

Beyond ‘international:’ Understanding nuances of a diverse applicant pool

March 28, 2023



Authors

Data Analytics and Research

Preston Magouirk *
Mark Freeman
Trent Kajikawa
Honeiah Karimi
Brian Heseung Kim

* corresponding author

Press inquiries

Emma Steele
esteele@commonapp.org

Introduction

The majority of the applicants using the Common App platform reside in and are citizens of the United States, but the number of international applicants¹ has [increased dramatically over the past several years](#). While ‘international’ applicants have increased over time, most research has continued to focus on trends in domestic applicants, and so we know relatively little about the students from other countries who use Common App to apply to college.

In this research brief, we ask: who are the international applicants using Common App? Specifically, we describe the increase in these applicants over time and the countries from which they are applying. We then assess variation across countries in applicants’ demographic characteristics and application behaviors.

We find that general descriptions of international applicants and their application patterns ignore meaningful nuances that differentiate the experiences of applicants living in different countries and contexts. These nuances render the use of the broad term ‘international’ largely unhelpful without additional clarifying data. We argue such data are necessary to inform college access discussions

¹ **Note:** We classify international applicants as those who reported citizenship outside the U.S. (dual U.S. citizens are not included) and attended high school outside the U.S.

Contents

[Key findings](#)

[Overall applicant trends](#)

[Where do international applicants reside?](#)

[Demographic diversity: Applicant characteristics across countries](#)

[Application behaviors: How and where do applicants apply?](#)

[Conclusion](#)

Acknowledgements: We would like to thank Julie Baer from the Institute of International Education for expert counsel in clarifying the definition of an international student in higher education. This expertise allows us to ensure adherence to best practices when defining the population of interest in this study and other ongoing work.

Note: When identifying applicants who met the criteria for classification as ‘international’ students for this research brief, we included applicants for whom we had complete data on country of citizenship and the country in which the applicant attended high school. We often lacked information about the location of applicants’ high schools and in such cases, we could not determine that they met the criteria within the definition we used for this study. Therefore, a large number of applicants was excluded from the study population for this reason. Supplemental analyses confirm, however, that the applicant trends presented in this report are not dramatically different when we adjust the inclusion criteria for the study population to include the students without high school location data.

Key findings

- 1. The total number of international applicants rose 63% between 2014–15 and 2021–22. International applicants consistently make up 4-5% of all Common App applicants across seasons.**

Over half of this increase emerged between 2019–20 and 2021–22. Applications from international applicants increased 109% over this span.

- 2. China remained the home of the largest number of international applicants in 2021–22, and applicant counts from China have increased for the first time since 2017–18.**

Over 12,000 applicants from the 2021–22 season resided in China. India, Canada, Korea, and Pakistan were the next largest countries of citizenship for international applicants. The number of applicants from each of these countries has increased over time.

Disaggregating 2021–22 applicant characteristics by home country reveals striking differences in applicants' characteristics.

Striking socioeconomic differences emerged across countries, as the vast majority of applicants in Nepal (88%) and Pakistan (66%) reported eligibility for a Common App fee waiver, while fewer than 10% of applicants in China, Taiwan, Korea, Singapore, Canada, and India reported such eligibility.

- 3. Application behaviors also differed across home countries, highlighting the importance of disaggregating analyses of international applicants and applications.**

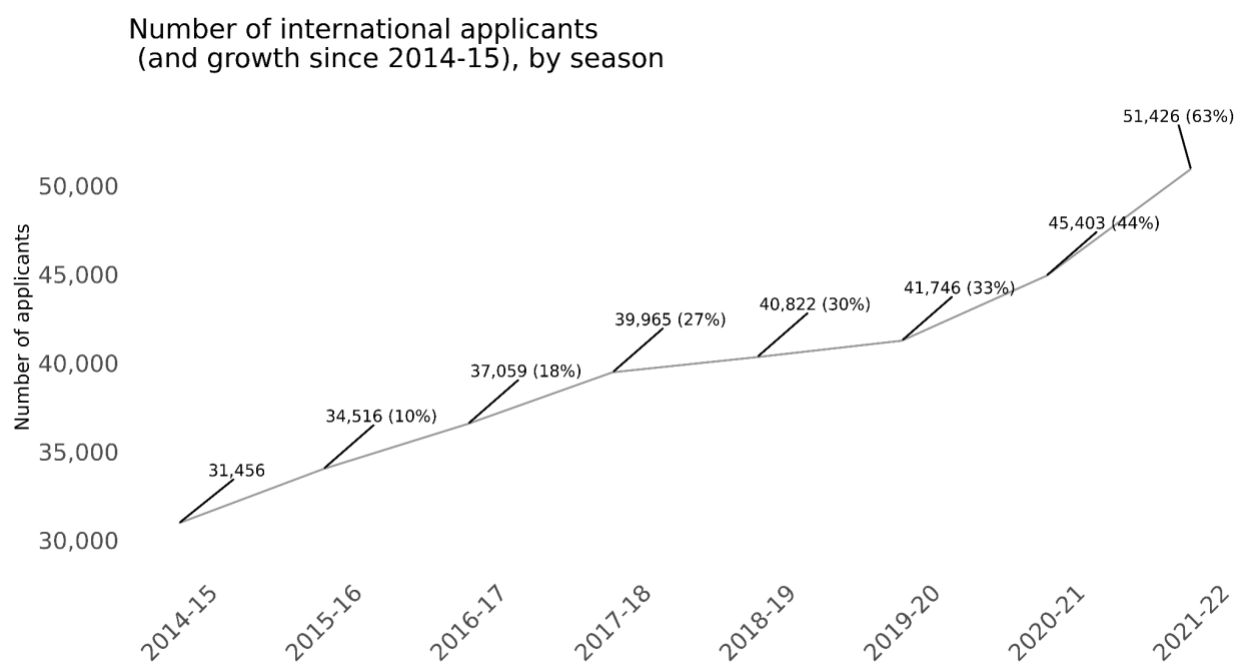
The majority of applicants in China (65%) and Korea (50%) applied Early Decision (ED) in 2021–22, suggesting a high degree of familiarity among these applicants with the nuances of selective college admissions in the United States. However, ED applying was far less common for other applicants (only 13% of all applicants applied ED in 2021–22). For example, applicants in China were five times as likely to apply ED in 2021–22 as applicants residing in Nigeria (15%).

These disparities may reflect, in part, differences in where applicants applied. For example, over 75% of applicants in China, Korea, Turkey, and Singapore applied to the most selective Common App member institutions, while fewer than half in Nepal and Nigeria did so.

Overall applicant trends

Between 2014–15 and 2021–22, the number of international applicants rose 63% from 31,456 to 51,426. As we highlight in **Figure 1**, this trend reflects steady growth until 2019–20 and then large spikes in applicants in 2020–21 and 2021–22. For comparison, *overall Common App applicant counts rose 61% over this period*, indicating a similar rise in international and domestic applicants. Across seasons, international applicants made up between 4–5% of the overall applicant pool and submitted about 13% of all applications.

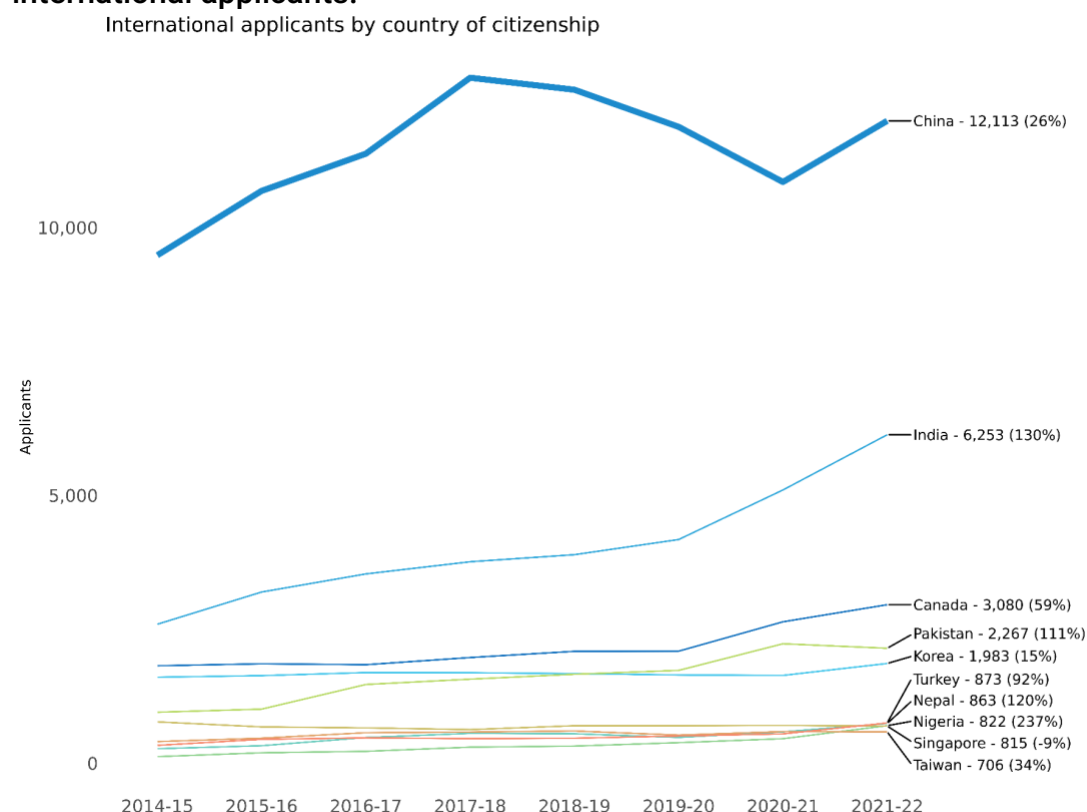
Figure 1: International applicant counts rose dramatically from 2014–15.



Where do international applicants reside?

As Common App has expanded [its membership](#) and observed increases in the number and diversity of applicants using the platform to apply to college each year, trends in the countries from which international applicants are applying have shifted, as well. As we illustrate in **Figure 2**, China and India were the two leading international countries of citizenship for applicants submitting an application using Common App. Since 2014–15, applicant totals in China rose 26% to 12,113 while counts in India rose 130% to 6,253. The remaining countries with the largest numbers of international applicants in 2021–22 include Canada (3,080), Pakistan (2,267), Korea (1,983), Turkey (873), Nepal (863), Nigeria (822), Singapore (815), Taiwan (706).

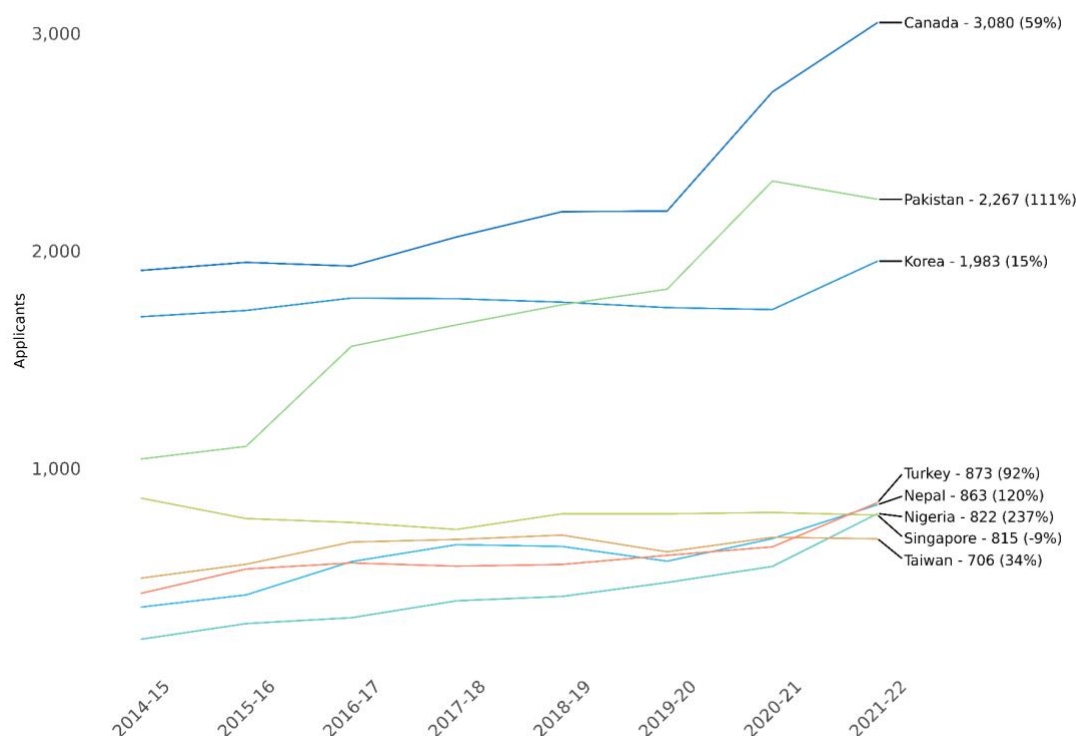
Figure 2: China and India were the home countries for the largest numbers of international applicants.



Beyond China and India, trends in applicant totals across the other leading home countries also differ meaningfully. First, as we show in **Figure 3** (which zooms into **Figure 2** to clarify trends), applicant totals from several countries, including Pakistan (+111%), Turkey (92%), Nepal (120%), and Nigeria (237%) rose significantly since 2014–15. Meanwhile, we observed smaller increases in Canada (59%), Korea (15%), and Taiwan (34%). Finally, we observed a small decline (-9%) in applicants from Singapore.

Figure 3: Applicant counts soared among citizens of several countries.

International applicants by country of citizenship,
(excluding China, India.)



Demographic diversity: Applicant characteristics across countries

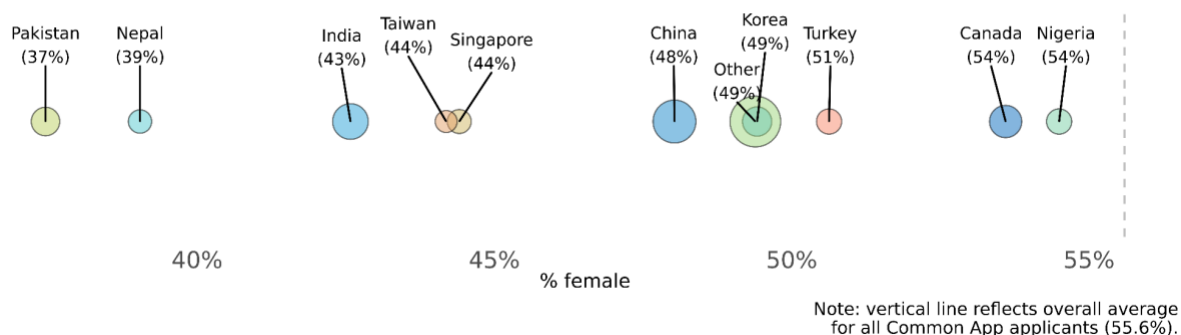
Describing applicant characteristics and application behaviors for ‘international’ applicants does not account for variation across the many countries from which applicants hail. Our analyses of applicant characteristics indicates that this broad description obscures striking differences in the experiences applicants bring to the college application process. To better understand how applicant characteristics vary across countries where ‘international’ applicants hold citizenship, we compare commonly analyzed metrics across the ten leading countries of citizenship².

First, we assessed differences in the legal sex composition of each leading citizenship country’s applicant pool. Overall, 55% of applicants on the Common App platform reported ‘female’ as their legal sex. For international students, we saw meaningful variation in the share of female applicants across countries. As we show in **Figure 4A**, just 37% of applicants in Pakistan, 39% in Nepal, 43% in India, and 44% of applicants in Taiwan and Singapore reported ‘female’ as their legal sex. This was far lower than the Common App average (56%) and well below both Canada and Nigeria (54% each). In sum, we find that the share of female applicants in Pakistan was about 50% lower than the share of female applicants in the overall population.

² Several students reported multiple countries of citizenship. These students are counted in overall totals, but excluded from country-level analyses of applicant characteristics.

Figure 4A. We observed lower shares of female applicants in Pakistan, Nepal, and India.

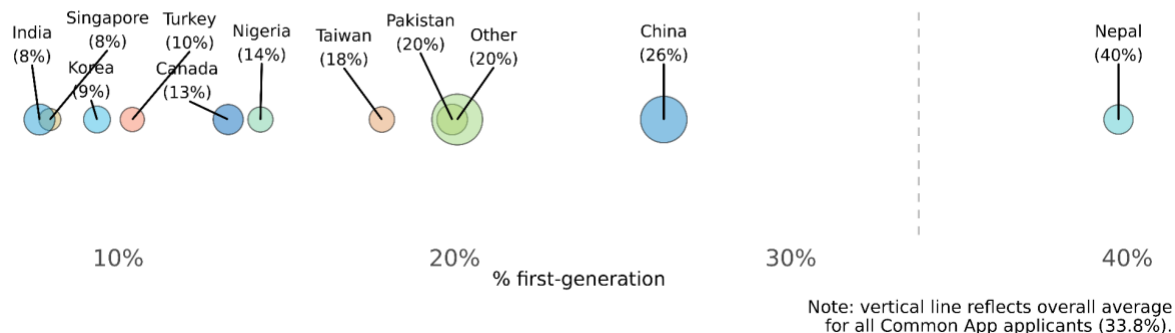
Share of female applicants, by country of citizenship
2021-22 season



Next, in **Figure 4B** we present a graph summarizing the share of applicants in each country that reported they would be first-generation college students (neither parent graduated with a four-year university degree)³. As we show with the dotted line in the figure, 34% of all Common App applicants identified as first-generation college students in 2021–22. While smaller shares of applicants from many countries, including Canada (8%), Singapore (8%), Korea (9%), Turkey (10%), and Canada (13%) identified as first-generation students, 40% of Nepali applicants were first-generation college students. Put another way, applicants in Nepal were about four times as likely as applicants in India, Singapore, Korea, and Turkey to identify as first-generation students.

Figure 4B. Applicants in Nepal were 4x as likely to identify as first-gen as those in India, Singapore, Korea, and Turkey.

Share of first-generation applicants, by country of citizenship
2021-22 season

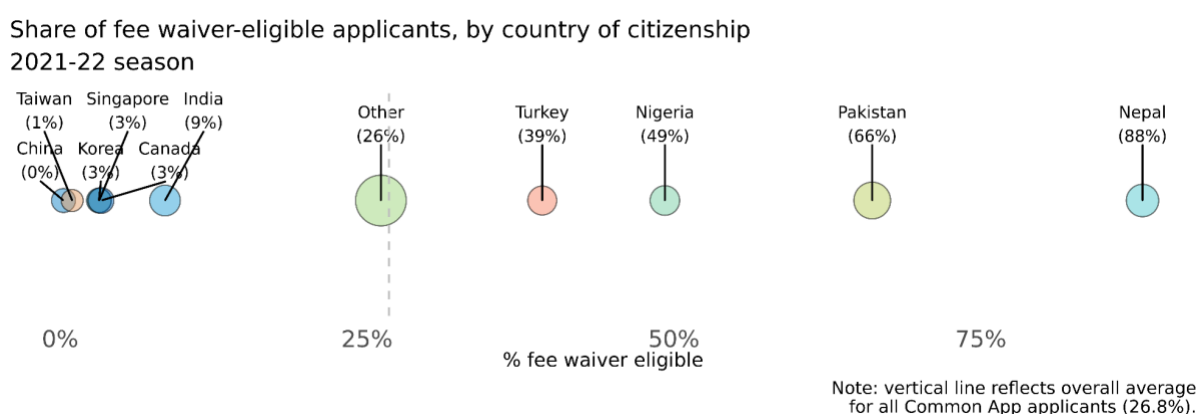


To better understand variation in applicants' socioeconomic contexts as they navigate the college search process, we assessed the share of applicants in each home country reporting eligibility for a Common App fee waiver. Because the criteria, [included here](#), require one of

³ We do not distinguish whether parents' college degrees were earned at domestic or international institutions. This variable is not a component of calculating 'first-generation' metrics for this figure.

several types of U.S.-based public assistance, we use this metric as an imperfect proxy for low-income status. Overall, 27% of Common App applicants reported eligibility for a fee waiver. As we show in **Figure 4C**, the majority of applicants in Nepal (88%), Pakistan (66%), and Nigeria (49%) reported eligibility for a Common App fee waiver. At the same time, just 1% of applicants in Taiwan, 3% in Korea, 3% in Singapore, and 3% in Canada reported eligibility (overall, 25% of all applicants report eligibility for a Common App fee waiver). In other words, applicants in Nepal were over 20-80 times as likely to report fee waiver eligibility as applicants in Taiwan, Korea, Singapore, or Canada, respectively. These differences likely reflect meaningful disparities in the financial resources of students applying via Common App from these countries.

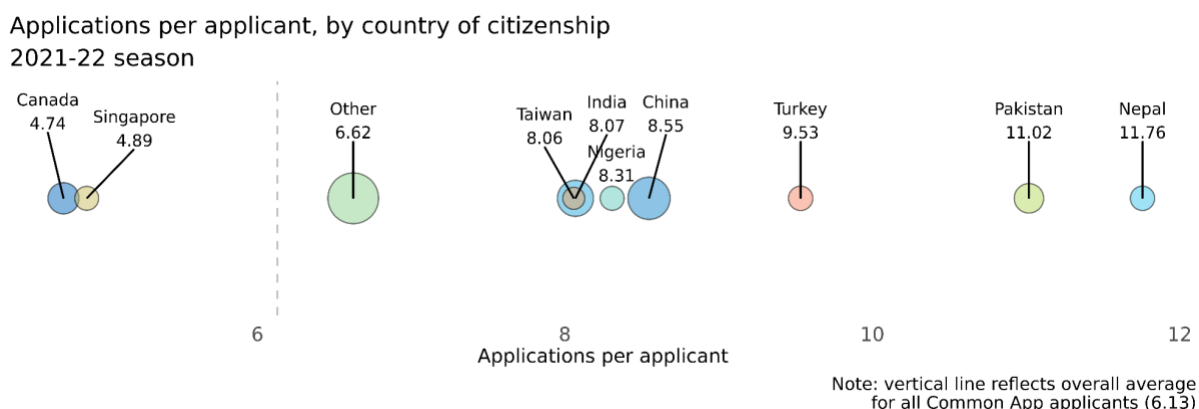
Figure 4C. Fee waiver eligibility varied dramatically across home countries.



Application behaviors: How and where do applicants apply?

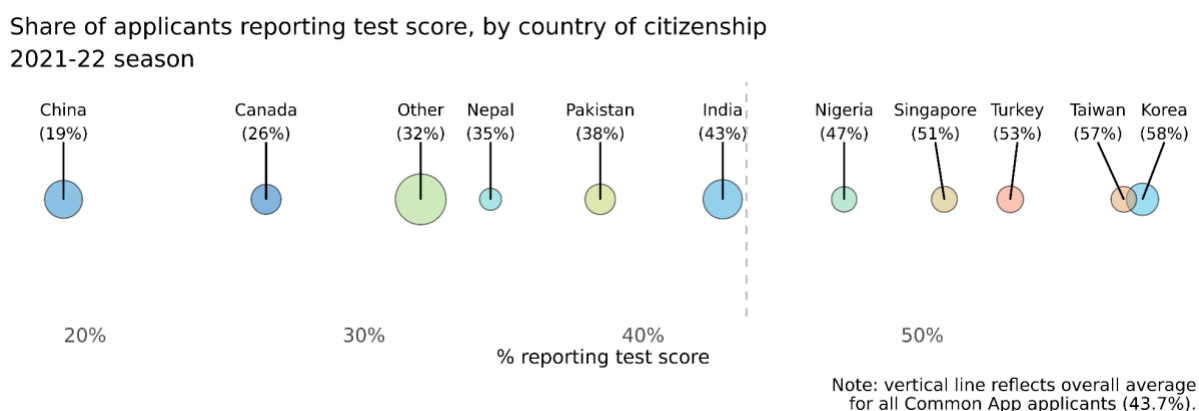
In addition to variation in applicant characteristics across home countries, we also tried to understand whether and how commonly measured application behaviors varied across applicants' home countries. In **Figure 5A** we show that submitted applications per applicant were most numerous in Nepal (11.76) and Pakistan (11.02). This was far above the overall average of 6.13 applications per applicant. Students in Canada and Singapore submitted, by far, the fewest applications per student (4.74 and 4.89, respectively).

Figure 5A: Submitted applications per applicant varied across home countries.



We also analyzed the share of students, by country of residence, who reported test scores in their applications. As we have reported in a [previous research brief](#), the onset of near-universal test-optional policies in Fall 2020 corresponded with meaningful declines in score reporting rates that have not meaningfully rebounded. In that report, we also observed large disparities in score reporting rates across applicant subgroups. In **Figure 5B**, we show that test score reporting rates for international applicants, by each citizenship country, were lower than for the overall applicant pool (44%). While international applicants from Korea (58%), Taiwan (57%), Turkey (53%), Singapore (51%), and Nigeria (47%) reported scores at rates above overall mean, reporting was less common for applicants from China (19%), Canada (26%), Nepal (35%), and Pakistan (38%).

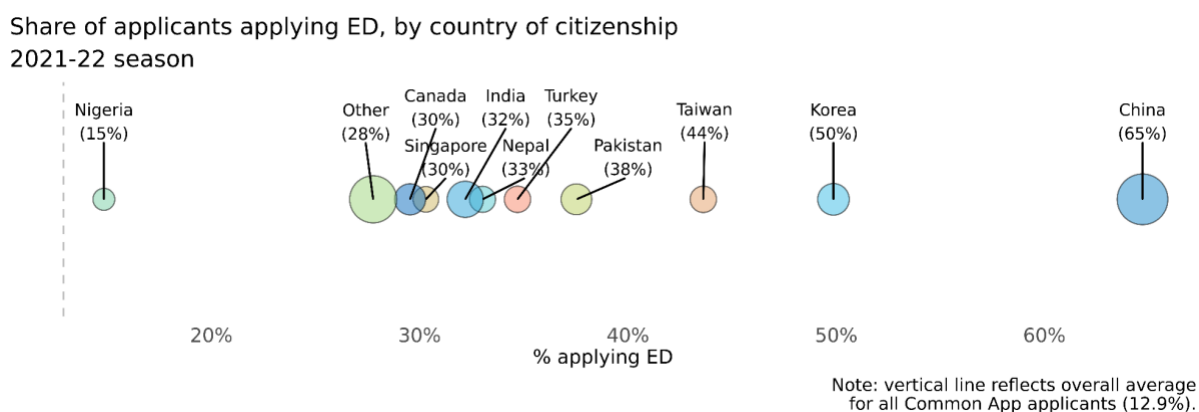
Figure 5B. Test score reporting was highly variable across countries.



In addition to the number of applications applicants submitted and applicants' decisions to report scores, we also examined the prevalence of applying Early Decision (ED) for international applicants, by home country. Applying ED, as we have reported in [previous research](#), is more common among applicants from more affluent communities and less common among first-generation students. Therefore, ED applying rates may reflect differences in both financial and informational resources available to international applicants across home countries.

About 13% of all Common App applicants submitted at least one ED application in 2021–22, but our analyses indicate that international applicants, on average, were far more likely to apply ED. We show in **Figure 5C** that the majority of applicants from China applied ED (65%). This is about five times the rate for the overall Common App applicant pool. However, ED applying was far less common among applicants from Nigeria (15%), Canada (30%), Singapore (30%), India (32%), and Nepal (33%). These gaps reflect major disparities in the application practices of applicants across home countries.

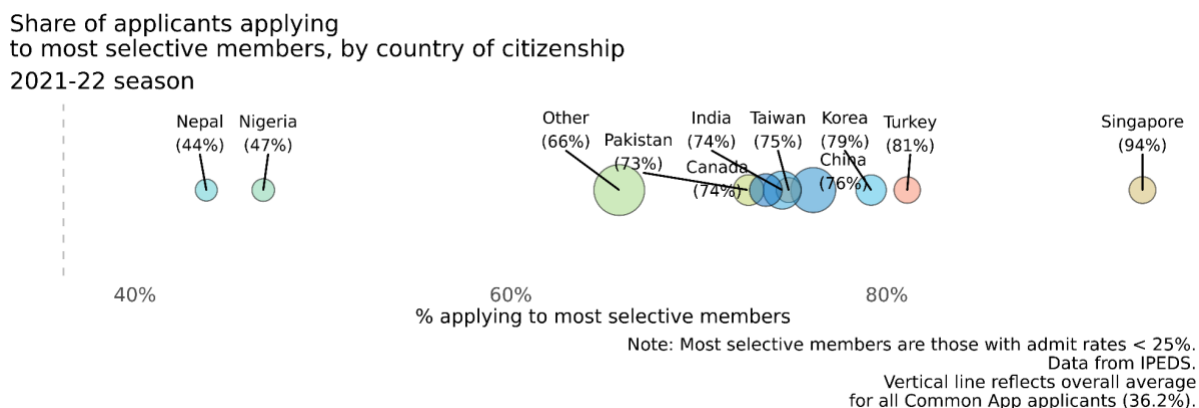
Figure 5C. Applicants in China were most likely, by far, to apply Early Decision.



Aside from decisions to report test scores and apply ED, applicants also vary in their decisions about where to apply to college. For instance, about 36% of all Common App applicants submitted an application to one of the 54 Common App member institutions (~5% of Common App members) with admit rates at or below 25% (from [IPEDS](#)). These highly selective institutions typically receive large numbers of applications each year and are somewhat common targets of Common App applicants.

However, the extent to which applicants applied to one of these highly selective institutions varied dramatically for international students on the basis of their home countries. As we show in **Figure 5D**, nearly all applicants from Singapore (94%), and most applicants in Turkey (81%), Korea (79%), China (76%), Taiwan (75%), India (74%), and Canada (74%), applied to one of these highly selective institutions. On the other hand, far lower shares of applicants from Nepal (44%), and Nigeria (47%) applied to one of these institutions. As with the other application metrics reported above, gaps in these percentages reflect very real differences across applicants' home countries in how and where applicants are applying.

Figure 5D. International applicants were more likely than domestic applicants to apply to selective colleges.



Conclusion

Common App has grown more popular among international applicants in recent years, but it was previously unclear a) where international applicants were applying from and how this has changed over time; b) the extent to which international applicants' demographic and socioeconomic characteristics vary across home countries; and c) the extent to which their application behaviors vary across home countries. This research brief provides a descriptive overview of these nuances and, as in [previous research](#), signals the importance of disaggregating general categories to better understand a very large and diverse group of applicants.

It is our hope that the analyses in this research brief inform constituents, including higher professionals, researchers, policymakers, and members of the media, about the nuanced experiences that international students bring to the college application process. These experiences are sufficiently nuanced to render the category of 'international' insufficient for clear description of application trends in reporting and research contexts.