Episode 47 – International Graduate Education Updates – October 2025

Welcome to Grad-post! I'm your host, Brian S. Mitchell, and we're here to talk about life before, during, and after graduate school, and whether an advanced degree is right for you. I'll draw upon my experiences as a graduate dean and research mentor, as well as my network of students, colleagues, and experts to bring you the most complete information on graduate education that I can.

I promised periodic updates on some of my previous topics, and enough has happened in the international graduate education space to warrant touching on some recent developments. Today we'll talk about how policy is impacting graduate enrollment and career options for international graduate students, and what's happening in other parts of the world that could impact graduate education here in the United States.

Let's start with how the tightening of non-immigrant visas for international students is affecting enrollment. We've touched on this topic multiple times before, but the situation is very fluid. We won't have official graduate enrollment numbers until the Council of Graduate Schools releases their data in December, but early indicators are not good for international enrollments. A recent article in University World News reported that interest from prospective international students for obtaining a master's degree in the United States fell by 61% since the beginning of 2025. How this lack of interest will translate into actual enrollment remains to be seen, but NAFSA – the association of international educators - predicts a 30-40% drop in international enrollment in the U.S. at all degree levels in the coming years. As I mentioned back in Episode 39 earlier this year, F-1 visa issuances had dropped 22% from the same time period in 2024. I'd like to give you an update on those numbers - especially since the crackdown on issuances has really started to hit - but the state department stopped issuing updates visa statistics. The last data they have is for May, 2025 – the same data I used for Episode 39. In her recent newsletter Latitudes, Karin Fischer of the Chronicle of Higher Education gave some data points on international student arrivals so far. She – along with the New York Times - report that the number of international students arriving on U.S. campuses dropped 20% in August compared to a year earlier. Graduate enrollments will be hit particularly hard because of the combination of difficulty in obtaining F-1 visas to come and study, the outpricing of H-1B visas to those completing degree programs, and rumors about the elimination of Optional Practical Training (OPT) programs that lead to citizenship for those who hold advanced degrees.

That leads us naturally into a recent policy shift on careers opportunities for international students. The H-1B visa program provides an employment opportunity for international students who have completed their college degrees here in the United States. It was established in 1990 by an act of Congress as a separate non-immigrant visa category to allow skilled, degreed foreign workers to remain in the United States for employment. Although the majority of these workers are bachelor's degree holders, there are separate caps on the number of H-1B visas for those with advanced degrees, and specific exemptions on caps for higher education institutions, non-profit organizations, and government research organizations. It has been a highly successful program. Notable past H-1B recipients include Elon Musk, and the CEOs of Microsoft, Google, IBM, and Zoom. But it's not just tech that has benefited from the H-1B visa program. Melania Trump was on an H-1B visa shortly after starting modeling work in the United States. If there has been fraud and abuse in the H-1B program as the administration argues – and that's a big "if" since the claims haven't been substantiated – then it's not coming from those who obtained their degrees in the U.S.

Any policy changes to the H-1B program heavily impact foreign nationals in U.S. master's and doctoral programs. It should come as no surprise, then, that the recent fee increase for H-1B applications to $100,000 has rattled not only those international master's and doctoral students looking to graduate in the coming years, but the universities and research organizations that employ them as researchers and teachers. This amount of money is untenable for most employers, including most for-profit businesses.

What makes this policy shift most aggravating and least understandable is that it is contrary to what the prevailing attitudes were just a few months ago. Here is Donald Trump less than one year ago speaking about foreign graduates from US colleges:

[https://www.youtube.com/shorts/GOpYg-wbDUo]

How did we get from a green card for all foreign graduates to charging them $100,000 to contribute to the economic growth of our country? Couple that with the reduction in time allowed in the country for F-1 visas as discussed in Episode 41, and it should come as no surprise that international students are looking elsewhere for their advanced degrees.

Speaking of elsewhere around the world, there are some interesting reports on how advanced degree programs are developing in other countries. The University World News in May gave an overview of the new so-called European Degree from European Union colleges and universities. While this degree is still in the formulation stages, it appears that it will be more a "certification" for joint degrees awarded by partnering EU institutions. It's future impact on graduate education may be minimal, but it raises interesting questions on what might happen at the graduate level if the EU decides that doctoral degrees also could use some European branding, and what that would mean for trans-Atlantic scholarly mobility. Stay tuned.

And as long as we're in Europe, let's close by looking at a report from European University Association (EUA) – Council for Doctoral Education (CDE) 2025 Survey on doctoral program quality. There's a lot in this survey and I'm not going to start comparing and contrasting all of doctoral education in the EU and the US here, but there is one bit of information that jumped out at me. In response to the question "To what extent are the following criteria used to evaluate the quality of doctoral education," 210 respondents from institutions in 39 European countries listed "staff qualifications" as the most utilized criterion for assessing the quality of doctoral programs at their institution. Other student-centered criteria like completion rates, satisfaction of doctoral candidates, and careers of doctoral graduates were further down this list. This stunning finding reminded me of the now-defunct U.S. National Research Council Assessment of Doctoral Programs from back in 2010. The doctoral program assessments and rankings from that report were confusing and confounding, but one commonality across all disciplines was that the faculty surveyed for that report listed their own productivity (publications, fundings, awards, etc.) of highest importance for assessing program quality above student outcomes. I was a sitting graduate dean at the time this report was formulated and published, and I was furious. How does faculty productivity in any way measure the quality of a doctoral program? I'm not going to get on my soap box today because this is an update on international graduate education developments, but apparently the EU hasn't learned anything from the mistakes the US made over a decade ago.

My point about this EU report is that "staff qualifications" is not an outcome of a degree program. Completion rates, student satisfaction, and career success are. If doctoral programs are ever to move away from pure reputational ranking, this focus on faculty star power has to stop. Look for a separate rant – er, episode – on this topic in the future. Those are the updates for now!

Figure 10: To what extent are the following aspects/criteria used to assess/evaluate the quality of doctoral education?
Number of respondents: 210/217-216/217

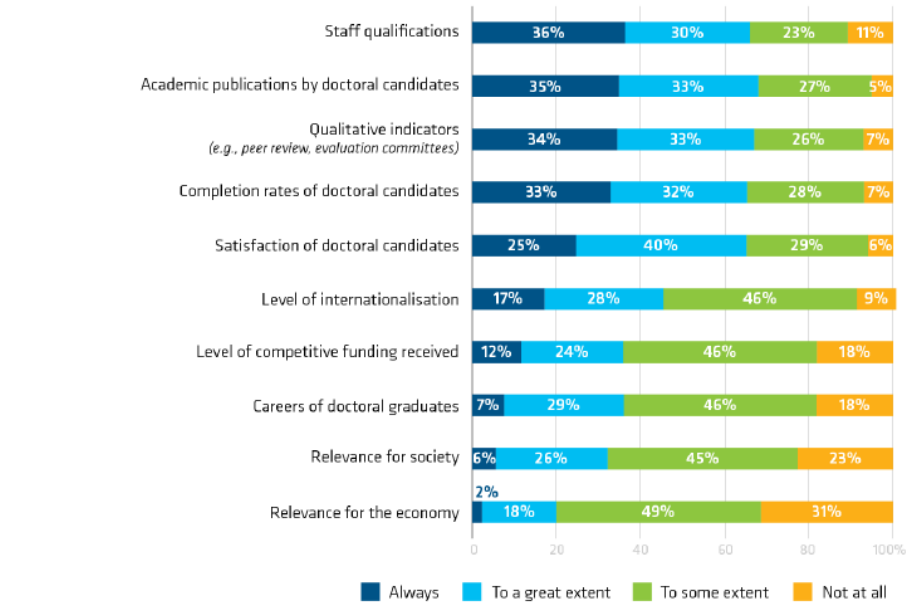

TABLE 5-2 Faculty Importance Weights by Broad Field

	Faculty Productivity and Associated Characteristics (%)	Student Support and Outcome Characteristics (%)	Program Diversity Characteristics (%)
Agricultural sciences	45.2	30.5	25.1
Biological and health sciences	45.1	31.9	23.7
Physical and mathematical sciences	48.9	29.7	22.2
Engineering	46.5	31.8	22.5
Social and behavioral sciences	49.1	28.2	23.6
Humanities	46.4	28.9	25.6

Thank you for joining me today. All of the links provided in my podcasts can be found in the transcripts available on my website at grad-post.com. There you'll find additional information and resources to help you make every degree count! –

Links

https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20251006103344702&utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=GLNL0850

https://www.piie.com/blogs/realtime-economics/2025/skilled-immigration-chopping-block-effects-eliminating-optional

https://www.nafsa.org/fall-2025-international-student-enrollment-outlook-and-economic-impact

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immigration_Act_of_1990

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H-1B_visa

https://www.the-independent.com/news/world/americas/us-politics/h1b-visas-ceos-elon-musk-satya-nadella-trump-list-b2838407.html

https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/melania-trump-modeled-u-s-prior-getting-work-visa

https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/03/04/what-we-know-about-the-us-h-1b-visa-program/

https://www.state.gov/h-1b-faq