

Estimating the international student population in Canada using administrative data: A feasibility study, 2025/2026

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From the 2003/2004 to 2023/2024 academic years, the number of full-time international students in public postsecondary institutions in Canada increased eightfold. It then fell by almost one-third, according to new preliminary estimates now available for the 2024/2025 and 2025/2026 academic years.

These results are from the study entitled "[Feasibility study: Estimating the international student population in Canada using administrative data](#)," which produced preliminary estimates of the number of full-time international students in public postsecondary institutions and selected characteristics of these students for the 2024/2025 and 2025/2026 academic years. Data for these years are not yet available in Statistics Canada's Postsecondary Student Information System (PSIS).

According to these new estimates, the number of full-time international students in public postsecondary institutions decreased 4% in 2024/2025 and 26% in 2025/2026, bringing their numbers back to levels similar to those recorded in 2021/2022, the second academic year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The number of international students in public postsecondary institutions falls

Since 2023/2024, the last year for which official data from the PSIS are available, the number of international students decreased 124,000 (-29%), bringing their numbers back to about 300,000 in total in 2025/2026, which is similar to the level observed in 2021/2022.

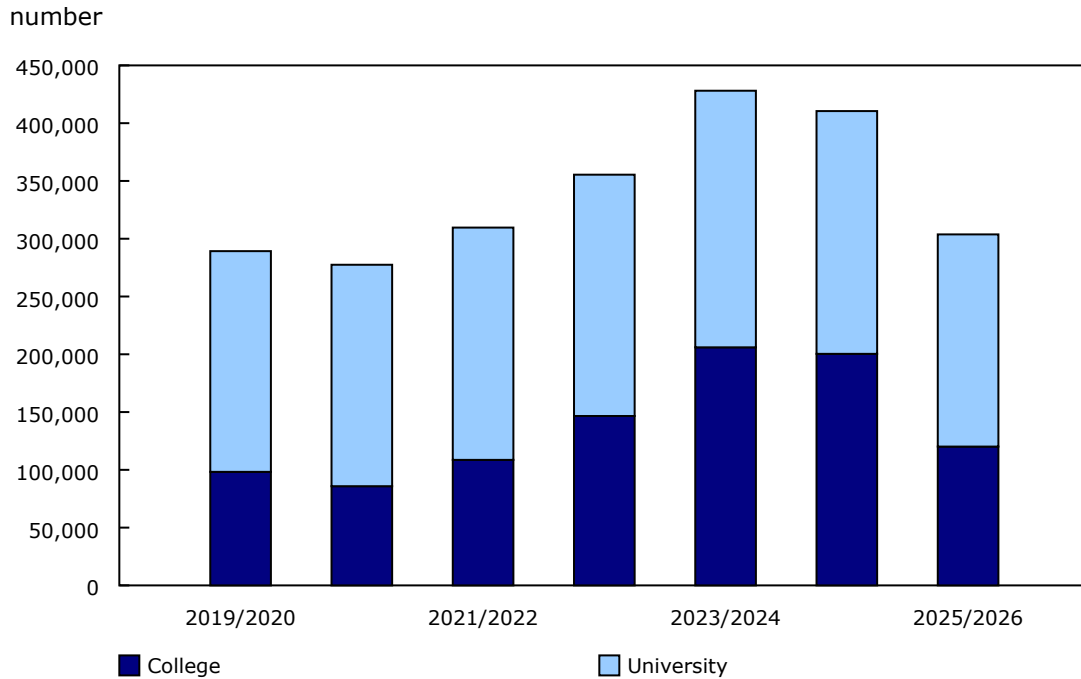
In college programs, the decline was moderate in 2024/2025 (-3%) and more pronounced in 2025/2026 (-40%). This represents a 42% decrease since 2023/2024, bringing the number of international students below the level recorded in 2021/2022.

The decrease in university programs (-17%) from 2023/2024 to 2025/2026 was estimated to be almost half as large as that in college programs. Nevertheless, the number of international students dropped to a level below that observed in 2019/2020.



Chart 1

Number of full-time international students in public postsecondary institutions by institution type, observed (2019/2020 to 2023/2024) and estimated (2024/2025 and 2025/2026)



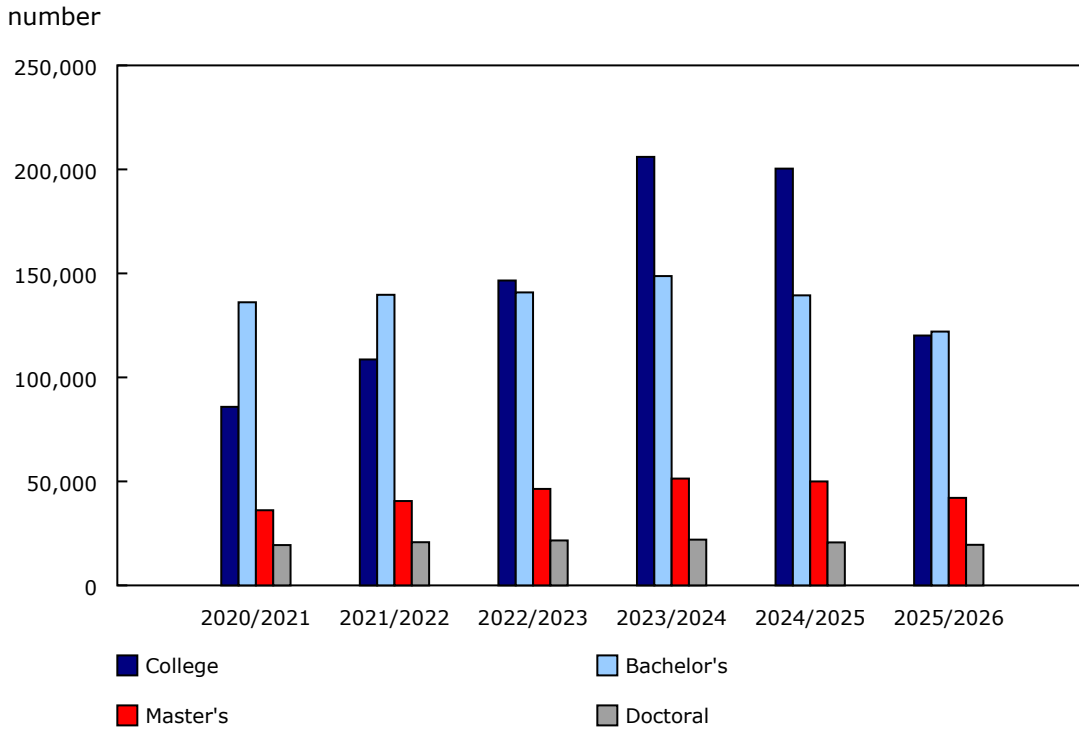
Source(s): Postsecondary Student Information System (5017) for the observed period and author's calculations for the estimated period.

The total number of international students declines at all levels of university

The number of international students at all levels of study at university increased steadily from 2020/2021 to 2023/2024. However, from 2023/2024 to 2025/2026, their numbers are estimated to have dropped 18% each at the bachelor's level and the master's level and they declined to a lesser extent at the doctorate level (-11%).

Chart 2

Number of full-time international students in public postsecondary institutions by level of study, observed (2020/2021 to 2023/2024) and estimated (2024/2025 and 2025/2026)



Source(s): Postsecondary Student Information System (5017) for the observed period and author's calculations for the estimated period.

Larger decline in the number of international students in Ontario

At the regional level, preliminary estimates indicate that Ontario could see the largest decline in the number of full-time international students in public postsecondary institutions, with losses of roughly 15,000 students in 2024/2025 (-6%) and of 92,000 in 2025/2026 (-36%) compared with the 2023/2024 academic year.

In the rest of Canada, the decline in the number of international students from 2023/2024 to 2025/2026 is estimated to be smaller, at 26% in the Atlantic provinces, 14% in Quebec, 17% in the Prairie provinces and 24% in British Columbia.

In 2023/2024, Ontario was home to the most international students in Canada (60%), which represents a larger share than its demographic weight in the Canadian population (39%). In 2025/2026, Ontario's share of international students had declined to 54%.

In 2025/2026, the share of international students was estimated to be lower than the demographic weight in the provinces of Quebec (15% of international students compared with a demographic weight of 22%), British Columbia (12% compared with 14%) and the Prairies (13% compared with 19%). In addition, the Atlantic provinces' share of international students reached a level equal to its demographic weight, at 6% in 2025/2026.

New cohorts of international students are affected most

New cohorts of international students starting on their academic path in public postsecondary institutions may be affected most by the decreases in the past two academic years.

In colleges, the loss is estimated at 102,188 new students (-75%) compared with 2023/2024, according to preliminary estimates. The decline is smaller for new cohorts in 2025/2026 in university, with estimated losses of 36,740 (-46%) compared with new cohorts in 2023/2024.

As a result, the size of the new cohorts starting their studies in 2025/2026 seems to be similar to the size of college cohorts in 2020/2021 and university cohorts in 2013/2014.

Note to readers

In 2024, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) announced its intention to decrease the number of temporary residents. This [measure](#) aimed to reduce the number of new study permits issued by 35% in 2024 relative to 2023, followed by an [additional 10%](#) in 2025. New [provincial and territorial caps](#) based on population figures were also put in place. At this time, Postsecondary Student Information System (PSIS) data do not give an indication of the impact of these measures on the number of international students enrolled in public colleges and universities.

The purpose of this study was to estimate the number of international students (excluding private institutions and part-time students) enrolled in study programs of more than one year at public postsecondary institutions in PSIS. In contrast to data on study permits, which are authorizations to study in Canada, these estimates speak to the students actually or potentially enrolled at public postsecondary institutions. The analysis uses a longitudinal approach by study cohort for the academic years 2011/2012 to 2025/2026, with estimates based on historical persistence rates. For recent cohorts, the initial number of study permit holders from IRCC is adjusted to account for differences in coverage and concepts between enrolled students and study permit holders. The estimates are broken down by gender, region, institution type and level of study.

These estimates must be considered preliminary. They will be revised as new data become available.

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

For more information on the data sources and methods used, please consult the study, "[Feasibility study: Estimating the international student population in Canada using administrative data](#)."

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) or Media Relations (statcan.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.statcan@statcan.gc.ca).