# Analyzing the Evaluation Process for International Student Applications in U.S. Universities

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## ABSTRACT

The surge in international student applications has posed a significant challenge for the U.S. universities admissions team. This surge has resulted in extended processing times, adversely affecting the yield from international applicants. The objective of this research is to enhance the efficiency of the intricate and time-consuming evaluation process. The primary objective is to establish a more streamlined and expedited process, guaranteeing uniformity and impartiality. Ultimately, the aim is to render decisions within two weeks of application submission, thereby benefiting both the institution and prospective international students.

KEYWORDS: International Students, Application, Evaluation process, U.S. Universities, Illinois State University (ISU), University Admission Process

**INTRODUCTION**

The United States has a long-standing reputation for having a superior higher education system that is distinguished by world-class institutions, cutting-edge research, and a thriving innovation culture. Due to its reputation, the United States is now a major destination for international students looking to pursue higher education. But applying to universities in the US can indeed be a daunting process for international students. The application process typically involves several steps, including gathering necessary documents, completing application forms, submitting standardized test scores (like the SAT or ACT), providing English language proficiency test scores (such as TOEFL or IELTS), writing essays or personal statements, obtaining letters of recommendation, and, in some cases, attending interviews. Once an international student submits their application, the waiting period for a decision can vary widely. Universities often receive a large number of applications, especially from international students, which can create a backlog for the admissions team. Factors like application volume, the complexity of evaluation, and specific program requirements can significantly impact the processing time. Admissions teams strive to evaluate applications as efficiently as possible, but the sheer volume and intricacies of each application can cause delays. Furthermore, universities might prioritize certain applications, such as those for early decision or high-priority programs, which could also affect processing times for other applicants. Efficient and swift processing of applications by the international admissions department is crucial for providing timely and equitable decisions to applicants. A rapid turnaround time not only ensures fairness but also encourages early commitments from prospective students. When applicants receive offers promptly, they are more inclined to confirm their enrollment, aiding the university's yield rate. An increased yield rate signifies that the international admissions team is effectively adding value through their evaluation processes. It minimizes inefficiencies within these processes, ensuring that efforts are concentrated on evaluating promising candidates rather than navigating administrative delays. Therefore, expediting the application process not only benefits applicants but also optimizes the resources and efforts of the admissions unit, leading to a more streamlined and effective evaluation system.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The trend of international students applying to universities in the United States exhibits a consistent upward trajectory each academic year. As reported by the Open Doors Data website, the latest figures reveal a notable enrollment of 1,057,188 international students in the academic year 2022-23 at various US institutions (Institute of International Education, 2023). The overwhelming volume of applicants poses a tremendous challenge for university admissions offices, which must undertake the difficult task of thoroughly and quickly reviewing each application. The objective is to make a quick and well-informed decision regarding the admission of potential students. An applicant's profile is evaluated in a number of different ways during the review process. Every university employs its own distinctive method for evaluating applications from international students. Additionally, the acceptance rates tend to differ from one university to another. Some of the top universities, like Pace University have an overall acceptance rate of 88% and an international student acceptance rate of 84%. Massachusetts Institute of Technology has an overall acceptance rate of about 7% and an international student acceptance rate of 3.4% (Interstride, 2023). To evaluate a candidate's academic ability, character, and prospective contribution to the university community, admissions committees carefully examine the applicant's academic transcripts, standardized test results, letters of recommendation, and personal statements. In addition, universities take a holistic approach to admissions. This means that they take into account an applicant's unique capabilities or experiences in addition to their academic accomplishments, extracurricular activities, and involvement in the community. However, "the process of applying to graduate schools is much less standardized than applying to undergraduate schools. Whereas undergraduate applications focus primarily on academics and extracurriculars, graduate school applications focus more heavily on your intended degree, future direction, and even professional experience." (Interstride, 2023). This approach aims to create a diverse and dynamic student body that enriches the overall learning environment. A diversified and active group of learners that enhances the overall learning environment is the goal of this strategy. This procedure takes an extremely long time because of the sheer number of applications and the need to make intelligent choices. The admissions committees spend numerous hours scrutinizing each application to make sure that no deserving applicant is passed through. The enrollment manager from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee says, "The timing for acceptance to a U.S. university really depends on the university you're applying to as well as the degree you're applying to. Many undergraduate degrees can be accepted in a few weeks. But depending on the program you're applying for, it may require things like portfolios or things like that. Also, at the graduate level, they will be looking at many different things and requiring a large applicant pool." (IDP Education, 2023). Additionally, they must strike a balance between the necessity of completeness and the requirement to respond to candidates promptly so that they have enough time to be ready for the new academic term. Some universities have adopted advanced technical solutions and optimized workflows in response to this problem
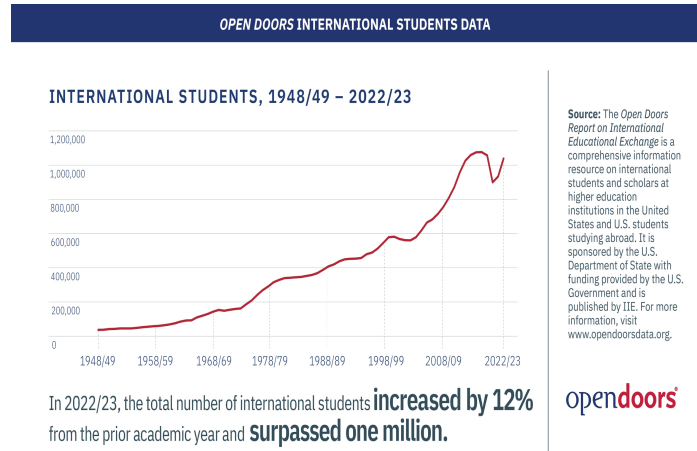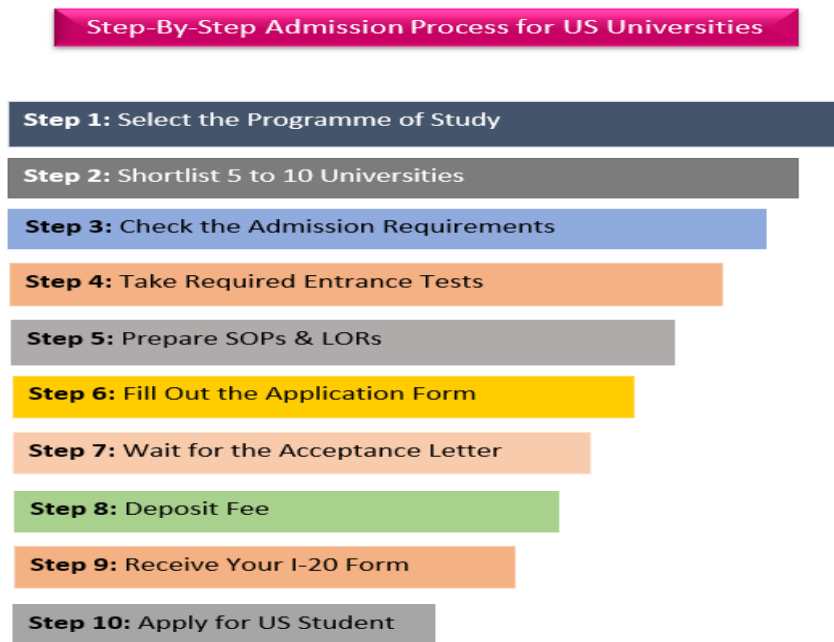


*Figure 1 No. of Students coming to US every year.*

to speed up the review process without sacrificing assessment quality. In order to assure uniformity and impartiality in the evaluation process, many schools have instituted intensive training programs for admissions staff. Ultimately, the dedication and meticulousness of admissions committees at U.S. universities play a crucial role in maintaining the nation's reputation as a global leader in higher education. Their efforts are instrumental in shaping a diverse and intellectually vibrant academic community that fosters innovation, research, and learning at the highest level.

**Step-By-Step Admission Process for US Universities**

**Step 1:** Select the Programme of Study

**Step 2:** Shortlist 5 to 10 Universities

**Step 3:** Check the Admission Requirements

**Step 4:** Take Required Entrance Tests

**Step 5:** Prepare SOPs & LORs

**Step 6:** Fill Out the Application Form

**Step 7:** Wait for the Acceptance Letter

**Step 8:** Deposit Fee

**Step 9:** Receive Your I-20 Form

**Step 10:** Apply for US Student

*Figure 2 Steps for Admission Process to U.S. Universities*

**BUSINESS CASE**

Illinois State University's international admissions unit within the Office of International Engagement (OIE) processed a record number of applications (8000) for the Fall 2023 term of entry. Until now, the average number of international applications processed by the international admissions unit per required term between Fall 2018 and Spring 2022 was 1,796. But this time the international admissions unit processed 8000 applications for the Fall 2023 term alone, and early indicators suggest that high application volume will persist through the Fall 2024 application cycle. In the future, swift, effective, and accurate handling of applications by the international admissions team will ensure timely and just decisions for applicants. Prompt offers can lead to early commitments, positively impacting the yield rate. A higher yield signifies the effectiveness and efficiency of the international admissions team's evaluation methods, minimizing waste and maximizing value within these processes. The OIE is currently under contract with INTO North America to meet a 3-business day service-level agreement (SLA) for determining the
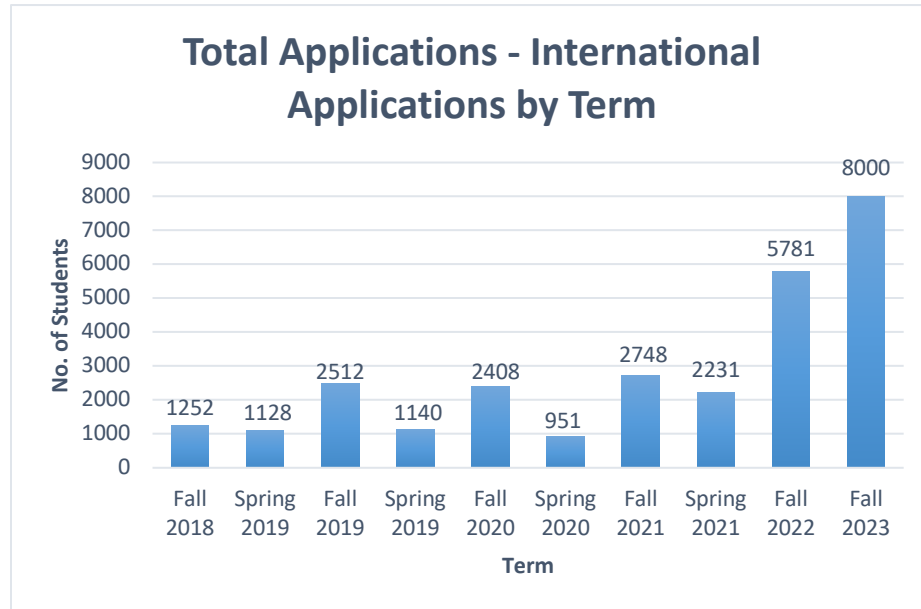
**Total Applications - International Applications by Term**

Figure 3 Total no. of applications every term

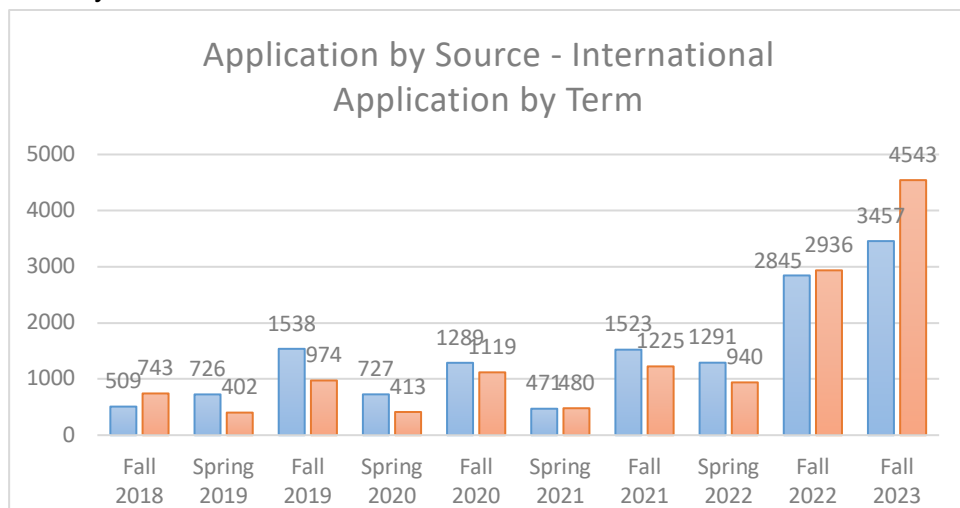**Application by Source - International Application by Term**

Figure 4 Number of Applications by Application Source by Required Term

eligibility/admissibility of an applicant who has submitted all required application materials via one of two application processing platforms. There is an expectation from institutional administrative stakeholders for application processing timelines to be comparable between the two application processing platforms (Salesforce and Slate) to promote equitable application processing practices regardless of source (direct applications versus INTO-recruited) and to encourage timely offers of admission that lead to earlier commitment and higher international yield. The current processes operate at an average of 14-21 days from the submission of a completed application to the decision released or the next review phase entered. This delay began and worsened during the Fall 2022 application cycle when the number of applications increased dramatically across both platforms and INTO North America's APC (American Processing Center) laid off a substantial percentage of its operational staff (resulting in a significant number of evaluation tasks being withheld and then released to the international admissions unit in bulk mid-cycle when the processing burden was already at its peak). The international admissions unit hired an enrollment manager in February 2022, as well as two additional evaluator or DSOs in June 2022 and later two in May 2023. The unit is staffed to process the expected number of applications per term based on the growth evidenced during the Fall 2022 application cycle, and there is now opportunity to optimize evaluation practices to meet the standing SLA and ensure precision and fairness in evaluation methodology, thereby improving yield.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

Illinois State University's Office of International Engagement (OIE) is facing challenges in efficiently processing a record number of international student applications due to increased application volumes and staffing changes. The current evaluation process exceeds the intended 3 business days service-level agreement, with an average processing time of 14-21 days. This delay hinders the university's goal of increasing its international student body and achieving equitable and prompt admissions processes across different application platforms. Consequently, there is a need to optimize and streamline the application evaluation process to meet service-level agreements, enhance fairness in evaluations, and improve the international student yield.

## GOAL STATEMENT

The objective of the international admissions unit is to enhance the international student enrollment rate at ISU by refining the evaluation procedures and making decisions within one week of the applications submitted by students. Also, the aim is to progressively raise the current 3.6 percent representation of international students in the overall student body. Ultimately, the goal is to work towards achieving a targeted enrollment percentage of 10 percent over time. This involves optimizing the evaluation process to attract and admit a more diverse pool of international students and steadily increase their presence within the university community.

## CURRENT PROCESS

The depicted process flow chart offers a comprehensive overview, detailing each step involved in the evaluation of applications and the subsequent decision-making process.
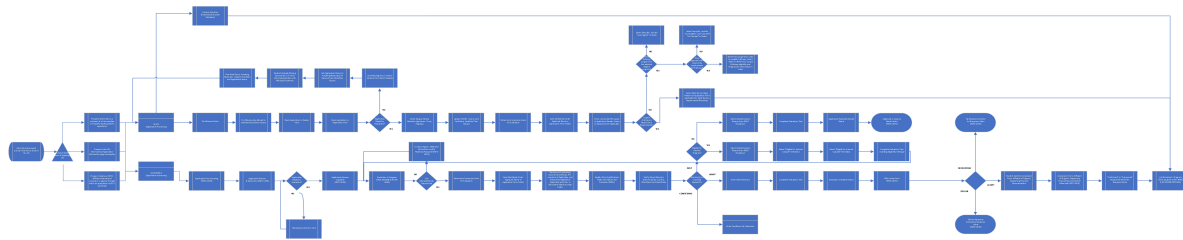


*Figure 5 Detailed application evaluation process.*

Currently, there are five evaluators out of two who are new, so they do not have enough training to evaluate transcripts. On an average, evaluator takes 20-25 minutes to evaluate one application. So, on a daily basis, approximately 25-27 applications are evaluated since there are 5 evaluators. The international admissions team also handles various additional responsibilities for the OIE, such as issuing immigration paperwork for F-1 and J-1-seeking students, gathering verified copies of academic records, and responding to inquiries from international prospects, applicants, newly admitted students, and current students through a centralized email platform. Enhancements to these procedures not directly linked to the application cycle are excluded. This approach aims to concentrate on refining a specific and interconnected set of processes. The simulation can be implemented in the multi-method simulation AnyLogic to analyze the process.
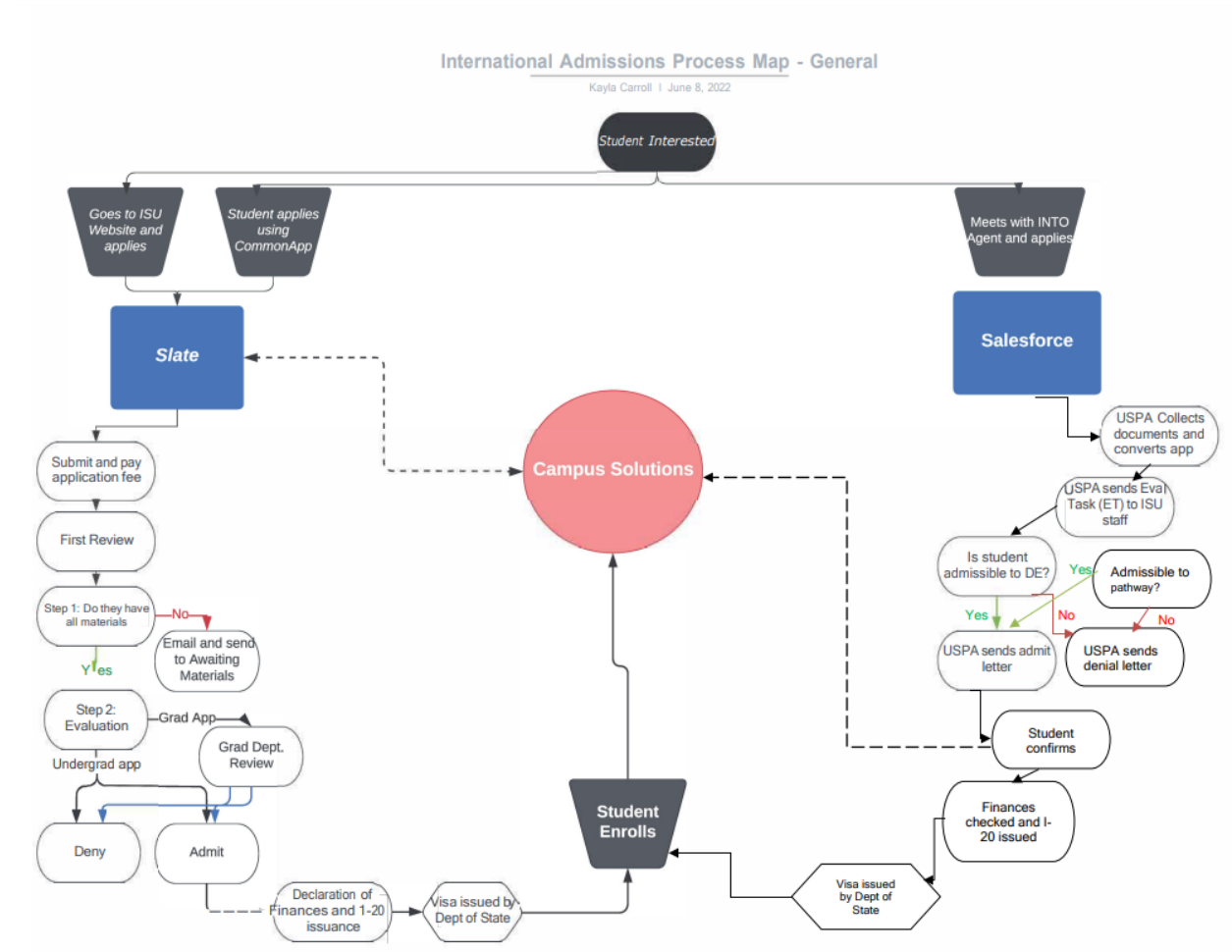
*Figure 6 Admission Process Map – General by Kayla Caroll (Director International Admissions)*

## REASONS FOR DELAY IN DECISION

**Application Issues and Delays from Applicants:** This factor highlights problems arising from incomplete applications or delays in receiving necessary documents from applicants. When applicants fail to submit essential materials promptly or respond to requests for additional information, it creates bottlenecks in the evaluation process. Admissions teams rely on complete application packages to make informed decisions, and any missing or delayed documents can significantly hinder timely assessments. Consequently, these issues prolong the decision-making process as the admissions team awaits the necessary information to finalize evaluations and render decisions.

**Teamwork Challenges and Insufficient Training:** Inefficient teamwork and inadequate or inconsistent training among admissions staff can lead to delays. Effective collaboration among team members is crucial for a streamlined application review process. Inadequate training may result in inconsistencies in application evaluation standards or inefficient workflows. A lack of cohesion among team members can slow down the overall evaluation process, impacting the

timely release of application decisions. Adequate training and a cohesive team approach are essential to ensuring a smooth and efficient admissions process.

**Equipment and Grading Scale Challenges:** Issues related to equipment, such as lacking standardized conversion templates for international credentials and variations in grading scales across different educational systems can cause delays. Without standardized templates for converting international grades to the university's system, evaluating applicants becomes more time-consuming and prone to errors. Inconsistent grading scales or unfamiliar educational systems might complicate the assessment process, necessitating more detailed reviews and potentially extending the decision-release timelines.

**Backlog and Increased Workload:** A backlog of deferred applications from previous admission cycles, coupled with an increased workload, can significantly impact decision timelines. If the admissions team has pending applications from previous terms that require reevaluation or further consideration, this backlog can delay the processing of current applications. A high volume of applications in conjunction with backlog clearance efforts leads to an increased workload, straining resources and causing delays in decision releases for new applicants.

**Task Prioritization and Administrative Responsibilities:** Administrative tasks such as prioritizing various responsibilities, managing staff meetings, issuing immigration documents to admitted students, and responding to applicant inquiries also contribute to delays. While these tasks are essential, they require time and attention from the admissions team. Balancing administrative duties with the core responsibility of evaluating applications can lead to diverted resources and delays in decision releases.

## PRE-INTERVENTION MODEL

In the pre-evaluation simulation model for application evaluation, the process follows a systematic flow to review and assess student applications. By breaking down the evaluation steps, we've pointed out the time each phase takes, enabling us to identify areas for optimization. This breakdown allows us to streamline processes, aiming to expedite the evaluation and decision-making process. Initially, the application is received by the student from one of the application processing platforms (Slate or Salesforce). The first application is moved to individual evaluation in the queue, followed by checking documents (review bin). The application is then accessed in both reader and application views to ensure all documents are accurately labeled and checklist items checked off. Essential checks include verifying passport names matching application names and addressing discrepancies; confirming application fee payments for Common App applicants; and acknowledging the acceptability of unofficial documents, particularly transcripts. Applications lacking essential documents prompt the sending of a personalized email using a predefined template, after which the application is moved to the individual evaluation queue. The subsequent evaluation phase involves Grading conversion is done adhering to the AACRO (American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers) standards if no specific policy exists. Grades are entered, and GPA calculations are cross-checked for accuracy. Any pertinent notes regarding missing documents or transfer credits are added to the evaluation form. Finally, adherence to program requirements guides the decision-making process, categorizing applications into Admit, Deny, or Pathway programs if eligible.
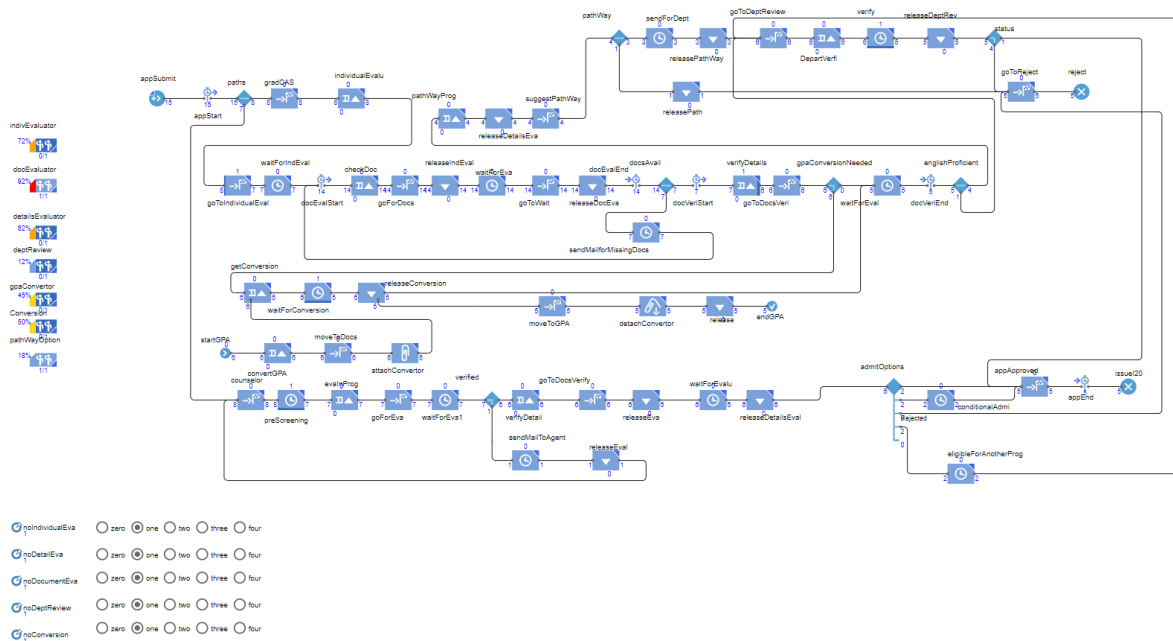
*Figure 7 Pre-Intervention Simulation Model.*

## POST-INTERVENTION MODEL

In the post-implementation phase, we've made a change to our evaluation process. By integrating advanced data processing and AI technologies, we've streamlined application sorting and initial screening. With automation taking care of the initial tasks, our evaluators can dedicate more personalized attention to each application. They get enough time to look into the details of every candidate and other tasks. This extra time allows for a deeper consideration of various aspects beyond just the checklist items. Additionally, utilizing third-party grade conversion services like WES (World Education Services) can save a good amount of time. This step has accelerated our evaluation of international transcripts. By leveraging their expertise, we've expedited the assessment process, saving valuable time and ensuring accuracy in grading conversions. These recommended changes have effectively improved our evaluation workflow, making the process more efficient. As a result, decisions on admissions come earlier in the process, giving applicants quicker responses.
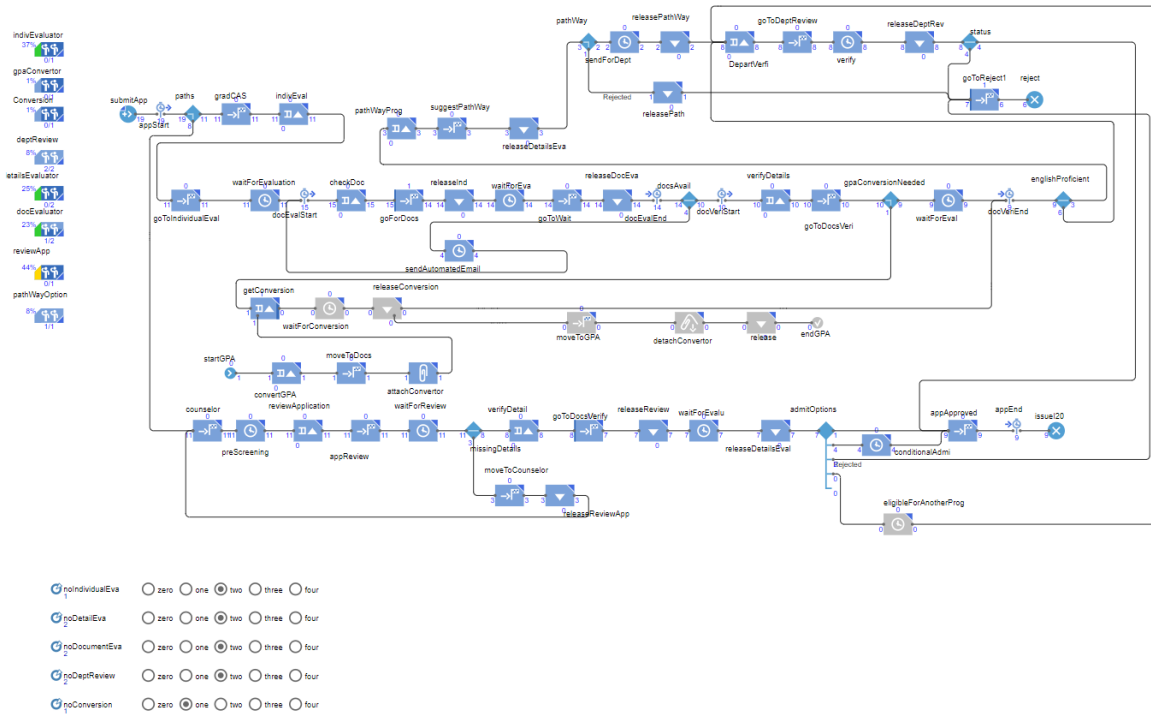
*Figure 8. Post-Intervention Simulation Model*

**RESULT AND OUTCOME**

In order to compare the pre-model and post-models, both simulations were executed in AnyLogic for a duration of 84600 seconds, which is approximately a day. In order to determine the results, five distinct metrics were added together to compare the data. The initial metrics, computed utilizing the probability density function histogram, are used to examine the application approval time from the time the application is submitted. The conversion of grade point averages and manual application review significantly altered the application procedure. It is apparent from these values that students have to endure a waiting period of a few months before receiving the outcome of their applications.
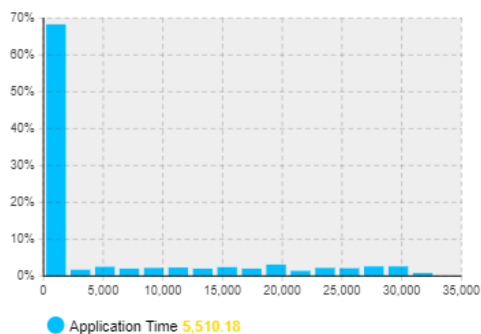


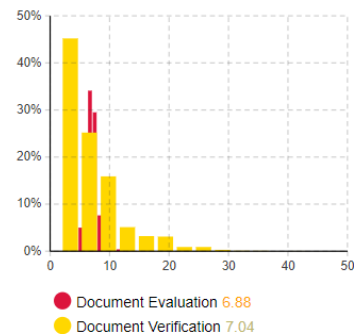*Figure 8  Pre-Intervention Application Time*



*Figure 9  Post-Intervention Application Time*

The pre-model implementation took an estimated 1 hour 30 minutes to process a single application. However, with the incorporation of automated tasks and the assistance of a third party, that time was reduced to 34.99 seconds. The processing time has been reduced by roughly 98%.

In order to compute the document evaluation and verification procedure, the second metric is employed. A subprocess of the document evaluation procedure requires an email to be sent to the applicant in the event that any documents are missed. In place of the previously time-consuming nature of this procedure, we have now established an automated email system that significantly reduces the required duration. Aside from this, the time required to evaluate the two types of applications, one from GradCAS and the other from a third party was longer than anticipated due to the fact that there was only one evaluator; however, the process has been made more efficient by the addition of an additional evaluator in the post-model.

Likewise, the grade point average (GPA) must be converted in accordance with the system in the United States for the document verification procedure; this used to require time to convert for each application. Furthermore, this task has been delegated to a third party, which is responsible for converting the data and transmitting it throughout the admissions procedure.
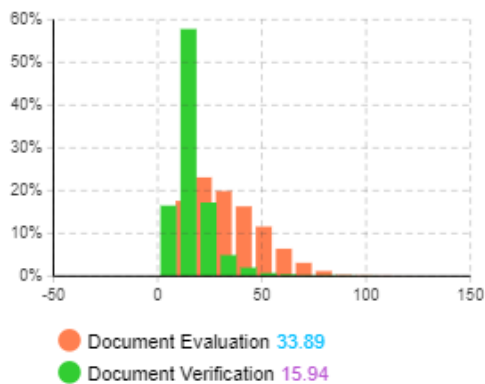
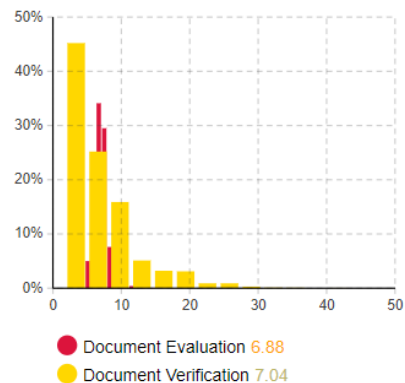*Figure 10 Pre-Intervention Documents*



*Figure 11  Post-Intervention Documents*

These improvements have contributed to the process's increased efficiency. The process of document evaluation has been enhanced by 79.69 percent, while the process of document verification has been improved by 55.83 percent.
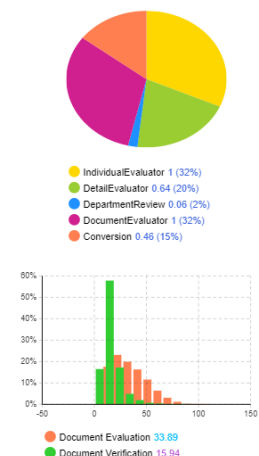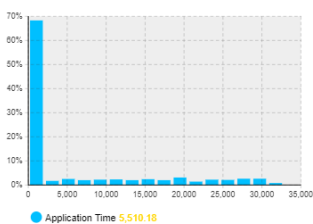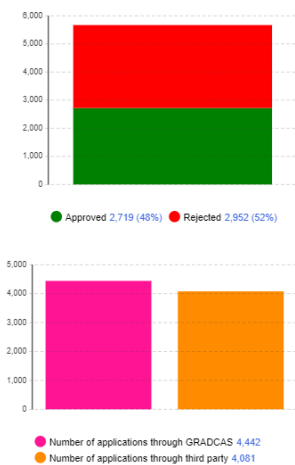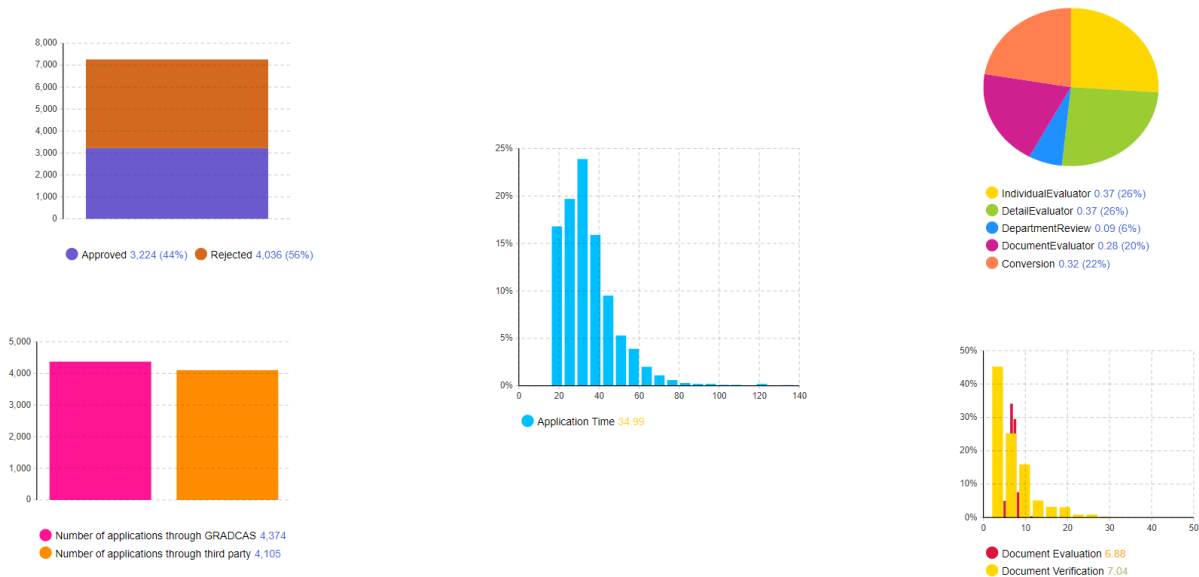


*Figure 12 PRE-MODEL KPI*

*Figure 13 POST MODEL KPI*

## LIMITATIONS

The evaluation process for international graduate student admissions faces limitations, primarily due to the lack of a standardized process. Assessing applicants involves subjective elements like work experience, personal statements, and interviews, which lack defined timelines and uniform benchmarks and come to a decision. This subjectivity makes it challenging to uniformly evaluate applicants' qualifications and interests. Moreover, diverse academic credentials from various educational systems worldwide further complicate assessment, lacking standardized conversion tools. The absence of clear timeframes for subjective evaluations and the resource-intensive nature of holistic assessments also contribute to delays and complexities in the evaluation process. These limitations highlight the need for comprehensive evaluation frameworks that balance subjective elements while ensuring fairness and consistency in admissions assessments.

## CONCLUSION

The complexity of the application evaluation process arises due to its lack of standardization and reliance on multiple variables, often resulting in delays in decision-making. However, leveraging a simulation model proved instrumental in pinpointing time-consuming stages within the process. By implementing strategic modifications, we successfully reduced the timeframe for each step. Introducing cutting-edge data processing and AI technologies played a pivotal role in streamlining processes like application sorting, initial screening, and data verification. Automation significantly expedited these phases, enhancing efficiency. Furthermore, integrating third-party services for grade conversion emerged as a game-changer, markedly reducing the time required for decision-making. These measures collectively revolutionized the evaluation process, resulting in faster and more precise admissions decisions.

The entire process used to take approximately 1 hour 30 minutes from when the application was sent to when it was approved. Now that automation and a third party for GPA conversion have been added, it only takes 34.99 seconds, a 98% improvement. Document evaluation used to take

about 33.89 seconds for a single application, but now it only takes about 6.88 seconds which is 79.69% improvement. Similarly, document verification used to take about 15.94 seconds for a single application, but now it only takes about 7.04 seconds which is 55.83% improvement.

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