

Prior to COVID-19, international students accounted for the growth in postsecondary enrolments and graduates

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In the 2019/2020 academic year, just prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, student enrolments in Canadian public universities and colleges rose for the fifth consecutive academic year to almost 2.2 million. The increase was largely driven by higher enrolments of international students, a trend that has been ongoing for the last decade. See "[International students accounted for all of the growth in postsecondary enrolments in 2018/2019.](#)"

From 2018/2019 to 2019/2020, there was a 13.7% (+46,815) increase in enrolments of international students in colleges and universities, while Canadian student enrolments declined by 0.9% (-16,005).

To explore the data in a visual format, refer to "[Postsecondary program enrolments and graduates: Interactive tool.](#)"

By the end of the 2019/2020 academic year, the COVID-19 pandemic led to the physical closure of colleges and universities across Canada. Many postsecondary students who participated in a crowdsourced survey in the spring of 2020 reported that some of their courses had been postponed or cancelled by their institutions, including course work such as labs, applied learning and hands-on instruction that cannot be delivered online. See "[Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on postsecondary students.](#)"

Number of international college student enrolments more than doubled over the last five years

Although most (60.6%) international students were enrolled in universities in 2019/2020, the proportion studying in colleges (39.4%) has been on the rise. Over the last five years, the number of international college students more than doubled, rising from 60,318 enrolments in 2015/2016 to 153,360 in 2019/2020. The number of international university students increased from 168,606 to 235,422 over the same period.

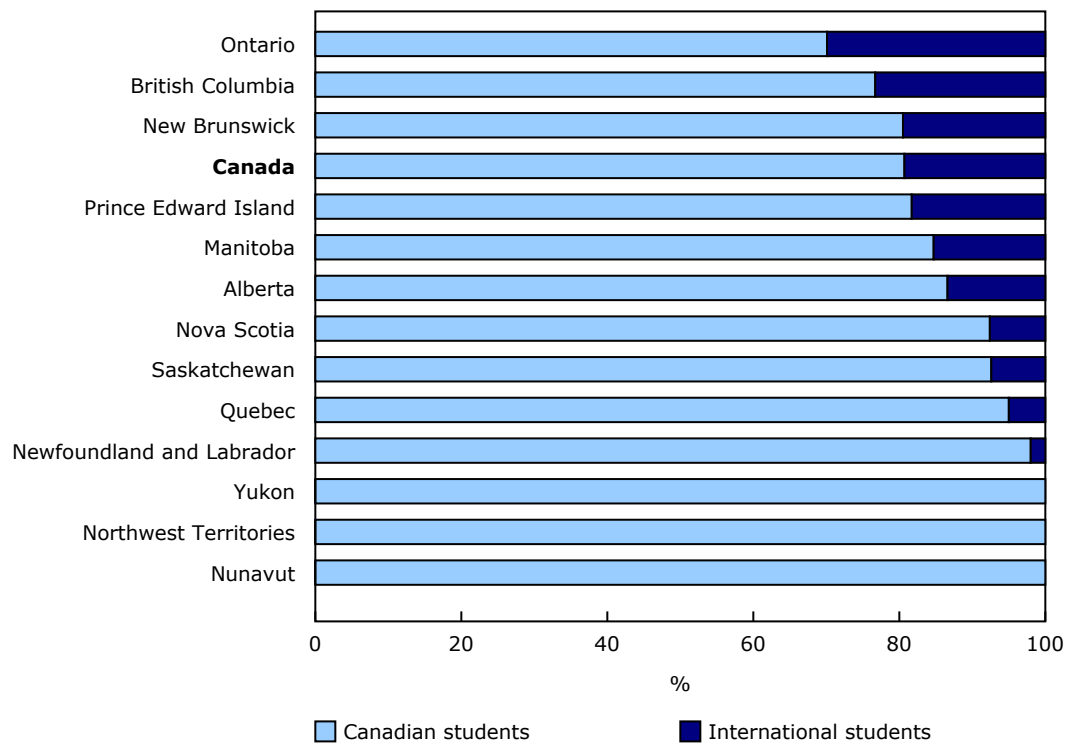
Overall in 2019/2020—taking into consideration both Canadian and international students—63.1% of all enrolments were in universities, while 36.9% were in colleges.

The proportion of international students studying in colleges and universities varied across provinces and territories. For example, almost a third of college students in Ontario (29.9%), and more than one in five in British Columbia (23.3%), were from outside Canada.

By contrast, colleges in Saskatchewan (7.4%), Quebec (including CÉGEP—5.0%) and Newfoundland and Labrador (2.0%) had far fewer international student enrolments. In general, international student enrolments accounted for 19.3% of all students enrolled in colleges in Canada.

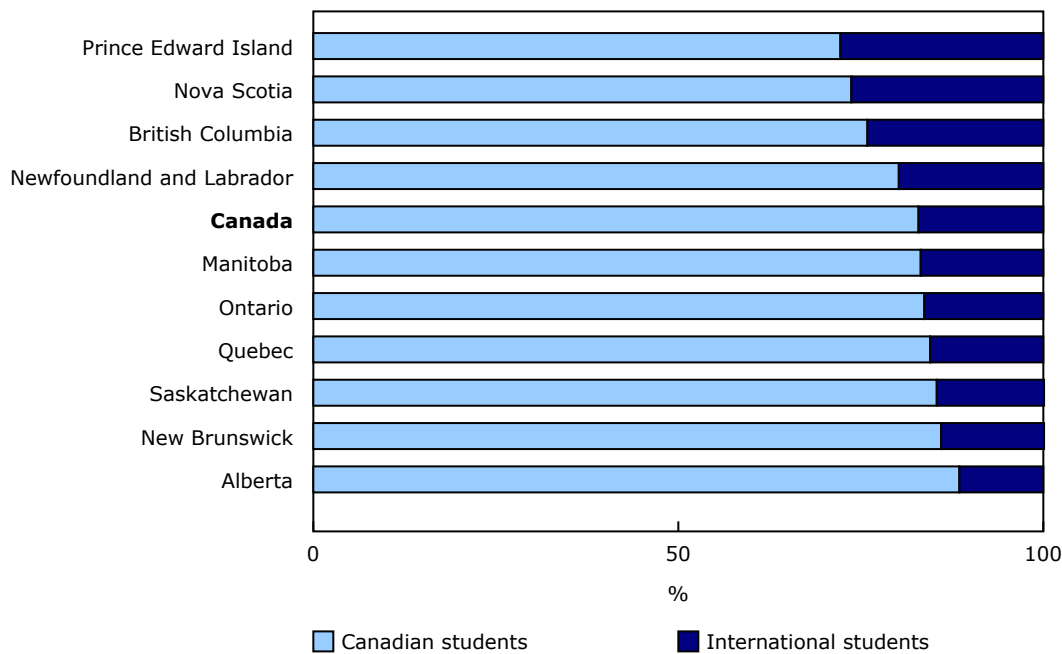


Chart 1
College enrollments by status of student in Canada and province of study, 2019/2020



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

Chart 2
University enrollments by status of student in Canada and province of study, 2019/2020



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

At the national level, international students represented 17.1% of total university enrolments. This proportion varied from the highest in Prince Edward Island (27.8%), Nova Scotia (26.3%) and British Columbia (24.1%) to the lowest in Alberta (11.5%).

There are a number of programs at both the federal and provincial or territorial levels that are designed to attract international students to Canada. The Canadian International Education Strategy 2019–2024 describes international students, particularly those who choose to remain in Canada, as contributing significantly to Canada’s long-term economic success and competitiveness.

According to a recent Statistics Canada study, the share of first-time study permit holders for college programs grew from 28% (101,000 out of 354,500) in the 2000-to-2004 period to 34% (324,000 out of 950,300) in the 2015-to-2019 period. By comparison, the share intending to study at the bachelor’s degree level, after increasing in the late 2000s, had dropped back to the level of the early 2000s by 2010 (13%) and remained fairly stable over the next decade (15% in 2019). Increasingly, students from India are enrolling at the college level. Among international students intending to study at the college level, the share of students from India grew from 4% in the 2000-to-2004 period to 67% in the 2015-to-2019 period. See "[International students as a source of labour supply: The growing number of international students and their changing sociodemographic characteristics.](#)"

There have been numerous media reports about the barriers that COVID-19 travel restrictions created for international students wishing to study in Canada. In a recent Statistics Canada study, the potential financial impact of the pandemic on Canadian universities in the 2020/2021 school year was assessed based on assumptions about possible changes in international and domestic student enrollments using proxy data. See [Projected Financial Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Canadian Universities for the 2020/21 Academic Year.](#)

International college graduates led the overall growth in number of graduates in 2019

Looking at those who graduated in the 2019 calendar year, 587,151 students received a credential, such as a certificate, diploma or a degree, from a public postsecondary institution, up 4.0% from the previous year. While the majority of graduates continued to be from university programs, the increase (+22,446) was driven mostly by graduates from college programs (+19,692) which accounted for 87.7% of total growth.

Table 1
Graduates from Canadian universities and colleges, 2018 and 2019

	2018	2019	2018 to 2019
	number of graduates		% change
University	318,015	320,775	0.9
College	246,687	266,379	8.0
Total	564,705	587,151	4.0

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

International students accounted for the majority of this increase in college program graduates. At the college level there were 18,366 (+33.6%) more international student graduates, compared with 840 (+0.4%) more Canadian student graduates, than in 2018.

Overall, though international college students represented 27.7% of college graduates, they were responsible for 81.8% (18,366 out of 22,446) of growth in all graduates from Canadian colleges and universities in 2019.

Among university graduates, there was a decrease in Canadian student graduates by 903 (-0.3%), while the number of international student graduates increased by 3,675 (+7.9%).

The increase in international student graduates and decrease in Canadian student graduates changed the proportion of Canadian graduates from 82.0% in 2018 to 78.9% in 2019. Over the same period, the proportion of international student graduates grew from 18.0% to 21.1%.

Graduates in health professions will be increasingly important in the post-COVID-19 labour market

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated an already existing labour shortage in some health sector professions. According to the [Job Vacancy and Wage Survey](#), from the second quarter of 2019 to that of 2021, the health care and social assistance sector had the largest increase in vacancies of any sector. Along with immigration of skilled workers, the Canadian postsecondary system will be a source of highly trained graduates in health and related fields to address these challenges in the post-COVID-19 labour market. The full magnitude of the shortage, and whether these combined sources will be sufficient to address it, remain to be seen.

The cohort of graduates who completed programs in the health professions and related programs in 2019, just prior to the pandemic, accounted for 12.7% of all 2019 graduates (74,277). Of these, 53.0% were college graduates, while 47.0% graduated from a university.

Graduates from health programs were predominantly Canadian students (92.5%), while international student graduates accounted for 7.5%. Of the 5,553 international student graduates in health programs, more than two-thirds (78.8%) graduated from college programs. For Canadian students, the proportion of university (49.2%) and college (50.8%) graduates was roughly equal.

Women accounted for 82% of health program graduates, while 18% were men. Women graduates outnumbered men in this field of study at both universities (79.4%) and colleges (84.4%).

Graduates from registered nursing, nursing administration, nursing research and clinical nursing programs represented the largest (19,770) sub-group for both colleges and universities from all health program graduates, with 28.6% and 71.4%, respectively.

Meanwhile, a total of 213,144 students were enrolled in health programs in the 2019/2020 academic year, including 85,212 in nursing programs. Although some students may not have continued or completed their programs in subsequent years for a variety of reasons, these enrolments point to a potential labour supply to fill positions in the health care sector in the years to come.

Although it is too early to fully understand how postsecondary students and graduates will be impacted by the pandemic, future Postsecondary Student Information System cycles will allow more in-depth exploration of the effect of the COVID-19 lockdowns and health restrictions on enrolments and graduates.

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 2019/2020 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 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, 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 by 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) or Media Relations (613-951-4636; STATCAN.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.STATCAN@canada.ca).