

Increasing conversions in international student enrolment



Evidence and operating priorities after the offer



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Purpose and scope

This report examines the path from an academic offer to confirmed enrolment for international students. It covers the United Kingdom, United States, Canada and Australia, with lessons for universities recruiting across borders. The intended readers are recruitment, admissions, finance, international student support and institutional leadership teams.

Research approach

This report synthesises official statistics, government guidance and original research available by its stated evidence date. Sources are numbered in the text and linked at the end. National datasets count different populations and stages; definitions appear beside each comparison. Calculations and Merta recommendations are distinguished from reported results.

This is a selective review of published evidence, not new institutional fieldwork, a systematic review or an evaluation of Merta's products.

Interpretation and use

Findings from one institution or population may not transfer to another. Policy summaries reflect the report date; current official guidance should govern individual cases. Recommendations should be tested against an institution's own applicants, service capacity and outcomes. A cited organisation does not endorse Merta.

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Executive findings

An offer is permission to study, not a settled decision to enrol. International offer holders must still judge whether a course is worth its total cost, obtain funds, satisfy offer conditions, secure immigration permission and housing, and trust that the institution will help when something changes. Universities should treat the interval after offer as a service journey with several decisions, not a sequence of reminders.

The market has become less predictable. OECD reports about 1.9 million new international higher education students across its members in 2024, 13% fewer than in 2023. US Open Doors counted a 7% fall in new international enrolments in fall 2024 even while its wider international student stock grew. These are different measures, but both caution against inferring future intake from total students already enrolled. [1,2]

No single tactic solves every loss. A scholarship can change the price; an ambassador can address belonging or a question about daily life; a visa team can prevent a missed deadline; a faculty conversation can clarify academic fit. Their value depends on the obstacle. The strongest post-admission scholarship study found meaningful recruitment gains for disadvantaged students at one US university, with heterogeneous effects. The evidence for ambassadors is more suggestive than causal. [7,8,9]

Offer holders need the university directly. Agents may offer local language, coordination and reassurance, but the institution still controls its academic offer, approved fee terms, sponsorship and student support. A student should be able to view status, ask questions and verify advice through an official university route even when recruited by a partner. [15,17,18]

Recommended next intake: create one offer-holder record with reasons for uncertainty; make funding, visa and housing milestones visible; provide timely staff and peer access; test one intervention at a time; and judge it by enrolment at census, student effort, net revenue and early continuation. An informed decision to defer can be a good outcome.

A university should report both gross enrolment and the quality of the decision. A student who accepts under financial pressure, arrives without housing and leaves after one term has not become a durable success. Conversely, a timely deferral may preserve trust and lead to a later start. This is why the recommended dashboard extends beyond offer acceptance and deposit to census, student experience and continuation. The metric should support staff judgement, not reward pressure tactics that move a number before the underlying obstacle is resolved.

The conversion problem starts after the offer

Universities often quote an offer-to-enrolment “conversion rate” without defining its denominator. A conditional academic offer, unconditional offer, accepted offer, deposit, visa grant, arrival and census enrolment are distinct events. Multiple offers to one person, course changes and deferrals can make a simple ratio misleading. For decisions, use unique offer holders by intake and programme, then publish the share reaching each subsequent stage. Record when an offer was made: a late offer has less time to convert.

International students face a chain of contingent decisions. Paying a deposit may precede certainty about the visa; arranging accommodation may precede certainty about travel; accepting one university may foreclose another scholarship. A family may have to mobilise funds across currencies and obtain documents from several institutions. An applicant can be eager to enrol yet unable to complete one step by the deadline. “No response” is therefore an unknown reason, not proof of lost interest.



Figure 1. A recommended offer-holder measurement sequence. The diagram shows stages, not observed rates or a claim that every system uses the same labels.

Lower yield can also reflect deliberate institutional behaviour. Easier application systems expand the pool of applicants who seek options. Research on Common Application membership associated adoption with more applications and lower yield at private US colleges, illustrating how a wider offer pool can mechanically dilute the ratio. It should not be read as a contemporary international estimate. [21]

The right baseline is a cohort table: applications complete, offers conditional, conditions cleared, offers accepted, deposits paid, visa applications lodged, visas granted, arrivals and enrolments. Show numbers and rates by country, programme, channel and offer month. Distinguish withdrawal, deferral, refusal and “unknown.” This exposes a preventable operational loss such as an unanswered funding question without claiming every non-enrolment was avoidable.

Why the landscape is harder to convert

Destination policy has become part of the decision. Canada announced a 2026 target of up to 408,000 study permits, including 155,000 for newly arriving students and 253,000 extensions; the cap governs applications accepted into processing for covered cohorts. Australia's offshore visa processing direction changed for applications lodged from 14 November 2025. A priority category concerns processing order, not the academic merit of a university offer or an assurance of grant. [4,6]

The UK's November 2025 statistics and the OECD's 2025 release show that growth and contraction can coexist across different time periods and student categories. Immigration decisions respond to political concerns about population, housing, labour markets and institutional integrity. Universities do not control those decisions, but they do control the accuracy and timing of advice. A major policy announcement can make an applicant wait for clarity even where their own eligibility is unchanged. [1,5]

Affordability is more than tuition. It includes deposits, visa and health charges, travel, currency movements, housing and the cash needed before paid work is possible. In the University of Manchester's 2024 UCAS offer-holder survey, 45% of international decliners cited tuition cost among main reasons, up from 36% in 2023. This is a specific surveyed population and a stated reason, not a causal estimate of what a discount would recover. [14]

Competition includes other universities, other destinations and staying home. The offer holder compares expected teaching, career options, safety, family separation and risk of sunk cost. Political rhetoric and events can alter perceived welcome. Universities should monitor what applicants say changed their mind, but should not attribute every decline to a visa rule or every increase to marketing.

Policy risk is asymmetric across stages. A change announced before application can alter where students apply; a change after deposit may leave an individual with sunk costs and little time to switch. Universities should therefore keep a dated log of what was communicated, to whom, and under which version of the rule. That helps staff correct an error quickly and gives leadership a way to distinguish externally driven losses from preventable service failure. Scenario forecasts should be updated when an official rule changes, rather than when a rumour circulates.

What each actor can and cannot do

Education agents

Agents can explain local qualifications, translate procedures, arrange events and help applicants assemble files. Good agents also tell students when a course or destination is a poor match. Their commission is usually tied to enrolment, creating a potential conflict when the student needs impartial comparisons. The UK Migration Advisory Committee acknowledged their role while reporting misleading advice from some agents and subagents; it said the data were insufficient to measure prevalence. Ontario's Auditor General documented weaknesses in college agent oversight and incentives. Neither finding warrants treating all agents as suspect. [15,16]

Universities

Universities set offers, fees, scholarships, condition deadlines, deposit and refund terms, and the service available to offer holders. They can issue accurate documents, keep records aligned, provide accessible staff, and act quickly when a student is stuck. They cannot honestly promise a job or visa. UK sponsor guidance makes the institution responsible for sponsorship activity undertaken on its behalf; Australian standards require written agent agreements, monitoring and corrective action. [17,18]

Visa decision makers and governments

Visa officials assess applications under current law and operational priorities. They do not “convert” an offer and a university cannot override a refusal. Government policy influences the feasible intake through caps, evidence rules, dependent eligibility, work rights and processing capacity. Universities can reduce avoidable document errors, set realistic latest-arrival dates and offer deferral or refund routes. The prudent promise is a clear process, not a predictable decision.

Students and families

The final choice belongs to students, often with family financial input. UCAS research finds that parents are especially influential for Chinese applicants and that students draw on teachers, agents and their own research. One communication style cannot substitute for an accessible choice architecture. [20]

The boundaries between actors should be visible in the student interface. Mark advice as originating from the university, an agent, a government source or a current student. A statement about a course requirement is different from a personal account of campus life, and both differ from an official immigration decision. If an agent enters information on the student's behalf, the student should be able to inspect and correct the submitted record. Those basic controls reduce inconsistent promises and make a complaint easier to resolve.

Diagnose the lost decision before buying a tactic

Start with a short, structured question at the point of uncertainty: “What is the main thing you still need to decide or arrange?” Let the student choose price, funding proof, course fit, career outcomes, visa, housing, safety, family, competing offer, timing or another reason. Allow several reasons and a confidential free-text response. Ask again at a meaningful milestone because the obstacle changes over time. Keep a visible “I need a person” route.

Do not code silence as “price.” An offer holder who does not pay a deposit may be comparing two programmes, awaiting an exam result, or unable to get a bank document. An aggregate discount is wasteful if the real problem is a visa appointment or accommodation. Conversely, more reassuring messages do little for a student with a genuine funding gap.

Segment by controllability. **University-resolvable:** unclear conditions, slow response, missing course detail, confusing deposit or housing process. **Partly influenceable:** financing, family confidence, travel logistics, credibility of career information. **Externally determined:** visa outcome, political change, exchange rate and some personal circumstances. Staff should still support an externally affected student through deferral or refund, but should not claim credit for changing the external decision.

Build a weekly exception queue from real milestones: no acknowledgement of offer; condition close to deadline; document received but unreviewed; funding question unresolved; deposit paid but no visa plan; visa pending near latest arrival. The queue needs an owner, accepted handoff and resolution date. An automated “we referred this” notice is not a completed handoff. The 2025 Edified mystery-shopping study found 14% of enquiries at 103 institutions unanswered, showing the basic service risk, though it did not measure enrolment. [19]

Reason codes need calibration. Ask staff to review a sample of free-text answers and compare them with the selected category; ‘affordability’ may mean tuition, a temporary cash gap or fear of poor employment outcomes. Keep an ‘unknown’ category and report its size rather than forcing every case into a neat explanation. Investigate whether particular programmes or channels have unusually high unknown rates. That pattern may reveal a contact problem, an unrecorded deferral or a partner retaining the relationship outside the university’s system.

Student ambassadors: useful, with a clear evidence limit

Current students can answer questions staff are poorly placed to answer: what a week in the course feels like, how accommodation works, whether a campus community feels welcoming, and what surprised them after arrival. Pairing by course, language, country or lived concern may reduce uncertainty. UCAS and Unibuddy reported that 78% of surveyed prospective applicants wanted a connection with current students, and that 92% of students surveyed found such conversation beneficial. These are preferences and perceptions, not a measured causal gain in post-offer enrolment. [7]

Vendor case studies report striking associations. An EAB/Wisr admitted-student community study said joiners deposited at much higher rates than non-joiners. Students who opt into a community may already be more committed; the design cannot separate the programme effect from selection. Such cases justify a test, not a forecast of tenfold yield. [8]

Design the programme around questions, not persuasion. Recruit and pay a diverse ambassador group. Train them to describe their experience honestly, disclose that they represent the university, and refer immigration, health, finance or formal academic advice to authorised staff. Let offer holders choose private chat, small group sessions or a recorded question library. Provide family-facing sessions where useful, with the student's consent. Moderate safeguarding and response times, and do not ask ambassadors to collect sensitive documents.

Test it properly. Randomly invite eligible offer holders to an added peer conversation while preserving usual support for everyone. Compare arrival and census enrolment, not chat volume alone. Track who accepts the invitation and whether effects differ for students with housing or belonging concerns. A nil result is informative: it may mean the offer-holder group needed a different kind of help.

The ambassador offer should be timed to an actual question. A general chat invitation immediately after every offer may attract students already committed; a targeted invitation after a housing or belonging concern is more informative. Make response standards realistic and publish them. Review a sample of conversations for accuracy and safeguarding, while protecting ordinary student candour. The university can test whether the programme changes decision confidence and later enrolment without asking ambassadors to behave like sales staff.

Scholarships: potent for the right constraint

The direct financial case for a scholarship is strongest when the offer holder has a credible funding gap and a plausible route to completion. A randomised US university study of post-admission merit aid found substantial recruitment effects among disadvantaged students, with no overall graduation gain for that group and different, sometimes negative, effects among advantaged students. It demonstrates heterogeneity, not a universal yield return or a result directly transferable to international students. [9]

A scholarship should state its **net effect on the full cost of study**. A small headline award may be outweighed by living expenses or exchange-rate risk; a larger award can still fail if the student cannot show required funds at visa application. “Up to” awards, hidden renewal conditions and late decisions can lower trust. For recruitment purposes, compare a tuition award with needs-based grants, predictable multi-year pricing, deposit flexibility and emergency travel or housing support. These solve different cash-flow problems.

Assess value on net contribution and student outcomes. If a £5,000 award causes a student who would not otherwise enrol to enrol and persist, the investment may be sensible. If it mostly discounts students who were already committed, the programme can reduce revenue without expanding access. Avoid evaluating a scholarship only by recipients' higher yield; winners differ from non-winners. A lottery among equally eligible applicants, an explicit threshold design, or staged offer timing can improve inference. Protect the fairness of eligibility and communicate it clearly.

Decision rule. Offer meaningful aid where an applicant's stated constraint and verified need suggest price is decisive, while preserving academic fit and capacity to support the student. Publish transparent criteria and make award decisions early enough to affect the real choice. Do not advertise scholarships as a substitute for accurate costs or a realistic employment pathway.

Financial aid has an opportunity cost. Before increasing the award budget, estimate how many otherwise suitable students are price constrained and whether a different support would be cheaper and more effective. Include the administration of applications and appeals in the cost. Evaluate not only how many recipients enrol, but how many additional students enrol because of the award and how they progress. A transparent, needs-sensitive policy can protect access and trust even when its short-term yield effect is modest.

Personal support and digital follow-through

An offer holder needs timely answers about the next action, with a person accountable for an exception. A staff conversation may clarify programme content, recognition, funding or an unusual document requirement. A faculty member can explain intellectual fit and supervision; careers staff can explain evidenced outcomes and the limits of work rights. A generic “accept now” campaign addresses none of those questions.

The strongest experimental evidence for technology in this stage comes from US domestic contexts. Georgia State randomised 7,489 admitted students to usual support or added chatbot assistance. The already committed subgroup was 3.3 percentage points more likely to enrol on time; the full-sample estimate was not statistically significant. An East Carolina replication involving 4,442 intending students found no statistically significant overall enrolment benefit. Large financial-aid messaging experiments also found no overall effect on aid receipt or enrolment. More contacts are therefore not a reliable intervention by themselves. [10,11,12]

For international students, use digital support to answer approved factual questions, translate explanations and surface stalled tasks. Keep dated source material, preserve the original question in any staff handoff and stop reminders after a task is resolved. A chatbot should disclose uncertainty and route visa or funding specifics to qualified staff. It must not invent processing dates or quietly change a student’s record. [22]

Test a **complete service**: student identifies a problem, receives a correct answer or accepted referral, completes the task and knows it is resolved. Measure repeat contacts, days to correct resolution, errors, escalation time and enrolment. Faster first replies can coexist with a worse applicant experience if staff are harder to reach.

Digital channels also create an evidence trail. Record the approved answer source, date and owner for fees, visa process and deadlines. When a student asks a question the system cannot answer confidently, the handoff should carry their wording and the relevant record to a person. Resolve the case and update the approved answer if the problem recurs. Counting bot replies alone would reward activity even where the student never receives usable information.

Visa, arrival and housing support reduce avoidable loss

Many offer holders become operationally vulnerable only after deciding to attend. They may need a final transcript, sponsorship document, deposit receipt, translated evidence, biometrics appointment, housing confirmation or flight plan. A missing institutional signature or ambiguous deadline can convert an interested student into a deferral. These are legitimate service failures to prevent, even though the visa decision remains external.

Create a dated task plan for each destination and programme. Distinguish university requirements from government requirements. Make the last safe dates visible: to clear conditions, issue sponsorship documents, lodge a visa, request accommodation and arrive. Review exceptions daily near the intake. In Australia, the processing priority for offshore applications depends in part on provider circumstances and the date lodged; Home Affairs explicitly states that priority affects processing order, not grant criteria. [6]

Publish deposit refund and deferral rules before money is paid. Where a visa is refused or delayed, tell students what evidence the institution needs, when a refund or deferral is available, and how long a decision will take. Do not build a conversion strategy on retaining non-refundable deposits from students who cannot attend. For late arrivals, coordinate academic approval, teaching access and support; “arrive when you can” can hide an impossible start.

Housing should be treated as a conversion dependency. Show realistic prices, distance, contract dates, deposits and scams to avoid. Where supply is constrained, tell the student early and give verified alternatives. Arrival support should connect airport, enrolment, banking and orientation details, especially for first-time travellers. The success measure is an enrolled student able to begin, not merely a paid deposit.

Set a latest-arrival policy with academic staff before the peak visa season. It should specify which teaching activities can be missed, what remote participation is permitted, who approves an exception and when deferral is safer. Publish it alongside refund terms. A student may otherwise pay for travel after the academically viable start date. Measure the number of cases resolved by on-time arrival, approved late start, deferral and refund; each has a different effect on the student and the institution.

Compare interventions by evidence and fit

Intervention	What the evidence says	Best use and limit
Need-sensitive scholarship	Randomised US evidence shows gains for disadvantaged applicants; effects vary by group. [9]	Test where price is the real barrier; measure net revenue and persistence.
Student ambassador	Surveys show demand; vendor case studies show association, not causal post-offer impact. [7,8]	Use for belonging, housing and lived experience; run an invitation trial.
Staff or faculty conversation	Strong face validity and applicant demand; little transferable causal international yield evidence in this review. [20]	Route substantive questions to the person who can answer them.
Task support and chatbot	One trial helped committed students; replication and large nudge trials found no overall lift. [10,11,12]	Use for specific obstacles with human escalation, not message volume.
Visa and arrival casework	Process logic is strong; this review finds no general causal conversion estimate. [6,18]	Prevent avoidable missed dates and offer fair deferral options.

Table 1. Evidence appraisal. “Best use” is Merta’s operating judgement, not a measured effect size.

The table is intentionally conservative. Evidence from domestic US undergraduates cannot be applied directly to international taught-master’s applicants. Surveys describe what people say they value; observational vendor data often compare self-selected users with non-users. A university needs its own experiment or credible phased comparison before declaring a financial return.

The interventions should also be combined sensibly. A peer can explain what living on campus feels like, but cannot resolve a fee dispute. A scholarship can improve affordability, but cannot obtain a visa. Accurate career information may strengthen confidence, but cannot guarantee employment. Offer-holder service succeeds when the right form of help reaches the right constraint before the decision deadline.

Match the intervention to the barrier

An offer-holder programme should be a portfolio of specific help, not one universal campaign. A short diagnosis at each stage can route a student to the most relevant response. The point is to remove uncertainty or a practical obstacle before the decision deadline, while preserving the student's ability to choose another course.

Academic fit: offer a faculty or programme-lead conversation about modules, assessment, prerequisites, research supervision and the actual cohort. Publish a sample timetable or project description. Measure whether the question was resolved and whether the applicant later enrolled and continued. Do not substitute an institution-wide ranking for course detail.

Career confidence: provide programme-specific graduate outcome data with survey year, response rate and geography. Explain placements, professional accreditation and immigration limits precisely. Offer a careers clinic that includes home-country opportunities. A student may decline because a course does not fit a career goal; that is useful information rather than a sales failure.

Affordability: present the complete cash timeline and an individual award decision early. Use scholarships where price is binding, and consider deposit instalments or deferral where cash timing is the issue. Record what the student says remains unfunded. A tuition discount cannot remedy a missing visa appointment.

Belonging and family confidence: invite an honest conversation with current students and offer a session for family members with the applicant's consent. Make disability, wellbeing, safety and housing support concrete. Peer ambassadors should describe experience, while staff answer formal policy and support questions. [7,20]

Administrative progress: send a personal checklist for conditions, visa, arrival and enrolment, with a named owner for exceptions. Use automation to stop duplicate reminders, acknowledge completed tasks and prepare an escalation. Do not call an unanswered message "engagement." Test whether a student actually reaches census rather than optimising opens or clicks. [10,11,19]

A measurement plan that protects student outcomes

Define one primary measure: the share of unique offer holders enrolled at an agreed census date. Report intermediate transitions too: offer to acceptance, acceptance to deposit, deposit to visa, visa to arrival and arrival to census. Measure continuation into the second term so a tactic that boosts first-day enrolment but attracts poor fit is visible. Use consistent intake and programme definitions and publish exclusions such as deferred students.

Predefine outcomes before testing: enrolled share; student-reported decision confidence; unresolved questions; staff time; total recruitment cost; scholarship expenditure; refunds; complaints; and early withdrawal. Stratify by country, course level, channel, offer timing and aid eligibility. Record uncertainty in the estimate, not only the point result. For small groups, report descriptive patterns rather than pretend to detect precise differences.

For a peer programme, randomise the invitation, not access to ordinary support. For a funding pilot, apply transparent eligibility and consider a lottery only where equivalent applicants exceed available funds and policy permits. For a service intervention, randomise or phase rollout by teams and keep a credible comparison. Analyse everyone assigned, including those who never replied. Comparing “engaged” students with “unengaged” students exaggerates impact because engagement itself signals intent.

Assess fairness. Are particular nationalities, languages, disability groups or agent channels less likely to receive a response or more likely to be flagged as inactive? Does a scholarship reach applicants with real financial need? Does a late visa decision create avoidable loss for applicants from specific places? Staff should be able to correct data and explain unusual cases. Privacy should be proportional: record the obstacle and resolution, not an unnecessary dossier of family finances.

A credible evaluation also needs a stopping rule. Decide in advance what error rate, unresolved-case backlog, student complaint pattern or extra staff burden would cause a pilot to pause. Review adverse outcomes across groups as well as the average conversion estimate. This protects against a programme that appears successful because it helps already confident applicants while leaving the most uncertain students behind. Report the evaluation after the intake census, when the primary outcome is observable, and revisit persistence later.

Future priorities for universities

Next 30 days: map the offer-to-census journey for one intake. Reconcile unique offer holders and identify where the institution has no outcome or reason code. Audit a sample of declines and stalled cases. Publish a single, dated offer-holder checklist covering conditions, costs, housing, visa steps, latest arrival, deferral and refunds. Name an owner for each unresolved case.

Next 60 days: establish direct access for every offer holder, including agent-introduced students. Add a trained ambassador route for lived-experience questions and a staff route for academic, financial and immigration questions. Give agents the same approved information and a way to escalate; inspect what they tell students. Trial a targeted scholarship or practical support programme only after identifying the relevant constraint. [15,17]

Next 90 days and census: evaluate one added service against usual support. Examine conversions by stage and whether the result persists to arrival and early study. Calculate the full cost per additional enrolled student, including staff, awards, platform fees and refunds. Stop an intervention if it increases pressure to deposit while leaving material uncertainty unresolved.

Longer term, build a learning system across intakes. Compare cohorts under changed visa conditions without confusing policy effects with university effects. Keep source-controlled policy guidance and a clear student correction route. Use student and family feedback to improve programme facts, career evidence and housing support. Protect a student's informed decision, including deferral or withdrawal when that is the right choice.

The practical ambition is greater than a higher headline yield. Universities should help more suitable offer holders clear avoidable obstacles, arrive prepared and succeed. A service that achieves that can improve enrolment without treating every applicant as a transaction.

For future intakes, universities can improve forecasting by learning from decisions made well before the deadline. Offer holders can be asked whether the university is their current first choice, what must happen for them to attend, and whether a competing offer has a different advantage. Responses should guide support rather than become a prediction that closes options. Over time, compare stated uncertainty with actual enrolment and use the discrepancy to make advice more useful and forecasts more honest.

Sources

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From offer to arrival

Help offer holders resolve the decision in front of them.
Measure informed enrolment, service quality and student outcomes together.

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