

May 2021

Graduate
Management
Admission
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Research Brief

**UK Business Schools Remain Attractive
to Prospective International Students**





International students comprise nearly two in three students enrolled in master’s level business programs at British business schools. As a result, Brexit uncertainties coupled with COVID-19 travel restrictions have been particularly severe for many business schools in the UK as international student mobility faced more disruption. Yet, data shows that demand for pursuing graduate business programs in the UK remains strong among international candidates.

[GMAC.com/Research](https://www.gmac.com/research)

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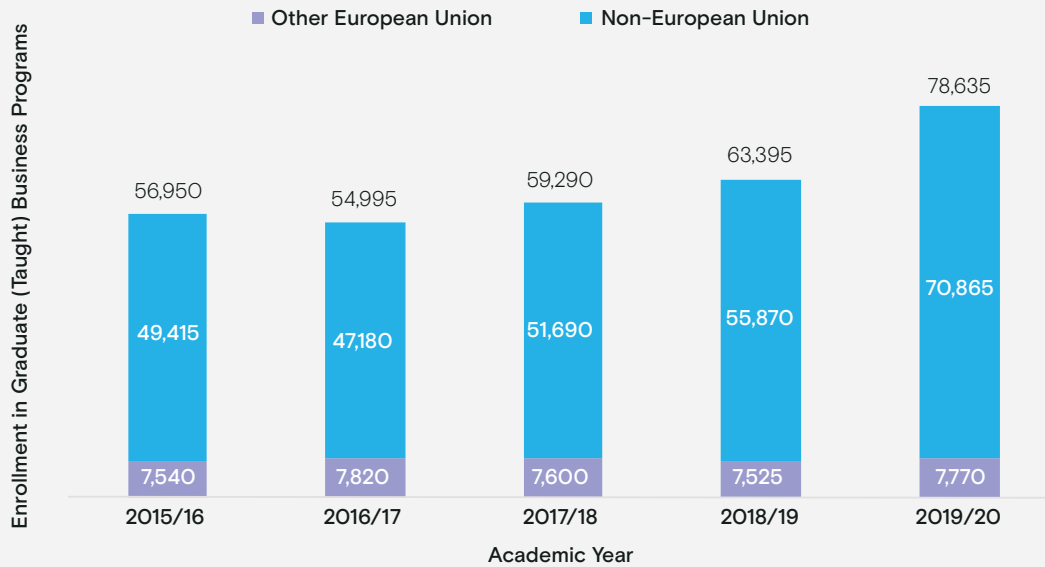
After more than four years of debates, negotiations, and uncertainties, the UK left the European Union on January 1, 2021. The impact of Brexit continues to shape the political, cultural, and economic landscape of the UK and its relationship with the world. During this time, universities have been adapting to the effects of Brexit on the attractiveness of the UK as a destination for international students. With the onset of COVID-19 and related safety concerns and travel bans, the barriers to international student mobility became higher. In this context, what are the prospects of the UK as a destination for graduate management education (GME)?

Data indicates that in spite of Brexit, British business schools fared well in the last few years at attracting international students for their master's-level business programs. Of the total 120,365 students pursuing graduate business programs (postgraduate programs in business/administrative studies) in the UK in 2019/2020, two in three students (65%) were international students, according to Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). Of these international students, students from non-European Union (non-EU) countries formed nine times as many students as from European Union (EU) countries in 2019/20.



Access the new research report “Enrolling the Incoming Class of 2021”

Student enrollment in master's level business programs in the UK, 2015/16 to 2019/20

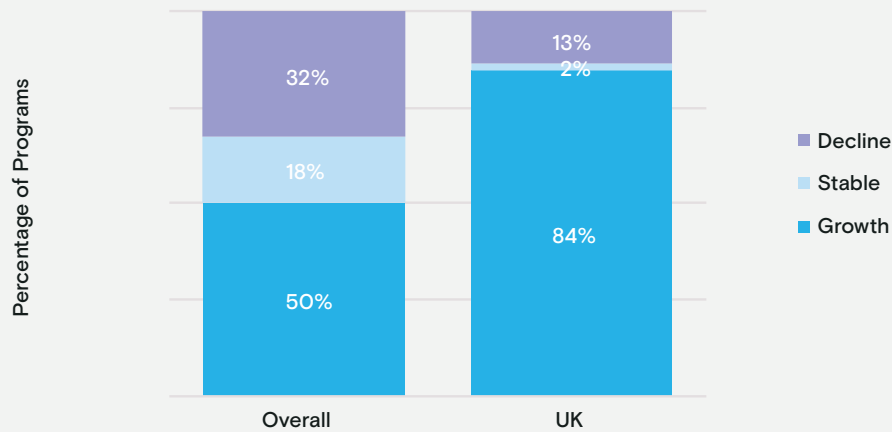


Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), UK

Interest in graduate business programs among EU students hasn't changed over the years and remained at about 7,500 students. In contrast, non-EU student enrollment grew by 50 percent between 2016/17 and 2019/20—a robust increase in demand despite the Brexit referendum. In addition to the established reputation of the British higher education system, one of the likely contributing factors is the unwelcoming rhetoric and immigration policies in the US after the 2016 Presidential elections. This might have redirected a segment of candidates who seem to have chosen the uncertainty of Brexit over the unwelcoming policies in the US.

With the onset of the global pandemic, British universities faced a new set of mobility disruptions that compounded the Brexit uncertainty. However, yet again, GME programs in the UK continued to remain attractive to international students and exhibited resilience in enrollment. The Application Trends Survey noted that UK business schools fared better than the overall respondents in the 2019-2020 admission season. In the 2020 survey, 84 percent of GME programs in the UK reported growth in international application compared to 50 percent of overall respondents.

Relative year-on-year change in applications from international candidates for graduate management programs, 2020

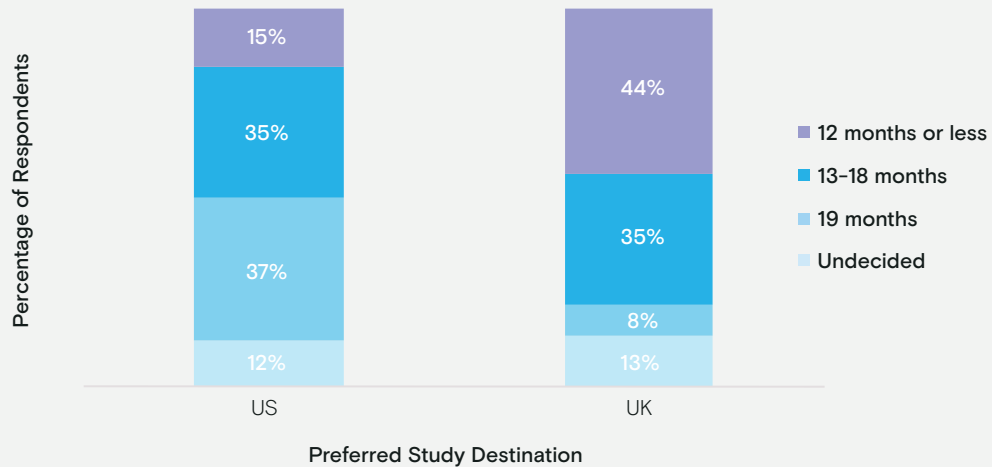


Source: 2020 Application Trends Survey, gmac.com/ApplicationTrends
Overall (n=982), UK (n=45)

Looking ahead in 2021, pandemic-induced economic uncertainty continues to reshape prospective students' choices and journeys. In this context, the UK as a destination got “a shot in the arm” with the announcement of the new graduate visa route and the points-based immigration system. Specifically, the Graduate Visa will allow international students to remain in the UK and work for two years after completing their studies without requiring sponsorship from employers. The Graduate Visa will offer students a pathway to gain experience, recover education costs, and find a route for a work visa that requires employer sponsorship. This approach is similar to the one-year Optional Practical Training program (with a two-year extension for STEM-designated programs) available to international students in the US.

New GMAC research based on mba.com Prospective Students Survey provides insights into the preferences and choices of candidates planning to enroll in 2021. According to the survey findings, one in four candidates (27%) from the Greater China region indicates that they prefer to study in the UK as compared to one in five candidates preferring to study in the US (21%). Also, 44 percent of international candidates preferring to study in the UK would like a program lasting 12 months or less compared to 15 percent of candidates preferring to study in the US. In addition, international candidates identify the “reputation of the educational system” as the top reason for choosing to study in the UK. This shows that shorter duration, high-quality programs offered in the UK are highly attractive for international candidates.

International candidates preferring to study in the UK opt for shorter duration of programs



International candidates planning to enroll in 2021 (n=715, Jul-Dec, 2020)
Source: mba.com Prospective Students Survey, GMAC.com/research

In sum, COVID-19 uncertainty coupled with the unfolding of Brexit disrupted the candidate journeys; however, the attractiveness of the UK as a destination for international students, especially from non-EU countries remains strong. The redirection of a segment of candidates from the US, availability of shorter duration, high-quality master's level business programs in the UK, and introduction of the two-year post-study work visa have strengthened the appeal of British business schools among international candidates.

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