

2025

Voice of the Online Learner: Graduate Edition



Risepoint

Introduction

The Risepoint Voice of the Online Learner report, now in its 14th year*, reflects our commitment to understanding online learners and supporting universities in fulfilling their needs, especially as they evolve over time.

New this year, the graduate edition of the report explores the priorities and learning preferences of graduate learners, ultimately informing actionable takeaways for universities to design online graduate programs that return the highest return on investment.

*This report was published by Wiley prior to Wiley University Services joining Risepoint.

Who are online graduate learners?

Online graduate learners are largely working adults who juggle multiple personal and professional responsibilities and are determined to advance in their careers for themselves and their families.



“I’m very glad to be in the online program because I [wouldn’t] be able to be in a master’s program otherwise, considering all the other responsibilities and things that I have going on... that would require a complete reconstruction of my schedule, and that would be not very feasible.”

Connor, Master of Science Clinical Mental Health Counseling

What is important to online graduate learners?

Modality first and career-focused

Online learners pick modality before institution because it fits the needs of their lives. These learners are pragmatic — they are not learning to learn, but rather to move ahead in their jobs.

77%

would not enroll in a school if desired program was not offered online

83%

are studying in a field related to their work

95%

of graduate learners pursue a degree for career outcomes

71%

believe advanced degrees are required to improve career prospects

Learners are still local

While you might expect that online programs would draw students from a broad geographic area, in reality, most learners select an institution in their region. This gives regional universities a distinct advantage over mega online-only universities — if they have the marketing resources to compete for their target audience.



of graduate students choose a school within 100 miles of where they live



live and/or work in the same state as their school

“I’ve just been settled into my career, and I want to be in a director level. So just having that MBA behind my name looks better when I am ready to be in that position.”

**Tiffany, Master of Business Administration
in Healthcare Administration**

Affordability and flexibility are top of mind

Online programs tend to be more affordable than in-person programs, and affordability is top of mind for online learners. In fact, affordability is the most important decision factor across the entire graduate student journey.

Top five important factors in choosing a program:

When researching:

Affordability of tuition & fees

84%

Time to complete the program

83%

School/program accreditation

74%

Relevant program concentrations/specializations

70%

Positive interactions with university reps

56%

When enrolling:

Affordability of tuition & fees

70%

Time to complete the program

51%

School/program accreditation

45%

Relevant program concentrations/specializations

41%

Rank/reputation of the school or program

15%

After affordability, flexibility is essential for working adults, which contributes to their preference for learning online. While most learners complete their programs without interruption, there is a small group who do step out. When they do, it is primarily due to issues outside of their program, such as an unforeseen life event.

83%

of graduate learners complete their program without interruption

43%

of those who stepped out, did so within the first 6 months

22%

of those who stepped out, did so due to an unforeseen life event

Emerging findings in 2025

While many motivators, learning preferences, and challenges remained the same, a different set of factors influenced graduate students' experiences in 2025.

Learners know Gen AI will change their jobs – and they need help

Graduate learners recognize the growth in use of Generative AI and acknowledge that it will impact their careers, though they are split on whether that change will be positive or negative. Students articulate needing guidance on Gen AI to prepare them for using it in the workforce and note that such guidance isn't currently being provided by their universities.

69%

think Gen AI is important to learn and understand to be successful in the workplace in the future

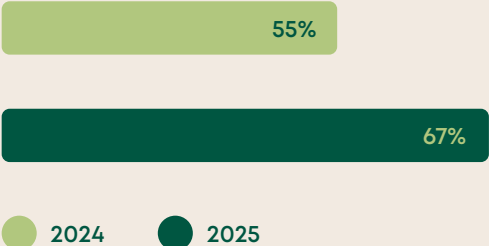
17%

say their program teaches them how to use Gen AI as a tool in the workplace

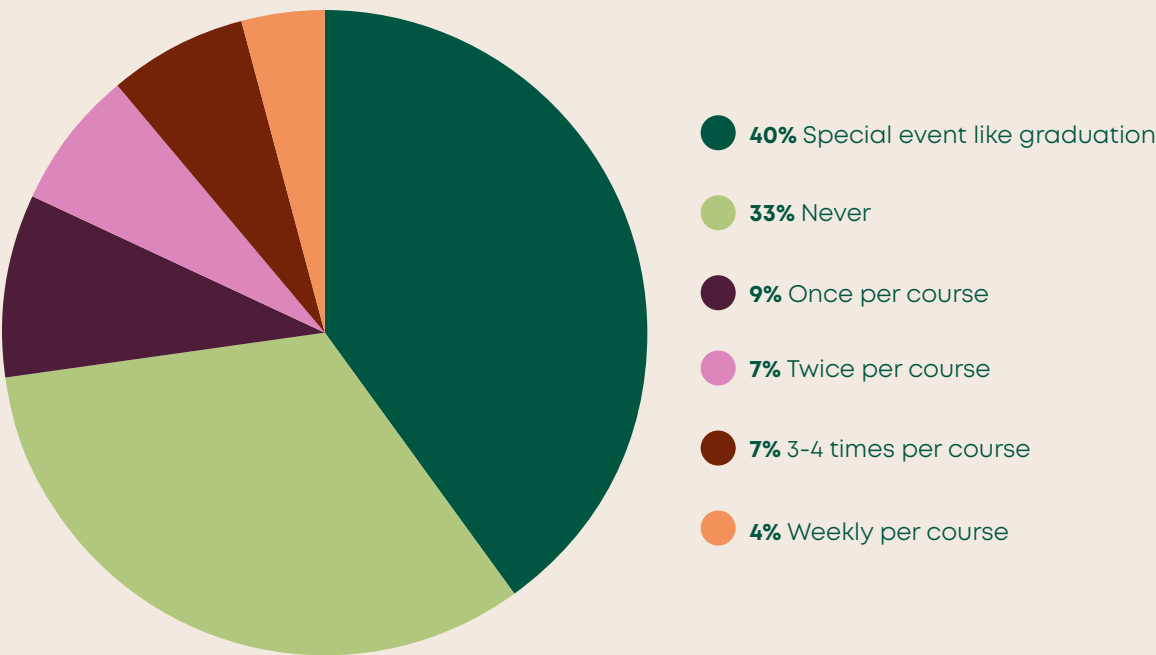
Increased interest in connection and academic support

Online graduate learners express an increased interest in connection and academic support. They are breaking down the traditional walls between online and offline, looking for learning opportunities that meet their immediate needs in the ways they want them to be met, which includes having options for connection with their peers and professors.

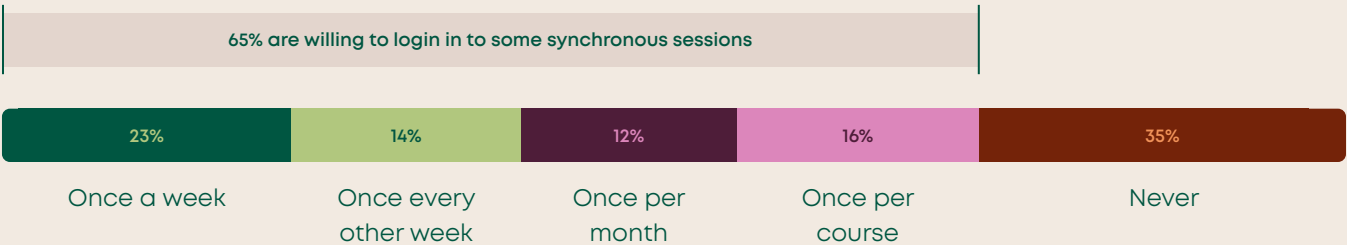
Percent of learners who would visit the campus of the program:



Percent of learners who would like to visit the campus of the program:



Percent of learners who would be willing to log in to a session synchronously:



Interest but some uncertainty about non-degree programs

While many graduate students have participated in a nondegree program, they have done so for in-the-moment skill needs, not for long-term benefit. This perceived immediate value makes alternative credentials an effective offering to attract working adults. However, most students don't understand how these credentials can potentially stack towards an advanced degree and they remain skeptical as to the value they provide to employers.

79%

say alignment with career or academic goals is the most important factor in deciding to pursue alternative credentials

11%

cited stackability as a key reason for pursuing alternative credentials



Takeaways for graduate program leaders

01.

Affordability and flexibility are key decision factors for graduate students. Online programs should be as affordable as possible and should offer schedule flexibility. Consider multiple start times a year to allow students to easily reenter should life events get in the way.

02.

Offer more optional opportunities for students to engage with professors and other classmates.

03.

Integrate Gen AI into coursework for career relevance and provide practical instruction around how Gen AI will play a role in their industry.

04.

Highlight pathways for stacking alternative credentials to traditional degree programs and partner with regional employers to ensure workforce relevance.

“I work in the operating room, so you have to have the physical people doing the surgeries. But we have AI that helps generate our robotics for our surgeries, and it’s huge in the hospitals.”

Bailee, Master of Science in Nursing — Family Nurse Practitioner

Methodology

Based on a Risepoint survey of 3,778 online higher education learners across the student lifecycle, conducted in January and February of 2025. Of the learners surveyed, 1,688 were graduate students. Half were from Risepoint partners' schools and half from an external panel. 50% enrolled students; 25% prospective students; and 25% graduates.

Note: data was weighted to 60% graduate degree level.



- 50% enrolled students
- 25% prospective students
- 25% graduates

About Risepoint

Risepoint is an education technology company that provides world-class support and trusted expertise to more than 100 universities and colleges. We primarily work with regional universities, helping them to develop and grow their high-ROI, workforce-focused online degree programs in critical areas such as nursing, teaching, business and public service. Risepoint is dedicated to increasing access to affordable education so that more students, especially working adults, can improve their careers and meet employer and community needs. Learn more at risepoint.com.

Over 14 years of research, online learners have told us who they are, what they value, and what they need to succeed. Our analysis of graduate learners specifically helps universities make informed decisions about graduate programs for continued relevance and impact.

Looking to expand your graduate programs for online learners?

Let's talk:



Risepoint.com