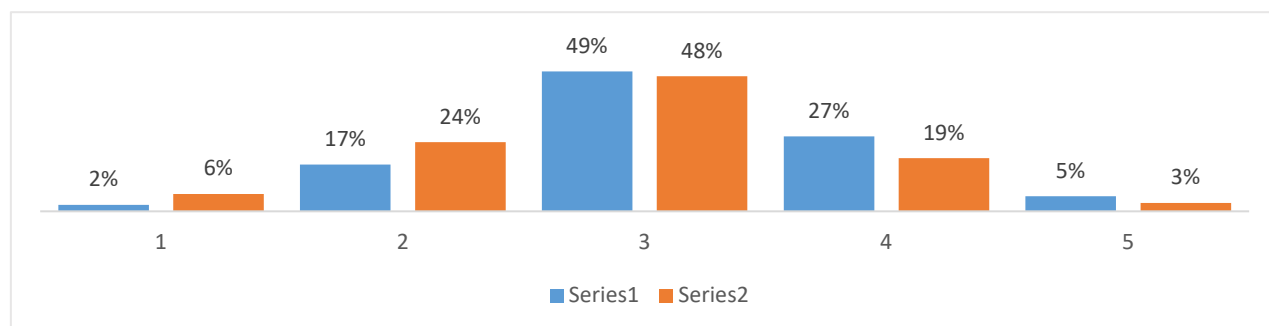
International Student Transition: Fall 2017-Fall 2021

In September 2021, the Michigan Doctoral Experience Study (MDES) was administered to entering Ph.D. students for the fifth 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. This question is only posed to international students as previous concerns about international student transitioning to living in the United States have been posed both locally at the University of Michigan and nationally as a potential issue affecting newly arriving international students.

A total of 1,181 international students rated their ease of transitioning to the U.S. In the data, we observe different response patterns depending on whether the cohorts were pre- or post-COVID-19. Therefore, we pooled together cohorts 2017 to 2019 and cohorts 2020¹ and 2021 for analysis purposes.² The analysis indicates that, for the 2017-2019 cohorts (n=739), 19% of students had significant difficulties making a transition (responded very difficult or difficult to the question). In contrast, 30% of students in 2020-2021 (n=442) mentioned having difficulties making the transition. The predominant challenges these students faced are feelings of isolation, navigating administrative bureaucracy, and financial concerns. To address these concerns, many students suggested facilitating connections, providing a transition stipend, and offering more information regarding American culture and logistics when settling in.

Transitioning to the United States

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



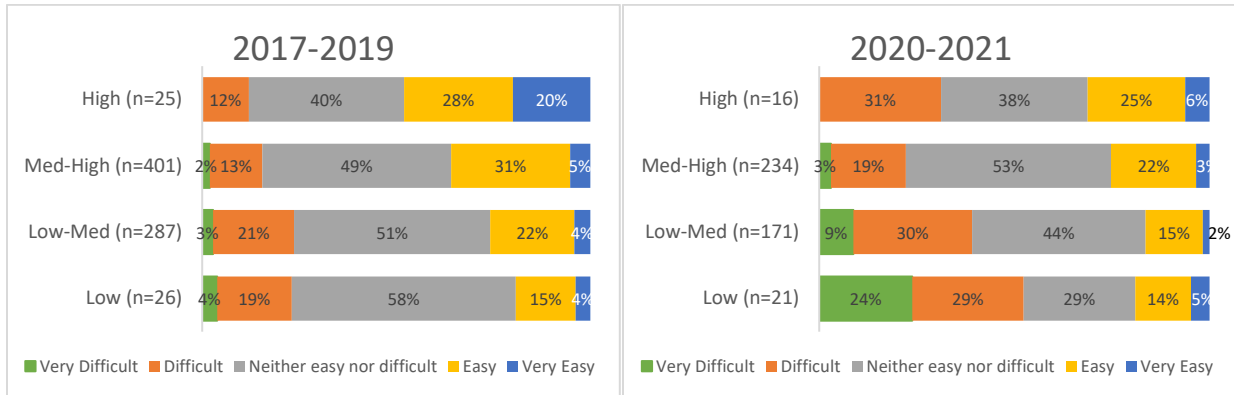
The majority of international students rated their transition to the U.S. as being either a neutral, easy or very easy experience (see Figure 1). There are, however, an additional set of categories that help contextualize these findings. There is a relationship between reported financial resources and 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 report transitioning into their doctoral work. Students in the Social Sciences and the Humanities rate their

¹ 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. 34% of international students that rated their ease of transition to the U.S. were not living in or around Ann Arbor in Fall 2020. 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 ($\chi^2(4)=1.52, p=0.82$).

² Chi-square tests were performed to test the association between year and rating of transition difficulty. No statistical differences at a 95% confident interval were found among the 2017 to 2019 cohorts ($\chi^2(8)=2.55, p=0.96$) and between 2020 and 2021 cohorts ($\chi^2(4)=8.63, p=0.07$). A statistical difference was found between the 2017-2019 and 2020-2021 pooled cohorts ($\chi^2(4)=30.29, p=0.00$).

transition as much more difficult than those in Physical Sciences and Engineering (Figure 3, 2017-2019). However, this relationship is not found in the 2020-2021 cohort (Figure 3, 2020-2021).

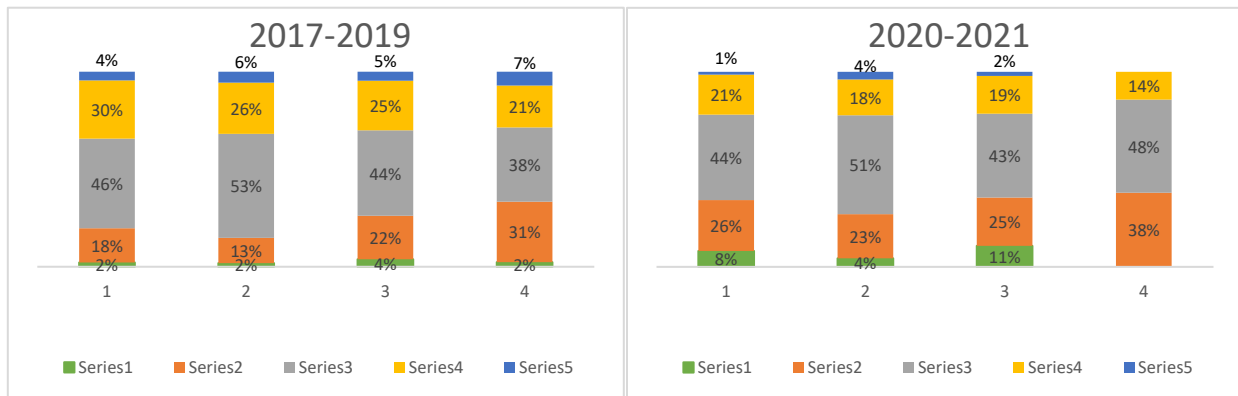
Figure 2. Transition Ease for New International Ph.D. Students by Income Quartile



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 and 2021 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 and 2021, logistic and bureaucracy and financial issues were the most cited challenge in their transition (31% and 12%, respectively).

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



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. In general and 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 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. The only new suggestion in the 2020 and 2021 cohorts is providing a transition stipend to international students to help cover the relocation costs.

Table 1. International Student Comments: Challenges Transitioning and Suggestions

| Themes | % 2017-2019 | % 2020-2021 | Quotes |
|---------------------------------|----------------|----------------|---|
| Challenges Transitioning | | | |
| Sense of isolation | 30 | 6 | 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. Visa, getting accustomed to banking and shopping, buying furniture for rented apartment. ...earlier visa, due to the covid pandemic , my visa appointment was too close to the program start, so I had no time to settle in. Depositing the first month salary earlier. Because we need money to move and settle down but the salary is received at the end of the month , nearly 2 months after international students arrive. Huge problem. |
| Financial | 15 | 12 | ...provide funding for at least five years of PhD study. |
| Housing information/support | 12 | 6 | As a prospective student, I had little information about on campus housing for graduate students with families. 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. |
| Issues with U-M administration | 6 | 5 | ...most people in the administration and surprisingly even at the iCenter don't seem very well informed about the visa and related processes , would really help if the university sets up a dedicated team at the iCenter to help incoming international students navigate the process better, especially as with Covid the situation has become much harder. |
| Suggestions | | | |
| Offer informational programming | 13 | 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 | 6 | Having more programs for international students to get together and get to know each other. Making friends with American students was tough because it was hard to find things we had in common. |
| Provide mentors | 5 | 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. |
| Transition stipend | | 11 | When you come from third world country it is financially difficult Getting travel expense covered also stipend up on arrival for the first month's expense will really be helpful. |
| N | 223 | 127 | |

Note: Answers to the question "What, if anything, could have been done to make your transition easier?" MDES 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021.