



THE INTERVIEW OF A LIFETIME:

An analysis of visa denials and international student flows to the U.S.

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Overview

Contributing robust evidence and analysis to the current calls-to-action for a comprehensive national strategy to attract and retain international students in the U.S., this new analysis of visa denial trends provides critical insights into the impact of visa adjudication on international student flows to the U.S. The analysis examines these trends by students' world regions between 2015 and 2022, a period that captures data over three U.S. Administrations and both pre- and post-pandemic mobility.

The overarching goal of the visa denials analysis is to bring an evidence-based focus to an issue that to date has been widely reported through individual narratives and anecdotal reports: that students from certain world regions—the Global South¹ as a whole, and the African continent in particular—are denied student visas at disproportionately higher rates than students from other world regions. Our analysis provides evidence that this is indeed the case.

Context on Student Visa Denial Rates:

It has long been argued that students are denied visas due to a combination of lapses on their part, including being ill-prepared for the visa interview; not being able to demonstrate a strong connection to the homeland (and thus triggering concerns about ineligibility for a nonimmigrant F-1 student visa); and not having adequate funds to support their studies in the United States. Additionally, concerns have been raised about fraud, but it is important to note that the students are often the victims, rather than perpetrators, of fraud. For example, high visa denial rates have reportedly resulted in African students falling victim to con schemes by fraudulent actors who offer false guarantees for securing a visa².

For many students, the few, tense minutes of a visa interview can define or confine their future.

Despite these issues, testimonials from international students and discussion forums of groups that serve international students are rife with concerns that students who have met every admissions and financial requirement and are seemingly well-prepared for their high-stakes visa interview, are nonetheless denied visas.

Higher education officials who are eager to have these talented students on their campuses share perceptions that it is harder for students in certain countries to acquire a visa than in other countries. Some even report

that students from some African nations, for example, are more likely to receive a student visa when applying in a non-African country, such as Australia, to study in the U.S.

Through this first-ever analysis, we aim to engage all relevant stakeholders whose work impacts international students in a collective and constructive dialogue around visa-related barriers for international students, while also seeking accountability for persistent gaps and systemic issues that have largely been ignored.

¹ Used throughout this report and first coined in 1969, the term "Global South" is the more current and widely accepted usage for terms such as developing countries, least-developed countries, underdeveloped countries, low-income economies, or the out-of-favor term third world countries.

² <https://thepienews.com/news/high-visa-rejection-blamed-for-con-schemes-targeting-african-students/> and <https://nation.africa/kenya/news/how-students-were-conned-out-of-sh156m-in-college-scam-3952348>



Until now, no definitive data has been published to substantiate these perceptions and concerns, or to reveal the scale and complexity of a problem that can potentially have a wide-reaching impact on the ability of the U.S. to attract global talent.

We examine patterns of visa denials for all world regions, but include a focus on Africa for two reasons: (1) most anecdotal reports hitherto point to visa denials being greatest for African students, (2) the African continent constitutes the largest and fastest growing pool of youth and future global talent whose ability to study in the U.S. has implications both for African countries and for the U.S.

Framing Questions

- Do patterns of visa denials emerge from certain countries and regions which ultimately negatively affect the number of students who are able to study in the U.S.?
- Do these trends of visa denials impact the diversity of international students in the U.S.? If so, how and where do these trends fit within current strategic and inclusive enrollment conversations in American higher education and how do they align with the goals of the Joint Statement issued by the US Departments of State and Education which state that, "...the presence of international students, researchers, and scholars on U.S. campuses enhances diversity, contributes to academic vibrancy, and fosters creativity and innovation in the sciences and the arts."

- Are visa denials a quantifiable indicator of unmet student demand and if so, how does this relate to the existing capacity of consular services and student visa appointments?
- If there is a potential gap between the the large demand from certain countries and visa issuance rates, is this detrimental to the ability of the U.S. to enroll a substantially larger and more diverse population of international students?

Data Sources

Our analysis is based on the following public and proprietary data sources:

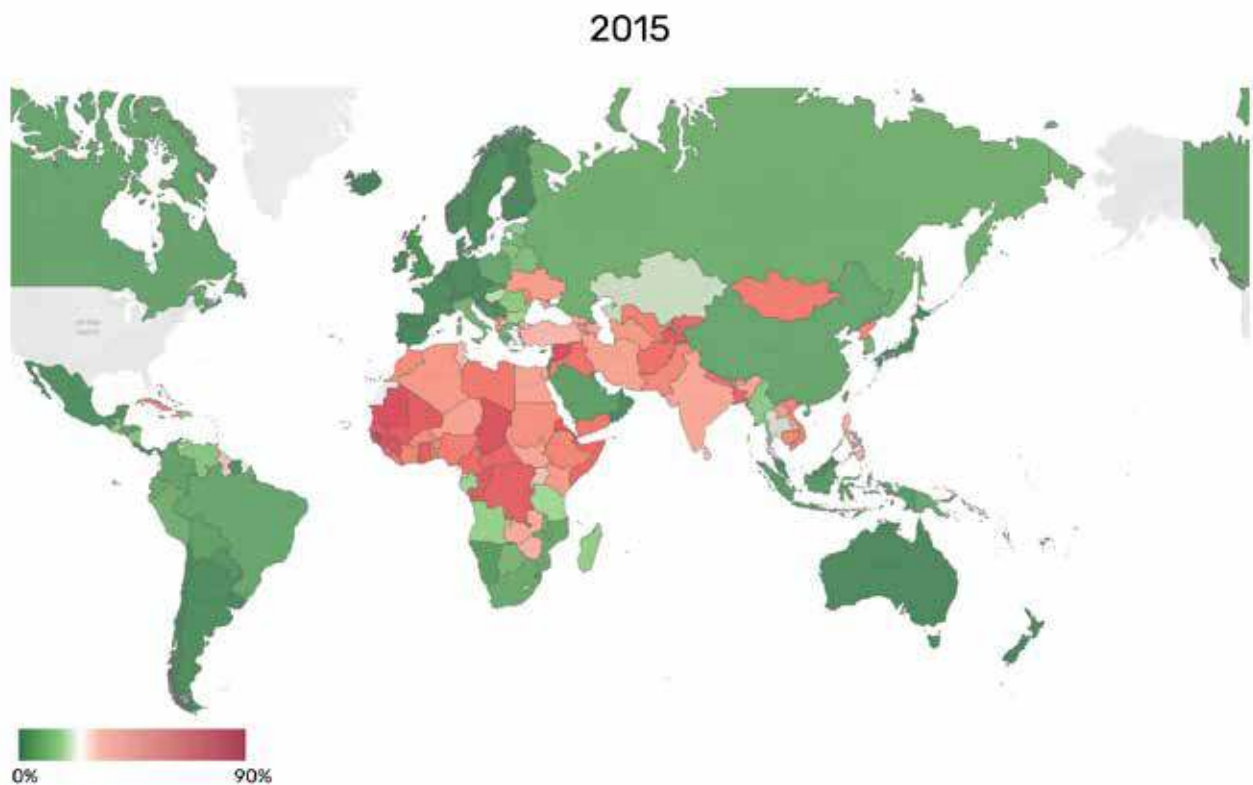
- F-1 Visa Refusals data obtained by Shorelight from the U.S. government through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request submitted in August 2022. Covering 2015-2022, the data includes student visa refusal rates by world region and by year³. Additional demographic data on students who were denied visas was not available. The appendix contains further details on how denial rates were calculated.
- F-1 Visa Approvals public data available through the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Consular Services.
- International Student Flows data available through the IIE Open Doors project.
- Global Tertiary Enrollment Data and Projections available through global data sources such as the UN and the World Bank.

³ F-1 Visa Refusals data obtained from the U.S. government through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request submitted in August 2022.

Visa denials to study in the U.S. grew significantly from 2015-2022, especially for Global South countries

Key Findings

Overall, F-1 student visa denials around the world have grown significantly between 2015 and 2022, a period that also reflects a pre- and post-pandemic scenario. In 2015, higher rates of F-1 visa denials were primarily clustered in Africa (with the exception of South Africa), South Asia, and parts of the Middle East. But by 2022, F-1 visa denials were seen across much of the world, with the exception of Australia, China, Brazil, South Africa and some European countries. The most notable shift was for South America, where these visa denials more than doubled (10 vs. 24%) during this time period. Regardless of these shifts, and discussed in greater detail below, denial rates for African countries remained the highest during this eight-year period.



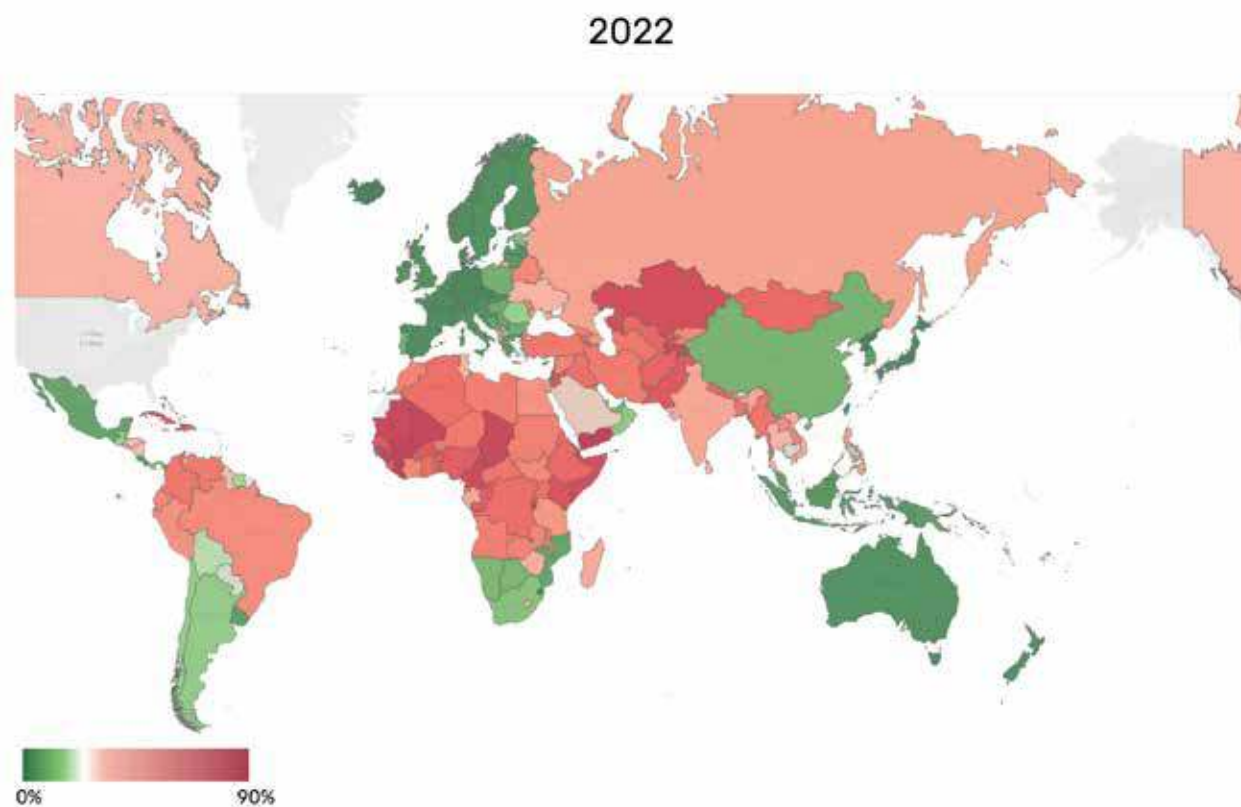
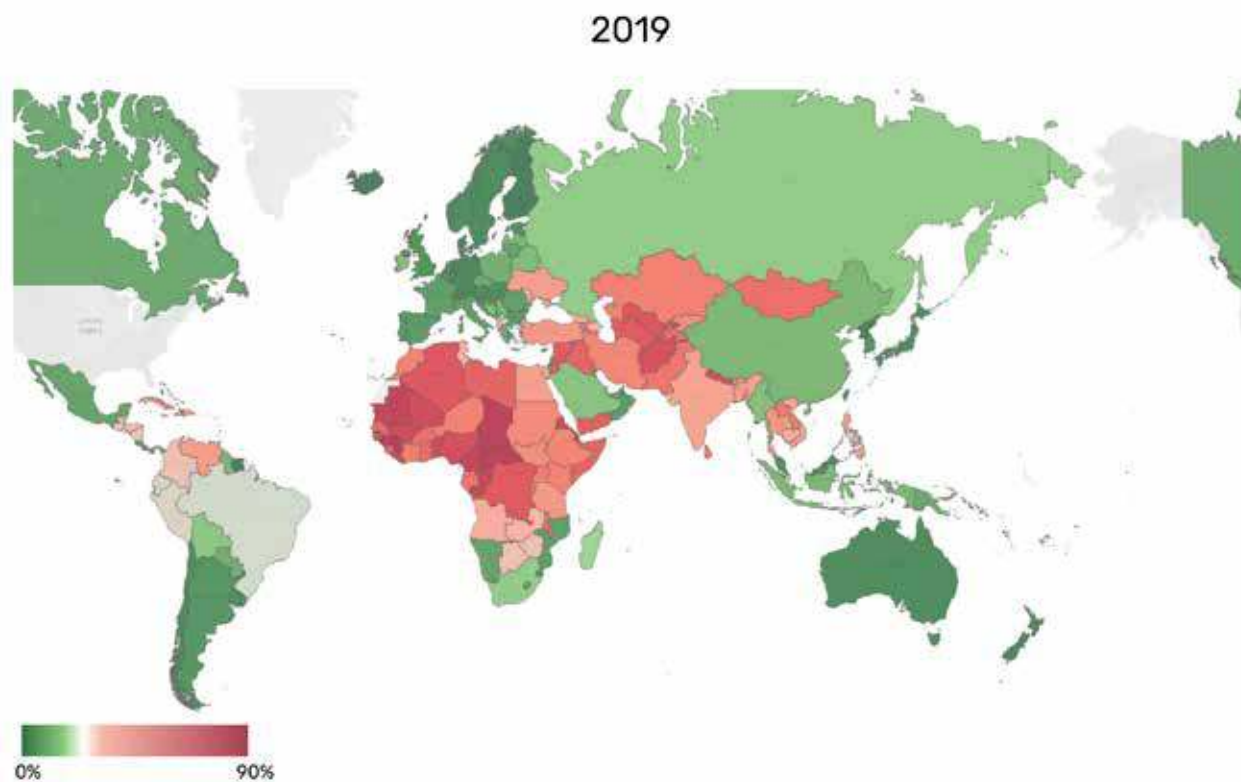


Figure 1. Adjusted Refusal Rates By Country (2015, 2019, 2022)

The sharp rise in denials globally during this period could be due to a combination of reasons, including increased scrutiny by consular officers of financial documents and students' post-graduation plans, leading to concerns about ineligibility for a non-immigrant F-1 student visa which requires that students return home after study completion; changes in consular staffing, guidance, or training; increased global demand for visas, or other reasons.

While it is not clear how or why the COVID-19 pandemic would affect visa denials, it does need to be noted that part of the period covered by the analysis (2020-2022) has coincided with the pandemic. During this time there was an overall slowing of student mobility, reduced staff capacity at U.S. consulates around the world, and high deferrals amongst students who were granted admission to U.S. institutions but were either

unable to or chose not to attend. However, the exact interplay of these factors and whether and how they might have affected denial rates is unclear. For the purposes of our analysis we assume that what a visa denial constitutes remains the same before and after the pandemic.

The eight years covered by the analysis (2015-2022) also coincide with three different governments and administrations in the U.S. and while by no means confirming a correlation or causality, the current analysis nonetheless evokes the question of whether fluctuating denial rates over this period are a reflection of national policies and an overall negative public narrative toward international students and immigrants in general, especially those from certain countries and regions.

The African continent has, by far, the highest visa denial rate than any other world region, and it is steadily rising.

The remainder of our analysis focuses on the African continent which – with the exception of four countries in southern Africa – has by far the highest visa denial rate than any other world region. In 2015, Africa had a visa denial rate of 44% as compared with 30% for students from Asia, and a low of 7% and 8%, respectively, for students from South America and Europe.

As the accompanying figure demonstrates, student visa refusal rates for Africa were consistently higher than other world regions for each of the eight years included in our analysis.

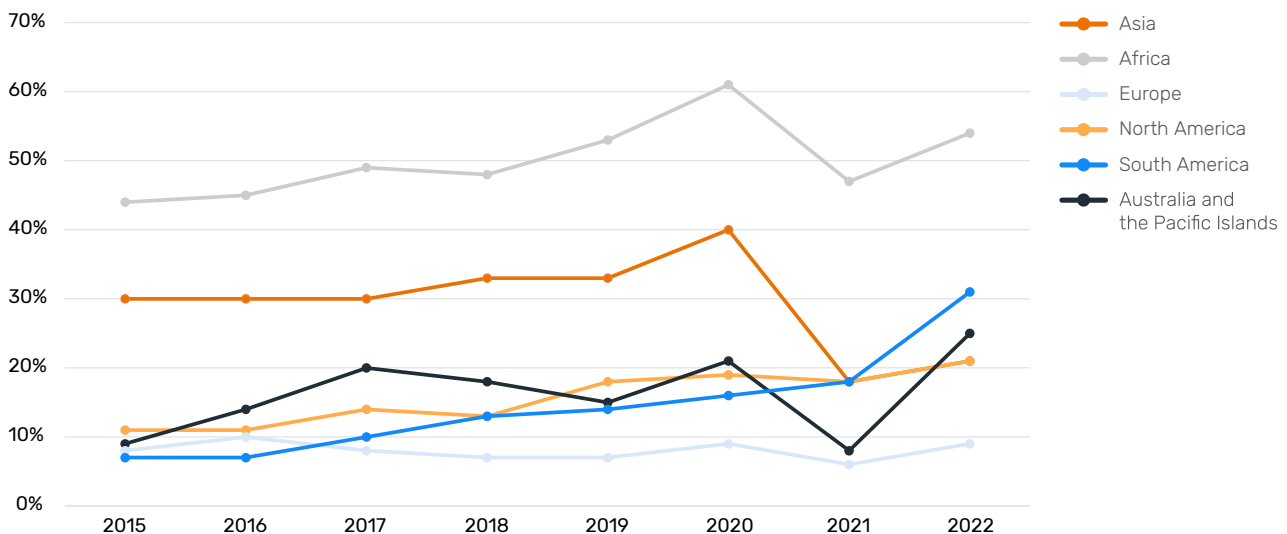


Figure 2. Adjusted Refusal Rates By Continent (2015-2022)

Recent data available from MPOWER Financing for international students who obtain financing to study in the U.S. reveals a similar pattern⁴. Of 3,000 students from Sub-Saharan Africa admitted for graduate studies to a top U.S. university in 2022, only about 60% were granted a student visa to the United States despite being admitted and having secured the required funding. This translates into a denial rate of 40% as compared with denial rates of 30% for India and 10% for students from China and Brazil.

MPOWER further reports that first-hand accounts from African students suggest a range of barriers related to the visa interview process, from securing visa interview slots in the first place, to having to travel to a second country due to the unavailability of adequate interview slots in Nigerian cities, and to ultimately being “held to a

higher standard by U.S. immigration authorities than their peers from other emerging markets.”

Disaggregating the F-1 refusals data further and looking at the sub-regions of Africa reveals a striking variation: denial rates for the four countries that constitute southern Africa are substantially and consistently lower than for other regions of Africa.

In 2022, the visa denial rates for central, eastern, western, and northern Africa ranged between 48% and 71%, but were at only 16% for southern Africa. The visa denial rates for southern Africa are in fact among the lowest in the world, paralleling those of Europe. If southern Africa is excluded from the mix, the denial rate for the rest of Africa increases to 57% as compared with 54% overall.

African Regional Refusal Rates By Year

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Western Africa	61%	65%	71%	71%	72%	74%	57%	71%
Central Africa	43%	41%	49%	57%	66%	71%	64%	61%
Northern Africa	42%	46%	51%	50%	51%	55%	38%	49%
Eastern Africa	38%	38%	39%	34%	45%	58%	43%	48%
Southern Africa	10%	7%	11%	10%	14%	18%	10%	16%
Total	44%	45%	49%	48%	54%	60%	47%	54%

Figure 3. Adjusted Refusal Rates By African Region (2015-2022)

By 2022, the denial rate for African students had risen to 54%, indicating that just over half of all African student visas were denied as compared with 36% of Asian students and just 9% of students from Europe.

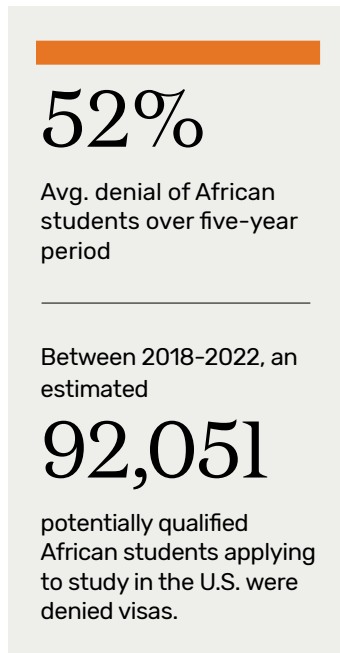
⁴ <https://intpolicydigest.org/is-the-u-s-missing-out-on-top-talent-from-africa/>

Hosting more African students: A missed opportunity for the U.S.?

A key question guiding this analysis is that if visa denial rates are unusually high for certain students then is the U.S. missing out on hosting a larger number of qualified international students, especially from African countries? To address this question, we look at three data points: the visa denial rate relative to the number of students who were issued an F-1 visa during the same period; enrollment trends for African students; and global projections of future growth in college-aged populations around the world.

Visa denials vs. visa issuances:

Visa issuance statistics⁵ made publicly available by the U.S. Department of State indicate that 24,676, F-1 visas were issued for the continent of Africa in FY 2022. As shown above in our analysis, the visa denial rate for Africa during approximately the same time period was 54%. If we simply apply this assumption of a 54% F-1 visa denial rate, this would mean that over 28,967 potential African students were rejected for an F-1 Visa in 2022 alone. Further, when southern Africa is removed from the equation (due to its historically low visa denial rates), the number



of visas issued drops to 22,612 and the visa denial rate jumps to 57%, suggesting that most of the “missed opportunity” 28,967 African students were in fact concentrated in other parts of Africa.

When we extrapolate this approach using data from 2018-2021, there are 92,051 students who were potentially eligible to study in the US but were not able to.

While some of these students likely subsequently re-applied for and obtained visas, the fact still remains that a large number of students were denied visas in the first place.

African students rejected for F-1 visas over a five-year period

Year	Visas Issued	Visa Denial Rate	Missed Opportunity Students
2018	17,661	48%	16,302
2019	16,855	54%	19,786
2020	5,776	60%	9,034
2021	20,254	47%	38,215
2022	24,676	54%	28,967
Total	85,222	52%	92,051

Figure 4. Adjusted Refusal Rates By African students rejected (2018-2022)

⁵ <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/legal/visa-law0/visa-statistics/nonimmigrant-visa-statistics/monthly-nonimmigrant-visa-issuances.html>

International student enrollment trends in the U.S.

Looking next at enrollment trends, data from the *Open Doors* project shows that the number of African students enrolled in U.S. higher education has been rising steadily, suggesting that there is strong demand amongst African students for a U.S. education despite the barriers they encounter in accessing it. In fact, students from Africa grew at the fastest rate as compared with students from any other world region. Even though their absolute numbers are much lower than

students from Asia, between 2015 and 2022 (the period covered by the current analysis), students from Africa grew by 22% whereas students from Asia grew by 5% and students from all other world regions declined.

When juxtaposed with the analysis of a missed opportunity to host more African students, the rising numbers of African students suggests that there is a clear demand amongst African students and that these numbers could have been potentially higher if more of those who had applied had been granted visas.

Total International Student Enrollment By Year

	Africa	Asia	Australia & Asia Pacific Islands	Europe	North America	South America
2014/15	40,285	627,306	6,471	90,621	62,413	51,191
2015/16	42,665	689,525	6,917	91,905	62,996	48,883
2016/17	45,279	734,309	7,222	92,816	63,569	43,146
2017/18	46,746	758,076	7,372	92,654	61,188	44,629
2018/19	47,251	768,260	7,542	90,995	61,185	45,899
2019/20	48,679	758,014	7,473	89,782	60,926	45,249
2020/21	45,343	645,622	5,864	67,976	57,538	40,451
2021/22	49,308	658,669	5,994	83,236	61,324	43,655
Change	22.40%	5.00%	-7.37%	-8.15%	-1.74%	-14.72%

Figure 5. Total international student enrollment by world region, 2014/15 - 2021/22
(Source: www.opendoorsdata.org)

Growth in college-aged cohorts and future demand

While visa data and international enrollment data point to current demand and supply for a U.S. education amongst students from the African continent, they do not address the question of what this dynamic might look like in the future and whether the U.S. has the potential and capacity to meet burgeoning demand from African students.⁶

By 2030, just seven years from now, young Africans are expected to constitute 42% of the world's youth population, and by 2050 are expected to number 1.1 billion.⁷ Given that these projections for population growth on the African continent coincide with the declining demographic trends for the U.S., it is clear that our

institutions will have the capacity to host more international students than they are hosting today. In fact, the U.S. is the only country with enough capacity to handle the anticipated global growth in international education.

While historically the African continent has had some of the lowest postsecondary enrollment rates in the world with just 9% of the college-aged population able to access a college education and even fewer (6%) graduating,⁸ other data points suggest that a larger number of African students will enroll in higher education in the future and will need expanded options both at home and abroad. According to one projection, sub-Saharan Africa's tertiary population could swell to 90 million by 2050 with over half of this growth coming from Nigeria.⁹

“The growth in the world’s labor market is in Africa. As other parts of the world begin to age, Africa will grow its population and today’s children will be the talent tomorrow’s global companies will be recruiting.”

– Testimony by Rebecca Winthrop, Director of the Center for University Education at the Brookings Institution, before the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Likewise, there seems to be growing interest amongst certain destination countries to reap this “demographic dividend” from Africa. While traditional Anglophone destinations like Canada and the U.K. also have purported higher visa denial rates for students from Africa¹⁰, other destinations such as France and China are aggressively recruiting African students, and there also appears to be interest and potential amongst U.S. institutions to do so.¹¹

⁶ <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/depth/how-can-africas-vast-appetite-higher-education-be-met>

⁷ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/09/why-africa-youth-key-development-potential/>

⁸ <https://mastercardfdn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/MCF16005-Executive-Summary-Final.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/depth/how-can-africas-vast-appetite-higher-education-be-met>

¹⁰ <https://thepienews.com/news/africas-visa-refusal-rate-an-urgent-challenge-canadian-higher-education/>

¹¹ https://www.chronicle.com/article/betting-on-africa?sra=true&cid=gen_sign_in and <https://www.campusfrance.org/en/france-the-world-s-top-destination-for-sub-saharan-african-students> and <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20220920120026164>



What does this mean for the future of the U.S. as a destination?

The U.S. is losing out on qualified future talent from Africa. While large numbers of African students are being denied U.S. visas, other nations are competing to attract this talented pool of students. For the U.S., these trends come at a time when domestic demographic and workforce shifts point to the need for an inclusive approach to attract diverse global talent.

As we have shown throughout this report, students from the vast majority of African countries continue to face a unique set of visa challenges that thwart the aspirations of this global talent but that also diminish the capacity of the U.S. to host a larger number of international students who contribute to its progress and prosperity.

We also recognize that these new findings are complex to interpret, given the onus on prospective students to establish their non-immigrant intent. The State Department has issued clear guidance about how consular officers should interpret “maintaining a residence abroad” for F-1 student visa applicants. Yet, these new findings show that students from the Global South are perhaps being held to a different standard than students from other world regions.

For those of us working with students in the field, we understand that there are a host of issues

that impact visa adjudication rates such as inadequate consular staffing, reports of document fraud, the inability of some visa applicants to clearly articulate their choice of institution, prior visa refusals for some applicants, concerns that students will not return home after their studies, etc. However, the Department of State asserts that each student is evaluated on the merits of their individual case.

Given the enormous growth potential of students from the African continent, as demonstrated in our analysis, what more could the U.S. government be doing to address the inequities in high student visa refusal rates?

Legislative and administrative recommendations

Now that these data show clear disparities in visa adjudications, we are eager to work with the State Department to address concerns that students from the Global South, and the African continent in particular, do not have the same opportunities to acquire student visas as students from other parts of the world.

The Presidents’ Alliance and others in the sector have recommended a number of policy improvements that could help to improve visa issuance for international students overall. We look forward to discussing with policymakers how to best implement these recommendations to help address inequities:

- **Congress should modernize immigration law** by expanding dual intent to include international students applying for F-1 visas attending U.S. colleges and universities, a concept that is currently available in other nonimmigrant categories such as specialty workers (H-1B) and intracompany transferees (L-1). Such a change would remove archaic non-immigrant language that requires students to maintain a “residence abroad” and instead permit individuals who are being screened for a visa or when entering the United States to communicate an interest in transferring to another legal status after the completion of their degree. This would help to reduce uncertainty around whether students who have been accepted to U.S. colleges and universities would be able to attain a visa.
- **The White House and relevant agencies** should continue to articulate the importance of international students to our campuses, communities and country.
- **In particular, all U.S. visa policy, processing, and communications** should signal to international students and scholars that they are welcome here, and that facilitating their admission and entry into the United States is a priority for our campuses, communities, and government.
- **The U.S. Department of State should increase training** and guidance for improved adjudication, with tailored outreach to posts with high student visa refusal rates, and with a focus on the following:

Recommendations for increased training and guidance.

1. Continue issuing annual guidance to consulates to prioritize students (F and J) and other academic-related visas (H, J, and O) during high-volume seasons and share that outreach with the higher education community.
2. Continue to remind consular officers that attendance at a lesser-known college, English language program, or community college is not, in itself, a reason for refusing a student visa applicant. DOS should leave questions of academic choice and qualifications to be decided between the student and the institution, instead focusing on evaluating whether the student meets the requirements of a bona fide student. Furthermore, denial of a visa should not occur based on English-language competency, as it is the purview of the institutions to evaluate language proficiency and to provide English-language training programs (either in-house or outsourced), if necessary, to help students succeed.
3. Continue to ensure the consistent application of consular guidance and/or provide training on how to assess financial means and travel documents. When assessing financial means, consular officials should not ask for proof of multiple years of funding. Just like U.S. students, many students and their families will pay for their education as they go. Proof of funding for the entire duration of the program is not reasonable and should not be required. The language of the Foreign Affairs Manual updated on May 27, 2021 gives the appropriate guidance about financial means and should be reinforced through training
4. Issue clear guidance that post-graduation work interests are not grounds for denial. The updated FAM guidance from December 2022 makes it clear that consular officers should not be speculating about students’ intentions into the future but instead evaluating their intent at the moment of the consular interview.
5. Issue clear guidance for how to evaluate student visa applications for forcibly displaced students, not only in the Global South, but throughout the world.
6. Provide transparent and clear information to students about visa denials. When prospective students are denied visas, they are often left to guess what aspects of their application may have led to the denial. When a student visa is denied, the prospective student should be provided a clear written explanation for the denial.

Moreover, the U.S. Department of State should continue to communicate regularly with the U.S. higher education community, both directly and through their relevant associations, about steps the U.S. government has taken and plans to take to ensure timely visa processing for students and other academic-related travelers. A series of roundtable discussions with key stakeholder communities would be useful, in addition to regular briefings.

Lastly, while resolving visa barriers is not within the purview of individual U.S. colleges and universities, they can nonetheless play a critical role

by prioritizing a diverse international study body on campus and by addressing systemic issues such as cost and affordability that limit the ability of students from the Global South to access a U.S. postsecondary education.

These students bring important assets and benefits to the U.S. Being denied a visa is not only their loss, but it is also a significant loss and missed opportunity for the U.S. that impacts innovation, economic contributions, and a talented workforce.

Appendix: Analysis notes

The Adjusted Visa Refusal Rate is calculated as follows: (Refusals minus Waived/Overcome) divided by (Total Applicants minus Waived/Overcome). When there are more Waived/Overcome than refusals (for example, when refusals from a prior fiscal year are waived/overcome), the result is a negative adjusted refusal rate

For the purposes of the analysis and based on the data received, we assume the definition of Adjusted Refusal Rate is the same across fiscal years and is not impacted by other confounding factors.

The Adjusted Refusal Rate By Continent, Region, and Sub-Region is an average of all countries within that specific continent, and does not take into account volume of visa issuances by country to create a blended average. All countries are equally weighted.

Only nationalities that have data available during the indicated fiscal year are listed. A refusal rate of 0% means that all applicants were issued visas.

Analysis of geographic regions and sub-regions was based on United Nations M49 Standard Geographic regions.

Authors

Rajika Bhandari, Ph.D., serves as a Senior Advisor to the Presidents' Alliance, focusing on international student research, data, and narratives. With 25+ years as an international higher education expert and scholar-practitioner, she is the Principal of Rajika Bhandari Advisors, an international education research and strategy firm. Quoted frequently in the global press, she is a keynote speaker on international student issues, global talent, and Asian American identity; a widely published author, most recently of the award-winning memoir, [America Calling: A Foreign Student in a Country of Possibility](#); and the host of the World Wise podcast on the intersections of education, culture, and (im)migration. Dr. Bhandari previously spent over a decade at the [Institute of International Education](#) where she led IIE's research, evaluation and thought leadership portfolio, including the [Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange](#), an essential resource for understanding international student flows. Committed to immigrant and diaspora issues, she is the Co-Founder of SouthAsia-IEN (the South Asia International Education Network) that brings together leaders, practitioners, scholars, and entrepreneurs in U.S. higher education whose origins and/or work touch upon the countries of South Asia. Learn more about her work at: rajikabhandari.com.

Jill Welch serves as Senior Policy Advisor to the Presidents' Alliance on international student and refugee student policy issues. As Principal of Out of Many 1 Advocacy, LLC, Jill specializes in mobilizing diverse stakeholder interests to achieve local, state, and federal change. With more than two decades of experience as seasoned public policy advocate, nonprofit leader, and strategic partnership expert, she has served in senior policy leadership positions both inside and outside of government. Before launching her consulting firm, she was Vice President of External Relations at the U.S. Institute of Peace and Deputy Executive Director for Public Policy at NAFSA: Association of International Educators. A columnist for The PIE with her "Jill on the Hill" series, she is regularly quoted in influential media outlets and is a sought-after source for both advocates and policymakers alike who seek to internationalize U.S. higher education, modernize the U.S. immigration system, and renew our democracy. She holds a masters in public administration from American University and a BA in political science and French from Berry College.

Shelley Landry serves as Shorelight's Senior Director Government of Affairs. Shelley is responsible for developing and executing strategies to promote Shorelight's mission by working with U.S. elected officials, agencies, and trade associations, to advocate for international education policies. Based in Washington, D.C., Shelley closely monitors legislative and agency policies to identify opportunities and address challenges that affect international students. She also leads efforts to raise awareness among members of Congress and their staff about the significant contributions of international students to the U.S. higher education system, workforce, and economy. Prior to joining Shorelight, Shelley held various positions in politics and advocacy, including Chief of Staff for the Idaho House Minority and Regional Director for former Rep. Walt Minnick. Shelley studied at Harding University, where she specialized in elementary education.

Hilary O'Haire serves as Shorelight's Executive Director of Analytics, managing the company's Analytics & Data Science team. With over 12 years of experience in research and analytics, Hilary is passionate about education and telling stories with data. Hilary is based in Boston and studied Psychology and Political Science at Gettysburg College in Gettysburg, PA.