

Global Standing and International Outlook of Top Ranked Universities in the United States of America: International Student Enrollment Decline

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Abstract

Postsecondary institutions in the United States of America have long enjoyed a high global standing with respect to reputation and international (i.e., non-U.S.) student enrollment. U.S. institutions tend to dominate rankings of world universities and have been a very important option for international students seeking a higher education at the undergraduate (i.e., baccalaureate) and graduate (i.e., postbaccalaureate) levels due to the extensive number of available institutions. However, current and projected international student enrollment is declining. The purpose of this article is to highlight the global standing of top ranked U.S. universities as well as briefly comment on the current environment that threatens all U.S. institutions' outlook as a desirable location for international students to matriculate. Substantively, this threat has been argued in the literature as related to the policies of the current Trump (i.e., U.S. President) administration.

Keywords: global rankings, U.S. postsecondary education, international outlook, international enrollment

1. Introduction

Various organizations rank universities across the globe, within given countries, and by various major courses of study. One organization that annually provides a global ranking is Times Higher Education (THE; 2026a), and its "World University Rankings are the only global performance tables that judge research-intensive universities across all their core missions: teaching, research, knowledge transfer and international outlook" (THE, 2026b, para. 1). The THE (2026a) ranking considers the following metrics and calculates a total overall score for "2,191 institutions from 115 countries and territories":

- Teaching – "Looks at the quality of the learning environment"

- Research Environment – “Based on research volume, income and reputation”
- Research Quality – “Looks at a university’s role in spreading new knowledge and ideas”
- Industry – “A university’s ability to help industry with innovations and inventions”
- International Outlook – “The ability of a university to attract undergraduates, postgraduates and faculty” (para. 1).

More specifically, the teaching factor includes reputation, student-to-staff ratio, doctorate-to-bachelor ratio, doctorate-to-staff ratio, and institutional income; research environment includes reputation, income, and productivity; research quality includes citation impact and research strength, excellence, and influence; industry includes income and patents; and outlook includes international students, staff, and coauthorship (THE, 2026b).

Based upon this extensive evaluation, THE (2026a) highlighted the following for its 2026 global rankings:

- **“Oxford** retains the number one spot for the tenth consecutive year, driven by strong research environment score
- **Princeton** rises to joint third place, and is the only US university to achieve its best-ever finish this year
- **China** has five universities in top 40, up from three last year, but top universities remain steady
- **Hong Kong** occupies a record six spots in the top 200 as a result of improvements in teaching metrics
- **India** now has the second highest number of ranked universities for the first time, behind only the US” (para. 2).

For the purpose of this article, *top ranked* universities refer to those in THE’s (2026a) top 50 rankings. This article will examine the overall standing and international outlook of institutions in the top 50 THE rankings, the comparative standing of U.S. institutions, and current matriculation trends of international students in U.S. institutions. As will be shown, U.S. universities dominate the top 50 THE rankings; however, international student enrollment is on the decline. Thus, the problem addressed in this study is the inconsistency of U.S. universities being highly ranked with a pervasive (i.e., across the United States) decline in international student enrollment. This article will highlight major factors that are currently being argued as related to the decline in international student enrollment in the United States despite this high reputation.

2. Method

Data provided at THE (2026a) were analyzed with respect to overall global standing and international outlook of top ranked universities (i.e., top ranked refers to the inclusion criterion of the top 50 ranked universities). These data were extracted directly from the THE website, analyzed in a descriptive—not inferential—manner, and are discussed primarily in a

comparative analysis of U.S. versus non-U.S. universities. As THE (2026a) was used as the data source, data extraction and resultant findings may vary by year.

Note that this study represents a descriptive snapshot of the current situation and offers suggested possible reasons; however, it is not a longitudinal study per se and does not incorporate a research design (i.e., an experiment) that supports tenable causal inferences.

3. Findings

Table 1 provides the top ranked world universities by rank, name, country, and overall score. The University of Oxford (United Kingdom) holds the top rank; the University of Texas at Austin (United States) holds the last rank.

Table 1. 2026 World University Rankings (Times Higher Education, 2026a)

Ranking	University	Country	Overall Score
1	University of Oxford	United Kingdom	98.2
2	Massachusetts Institute of Technology	United States	97.7
3	Princeton University	United States	97.2
3	University of Cambridge	United Kingdom	97.2
5	Harvard University	United States	97.1
5	Stanford University	United States	97.1
7	California Institute of Technology	United States	96.3
8	Imperial College London	United Kingdom	94.7
9	University of California, Berkeley	United States	94.4
10	Yale University	United States	94.1
11	ETH Zurich	Switzerland	93.1
12	Tsinghua University	China	93.0
13	Peking University	China	92.3
14	University of Pennsylvania	United States	90.8
15	The University of Chicago	United States	90.6
16	Johns Hopkins University	United States	90.1
17	National University of Singapore	Singapore	89.7

18	Cornell University	United States	89.5
18	University of California, Los Angeles	United States	89.5
20	Columbia University	United States	89.4
21	University of Toronto	Canada	88.5
22	UCL	United Kingdom	87.5
23	University of Michigan-Ann Arbor	United States	86.9
24	Carnegie Mellon University	United States	85.0
25	University of Washington	United States	83.7
26	The University of Tokyo	Japan	83.5
27	Technical University of Munich	Germany	83.4
28	Duke University	United States	82.9
29	University of Edinburgh	United Kingdom	82.5
30	Northwestern University	United States	81.9
31	Nanyang Technological University	Singapore	81.6
31	New York University	United States	81.6
33	University of Hong Kong	Hong Kong	80.5
34	LMU Munich	Germany	79.7
35	École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne	Switzerland	79.6
36	Fudan University	China	79.3
37	University of Melbourne	Australia	79.0
38	King's College London	United Kingdom	78.7
39	Zhejiang University	China	78.3
40	Shanghai Jiao Tong University	China	77.6
41	Georgia Institute of Technology	United States	77.1
41	McGill University	Canada	77.1
41	The Chinese University of Hong Kong	Hong Kong	77.1
41	University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign	United States	77.1

45	University of British Columbia	Canada	77.0
46	KU Leuven	Belgium	76.8
47	University of California, San Diego	United States	76.6
48	Paris Sciences et Lettres – PSL Research University Paris	France	76.5
49	Universität Heidelberg	Germany	76.3
50	University of Texas at Austin	United States	75.8

For the top ranked universities, 23 (46%; almost half) are located in the United States, 6 in the United Kingdom, 5 in China, etc. (see Table 2). Thus, U.S. institutions have an approximate fourfold representation over the next country, which is a dominant presence. Note that any calculated averages by country reflect the sample sizes presented in Table 2; in the extreme, averages associated with Australia, Belgium, France, and Japan reflect the statistics of a single institution.

Table 2. Countries Represented in Rankings

Country	<i>n</i>
Australia	1
Belgium	1
Canada	3
China	5
France	1
Germany	3
Hong Kong	2
Japan	1
Singapore	2
Switzerland	2
United Kingdom	6
United States	23

Average rank was calculated to highlight differences by country (see Table 3); though averaging an ordinal scale is not tenable statistically, it was done merely to reflect a typical metric used for comparing ranked independent variables. The United Kingdom represents the highest average ranking (16.8) followed in second place by the United States (21.0); France represents the lowest average ranking (48.0). Thus, U.S. universities not only dominate the list but also are highly ranked.

Table 3. Average Rank by Country

Country	Average Rank
Australia	37.0
Belgium	46.0
Canada	35.7
China	28.0
France	48.0
Germany	36.7
Hong Kong	37.0
Japan	26.0
Singapore	24.0
Switzerland	23.0
United Kingdom	16.8
United States	21.0

Average overall score was calculated by country (see Table 4). Similar to the average ranking scores, the United Kingdom holds the top place (89.8), the United States the second place (87.9), and France the last place (76.5).

Table 4. Average Overall Score by Country

Country	Average Overall Score
Australia	79.0
Belgium	76.8

Canada	80.9
China	84.1
France	76.5
Germany	79.8
Hong Kong	78.8
Japan	83.5
Singapore	85.7
Switzerland	86.4
United Kingdom	89.8
United States	87.9

Table 5 presents the international outlook (defined as “the ability of a university to attract undergraduates, postgraduates and faculty”; THE, 2026a, para. 1) score for the top ranked universities. Though ranked 8th overall (see Table 1), Imperial College London had the highest international outlook score (98.2); the University of Texas at Austin ranked 50th overall (see Table 1) and had the lowest international outlook score for the top ranked universities.

Table 5. Top 50 Universities: International Outlook* (Times Higher Education, 2026a)

University	Country	International Outlook Score
University of Oxford	United Kingdom	96.4
Massachusetts Institute of Technology	United States	91.9
Princeton University	United States	85.4
University of Cambridge	United Kingdom	96.3
Harvard University	United States	88.3
Stanford University	United States	83.9
California Institute of Technology	United States	87.9

Imperial College London	United Kingdom	98.2
University of California, Berkeley	United States	83.9
Yale University	United States	81.4
ETH Zurich	Switzerland	95.1
Tsinghua University	China	53.4
Peking University	China	67.3
University of Pennsylvania	United States	78.4
The University of Chicago	United States	79.7
Johns Hopkins University	United States	81.9
National University of Singapore	Singapore	92.8
Cornell University	United States	83.5
University of California, Los Angeles	United States	69.2
Columbia University	United States	83.7
University of Toronto	Canada	92.3
UCL	United Kingdom	97.5
University of Michigan-Ann Arbor	United States	65.8
Carnegie Mellon University	United States	84.3
University of Washington	United States	70.1
The University of Tokyo	Japan	50.8
Technical University of Munich	Germany	83.4
Duke University	United States	74.2
University of Edinburgh	United Kingdom	96.2
Northwestern University	United States	71.0
Nanyang Technological University	Singapore	93.6
New York University	United States	74.1
University of Hong Kong	Hong Kong	96.6
LMU Munich	Germany	78.7
École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne	Switzerland	95.4

Fudan University	China	53.8
University of Melbourne	Australia	91.6
King's College London	United Kingdom	96.9
Zhejiang University	China	55.5
Shanghai Jiao Tong University	China	57.7
Georgia Institute of Technology	United States	81.5
McGill University	Canada	89.2
The Chinese University of Hong Kong	Hong Kong	92.1
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign	United States	62.3
University of British Columbia	Canada	93.5
KU Leuven	Belgium	79.2
University of California, San Diego	United States	71.3
Paris Sciences et Lettres – PSL Research University Paris	France	77.9
Universität Heidelberg	Germany	80.2
University of Texas at Austin	United States	46.2

*Defined as “the ability of a university to attract undergraduates, postgraduates and faculty” (Times Higher Education, 2026a).

Average international outlook score was calculated by country (see Table 6). Similar to the average overall scores, the United Kingdom holds the top place (96.9) and Japan the last place (50.8). When these average scores are ranked (see Table 7), the United States is in 10th place.

Table 6. Average International Outlook Score by Country

Country	Average International Outlook Score
Australia	91.6
Belgium	79.2
Canada	91.7

China	57.5
France	77.9
Germany	80.8
Hong Kong	94.4
Japan	50.8
Singapore	93.2
Switzerland	95.3
United Kingdom	96.9
United States	77.4

Table 7. Rankings for Average International Outlook Score by Country

Ranking	Country
1	United Kingdom
2	Switzerland
3	Hong Kong
4	Singapore
5	Canada
6	Australia
7	Germany
8	Belgium
9	France
10	United States
11	China
12	Japan

4. Discussion

Of the 12 countries represented by the top ranked universities, U.S. universities dominate the list with 23 universities represented (46% of the 50 universities); the next country is the United Kingdom with six universities. U.S. universities are second to only the United Kingdom in highest overall score and average rank. In stark contrast regarding international outlook (i.e., attractiveness to students and faculty), U.S. institutions ranked 10th out of 12 countries with only China and Japan ranking lower. Thus despite an exceedingly high overall score, top ranked U.S. universities have an exceedingly low international outlook.

Wood (2025) reported a 17% decline in new international student enrollment in U.S. postsecondary institutions between fall 2024 and 2025. Baer and Ekin (2026) analyzed data from 585 U.S. postsecondary institutions of various levels and found that “more than three-quarters (78%) of doctoral institutions [31% of the sample; the highly ranked universities in the present study are doctoral institutions] ... anticipate decreases in [international student] enrollment” in the 2026–2027 academic year (p. 10); overall, “61% of [the analyzed] institutions expect a decline in undergraduate [international] students, and 65% foresee a decline in graduate [international] students” (p. 9). Alonso (2026a) suggested that these declines are a continuation of last year’s problems caused by

fallout of a chaotic [2025] spring for international education, as the Trump administration canceled students’ statuses in the Student Exchange and Visitor Information System, paused F-1 visa interviews, implemented new social media screenings for applicants, and detained students based on their political beliefs. (para. 1).

In addition, Alonso (2026b) recently reported that the U.S. Department of Homeland Security will implement on September 15, 2026, a new rule that requires international students to apply for an extension after completing 4 years of their degree program (note: the old rule allowed students to stay in the U.S. until program completion even if longer than 4 years without the need for an extension application); with an expected backlog based upon currently backlogged U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services cases, “delays in processing those [newly required] extensions could leave students in limbo—unsure whether they can continue their education” (para. 10). Alonso (2026b) recounted the views of international services specialist Delo Blough who stated that apart from delays in approval, there is uncertainty regarding the approval rate; Blough further suggested that the new rule “could further diminish the number of international students studying in the U.S., which is already in decline after the Trump administration’s repeated attacks on international students” (para. 13).

Wood (2025) recounted the view of enrollment management specialist Amy Crutchfield as follows: “Beyond visa issues, there’s ... a sense that the U.S. ‘may not be as welcoming of an environment for international students nowadays’” (para. 14). Alonso (2026a) asserted that “many [U.S. institutions] have begun acclimating to the new normal, shifting their enrollment projections and recruitment strategies based on declining international enrollment” (para. 2), citing Baer and Ekin’s 2026 report.

Of note also is the worsening environment for faculty members that includes tenure

protection to academic freedom in the expression and pursuit of truth. Marcus (2025) reported that

at least 11 [U.S.] states, including seven since the start of this year, have imposed new levels of review for tenured faculty, made it easier to fire them or proposed banning tenure altogether. Almost all have Republican-controlled legislatures or have seen lawmakers question what is being taught on campuses. (para. 4)

This suggests a politically-related issue (the Trump administration is Republican) on faculty in its pursuit of truth, which also has resulted in the removal of grants for research (Marcus, 2025). Just before the second Trump administration (note: the second, current Trump administration began in 2025; the first Trump administration occurred during the 2017–2020 timeframe), 37% of faculty were already expressing a decline over an approximate 6-to-7-year period (which overlapped the first Trump administration) in their academic freedom

to speak freely on campus, either in the classroom or when participating in institutional governance. More than a third of faculty also report[ed] that there is greater constraint on the ability of faculty to express their point of view as free citizens. (Finley & Tiede, 2025, p. 12)

Faculty are feeling pressure “to conform their political views” as faculty are concerned with a lack of perceived administrative support for their academic freedom (Finley & Tiede, 2025, p. 10). Finley and Tiede stated

a third to one half of faculty believe their faculty colleagues are more careful when revising curricula, more worried about being the target of online harassment, and less willing to express views in class, on social media, or at professional meetings (p. 15)

The international outlook score reflects attractiveness to students *and* faculty; thus, threats to academic freedom and tenure protections foment a potentially hostile environment for faculty work.

Thus, the international outlook ranking of U.S. institutions and diminishing international enrollment seem consistent with the notion that attending U.S. institutions is not viewed favorably by many international students who are choosing to not attend, and this unfavorable view and declining enrollment may only get worse with serious financial consequences. Dickler (2025) cited studies that suggest the 17% enrollment decline from fall 2024 to 2025 hurt the U.S. economy by approximately \$1 billion (U.S. dollars); thus, further declines will likely have even greater financial consequences not only to postsecondary institutions—some of which such as “regional and mid-tier” could be at risk for closure (Rim, 2025, para. 2)—but also the nation.

5. Limitations

The data analyzed were delimited to the top 50 rankings in the Times Higher Education 2026 World University Rankings (THE, 2026a); thus, findings related to these data are limited in generalizability to these top ranked institutions as well as the publication year.

6. Conclusion

U.S. universities enjoy an exceedingly positive global reputation with respect to teaching, research, and industrial service as evidenced by a dominating presence and overall scores on THE's top 50 world university rankings. Almost half of the 50 universities represented are located in the United States (almost four times the representation of the next highly represented country, the United Kingdom), and its average overall score is second to only the United Kingdom. In stark contrast, these top ranked U.S. universities place near the bottom (10th place out of 12) in attractiveness to students and faculty, which mirrors recent declines in international student enrollment across all U.S. institutions.

The cited literature (Alonso, 2026a, 2026b; Rim, 2025; Wood, 2025) suggests that policies implemented by the Trump administration are salient causal factors in declining international student enrollment. These enrollment declines are leading to significant reductions in the U.S. economy that impact not only the nation but also individual institutions (Dickler, 2025; Rim, 2025). U.S. institutions are adjusting to this new normal of fewer international students (Alonso, 2026a); however, these enrollment losses will likely have an ongoing dramatic impact on institutional revenues—perhaps even solvency (Rim, 2025)—as well as programmatic offerings, student services, and the cosmopolitan environment conducive to a more complete education for all students as international students “bring an array of perspectives that often enrich academic discourse” (Baer & Ekin, 2026, p. 5).

Also of note is the decline in faculty perceptions of academic freedom and actual reductions in tenure protections. With a worsening faculty environment, it is quite likely that U.S. institutions become less attractive to international faculty. Also likely, international faculty are less attractive for U.S. institutions to hire as the required H-1B work visa fee—paid by employers and is applicable to the hiring of non-U.S. faculty—is still \$100,000 (Malik, 2026; note: this fee was recently ruled in court as unlawful; however, it is still being collected due to a pause on the judicial decision).

With projections of this declining international student enrollment worsening, the Trump administration may want to consider a change in policies in order to better support U.S. institutions standing and success thereby ensuring that a U.S. higher education will continue—as it has for decades—firmly ground the higher education, training, thinking, and direction of so many students that positively impact not only the United States but also multiple countries around the world.

Note that there may be other important reasons unexamined by this brief study related to a decline in international U.S. enrollment (e.g., increased attractiveness of attending non-U.S. institutions based upon institutional—i.e., nongovernmental—policies, favorable exchange rates, accessibility, locality, demography, etc.). However, the cited literature suggests that recent U.S. government policies are a major disruptor to international enrollment and, thus, should be examined further as a potential causal factor.

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