

# International students accounted for all of the growth in postsecondary enrolments in 2018/2019

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Student enrolments in Canadian public universities and colleges rose for the fourth consecutive academic year in 2018/2019, driven solely by higher enrolments by international students.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, postsecondary students experienced significant changes to their educational instruction, with most students learning remotely at the end of the 2019/2020 academic period and continuing to do so at the beginning of the 2020/2021 academic period. Additionally, international students faced travel restrictions and delays in the processing of their student visas and study permit applications. The 2018/2019 results from the Postsecondary Student Information System can be used as a benchmark to evaluate the impact of COVID-19 on student enrolments and graduates, in particular international student enrolments.

In the 2018/2019 academic year, over 2.1 million students were enrolled in Canadian public universities and colleges, up 1.8% from the previous year. This was attributable to a 16.2% increase (+47,952) in international student enrolments during the same time period, while enrolments by Canadian students edged down by 0.5% (-8,301). To explore findings in a visual format, visit the new "[Postsecondary program enrolments and graduates: Interactive tool](#)."

The vast majority of enrolments (91.6%) were in formal programs, while 8.4% of enrolments were in courses outside of a program, or another type of non-formal learning activity such as continuing education or personal interest courses.

## Over a 10-year period, international student enrolments in formal programs more than tripled while Canadian student enrolments increased at a slower pace

International students increasingly contribute to Canada's postsecondary landscape. Over the past decade, from the 2008/2009 to 2018/2019 academic period, enrolments for Canadian students in formal programs grew by 10.9% (from 1,486,602 to 1,648,923). Over the same period, the number of international students more than tripled from 101,304 in 2008/2009 to 318,153 in 2018/2019. As a result, over a decade, the proportion of international student enrolments changed from 6.4% to 16.2% by 2018/2019 and represented 57.2% of the total growth in all program enrolments.

Previous analysis has shown that the reliance of universities on tuition as a revenue source has grown over the past decade and that international students, who pay substantially higher tuition than domestic students, are an important element of this growth, contributing an estimated 40% of all tuition fees and accounting for almost \$4 billion in annual revenue for Canadian universities in 2018/2019. See [Financial information of universities for the 2018/2019 school year and projected impact of COVID-19 for 2020/2021](#).

A profile of [international student enrolments](#) showed that they originate from 225 countries, with over half from China and India. Two-thirds of international students were pursuing a credential at the bachelor level or higher; the most common field of study was business, management and public administration.

## Increased enrolments in mathematics, computer and information sciences reflect labour market demands

As labour market needs evolve, education systems adapt to new demands for skills. These adaptations are reflected in enrolment changes in programs. Over a 10-year period, while enrolments by Canadian and international students increased by 24.2% overall, differences existed by field of study.



Although mathematics, computer and information sciences programs accounted for 5.0% of all enrolments in 2018/2019, growth in this field of study was the strongest (+102.7%) over the past decade, with the number of students increasing from 47,748 in 2008/2009 to 96,768 in 2018/2019. This reflects the increased digitalization of society in general where, according to a recent study, jobs associated with the digital economy (+37.0%) grew much more than the total economy (+8.6%) from 2010 to 2017. See [Measuring digital economic activities in Canada: Initial estimates](#).

Programs in the humanities had the largest decrease in enrolments. While these programs accounted for 11.0% of all enrolments in 2018/2019, over a 10-year period, the total number of students enrolled in these programs decreased by 19.4%, from 266,229 to 214,503. A Statistics Canada article exploring whether [young postsecondary graduates](#) were finding employment related to their studies determined that degree holders in "arts and humanities" were more likely than their peers who graduated from other fields of study to work in jobs typically requiring a high school education and to be classified as "overqualified" in their occupation.

**Table 1**  
**Enrolments in Canadian universities and colleges by field of study, 2008/2009 and 2018/2019**

	2008/2009	2018/2019	2008/2009 to 2018/2019	2008/2009 to 2018/2019
	enrolments		change	% change
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,583,040</b>	<b>1,946,103</b>	<b>363,063</b>	<b>22.9</b>
Business, management and public administration	316,107	404,364	88,257	27.9
Social and behavioural sciences, and law	225,372	274,446	49,074	21.8
Health and related fields	193,566	264,600	71,034	36.7
Architecture, engineering and related technologies	160,050	229,521	69,471	43.4
Humanities	266,229	214,503	-51,726	-19.4
Physical and life sciences, and technologies	135,021	173,802	38,781	28.7
Mathematics, computer and information sciences	47,748	96,768	49,020	102.7
Education	85,131	87,912	2,781	3.3
Visual and performing arts, and communications technologies	74,844	79,641	4,797	6.4
Personal, protective and transportation services	32,751	46,269	13,518	41.3
Other	17,781	38,508	20,727	116.6
Agriculture, natural resources and conservation	24,438	32,274	7,836	32.1
Personal improvement and leisure	3,996	3,495	-501	-12.5

**Note(s):**

Data in this table are presented using the Variant of the Classification of Instructional Programs Canada 2016 – Cannabis Primary Groupings (CIP\_PG). The CIP\_PG field of study "Unclassified" category is excluded from this table, and therefore the CIP\_PG field of study total is a modified total.

The data in this table represent enrolments in postsecondary programs. International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) categories "Upper secondary education" and "Not applicable" (ISCED 03 and 96) are excluded from the table.

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

## International students led the growth in business, management and public administration programs

Program enrolments over a 10-year period differed for international and Canadian students. For example, while enrolments in humanities decreased for Canadian students (-25.2%), they increased for international students (+106.1%). Differences observed for international students could be attributable to initiatives implemented to attract them to Canada, as well as to the program choices they made either to increase their job prospects to stay in Canada or to respond to labour market demands in their home country.

Over the decade, while business, management and public administration was consistently the top field of study for both Canadian and international students, growth was largely driven by international student enrolments. From 2008/2009 to 2018/2019, the percentage increase of international student enrolments in this field of study (+216.5%) far outpaced the increase of Canadian students (+7.7%). As a result, the majority of the total growth in enrolments (+87,948) was driven by international students (+65,868).

Programs in health and related fields were a more common choice for Canadian students (15.2% of all Canadian student program enrolments) than for international students (5.1% of all international student program enrolments) in 2018/2019. From 2008/2009 to 2018/2019, enrolment growth in these programs was driven by Canadian students, who accounted for 86.2% of the growth in these fields (61,170 out of 70,968).

**Table 2**  
**Canadian student enrolments in Canadian universities and colleges by field of study, 2008/2009**  
**and 2018/2019**

	2008/2009	2018/2019	2008/2009 to 2018/2019	2008/2009 to 2018/2019
	enrolments		change	% change
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,480,593</b>	<b>1,629,453</b>	<b>148,860</b>	<b>10.1</b>
Business, management and public administration	285,306	307,383	22,077	7.7
Health and related fields	187,290	248,460	61,170	32.7
Social and behavioural sciences, and law	212,727	239,262	26,535	12.5
Humanities	254,622	190,506	-64,116	-25.2
Architecture, engineering and related technologies	144,114	173,469	29,355	20.4
Physical and life sciences, and technologies	126,609	148,164	21,555	17.0
Education	83,292	84,486	1,194	1.4
Visual and performing arts, and communications technologies	70,833	69,120	-1,713	-2.4
Mathematics, computer and information sciences	40,821	63,804	22,983	56.3
Personal, protective and transportation services	32,187	41,961	9,774	30.4
Other	17,142	34,437	17,295	100.9
Agriculture, natural resources and conservation	22,815	26,514	3,699	16.2
Personal improvement and leisure	2,829	1,890	-939	-33.2

**Note(s):**

Data in this table are presented using the Variant of the Classification of Instructional Programs Canada 2016 – Cannabis Primary Groupings (CIP\_PG). The CIP\_PG field of study "Unclassified" category is excluded from this table, and therefore the CIP\_PG field of study total is a modified total.

The data in this table represent enrolments in postsecondary programs. International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) categories "Upper secondary education" and "Not applicable" (ISCED 03 and 96) are excluded from the table.

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

**Table 3**  
**International student enrolments in Canadian universities and colleges by field of study,**  
**2008/2009 and 2018/2019**

	2008/2009	2018/2019	2008/2009 to 2018/2019	2008/2009 to 2018/2019
	enrolments		change	% change
<b>Total</b>	<b>100,968</b>	<b>313,395</b>	<b>212,427</b>	<b>210.4</b>
Business, management and public administration	30,426	96,294	65,868	216.5
Architecture, engineering and related technologies	15,927	55,629	39,702	249.3
Social and behavioural sciences, and law	12,483	34,788	22,305	178.7
Mathematics, computer and information sciences	6,924	32,865	25,941	374.7
Physical and life sciences, and technologies	8,412	25,608	17,196	204.4
Humanities	11,595	23,892	12,297	106.1
Health and related fields	6,063	15,861	9,798	161.6
Visual and performing arts, and communications technologies	3,999	10,074	6,075	151.9
Agriculture, natural resources and conservation	1,617	5,751	4,134	255.7
Personal, protective and transportation services	552	4,245	3,693	669.0
Other	639	3,759	3,120	488.3
Education	1,830	3,204	1,374	75.1
Personal improvement and leisure	498	1,428	930	186.7

**Note(s):**

Data in this table are presented using the Variant of the Classification of Instructional Programs Canada 2016 – Cannabis Primary Groupings (CIP\_PG). The CIP\_PG field of study "Unclassified" category is excluded from this table, and therefore the CIP\_PG field of study total is a modified total.

The data in this table represent enrolments in postsecondary programs. International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) categories "Upper secondary education" and "Not applicable" (ISCED 03 and 96) are excluded from the table.

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

While the current and long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international student enrolments is not yet known, their participation in Canadian postsecondary programs is important for a variety of reasons. Not only does international student tuition revenue contribute to the viability of some courses and programs, international students increase the social and cultural diversity of campuses. In addition, while contributing to the local economy when studying in Canada, international students provide the country with a large pool of well-educated individuals who could contribute to Canada's work force and obtain permanent residency. According to a study that examined the [rate of transition into permanent residence](#), almost one-third of international students with a bachelor's degree and almost half of those with a master's degree became permanent residents in the 10 years after their first study permit was issued.

As data become available in the future, they will provide important insight into the impact of COVID-19 on Canadian postsecondary institutions, both in terms of enrolments for Canadian and international students and potential shifts in fields of study.

**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 are based on estimates.

The levels of enrolment presented are not meant to represent a complete enumeration of all students at postsecondary institutions during the 2018/2019 academic year. Rather, 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 are not enrolled during this time period are excluded. This 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, then all of their programs are included in the count.

Graduate data are published based on the calendar year.

Some programs at the bachelor level and above can be offered in colleges.

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.

**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](#) and [37-10-0182-01](#) to [37-10-0185-01](#) .

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

The interactive data visualization tool "[Postsecondary program enrolments and graduates: Interactive tool](#)" is available on the Statistics Canada website.

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; [STATCAN.infostats-infostats.STATCAN@canada.ca](mailto:STATCAN.infostats-infostats.STATCAN@canada.ca)) or Media Relations (613-951-4636; [STATCAN.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.STATCAN@canada.ca](mailto:STATCAN.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.STATCAN@canada.ca)).