

# **Recruiting International Students for Master's Programs**

## Insights from North America



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# Introduction

Graduate admissions for academic master's degree programs at elite universities in the United States tend to be highly decentralized.

Rather than going through a central admissions office that serves the entire institution, they are run at the department or program level. Because at many elite universities graduate students are also involved in research, admissions committees are often formed by faculty members, as they are not only selecting their graduate students, but also their likely assistants. In addition to faculty members, program administrators and current graduate students often serve on admissions committees. In contrast, many large professional programs, like business schools, run admissions in a more centralized fashion, hiring a professional team that does not involve faculty.

In order to attract international students to master's level programs, elite universities in the United States pursue a variety of strategies, from road shows with program administrators and faculty, to digital marketing campaigns, to word-of-mouth marketing leveraging alumni and other community members.



More creative digital strategies have also been tested over the years, such as leveraging the university's MOOCs to identify and attract top performers in faraway locations. Additionally, faculty and current students can often play a significant role in attracting international applicants through informal networks built during fieldwork. Lastly, an institution's brand recognition naturally plays a substantial role in attracting the brightest students globally. Among all these strategies, the leveraging of human capital—networks of current students, alumni, and faculty colleagues—provides the most consistent success.

The selection process for admitting the most promising international applicants can be a difficult one, particularly when candidates hail from countries with academic institutions that are not well known or established. Some institutions rely on outside organizations that specialize in international accreditations to assess backgrounds. Other strategies can include reaching out to alumni from the region to review an application and share some contextual information, or hiring outside reviewers who specialize in reviewing applications from certain geographic areas. Standardized test scores such as the GRE or GMAT have long played a substantial role in the selection process, although many programs have dropped this requirement in a trend towards greater diversity and inclusion.

# International Graduate Student Recruiting

## Attracting International Graduate Applicants

Elite universities in North America enjoy substantial brand recognition, which serves as one of the primary means to attract international graduate applicants. While an institution's prestige is closely tied to its standing in international rankings, universities can often improve their brand value by leveraging prominent faculty and alumni through targeted outreach strategies tied to specific geographies of interest. North American universities are often able to combine this with fundraising efforts, where roadshows take faculty, administrators, and fundraising staff to meet with donors globally, allowing for some engagements on recruiting as well, such as guest talks at universities. Of course, these efforts came to a halt in the last year due to the pandemic, although some efforts at virtual recruitment did attempt to fill the gap.

Paid marketing campaigns on the other hand continue to be a viable tool to reach prospective applicants around the world. From leveraging social media's marketing capabilities, which allow universities to reach target demographics with relative ease, to more traditional advertising in printed media, universities sometimes rely on paid campaigns. Harvard Business School for example tends to combine its paid marketing efforts with its outreach events and road shows. Some universities create highly targeted campaigns that reach out to specific audiences by country and subject of study, rather than advertising the school generically.

Current students and alumni are often key allies in attracting graduate applicants, particularly international ones. They play an essential role in enticing prospective applicants by informally sharing insights on the institution, and by providing guidance to navigate some of the more challenging administrative hurdles (visas, work permits, funding, etc.). The current push for equity, diversity, and inclusion has also led to the establishment of more formal programs aimed at supporting minority applicants throughout the application

process, pairing them with current students who will assist and support them. One such program is MIT's [Graduate Application Assistance Program \(GAAP\)](#). In this program, focused on electrical engineering and computer science graduate programs, applicants from underrepresented groups (those less likely to enroll) are paired up with current students, who provide feedback on applicants' materials such as research statements. Other similar programs exist throughout numerous departments, as well as at the Institute level, where the MIT Office of Graduate Education offers the [GradCatalyst](#) workshop led by current students.

Technological solutions often also rely on networks of alumni and community members. Massive online open courses (MOOCs), for example, were considered to hold great promise in reaching untapped talent pools globally, but data remains scarce on their effectiveness as a standalone tool. One anecdotal success story involves Battushig Myanganbayar, who was [featured in the New York Times in 2013](#). Battushig, then a 16-year-old in Mongolia, earned a perfect score in MIT's Circuits and Electronics course on edX and was subsequently admitted to MIT. His path was paved with the support of his high school principal, an MIT alumnus, who committed to building a pipeline of students to send to some of the best universities. This points to the importance of human networks in connecting students to relevant technologies. Similarly, in Kenya, a whole generation of successful MIT alumni can be traced back to the influence of a single high school teacher (an MIT alumnus), who nurtured them and nudged them towards pursuing their academic aspirations at elite universities. It stands to reason that identifying a handful of alumni in similar positions could have an outsize effect in building an outstanding talent pipeline from underrepresented regions.

While MOOCs may be waning as a recruitment tool, other more targeted programs are taking their place. More recently, MIT took a step towards attracting international talent by launching the [MicroMasters program](#) in 2015. Today MIT offers five MicroMasters programs in Supply Chain Management; Data, Economics, and Development



Policy; Principles of Manufacturing; Statistics and Data Science; and Finance. These programs run online and are accessible globally. A select number of students who excel in them in their first year are offered admission to pursue the second year on campus enjoying the full residential student experience. In recent years, the program expanded through partnerships with numerous other universities around the world, offering learners the possibility to complete their degree residually at [other universities as well](#).

## Evaluating International Graduate Applicants

According to a [study on holistic graduate admissions](#) conducted by the Council of Graduate Schools in 2016, graduate schools in the US typically embrace a decentralized admissions process. According to the study, 75% of the 540 surveyed member institutions reported that “master’s admissions are primarily the responsibility of the academic units.” This means that admissions decisions happen at the program or department level by admissions committees that are often composed of faculty, and sometimes also include administrators (admissions officers, administrative officers, program officers, etc.), as well as current graduate students. Such a high degree of decentralization means that evaluation standards often vary from program to program. At the same time, requirements for applicants (domestic and international) tend to be quite similar, focusing on standardized test scores (GRE, GMAT, TOEFL), past academic performance (transcripts with GPA as a key data point), a statement of purpose, and letters of recommendation.

In the case of evaluating international graduate applicants, particularly ones hailing from countries with less well-known academic institutions, programs may sometimes rely on outside reviewers who specialize in certain regions. Additionally, [World Education Services](#) is sometimes contracted to verify transcripts. This US-based non-profit provides both free information and paid services to universities to help them understand foreign student transcripts and help create a basis for equivalency between candidates from different countries.

Admissions committees consider a number of factors in assessing candidates, including standardized test scores, academic performance, CVs, statements of purpose, and letters of recommendation. Programs are also concerned about building the right composition of students, as measured by the total number of slots, ratio of domestic and international students, and gender, racial, or socioeconomic diversity. A clear transition is taking place from a metrics-based applicant review, where strong emphasis is placed on standardized test scores and GPA, to holistic applicant review. More and more institutions are dropping the GRE as a requirement entirely, largely as a result of a push for more diversity and inclusion. The GRE is an expensive test that is not as easily accessible to minorities, and unequal access to education plays a role in GRE scores as well.

## What are Holistic Admission Reviews?

**Holistic admission reviews are becoming increasingly popular in graduate schools. The following definition of holistic admissions comes from the [Association of American Medical Colleges \(AAMC\)](#):**

*Holistic Review refers to mission-aligned admissions or selection processes that take into consideration applicants’ experiences, attributes, and academic metrics as well as the value an applicant would contribute to learning, practice, and teaching. Holistic Review allows admissions committees to consider the “whole” applicant, rather than disproportionately focusing on any one factor. The core principles of holistic review are outlined below:*

- *Applicant selection criteria are broad, clearly linked to school mission and goals, and promote numerous aspects of diversity as essential to excellence.*
- *Selection criteria include experiences and attributes as well as academic performance [...]*
- *Schools consider each applicant’s potential contribution to both the school and the field of medicine, allowing them the flexibility to weigh and balance the range of criteria needed in a class to achieve their institutional mission and goals.*
- *Race and ethnicity may be considered as factors when making admission-related decisions only when aligned with mission-related educational interests and goals associated with student diversity; and when considered as a broader mix of factors, which may include personal attributes, experiential factors, demographics, or other considerations.*

**Holistic reviews consider an applicant’s level of accomplishment, taking into account access and opportunity, rather than just the GRE score or GPA. For example, an applicant may have seemingly unrelated work experience or hobbies that nonetheless demonstrate risk taking, self-directed exploration, and flexibility. Or an applicant may have taken on extra care duties for a family member, showing high levels of responsibility and resilience.**

**Holistic admissions considers these broader qualities, and ability to overcome challenges, as traits that both signal the candidate’s potential for success, and help build the diversity of the student body. While overall presenting a model showing great promise, holistic review also generally requires a more intensive time commitment.**

# Case Studies

## MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning (DUSP)

MIT DUSP admits a class of 60-70 Master in City Planning students out of approximately 500 applicants each year (pre-pandemic). The department, which is ranked the country's number one planning program, offers four program areas for applicants to choose from: city design and development; environmental policy and planning; housing, community, and economic development; and international development. Each of these program areas has a dedicated number of admissions slots and forms its own admissions committee composed of faculty and graduate students. Applicants select which program area they are applying for in the application process, but they are free to switch program areas once admitted.

While faculty make final admissions decisions, the MIT DUSP program allows for significant involvement of current enrolled students in the process. The following procedures were utilized:

- One student reader and multiple faculty are assigned to read each application.
- Students' ranking of applications are considered in initial reporting.
- Students participate at the beginning of admissions discussion, but do not stay in the room for additional ranking of applicants and final decisions.
- Students do not vote on admissions.

Each admissions committee member is assigned a number of applicants and each applicant is guaranteed multiple reviews. The first stage of the admission process consists in reading each assigned applicant's portfolio, comprising a statement of purpose, CV, transcripts, letters of recommendation, and sometimes a design portfolio or other additional information.

The second and final stage takes place when the entire committee meets to discuss the applicants. This meeting lasted 2.5 hours during which candidates were discussed and ranked and a final roster of 12 students to admit was selected.

In the context of MIT, DUSP is not one of the well-funded departments, so financial aid resources are limited and awarded on a need basis. Some students are admitted with a full financial aid package to cover tuition and cost of living, while others are admitted without any financial aid. Students who are admitted and awarded financial aid are given a deadline to communicate their decision before students who are admitted without financial aid, so that unclaimed funding can be redistributed to those with no financial aid package.

As the country's top planning program, DUSP attracts a lot of domestic applicants. Some in the program feel DUSP should do more to attract international applicants, particularly from certain regions in the Global South (Africa and Southeast Asia). International alumni and current students and faculty are the main proactive agents to attract international students. International faculty-led practica often generate waves of applicants from the regions where the practica take place, or where faculty members and students conduct research. These types of traveling faculty demonstrations are an excellent form of advertising for the program.

## Harvard Business School (HBS)

HBS admits a class of roughly 900 MBA students each year from a pool of approximately 10,000 applicants. To attract international applicants, HBS often partners with alumni clubs around the world and companies to organize targeted outreach events aimed at attracting talent. HBS is deliberate in its choice of cities and countries to focus on, and it complements these outreach events with digital marketing campaigns aimed at attracting the right people to the events. Digital marketing is employed particularly in African countries to attract participants in the events.





HBS has a large admissions team formed by a core of full-time staff as well as contractors that are hired to review applications. A total of 50 people are involved in the application process at its peak, and candidates are selected without faculty involvement. HBS invested significantly in building in-house expertise and a trusted network of contractors to evaluate candidates, and admissions officers often travel internationally to run the outreach events (pre-pandemic). HBS has approximately \$45 million in funding to award for financial aid, and it is allocated on a need basis.

## Boston University (BU) Graduate School

Boston University master's programs admissions are decentralized across more than ten major schools and colleges at the university, with individual schools and departments responsible for decisions. The university maintains around 250 master's programs and awards over 5,000 master's degrees per year, many of them in professional programs like the MBA or MPH (Master in Public Health). Most professional master's programs are revenue-generating and thus have a high degree of autonomy over how they attract and admit students. For programs with substantial budget needs, however, a central administrative office determines the overall level of student funding for each school, and allots a certain number of admission slots, which the various Deans then divide among their departments.

Because BU does not have the instant global name recognition of Harvard or MIT, it must embrace innovative strategies to recruit the best students. Recently the university has shifted more towards digital recruitment tools, a trend accelerated by the pandemic. This encompasses digital advertising, virtual events, and ambassador outreach. The university conducts focus groups with current international students about how they were recruited and why they came to BU. This information is used to build a targeted approach to admissions strategies based on country: for example,

targeting in-person outreach in one country, but emphasizing program rankings and social media campaigns in another.

The university recently started using targeted digital advertising. They began by cross-referencing external data ([OpenDoors report](#) on international student trends) with internal website traffic analysis, for example, how many unique users from country X visited BU department page Y. They then select specific countries where certain programs of study seem of high interest, and target ads for the specific program in that country. These ads direct students to a special landing page to sign up to receive more information. While the ads have not been running long enough to judge enrollment gains, the university reports increased conversations between programs and potential applicants in targeted countries.

The university also makes use of networks of alumni and current students. In professional master's programs, alumni are regularly invited to recruitment and admitted student events, where they are often the best 'salesperson' for programs. Some university departments also hire current students part-time as program ambassadors. These students are paid to engage with potential applicants and admitted students. Notably, these students are encouraged to give a real and unvarnished view of student life.

While individual departments determine admissions outcomes, some overall trends are notable. There is accelerating use of holistic admissions and abandonment of standardized test scores. Approximately 60% of academic master's and PhD programs at BU no longer require the GRE test. Emphasis is placed instead on academic achievement, but also statements of purpose, recommendation letters, and diversity. The central offices at BU are currently engaging willing departments in workshops to clarify their admissions standards in the absence of numerical metrics, and to ensure that implicit bias does not enter into decisions. Here, and at other universities across the country, the newly urgent push for diversity, equity, and inclusion is permeating admissions practices.

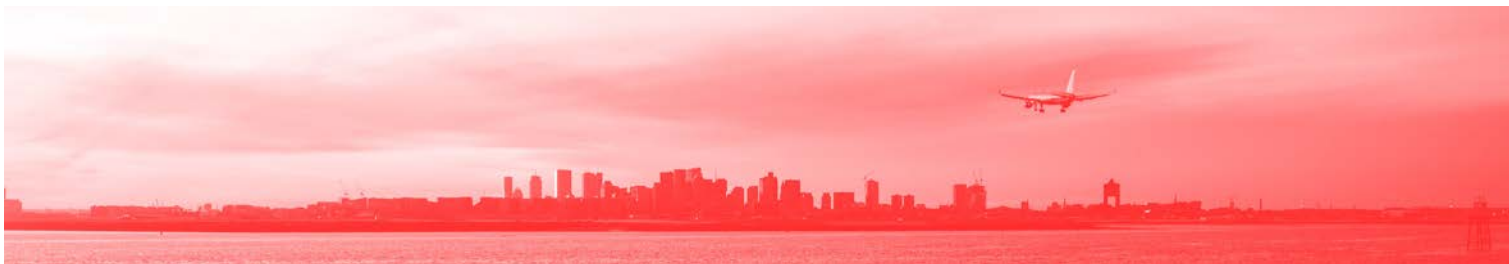
# Conclusions

The landscape of master's programs across the US is incredibly diverse, even among more elite universities.

In particular, there are major differences between professional programs, which tend to be revenue-generating and operate under more autonomous market-driven models, and academic programs which are more often under centralized budgeting. Professional programs are more likely in turn to run their own admissions centrally within their school, using professional staff, while academic programs generally rely on a decentralized admissions process, in which faculty within individual departments are the main decision makers. This decentralization grants autonomy to faculty to determine their own graduate student body, since graduate students typically work closely with faculty as research or teaching assistants.

In light of this diversity, some specific trends are percolating across graduate admissions. Even the most elite programs feel they must actively compete to recruit the best students internationally. Among its various resources, a university's human capital—its faculty, current students, and alumni—proves the most consistent and successful recruitment tool. From road shows to virtual events, paid student ambassadors to alumni engagement, universities are discovering ways to systematize their outreach using their community members. The best recruitment efforts are often organized centrally in order to target the right audience, but also allow for significant





autonomy and improvisation so that community members can speak authentically about their experiences. As one admissions administrator explained, the most important goal is to jumpstart conversations between the university and interested students.

Technology is an increasingly utilized tool in recruitment, but is most effective when targeting specific groups using reliable data. While MOOCs once held great promise for identifying an untapped global talent pool, only small anecdotal evidence exists of their success. And while generic online advertising may fail to reach targeted audiences, a combination of focus groups, website analytics, and mining of general trends is far likelier to produce the right communication strategy by subject matter and audience.

Admissions decision makers are, in turn, rapidly transitioning from more metric-driven models to more holistic standards. This is part of a broader redefinition of how admissions can serve the university: rather than simply being a gatekeeper that lets in the top numerical performers, admissions are increasingly understood as a key way to define the vision and values of the university. In the US context, admissions standards have most strongly been reshaped to create greater equity, diversity, and inclusion along lines of race, class, and gender, which has meant expanding the range of applicant experiences and talents that are valued. This same mindset could easily apply to internationalization, or whatever other value a university wishes to embody. Recruitment and admissions are no longer just about attracting top talent as narrowly defined by metrics, but about aligning that talent pool with institutional and societal priorities.



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