

International Student's Perception of the University of Tampa

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A Graduate Student Perspective
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Abstract:- This study explains why international students from India and Nigeria choose The University of Tampa “a mid-sized private university in the southeastern part of United states” for their master’s program. Both qualitative and quantitative processes were used to explain the reason behind their decision-making process. The research sample comprised 15 participants from India and Nigeria who were either current graduates or alumni of the university. The research findings reveal that better technology, recognized degrees, better teaching standards, and better career opportunities are the factors for selecting the U.S. for higher studies. On the other hand, exact same tuition for international and national students, teaching standards, flexibility in the curriculum, electives, and location were the other factors that influenced them in selecting the University of Tampa for their master's program.

I. INTRODUCTION

Western countries are the first choice for most people to pursue higher education or reside permanently. These countries have built on their immigration policies by supporting diversity and welcoming immigrants. Immigrants are one of the significant contributors to population growth in the United States and the western world. Not only this, but they have also contributed significantly to the economic development of these countries. Immigrants are migrating for different reasons, some for better career opportunities and others for them to be able to compete in the digital space. The western world is known to have better technology than third-world countries, which has attracted immigrants from near and far for those willing to compete in the digital space. Also, an educational degree from a western country (USA, Canada, Australia, and European continents) marks a trademark of excellence and trust. The fact that immigrants are significant resources to the western nation has also encouraged the United States to introduce STEM programs designed for international students giving them additional years to stay in the United States.

➤ *The Problem Statement*

International graduate students are a unique group belonging to the so-called "creative class" (Florida, 2002) who travel from afar to pursue advanced education for the love of knowledge and personal or professional advancement. The University of Tampa is a private school, which concerns some students who believe a private school

cannot give them all they need in a university. The researchers are trying to understand why Indian and Nigerian students choose to apply for their master's at the University of Tampa and their perception of the school. There is the belief that students prefer public universities to private universities because their school fees are seen as high compared to public universities, and the University of Tampa is a private university.

➤ *The Purpose of the Study*

This study aims to understand the factors influencing Indian and Nigerian students in selecting The University of Tampa as their school of study for the Master's program. As technology in each country continues to become more advanced, it is necessary to understand what is driving international students to move from their lands to the United States. As per the facts mentioned on the university website, about 1,200 international students are enrolled for the Fall semester. The University of Tampa's statistics also shows that every year there is an average increase of 8.8% of international students, which is high compared to the other universities (college factual, n.d.). Understanding the student's motivation toward selecting a university might enable the administration to better understand the international student's needs and support them accordingly.

Understanding the driving force behind the decision-making process will allow the administration to better understand their needs and help them accordingly. The Council of Graduate Schools conducted a survey in 2021 that found that during the pandemic, the United States suffered a \$100 billion loss due to the number of international students dropping significantly. Therefore, it is of great significance for the education administration to understand the push and pull factors of international students to compete with other universities across the globe.

➤ *Research Question*

The number of International students at the University of Tampa is increasing yearly. This research aims to understand “why do international students choose the United States of America as their destination for a master’s program?” with a specific focus on “why Indian and Nigerian students are selecting the University of Tampa for their master’s program.

➤ *Hypothesis*

Due to the STEM program and low fee structure offered at The University of Tampa compared to other

universities, Indian and Nigerian students are more likely to select The University of Tampa.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This part focuses on the current studies available on international students in the United States and the push and pull factors for deciding the United States as their destination for pursuing higher education. It is arranged systematically and starts with a detailed explanation of the motivational factors of International students to study in the United States, followed by the challenges and barriers they face in the decision-making process.

➤ *Motivation to study in the United States*

Immigration is: “Entering and usually becoming established to come into a country of which one is not a native for permanent residence.” This type of movement—often to a more developed country—has become a global phenomenon. There are several socio-economic and socio-political reasons to migrate from a home country to a host country. These include opportunities, poverty, unemployment, conflicts, threats, and political captivity (Acharya, B. B. 2016). The decision to study in any country apart from home is a complex process. Although it might seem easier to some due to the many international students at various institutes, it involves many complicated steps. In addition to taking time and expense, this choice is highly relevant and risky, requiring consideration of a wide selection of options (Eder, Smith, & Pitts, 2010).

The "Push Pull Model" is the most effective and often-used analysis method in the literature on international mobility. In this sector, this paradigm is now considered to be fundamental. In contrast to pull factors, which are particular to possible host countries and institutions, push factors foster a generalized interest in international education but do not provide individuals with a clear orientation. There has been a discussion of literature in the context of decision-making variables that affect the selection of the destination country and the host institution (Wadhwa, 2016).

➤ *International Student Destination Choice*

“Immigration is also sometimes posited as one avenue to address specialist–advanced ICT-related labor and skills shortages in the economy (Truong, N. K., & Sweetman, A. 2018).” Bhati and Anderson explained in their study that Indian students primarily went abroad to study to mingle with students from other nations, nationalities, and cultures and get international experience. One of the primary motivations for students to learn in western countries was the possibility of finding a job there once their studies were over. Their study's findings further support the idea that students continue to place a high value on education quality and that, as a result, American colleges are regarded as high-quality institutions. An intriguing conclusion from the focus group was that Indian students believe Western countries' teaching techniques are more effective than the pedagogy used in Indian schools. The academic programs at foreign universities were thought to impart knowledge and abilities

that graduates might utilize in the workplace. Therefore, higher education institutions should strive to offer students more experiential learning possibilities to draw them to their campuses (Bhati & Anderson, 2012).

Eder, Smith, and Pitts further explained the six factors influencing an international student's decision-making process. These factors are (1) familiarity with and awareness of the host nation, (2) personalized referrals, (3) concerns about costs; (4) the environment; (5) closeness to the host country; and (6) social ties (Eder, Smith, & Pitts, 2010).

The student and their families are given information on the probable destination country to make locating the report easier, influencing their knowledge and awareness. It is crucial to have a deeper grasp of the host country where they intend to study and the nation's reputation for academic achievement and quality. Personal recommendations are those made by parents and other student relatives regarding the host nation. Cost concerns include the cost of tuition, housing, food, social, and transportation expenses, among others. The student must know about any financial aid programs and potential employment opportunities on campus. The location's climate and geographic setting serve as the fourth motivator, the environment. Geographic proximity describes a country's proximity to a student's home country. The sixth and last component is social connections, which aids overseas students in knowing friends or relatives who have traveled to or attended school in that location (Rodriguez, 2018). Apart from the quality of education offered in western countries, these six factors impact international students deciding which country to study in.

➤ *Challenges Faced by International Students in the Process*

Only so many events add barriers to international students in the United States. Numerous obstacles may prevent international students from attending American universities for higher education. A student cannot just decide to study abroad; they must give the decision careful thought and consider all the different obstacles they will encounter. Some of these obstacles include not speaking the host country's language well, needing more financial resources, getting a visa or Form I-20, not realizing where they will live, and needing help with visas and official paperwork. Another difficulty is the social and academic isolation from poor English language ability. The impact of language on students' experiences while studying abroad is a barrier that affects whether they choose to apply, whether they are accepted, and how their journey will be (Rodriguez, 2018). Since some international students are accustomed to living in a city setting in their own country, they prefer to attend a graduate program in a big metropolis. Safety, prejudice, tolerance (being accepted), diversity, and multiculturalism in a community and within an institution are some other concerns for international students (Chen, 2006).

➤ *Methodology Data Collection*

The push factors that led Indian and Nigerian students to choose the University of Tampa for their master's degree was collected and examined using a mixed technique in this research study. A questionnaire was developed for this study to gather quantitative data. Two sorts of survey questions were used, including Likert scale and open-ended. A reliability test was conducted to ensure that the survey questions were reliable, valid, and usable. Tests were used to discover errors and identify opportunities for improvement. For the testing phase, a rating scale was used to test the effectiveness of the survey questions. The scale used was 1 - unacceptable, 2 - progressing, and 3 - excellent. The survey questions were written on an excel sheet and were shared with six evaluators, and they rated the questions from 1-3. The reason why students chose the University of Tampa for their master's program was covered in the first part of the survey. In contrast, questions addressing the difficulties faced by international students were included in the second part. These inquiries enabled us to investigate how overseas students view the University of Tampa (UT). In this research, 100 participants were invited to respond to a survey on the criteria they used to decide on UT for their master's degree. To maintain anonymity the survey was distributed via Google Forms to "maintaining anonymity". A link to the survey was sent to respondents via a Whats App group, along with the survey itself. We downloaded the results data set from Google forms once the data had been gathered. No personally identifiable data was collected, such as a name or email address. The Google Forms system and a Whats App group were used to distribute the questionnaires. There were about 100 graduate students who received the survey. However, only 15 students responded to the study. Qualitatively, the

researchers used Surveys and Interview.

➤ *Data Analysis*

The research question "why Indian and Nigerian students are selecting the University of Tampa for their master's program?" was addressed by analyzing the data collected from the respondents. Descriptive statistics were used to examine the surveys to get the frequency count and percentages quantitatively. Researchers first examined the survey's cumulative results before beginning to evaluate the data. Each survey question's responses were totaled, and a percentage number was assigned. Making numerical comparisons was made simple by adding bar graphs and tables to the information summary. The researchers determined the highest and lowest values by looking at the bar graphs and the tabulated data to make crucial comparisons.

Qualitatively, researchers reviewed participants' responses to the open-ended question in the survey and interviews and noted the critical parallels and divergences between their responses to assess the data acquired from the interviews. The researchers then examined these parallels and divergences to formulate conclusions.

III. RESULTS/FINDINGS

It has been discovered that the decision-making spectrum involves a multistage process. First, a clear decision must be made between domestic and international schooling. There are numerous push and pull elements that predominantly affect this period. A total of 15 participants—including responses from students from Nigeria and India—were submitted.

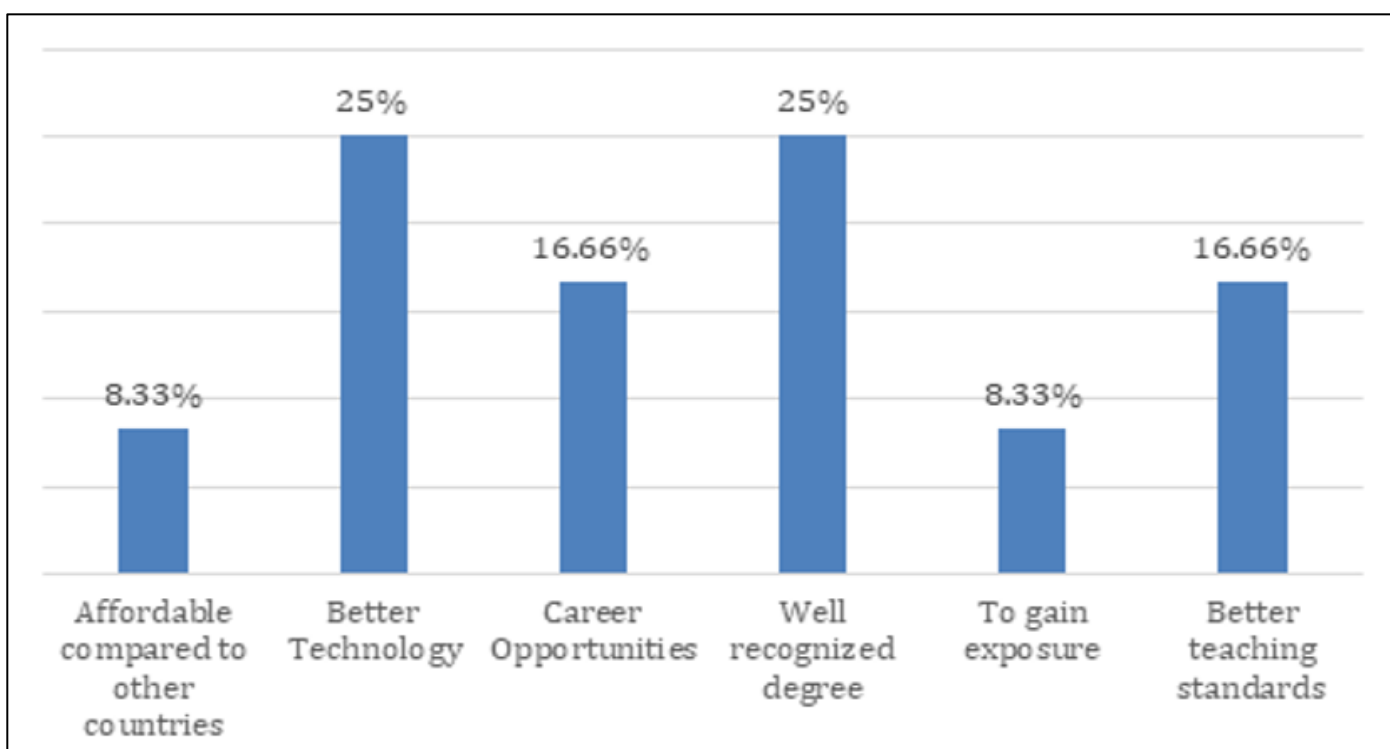


Fig 1 The Illustration Shows why Participants Chose the United States as their Country of Study

Figure 1 shows that almost all international students pursue their studies in the United States to have a better future. America is renowned for offering excellent living conditions and employment opportunities. Everyone's definition of what a better future means to them may vary. Like how they selected their trip, each participant had their view of the United States. The usage of superior technology

at US institutions, which results in higher IT skills, improved career chances following course completion-either at their residence location or in the US, better teaching quality at US universities, and exposure to the world are some of the other push factors. 25% of the participants claimed that a US degree is widely respected and accepted worldwide.

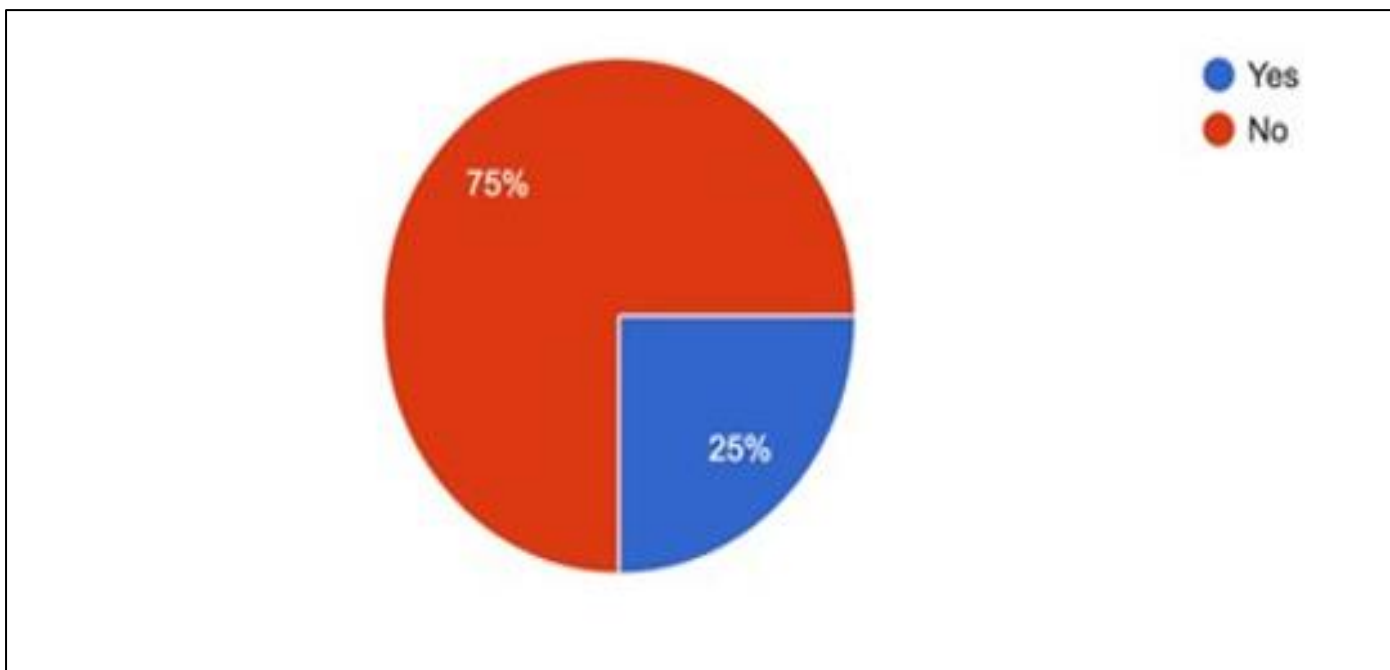


Fig 2 The Illustrations Show Participants with Families or Friends who Attended the University of Tampa in the Past

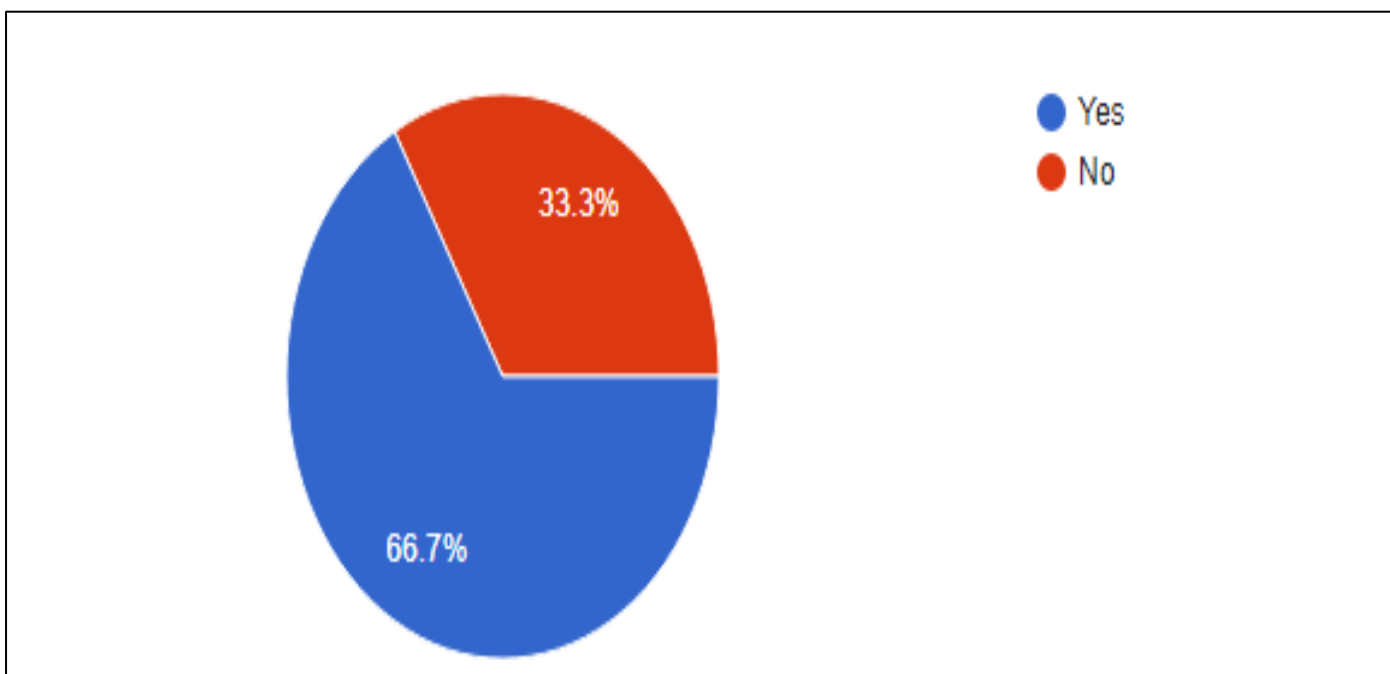


Fig 3 The Illustration Shows if the University of Tampa was the First Choice when Applying to Schools in the USA.

The choice of the university is a priority for international students after deciding on the location of their studies. Hours of web research or advice from a professional are required for this selection procedure. It is a complex undertaking because practically all students believe the

university they choose will significantly impact their future. Although three-fourths of the participants stated that no one in their immediate family or circle of friends has ever attended UT, 66.7% chose it as their top choice when applying to universities in the United States.

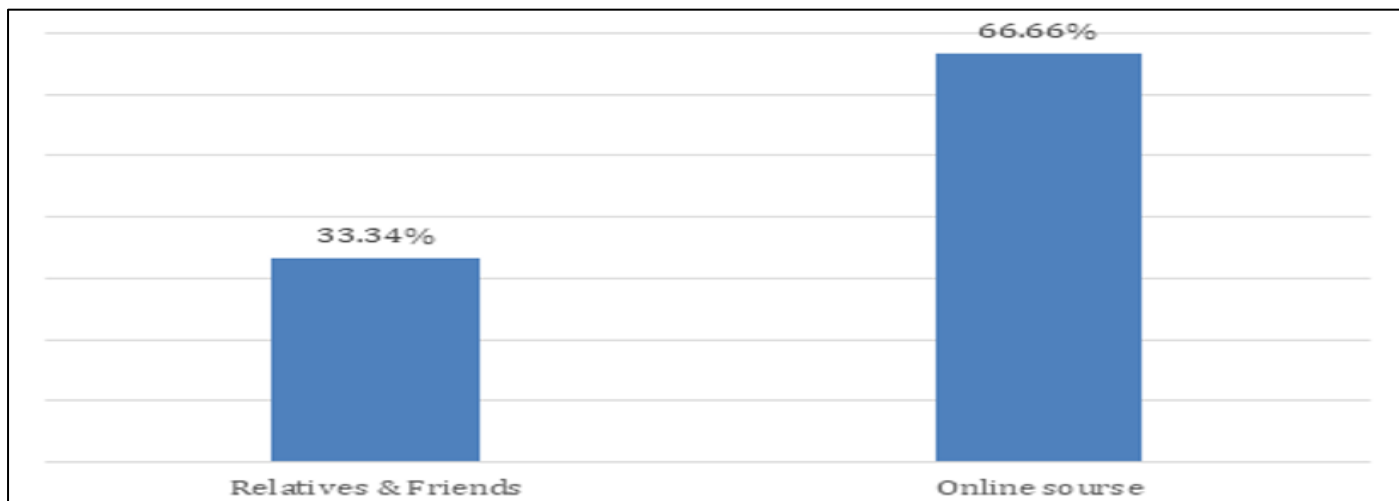


Fig 4 The Illustrations show how Participants Heard about the University of Tampa.

➤ *How did you hear about UT?*

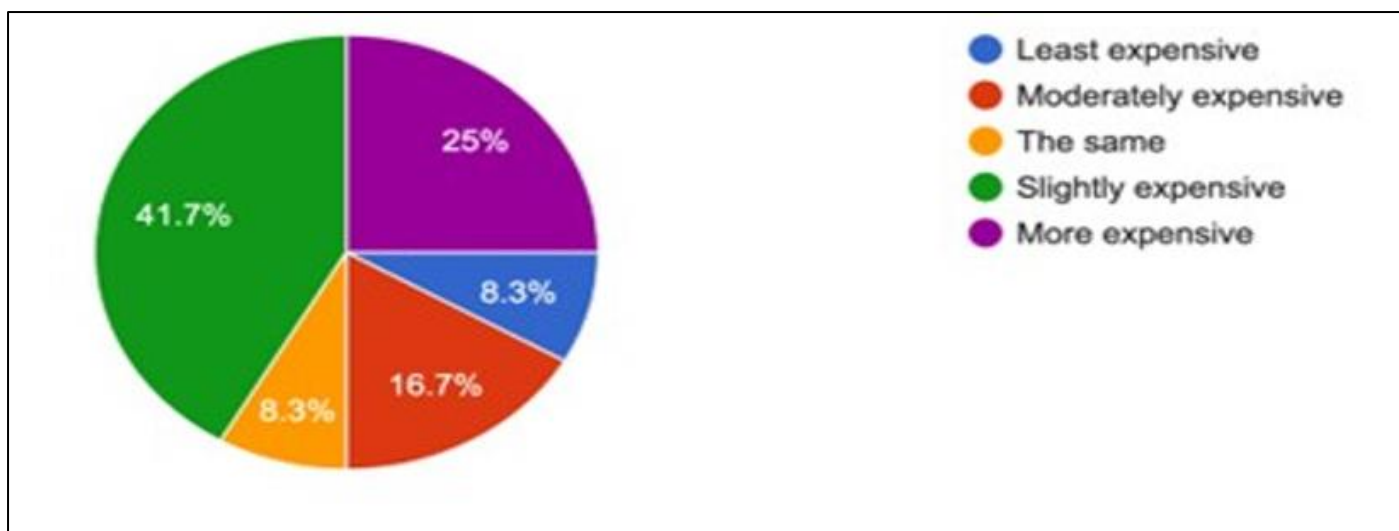


Fig 5 The Illustration Shows a Scale of 1-5 on how Participants rated the Tuition Fee for the University of Tampa Compared to their Home Country.

While the remaining individuals discovered UT from friends or family, 66.6% of the participants found their university through online search engines. Although the cost

of attendance is the same for international and domestic students at UT, 66.7% of the participants believe that UT's tuition is higher than universities in their home country.

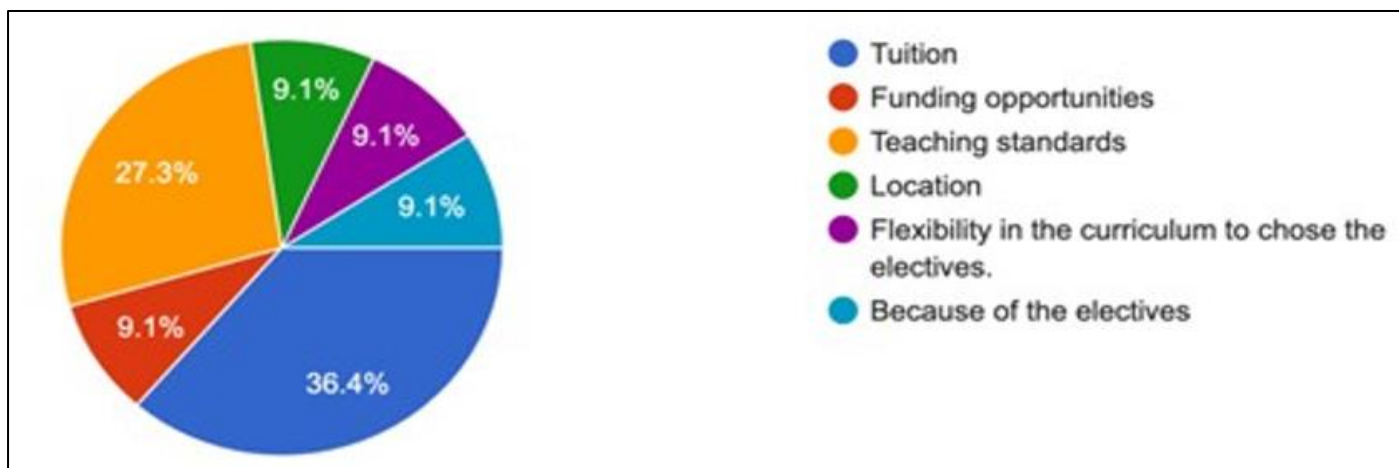


Fig 6 The Illustration Shows the Deciding Factor in Choosing the University of Tampa.

Figure 6 demonstrates that the tuition cost and academic qualities were the primary deciding factors in choosing the University of Tampa. 36.4% of the participants claimed that UT felt like a better fit financially for them because the tuition costs for domestic and international

students are the same. Compared to other colleges, UT's teaching standards are superb, according to 27.3% of the respondents. A small fraction said they chose UT because of the curriculum flexibility, available electives, location, and financial opportunities.

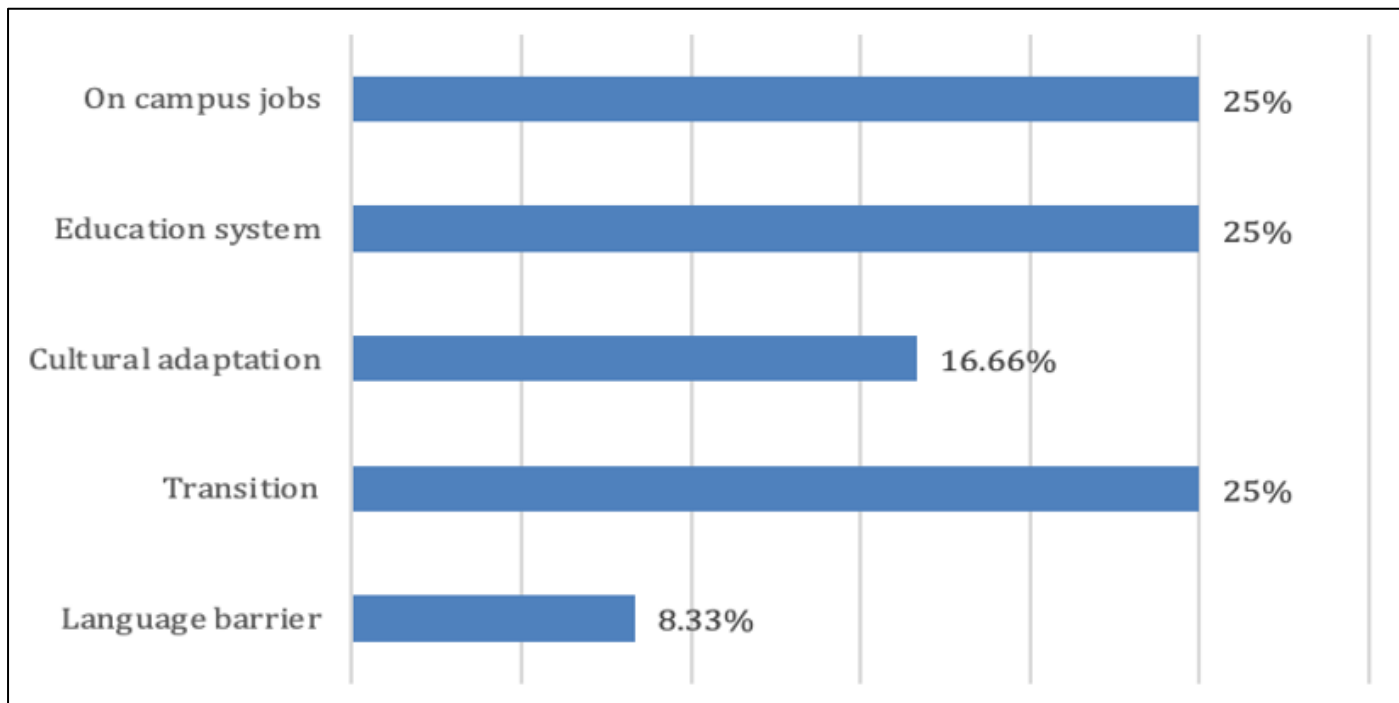


Fig 7 The Illustration Shows the Challenges Faced as an International Student at the University of Tampa.

It might be difficult for overseas students to adjust to a new environment and culture as they face numerous obstacles, and sometimes these obstacles have an impact. The on-campus employment prospects, transition, and educational system were the three main issues the overseas graduate students raised at UT. Some students found adjusting to the United States generally different teaching and learning culture challenging. It took much work for them to obtain employment on campus despite their years of experience. Applicants who applied for several positions claimed that the departments have yet to get back to them. Other vital factors that significantly affect acclimating to a new location include finding a home that fits their budget, making acquaintances, cultural differences, and overcoming language barriers.

➤ *Interview Reflections*

The interviews were conducted face-to-face at the Graduate Health and Science (GHS) building, Classroom 107, at the University of Tampa. The participants were informed that the interview would take 10-15 minutes and were asked to choose a time when they would have no distractions. The interview took 10 minutes and went exceptionally well. The interview was recorded via my iPhone voice note memos and stored in a cloud system as a backup. The participants were informed of the recording and happily agreed to it. The researchers also took handwritten notes of patterns and trends I saw forming from question to question. The participants were highly informative and provided thorough responses.

These questions correlated with our research questions which bode exceptionally well for the study. Why do international students choose the US as their destination for master’s program?” with a specific focus on “why Indian and Nigerian students are selecting the University of Tampa for their master’s program? Moreover, the participants were able to provide thorough responses with examples of their deciding factors in choosing the University of Tampa.

The participants were alumni and current graduate students. The finding from the participants is that in terms of weather, low tuition costs and future opportunities are the keys to why international students choose the United States and the University of Tampa. The participants also went further to explain that tuition costs for international and local students are the same, which was one major pull factor in choosing the University of Tampa. They also believe that an individual program of study is the future and that an education from the United States can give them that leverage for future opportunities.

IV. LIMITATIONS

Ideally, the quality of this study could be strengthened by conducting the research with a broader array of in-depth interviews and surveys. The research is less in-depth due to the limited timeline available to conduct this study and would have liked more time to conduct a broader scope.

V. IMPLICATIONS/CONCLUSION

The survey results and group interviews confirm that Indian and Nigerian students come to the United States to have a better living standard. They also believe that the teaching standards of the universities in the United States are better than their home country. This eventually leads to a better career after completing the study. Friends and family have an essential role when it comes to suggesting universities abroad. These could be the current students in the various universities, alums, or friends back in their home country. Apart from the above, online sources such as Google and social media platforms play an essential role in spreading the word about the university. Many students come across the courses offered by the university while scrolling down through social media or searching using the google search engine. Before deciding on the university, international students look at various factors such as tuition costs, teaching standards, location, and electives. The cost of living and tuition in the United States is already high compared to countries like India and Nigeria; thus, the overall tuition cost is one of the main factors that international students look at while deciding about a university. As per the statistics found during this study, International students at the University of Tampa are increasing because of the exact same tuition fee for both National and International students. The University of Tampa is also recognized for good teaching standards, and another factor international students look at while deciding the universities. The minor factors include funding opportunities, location, curriculum flexibility, and the course's electives offered. It is not easy for international students to move to a new country and get settled for any purpose. Various hardships come as a result of their decision to study abroad. This transition phase comes with various difficulties, such as difficulty finding budget-friendly accommodation was the biggest concern. Although a basic knowledge of English is required to study in the United States, many students find it challenging to adjust to the new environment due to this language barrier. This also makes it hard for them to adjust socially and to make friends. Some students need help to adapt to the university's teaching standards in the United States. Another biggest concern for them was finding an on-campus job at the university. Given the low cost of living in their native countries, it is difficult for the Indian and Nigerian population to maintain their standard of living in any western country. Considering the high cost of living in the United States, the burden of tuition fees, and various other expenses, most international students look for ways to earn so they can be financially independent. Cultural differences and adapting to that is another factor that the international students expressed.

VI. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The pressure on institutions to meet student demands is rising, which is a corollary. Institutions need to know students' needs, desires, and expectations to accomplish this

(Wilkins, Balakrishnan, Huisman, 2011). The pull and push factors have been the subject of extensive research. Now is the moment to think about how to keep and bring in more foreign students to the United States. This can be accomplished by paying close attention to the issues that foreign students encounter while studying in the United States and then outlining solutions, if not for all of them, then at least for some of them. Considering that international students make significant economic contributions to the United States, caring for them will not only be in their best interests but also that of the nation as a whole.

➤ Ethical Considerations

The Participants were notified of the research study's objectives, scope, and sequence and that their participation in this research study is purely voluntary. Surveys were anonymously returned, and the interviewed participants have not been named. So as not to interfere with the research process, participants were interviewed at the Graduate Health and Science building (GHS) classroom 107 within the University of Tampa. All the applicable guidelines set forth by the Institutional Review Board were honored to protect the participants' privacy and the objectivity of this study.

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APPENDIX

A. Appendix 1 – Survey Questions

➤ Survey Questions

- Why did you choose the United States as your country of study?
- How did you hear about the University of Tampa?
- On a scale of 1-5, how would you rate the tuition fee for The University of Tampa compared to your home country?
- 1-Least expensive, 2- moderately expensive, 3-The same, 4- slightly expensive, 5- More expensive,
- Was the University of Tampa your first choice when applying to schools in the USA?

✓ Yes

✓ No

- Do you have families or friends who attended the University of Tampa in the past?

✓ Yes

✓ No

- What was the deciding factor in choosing the University of Tampa for you?

✓ Tuition

✓ Teaching standards

✓ Funding opportunities

✓ Others: (Please specify)

- What challenges do you face as an international student at the University of Tampa?

B. Appendix 2 - Interview Protocol

➤ Interview Protocol

This study aims to understand the decision-making process of Indian and Nigerian students in choosing the University of Tampa for their master's program. The participants for this interview are graduate Indian alumni of the University of Tampa. Google form will be posted on the Indian community what's app group asking about the alumni's willingness to participate in the interview. If the alumni agree to volunteer, they will be asked to fill in the next section about their preference for the interview method (zoom or face-to-face) and availability (date & time). Responses from the google form will be used to recruit the participants. The participants will be interviewed either online using the Zoom application or face-to-face based on availability. All face-to-face interviews will be conducted in Graduate Health and Science(GHS) classroom 107 or in the seating area in the GHS building at the University of Tampa.

This study involves minimal risks as the participants are not engaged in physical, psychological, or social harm. The personal data collected will be encrypted as soon as possible, and access will be limited to researchers A & B.

➤ Interview Guide:

The consent form will be shared with the participant, and the document's content will be read out loud for the participants.

Thank you for your time volunteering in our research study. This research aims to understand the decision-making process of Indian students in selecting the University of Tampa for their master's program. You have been chosen because you are an alum of the university and may have a perception of the University of Tampa. You have the right to decline to participate, take a break, skip any questions, terminate the interview, and withdraw from this study at any time without any adverse effect on your relationship with the university or your place of work.

Although the result of this study could be published, no information that leads to your identification will be included. We appreciate your time with us. Before we begin the interview, Do you have any questions for me? (*Pause*) Do I have your consent to start and record the interview process?

- Why did you choose the United States as your country of study?

- Why did you choose the University of Tampa?
- What was your experience as an international student at the University of Tampa?
- Did you think you got good educational value from the University of Tampa?
- ✓ Never,
- ✓ Rarely,
- ✓ Sometimes,
- ✓ Often,
- ✓ Always
- What are the perceptions among your friends/colleagues when you talk about the University of Tampa?
- What challenges did you encounter as an international student when you arrived at The University of Tampa?

➤ *Interview Questions: Graduate Students*

- Why did you choose the United States as your country of study?
- How did you hear about the University of Tampa?
- ✓ Family
- ✓ Friends
- ✓ The University website
- ✓ Others (Specify)
- What made you choose your program of study?
- What was the deciding factor in choosing the University of Tampa for you? Tuition/ Teaching standards/ Funding opportunities/Other (specify)
- On a scale of 1-5, how would you rate the tuition fee for The University of Tampa?
- ✓ Least expensive
- ✓ Moderately expensive
- ✓ The same
- ✓ Slightly expensive
- ✓ More expensive
- What is your perception of the University of Tampa as an international student?
- What challenges do you face as an international student at the University of Tampa?

➤ *Closing Script:*

Thank you again for your willingness to participate in our research study on understanding the push factors of Indian and Nigerian students in selecting the University of Tampa for their master's program. We greatly value your time and the input shared by you. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me. Again, thank you for your time and effort in making this research study possible.

C. Appendix 3 - Informed Consent

➤ *Informed Consent*

- **Topic:** To understand why Indian and Nigerian students select the University of Tampa for their master's program.
- **Responsible Investigators:** Prity Choudhary and Tolulope Alo
- You have been asked to participate in the research that aims to understand the decision-making process of Indian and Nigerian students in selecting the University of Tampa for their master's program.
- You have been chosen because you are either a current graduate student or university alumni and may have a perception of the University of Tampa.

- You have the right to decline to participate, take a break, skip any questions, terminate the interview/survey, and withdraw from this study at any time without any adverse effect on your relationship with the university or your place of work.
- Although the result of this study could be published, no information that leads to your identification will be included.
- The personal data collected will be encrypted as soon as possible, and access will only be limited to the researchers.
- The interview will be recorded on a smartphone or the Zoom application. The interview is estimated to last between 10-15 minutes.
- Questions about this research may be addressed to Prity Choudhary by email, at prity.choudhary@spartans.ut.edu, or my co-researcher, Tolulope Alo, by tolulope.alo@spartans.ut.edu.
- Your consent is being given voluntarily. You may refuse to participate in the survey.
- You will receive a copy of this consent form for your records.

➤ *Thank you for your time and effort in making this research study possible. Do you wish to participate?*

- Yes
- No