

# Canadian postsecondary enrolments and graduates, 2020/2021

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In the 2020/2021 academic year, the COVID-19 pandemic became a major disruption in colleges and universities across the country, with most institutions cancelling in-person classes and moving to virtual learning. Public health restrictions along with domestic and international border crossing limits had an impact on the Canadian postsecondary system.

Enrolments in public colleges and universities decreased slightly in 2020/2021; they dropped by 0.6% from 2019/2020, to just under 2.2 million students. This decrease was attributable largely to lower college enrolments (-5.0%) for both Canadian (-23,922 or -3.7%) and international (-11,385 or -7.4%) college students.

To review findings in a visual format across different geographies and academic years, refer to the new visualization tool: [Elementary to Postsecondary Student Education Dashboard: Enrolments, Graduations and Tuition Fees](#).

## International student enrolments decline for the first time in over a decade

For the past decade, [increases in postsecondary enrolments were driven primarily by international students](#). By 2019/2020 the number of international students enrolled in formal programs had nearly tripled compared with 2010/2011.

With the closure of visa application centres and travel restrictions because of COVID-19, however, many prospective international students faced difficulties obtaining permits to study in Canada. Consequently, in 2020/2021, international student enrolments declined by 4.0% (-15,504) at the national level, a notable decrease compared with the 11.2% increase experienced over 10 years prior to the pandemic. When looking specifically at new entrant international students—those who registered for postsecondary education for the first time—this decrease is even more pronounced.

In 2020/2021, their enrolments declined by 22% (from 108,672 to 84,807) in college-level certificate, diploma and degree programs.

In response to the public health and travel restrictions, many universities and colleges increased their offering of online classes. As a result, the number of new entrant international students enrolled to study outside Canada by Internet or offshore campuses more than quadrupled from 1,323 in 2019/2020 to 5,439 in 2020/2021. Degree programs saw the highest increase in online learning.

## College enrolments decline in the 2020/2021 academic year for programs requiring a work placement

Not all postsecondary programs were equally affected by the pandemic. According to a recent Statistics Canada study, [educational programs that required work-integrated learning](#) were affected to a greater degree by COVID-19 than other learning and academic activities that were more easily offered online.

Overall, the greatest impact was observed in college programs that were generally shorter in duration, had a higher student turnover, and frequently offered a work-related placement. For example, the career, technical or professional training programs experienced the largest decrease (-4.6% or -23,550 enrolments) in 2020/2021, compared with the previous year.

The decline in students enrolled into business, humanities, health, arts, social science, education, legal studies, trades, services, natural resources and conservation was also driven by decreases in fields of study which include a work placement, such as the trades, services, natural resources and conservation, down by 9.3% (-14,514). Similarly, within the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics and computer science programs, the largest decline was reported in engineering and engineering technology, a decrease of 7.6% (-4,341).

## Canadian student university enrolments increase in 2020/2021

Despite the overall decline in postsecondary student enrolments experienced during the pandemic, some gains in university enrolment were observed. Overall, the number of university enrolments increased by 2.1% (or +28,365) in 2020/2021 compared with a year earlier. While the international student enrolments decreased by 1.8% (-4,029), Canadian student enrolments were up by 2.8% (+32,394) in 2020/2021.

University enrolments of female students experienced an increase of 2.5% (+19,761) in 2020/2021, driven mainly by increases (+2.8%) in younger Canadian university students, aged 15 to 29 years. A recent Statistics Canada study revealed that during the start of the 2020/2021 academic year [young Canadian-born women's participation in postsecondary education increased during the pandemic compared to the previous year and relative to their male counterparts](#).

## Pace of growth slows for postsecondary graduates in the 2020 calendar year

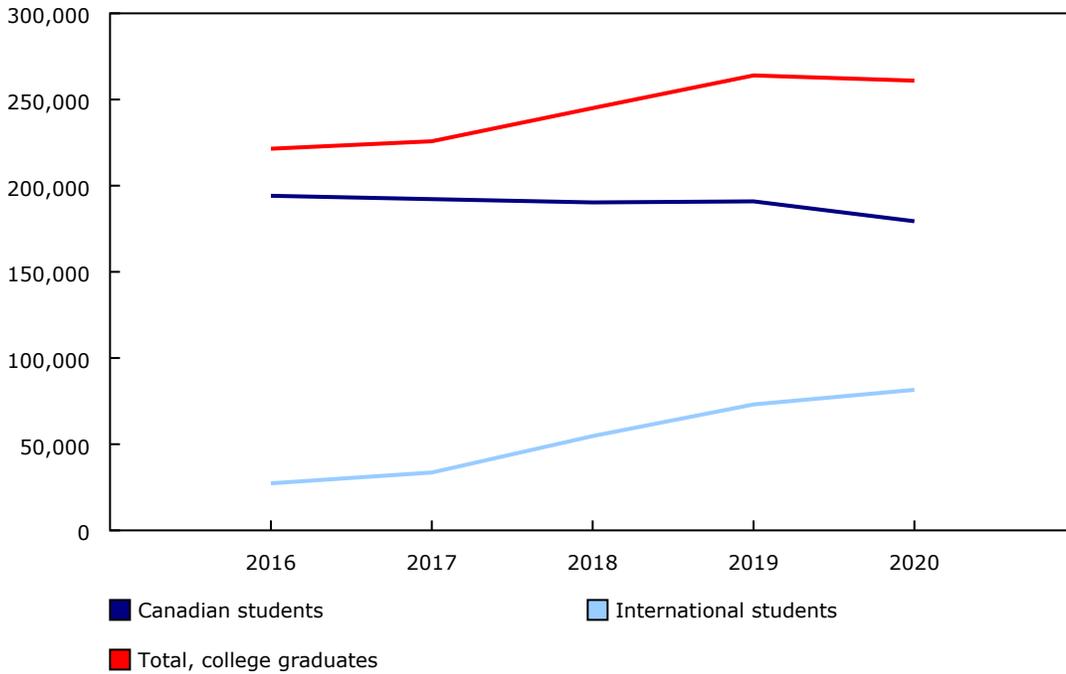
**Table 1**  
**Graduates from Canadian universities and colleges, 2019 and 2020**

	2019	2020	2019 to 2020
	number of graduates		% change
Universities	320,784	326,991	1.9%
Colleges	266,175	263,349	-1.1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>586,959</b>	<b>590,340</b>	<b>0.6%</b>

Source(s): Postsecondary Student Information System ([5017](#)).

In the 2020 calendar year, 590,340 students graduated with a certificate, diploma or degree, from a public postsecondary institution. This number represented an increase of 0.6% from the 2019 calendar year, much lower than the 2.5% year-over-year change observed during the previous five years. The decline in the number of graduates was mainly attributable to a decline in Canadian college students, by 6.0% (-11,538) compared with 2019.

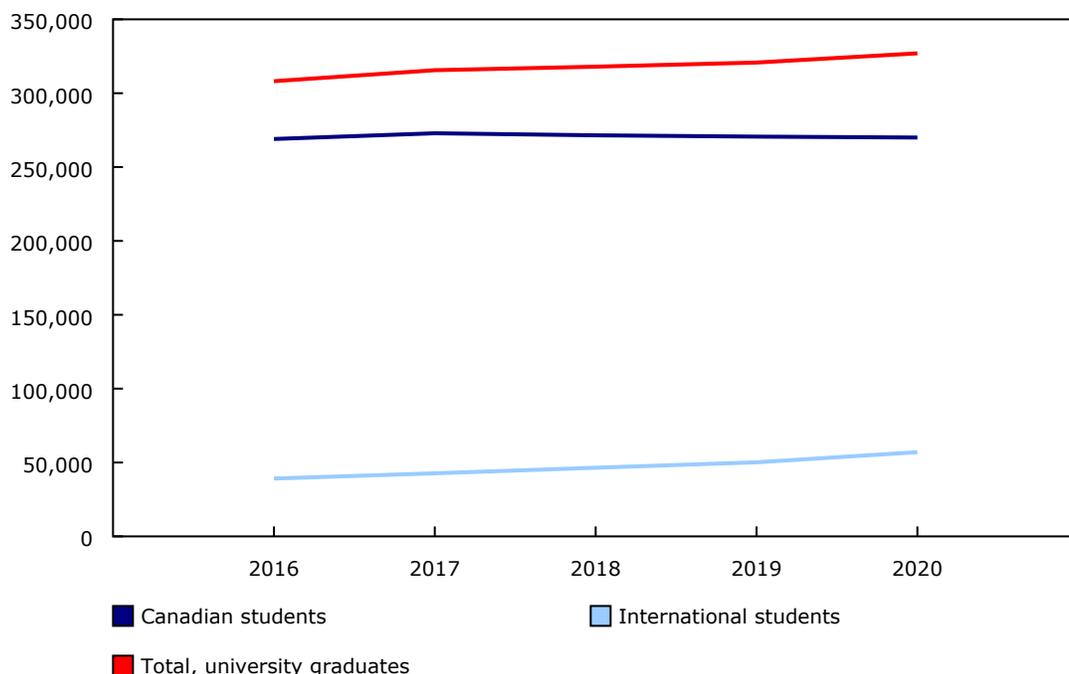
**Chart 1**  
**College graduates by status of student in Canada, 2016 to 2020**



Source(s): Postsecondary Student Information System (5017).

Conversely, university graduates experienced an increase of 1.9% (+6,207) in 2020. The increase was observed in all degree programs except for doctoral or equivalent programs. This group experienced a drop of 4.4% (-345), the largest observed in the last three years of continuous declines. The most affected were doctoral students in programs where laboratory research was a major component of the degree requirements, but which could not be fulfilled in light of COVID-19 restrictions and closures.

**Chart 2**  
**University graduates by status of student in Canada, 2016 to 2020**



Source(s): Postsecondary Student Information System (5017).

## Graduates from healthcare programs see a decline in the 2020 calendar year after consistent growth in previous years

In 2020, the number of graduates who completed healthcare programs accounted for 11.6% of all graduates. Compared with 2019, this represents a 5.8% decline in the number of graduates. This drop was more pronounced among college graduates (-10.3%). Because of the pandemic, many students in health care programs did not have an opportunity to complete in-person clinical placements to fulfill the program requirements for graduation. In addition, some nursing students from health care programs stepped in to support public health efforts given the scarcity of resources at the height of the pandemic. This disruption in the learning curriculum may also have postponed graduation for nursing students.

Looking more specifically at general healthcare programs, nursing graduates reported the greatest decline in 2020 (-6.2% or -1,620), after experiencing a growth of 1.7%, on average, each year over the previous five years. This drop was mainly observed at the college level (-1,479) across most provinces.

The 2020/2021 academic year was not typical for Canadian colleges and universities, with some immediate pandemic impact on enrolments and graduates observed in the Postsecondary Student Information System data. As more years of data become available, future studies will be able to provide additional insights into the potential long-term impacts of COVID-19 on Canada's postsecondary education system.

### Note to readers

Administrative data on Canadian postsecondary institution enrolments and graduates are obtained from public colleges and universities using the Postsecondary Student Information System. The counts exclude students enrolled in apprenticeship programs. Enrolment and graduate counts for certain institutions are preliminary or based on estimates.

The numbers of enrolments presented are not meant to represent a complete enumeration of all students at postsecondary institutions during the 2020/2021 academic year. Instead, they are based on students enrolled in postsecondary institutions at the time of the fall snapshot date, that is, a single date chosen by the institution that falls between September 30 and December 1. Therefore, students who were not enrolled during this period are excluded. This count has a greater impact on colleges as they have a continuous intake of students and offer shorter programs.

Enrolments are based on program counts and not on student counts. If a student is enrolled in more than one program as of the snapshot date, all of their programs are included in the count.

Graduate data are published based on the calendar year.

Colleges can offer some programs at the bachelor level and above.

All numbers, including the totals, have been rounded; therefore, sums of the values may not match the total counts. Percentage changes were calculated using rounded values. The data are subject to annual revisions. These revisions are applied to include new data submissions from 2004, any updates to classification standards and changes in concepts.

For methodology on new entrant enrolments calculation, see the technical reference guide "[Persistence and graduation indicators of postsecondary students, 2011/2012 to 2019/2020](#)" for further information. Institutions with imputed data were not included into the calculation.

For new enrolments by main credential programs, refer to [Classification of programs and credentials](#).

**Available tables:** [37-10-0011-01](#), [37-10-0012-01](#), [37-10-0015-01](#), [37-10-0018-01](#), [37-10-0020-01](#), [37-10-0069-01](#), [37-10-0070-01](#), [37-10-0086-01](#), [37-10-0087-01](#), [37-10-0090-01](#), [37-10-0112-01](#), [37-10-0135-01](#), [37-10-0163-01](#), [37-10-0164-01](#), [37-10-0182-01](#) to [37-10-0185-01](#) and [37-10-0232-01](#) to [37-10-0235-01](#) .

**Definitions, data sources and methods:** [survey number 5017](#).

To further explore 2020/2021 postsecondary enrolment and graduation data in a visual format, refer to the comprehensive data visualization tool "[Elementary to Postsecondary Student Education Dashboard: Enrolments, Graduations and Tuition Fees](#) ."

This new comprehensive data visualization tool combines information from three surveys: Tuition and Living Accommodation Costs, Elementary-Secondary Education Survey, and the Postsecondary Student Information System. Each survey is released separately, and information includes the cost of tuition, an overview of total enrolment and graduation counts, characteristics of students and programs, and including details on new enrolments by gender, age group and student status, which will be released on a separate date.

For more information, or to enquire about the concepts, methods or data quality of this release, contact us (toll-free 1-800-263-1136; 514-283-8300; [infostats@statcan.gc.ca](mailto:infostats@statcan.gc.ca)) or Media Relations ([statcan.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.statcan@statcan.gc.ca](mailto:statcan.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.statcan@statcan.gc.ca)).