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Feasibility study: Estimating the international student population in Canada using administrative data

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Abstract

Following the changes to the international education program announced by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) in 2024, this study examines the feasibility of producing current estimates of the number of international students enrolled in public postsecondary institutions in Canada. Using data from the Postsecondary Student Information System (PSIS) and supplemented by administrative data sources, these estimates are intended to fill an important data gap for recent academic years, specifically 2024/2025 and 2025/2026. Preliminary results suggest that the new government measures led to a sharp decline in the new cohorts of international students and, to a lesser extent, a decline in total international student enrolment in public postsecondary institutions. The results indicate that in the short term—over two academic years—these measures may have significantly reduced the size of new cohorts of international students (-64%) in 2025/2026 and, more moderately, the total number of international students in public postsecondary institutions (-29%). The total number of international students appears to have particularly fallen in college programs (-42%) and in Ontario (-36%).

Keywords: International students, international education, PSIS, postsecondary institutions.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the portrait of the postsecondary student population in Canada has changed quickly, mostly due to the increase in the number of international students. The relative share of international students among all postsecondary students has increased fivefold since the early 2000s, from about 5% to nearly 25% (Statistics Canada, 2025a). A number of factors contributed to this rapid growth in the number of international students, including the Government of Canada's International Education Strategy 2019-2024, which highlighted the economic, social, and cultural contributions of international students to Canada (Global Affairs Canada, 2019). This strategy set objectives to ensure Canada's long-term competitiveness and to continue attracting the best talent from around the world. At the same time, in recent years, decreased investment by the provinces in the postsecondary education sector has prompted institutions to intensify their recruitment abroad (Usher, Balfour & Jeon, 2025). Tuition fees, which are much higher for international students (Statistics Canada, 2025b), have helped, among other things, to alleviate the financial pressure that some institutions were experiencing (Statistics Canada, 2025c). Together, these factors have contributed to sustained growth in the number of international postsecondary students since the early 2010s, averaging over 10% per year (Statistics Canada, 2025a).

However, this growth in the international student population has raised concerns about the sustainability of Canada's international education program. In public discourse, international students are viewed, on one hand, as ideal candidates for permanent residency due to their knowledge of official languages, their recognized Canadian education, and above all, their contribution to the Canadian economy (Scott & al., 2015; IRCC, 2022). On the other hand, they are sometimes associated with the pressure they can exert on access to housing, the health care system and schools (Government of Canada, 2025). At the same, several studies paint a portrait of an increasingly marginalized population: in addition to high tuition fees, a lack of adequate housing, and financial, psychological and sexual abuse (Marwah & al., 2023; Stick, Hou & Zhang, 2024), there is evidence of potential abuse of the international education program (Hune-Brown, 2021).

As a result, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) implemented various measures aimed at better controlling the growth in the number of international students. Caps on study permit applications and additional constraints on obtaining post-graduation work permits were implemented, reducing the number of international students who will come to study in Canada (IRCC, 2024a; IRCC, 2024b; IRCC, 2025). However, according to various stakeholders in the field, these policies could potentially lead to repercussions on the financial health of postsecondary educational institutions, the diversity of programs offered, and Canada's long-term competitiveness as an international study destination (Radio Canada, 2026) (French only).

These changes in Canada are set against a global backdrop of increasing restrictions for international students in the traditional "Big Four"[1] destinations. In 2025, an 18% decrease in the number of international students in these countries is expected, in favour of new hubs in Europe and Asia (Bartosik & Simonova, 2025). In the United States, visa restrictions and the social climate could lead to a drop of 30% to 40% in new international enrolments, representing a loss of nearly $7 billion (NAFSA, 2025).

For now, the impact of measures on the number of international students enrolled in colleges and universities in Canada is not known, as data for the last two academic years are not yet available. The most recent release from Statistics Canada's Postsecondary Student Information System (PSIS) examined students in the 2023/2024 academic year, i.e., before changes were made to IRCC's International Student Program (ISP). The key objective of this study is therefore to measure the feasibility of developing a system for producing more current estimates of the number of international students in the public postsecondary sector in Canada. Using survey data and supplemented by administrative data sources, these estimates will help to meet a significant data need and better measure the potential impacts that migration policies have had on international postsecondary education in Canada, particularly for the 2024/2025 and 2025/2026 academic years. Furthermore, the estimates will also help to assess where these impacts have been felt most, based on certain key characteristics such as region, level of education (e.g., bachelor's degree), institution type (e.g., university), or field of study.

Data sources

For this feasibility study, we used longitudinal data from the PSIS along with two administrative data sources available at Statistics Canada: IRCC's monthly study permit files and the Canada Revenue Agency's (CRA) T2202 tax data.

The Canadian Centre for Education Statistics' (CCES) Postsecondary Student Information System (PSIS) is a national survey that enables Statistics Canada to publish information on enrolments and graduates of Canadian public postsecondary institutions to meet policy and planning needs in the field of postsecondary education. Since the PSIS consists of a set of cross-sectional data files, it has the great advantage of making longitudinal analyses possible. Statistics Canada's Education and Labour Market Longitudinal Platform (ELMLP) integrates data from the PSIS and other data sources for analytical purposes. In this study, we first drew on the longitudinal data from the ELMLP.

Second, we used the monthly study permit files from IRCC available at Statistics Canada. According to IRCC, a foreigner must acquire a study permit to begin university or professional studies or training courses or other courses whose duration is more than six months and are offered at a designated learning institution (DLI)[2] in Canada (Global Affairs Canada, 2026; accessed on March 2, 2026). IRCC's data on study permits are very current, being available on a monthly basis about three weeks after the end of the reference month. These files include both certain demographic characteristics of students who have had one or more study permits in Canada and information about the permits themselves. These data are used to estimate the size and certain characteristics of new cohorts of international students.

Lastly, tax data from the CRA's T2202 file (Tuition and Enrolment Certificate) were used during an exploratory period to confirm the validity of our adjustment method for the overestimation resulting from study permit holders who are not in the PSIS. The T2202 is a tax form provided by designated educational institutions to all qualifying students in a qualifying educational program for tax purposes.[3] Since 2019, the CRA has collected T2202 certificates from both public and private designated learning institutions.

Methodology

To align the estimates with the objectives of this study, the reference population was defined as international students attending a public postsecondary DLI. As a result, the total population in our estimates was not directly comparable with other sources. For example, there is a major conceptual difference between enrolled international

1. The United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia.
2. Refers to postsecondary educational institutions designated by provinces and territories to host international students and to educational institutions managed by a federal department or agency.
3. More information on student eligibility and program eligibility is available on this page on the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) website.

students (estimated here) and study permit holders in IRCC's files. Essentially, the study permits provide an indication of permission to study in Canada, rather than school enrolment. Moreover, the data on study permit holders have been recognized for historically overestimating the number of international students actually enrolled in a Canadian postsecondary institution (Statistics Canada, 2019; Statistics Canada, 2023). Lastly, unlike the PSIS data which are based on the number of enrolments in programs, our estimates are based on the number of students studying full-time.

In this study, we took a longitudinal approach by cohort to maximize the use of ELMLP data. First, each student was placed in an entry cohort for a given program of study and region of study. We define entry cohorts, or new enrolment cohorts, as students who are enrolled full-time for the first time in their program of study during the reference period (September 30 to December 1). For our estimates, the entry cohorts were estimated for the fall session of the academic year. We tracked the respective enrolments of each of these cohorts longitudinally until the end of the PSIS data availability period—for this study, the 2023/2024 academic year.

Subsequently, we projected these student enrolments using historical annual persistence rates defined as

$$Annual\ persistence\ rates\left(i\right)=\frac{E_{i+1}}{E_i}\times 100$$

where E_i represents the number of students enrolled after i years and E_{i+1} the number of students still enrolled the following year. The annual persistence rate represents the proportion of students in a given cohort who will still be enrolled the following year. This method supposes that the school persistence rates of recent cohorts will remain roughly the same for future cohorts. This method was inspired by the one used to calculate the persistence and graduation indicators of postsecondary students (Statistics Canada, 2025d). However, to ensure the reliability of estimation parameters for small numbers, annual persistence rates were preferred for our study.

For the 2024/2025 and 2025/2026 entry cohorts, we used monthly IRCC data on study permit holders to estimate the starting population of these cohorts. Only permits selected on the basis of their effective date and validity during the PSIS reference period (the fall semester) were taken into account for the estimates. The new cohorts were created based on the first study permit issued to the person for a given level of study. The number of study permit holders was first adjusted to account for the overestimation historically observed compared with the actual number of international students enrolled (Statistics Canada, 2019; Statistics Canada, 2023). These adjustments were also made amid the introduction of new mechanisms in the International Student Program for monitoring international students (IRCC, 2024c). However, our model assumes that this adjustment factor calculated using 2023 data remains constant for the years estimated. Then, these new entry cohorts were projected using previously calculated annual historical persistence rates, namely the average of the rates from the last three years published by the PSIS.

Cohorts were longitudinally tracked by gender (male, female), study region (Atlantic, Quebec, Ontario, Prairies, and British Columbia), institution type (public colleges and universities), level of education, and field of study. We defined four categories of education levels: college studies (including short-cycle programs, applied degrees, and college-level bachelor's degrees) as well as university-level bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, and doctorates. Apprenticeship programs, language training, and any other non-tertiary postsecondary education programs were excluded from the estimates because these students are not part of the PSIS universe. In addition, given the very small proportion of students enrolled in master's or equivalent programs in colleges rather than in universities (0.1% in 2023/2024), they were excluded from our estimates. The two main fields of study considered are "Science, technology, engineering and mathematics" (STEM) and "Business, humanities, health, arts, social science and education" (BHASE). Part-time students were also excluded from the analysis and estimates.

To verify the reliability of the methods and the validity of the results, we conducted sensitivity analyses by checking the degree of error in our estimates through **backcasting**. This method involves testing an estimation or projection model on historical data by comparing the projected values with the known values. We did this by measuring the weighted mean absolute percentage error (WMAPE), defined as

$$WMAPE = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n} |A_i - F_i|}{\sum_{i=1}^{n} A_i} \times 100$$

where A_i is the observed value and F_i is the predicted value. The lower the WMAPE, the more reliable the estimates. The error percentages, or the difference between the value observed in the PSIS data and the value predicted by our estimates, were also analyzed for 2022/2023.

Results

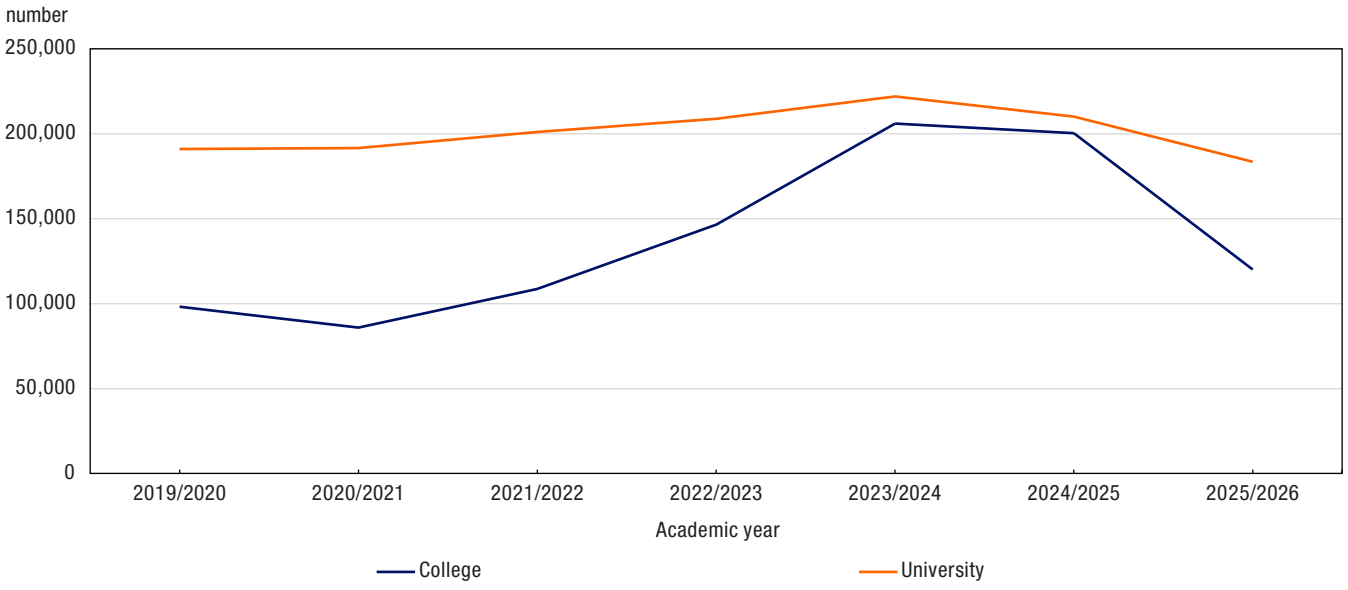
Total population

In recent years, the number of international students enrolled in public postsecondary institutions at the college and university levels has grown substantially, rising from 289,259 students in 2019/2020 to 428,077 in 2023/2024 (Chart 1). Except for the 2020/2021 academic year—the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic—growth has been sustained, ranging from 12% to 20% each year, compared with a 4% decline in 2020/2021. From 2019/2020 to 2023/2024, the number of international students grew more rapidly at the college level (+110%) than at the university level (+16%). In 2023/2024, the number of international college students (206,013) nearly caught up[4] to the number of international students in university undergraduate and graduate programs (222,064).

The new estimates indicate that the number of international students decreased by 4% in 2024/2025 and by 26% in 2025/2026 compared with previous years. Over two years, this estimated decline represents a loss of about 124,000 students (-29%), bringing the total number of international students back to levels similar to those observed during the second academic year of the pandemic (2021/2022)—nearly 300,000 students. In college programs, the decline appears to be moderate in 2024/2025 (-3%) and more pronounced in 2025/2026, with a 40% drop in enrolment, representing a cumulative decrease of 42% between 2023/2024 and 2025/2026. Although the gap between college and university enrolment had been narrowing since 2020/2021, it is thought to have widened in 2025/2026. In 2025/2026, the number of international students at colleges may be lower than in 2021/2022, while the number at universities is thought to be lower than in 2019/2020.

4. These results differ from the last release of PSIS data because certain programs below the bachelor's level, such as minors or certificates, were excluded, as were students enrolled in educational activities without being enrolled in a program (non-program) or in certain preparatory programs or residency programs. Lastly, our results apply only to full-time students and exclude part-time students.

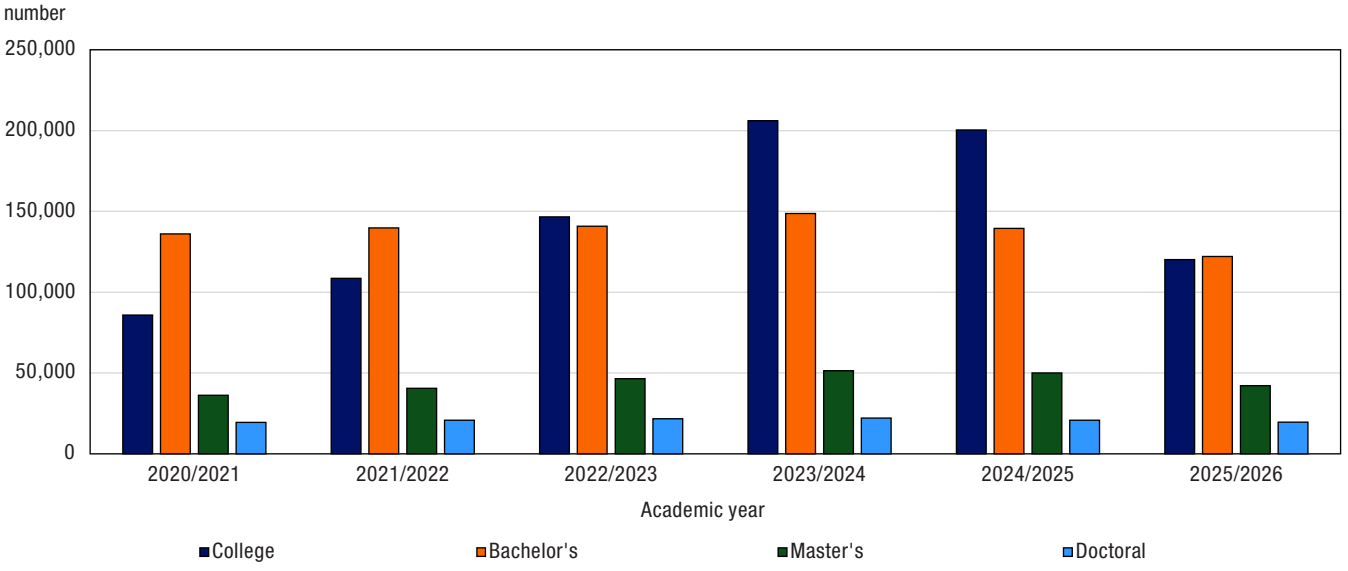
Chart 1
Number of international students in public postsecondary institutions, by institution type, observed (2019/2020 to 2023/2024) and estimated (2024/2025 and 2025/2026)



Source: PSIS for the observed period and author's calculations for the estimated period.

In university programs, the decline appears to be slower than in college programs. From 2023/2024 to 2025/2026, the decline in the number of international students is estimated to be 18% at the undergraduate and master's levels and 11% at the doctoral level (Chart 2).

Chart 2
Number of international students in public postsecondary institutions, by level of study, observed (2020/2021 to 2023/2024) and estimated (2024/2025 and 2025/2026)

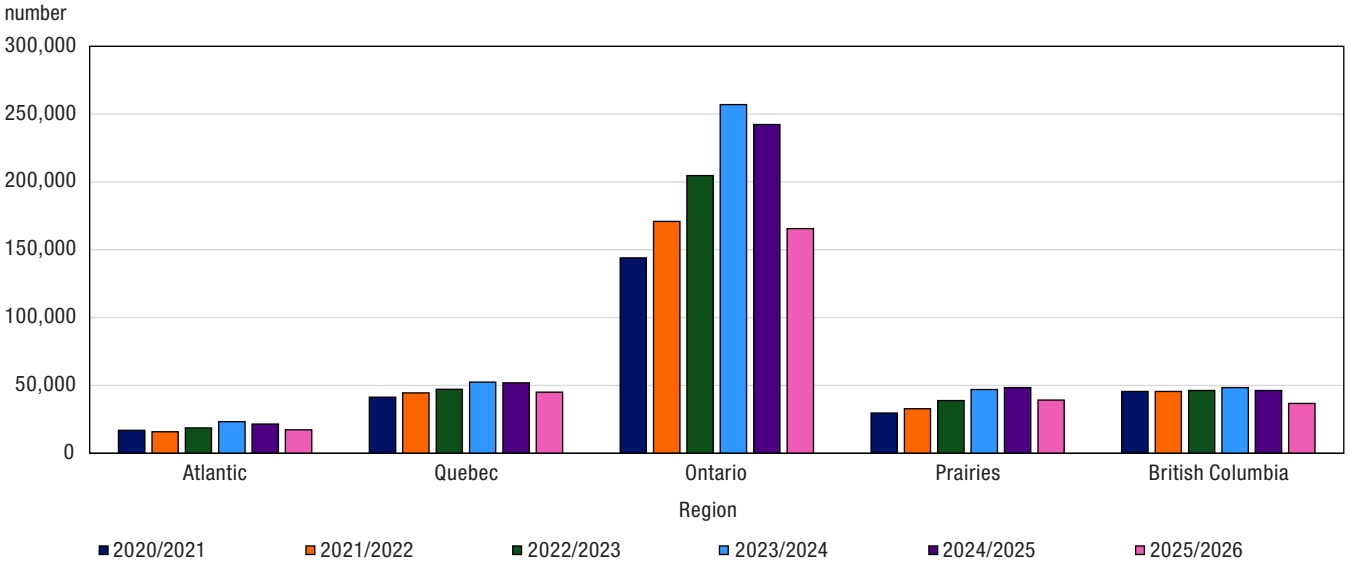


Source: PSIS for the observed period and author's calculations for the estimated period.

Regions

At the regional level, estimates indicate that Ontario would see the largest decline in the number of students, with losses of about 15,000 students in 2024/2025 (-6%) and 92,000 in 2025/2026 (-36%) compared with 2023/2024 (Chart 3). The trends observed in Atlantic Canada, Quebec and British Columbia showed similar patterns, with slight declines in 2024/2025 followed by larger drops of 14% to 26% in 2025/2026 compared with 2023/2024. The Prairies stand out with a slight increase in 2024/2025 (+3%) associated with college programs in Alberta. However, this region follows the same trend as the other provinces and regions in 2025/2026, with a decrease of 19%.

Chart 3
Number of international students in public postsecondary institutions, by region, observed (2020/2021 to 2023/2024) and estimated (2024/2025 and 2025/2026)



Source: PSIS for the observed period and author's calculations for the estimated period.

In 2024, the Canadian government established study permit quotas by province, based on population size, among other factors (IRCC, 2024a). With these changes, most of the less populated provinces were allocated a larger share of the new permits issued since their historical share of international students was often lower than their demographic weight. For Alberta, the number of study permits authorized for 2024 was 23% higher than for 2023.

Despite these changes, Ontario continued to be the province with the largest number of international students, with nearly 166,000 international students expected to still be enrolled in public institutions in 2025/2026. These results would nonetheless have a major impact on the distribution of international students across the country. For example, Ontario was home to a growing share of the total number of international students, reaching 60% in 2023/2024, compared with its respective share of about 39% of the Canadian population. In 2025/2026, this share seems to be more balanced, with about 54% in Ontario, around 15% in each of Quebec, British Columbia and the Prairies, and just over 5% in the Atlantic provinces (Table 1).

Table 1
Regional distribution of international students and the Canadian population

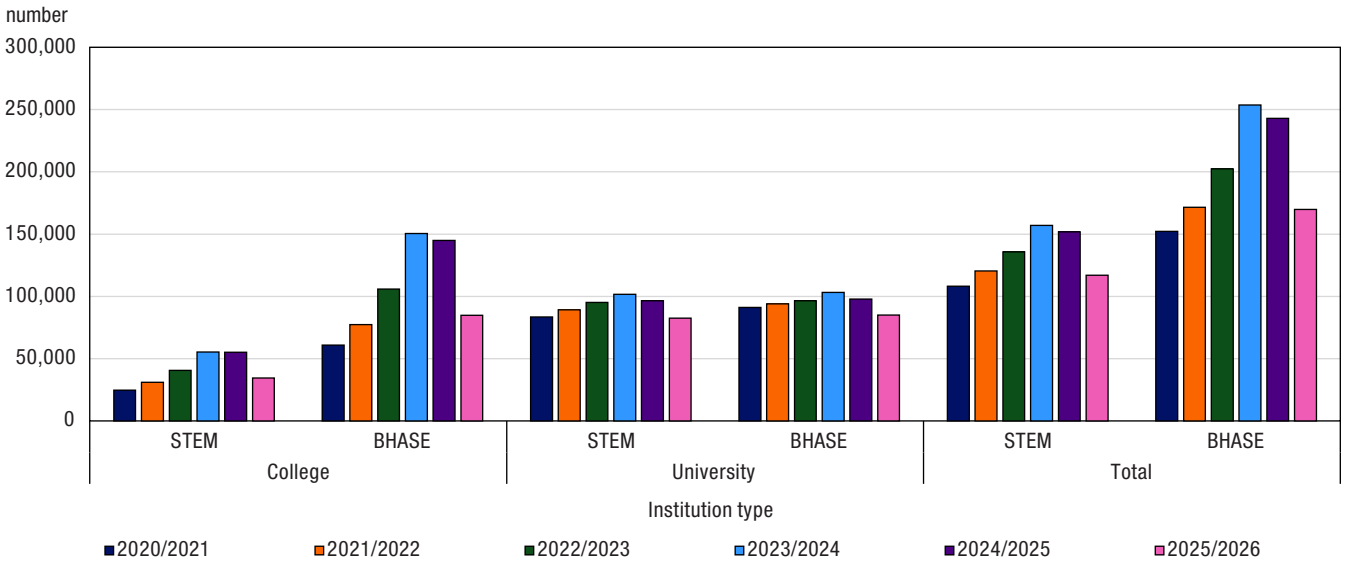
	International students			Canadian population[1]		
	2023/2024	2024/2025	2025/2026	2023	2024	2025
Region	percent					
Atlantic	5	5	6	6	6	6
Quebec	12	13	15	22	22	22
Ontario	60	59	54	39	39	39
Prairies	11	12	13	18	19	19
British Columbia	11	11	12	14	14	14

1. Statistics Canada (2025e), population as of October 1, release of December 17, 2025.
Source: Authors' calculations.

Fields of study

In the current context of the labour shortage affecting various sectors of the job market differently, the evolution of enrolment in certain fields of study is generating increasing interest. In the same way that growth in BHASE programs in 2023/2024 was stronger (+25%) than in STEM programs (+16%), the decline that began in the 2024/2025 academic year appears to have affected BHASE programs more (Chart 4). It is estimated that enrolment over the past two years fell by 26% in STEM programs and by 33% in BHASE programs.

Chart 4
Number of international students in public postsecondary institutions, by field of study and institution type, observed (2020/2021 to 2023/2024) and estimated (2024/2025 and 2025/2026)



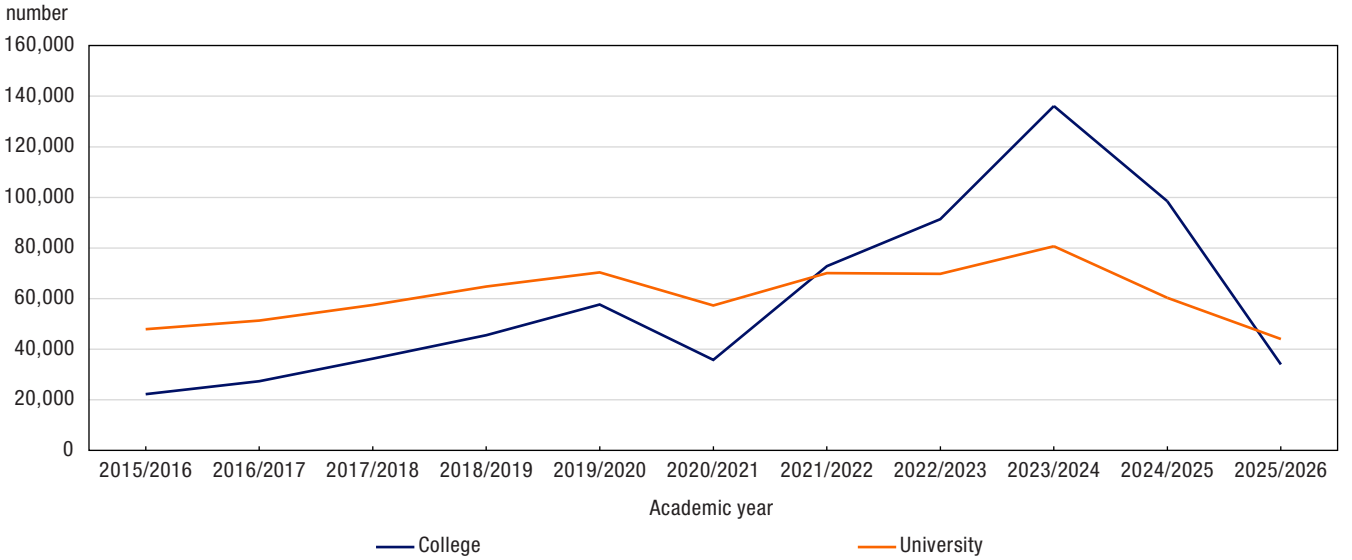
Source: PSIS for the observed period and author's calculations for the estimated period.

New cohorts

Since the measures to slow the growth in the number of international students are being applied gradually to new entry cohorts, it can be relevant to measure the change in the size of these new enrolment cohorts specifically. On the one side, it was observed that from 2021/2022 to 2023/2024, most international students starting a new program in Canada did so at a college and their relative share increased over time (Chart 5). Conversely, at the university level, the recent entry cohorts appeared to remain similar in size until 2023/2024. In fact, the 2024/2025 academic year seems to show a clear break in these trends, with a large drop in the number of students in new cohorts for both international students registered in colleges and universities. In colleges, this decrease may represent a loss of 102,188 new students (-75%) compared with 2023/2024. The decline appears to be less pronounced for new cohorts in university, with estimated losses of 36,740 or 46% over two years. 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 (not shown in Chart 5).

Chart 5
Size of new cohorts of international students in public postsecondary institutions, by institution type, observed (2015/2016 to 2023/2024) and estimated (2024/2025 and 2025/2026)

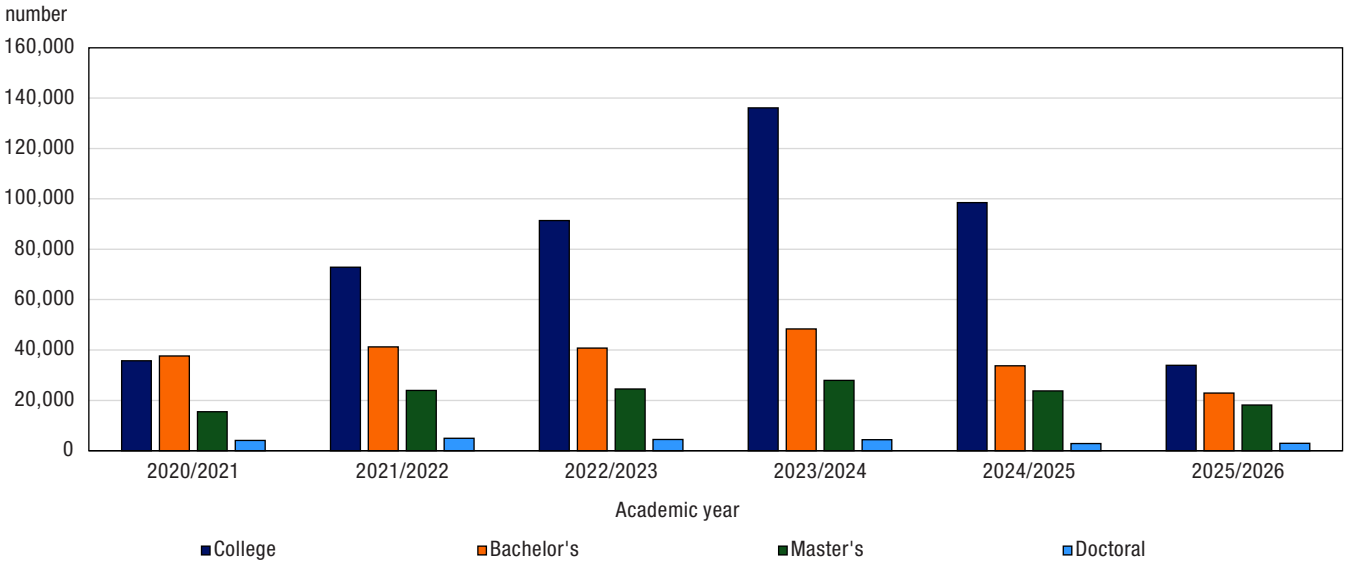


Source: PSIS for the observed period and author's calculations for the estimated period.

The sizes of new university student cohorts also seem to vary by program: the size of the new master's program cohorts in 2025/2026 seems to fall between those of 2017/2018 and 2018/2019 (around 18,000), while those for bachelor's programs (around 23,000) and doctoral programs (around 3,000) may be lower than in 2017/2018 (Chart 6).[5] The estimated decline from 2023/2024 to 2025/2026 appears to be more pronounced for bachelor's degrees (-53%) compared with the new cohorts at the master's and doctoral levels, which appear to have decreased about a third. The new cohorts of international graduate students appear to have been less affected by the changes in policies in the international education program.

5. The new cohorts of international students prior to 2020/2021 are not presented in Chart 6.

Chart 6
Size of new cohorts of international students in public postsecondary institutions, by level of study, observed (2020/2021 to 2023/2024) and estimated (2024/2025 and 2025/2026)



Source: PSIS for the observed period and author's calculations for the estimated period.

Sensitivity analyses

The results of the sensitivity analyses conducted on the data from the 2023/2024 academic year show a relatively low overall potential for error, but must still be taken into account when interpreting the results. The percentage error—the difference between the observed value in the PSIS data and the value predicted by our estimates—indicates that at the national level, the estimates of international students are 98.4% accurate (1.6% error rate) for international students at colleges and 98.8% accurate (1.2% error rate) for international students at universities (Table 2). Accuracy varies across regions: the estimates for colleges in Quebec (15.1% percentage error) and in the Prairies (12.8% percentage error) have the lowest accuracy levels. Tests that account for the differences in the population size of the regions (weighted mean absolute percentage error (WMAPE)[6]) point to the same conclusions and can be found in Table 3 in the appendix. For most regions and levels of study, the WMAPE is below 15% and therefore has a satisfactory degree of accuracy, with the exception of colleges in Quebec and the Prairies.

Table 2
Percentage error of the estimates of international students for the 2023/2024 academic year

	Level of study				
	College	Bachelor's	Master's	Doctoral	University
Region	percent				
Atlantic	2.5	8.1	3.3	3.2	4.9
Quebec	15.1	1.4	4.7	4.9	1.3
Ontario	0.9	4.7	1.3	1.5	3.3
Prairies	12.8	2.1	1.0	1.9	0.8
British Columbia	3.2	0.3	9.8	1.0	3.6
Canada	1.6	3.1	2.1	2.2	1.2

Source: Authors' calculations.

6. The WMAPE is calculated by taking the difference between the observed value (PSIS data) and the estimate divided by the sum of the observed values. In doing so, if a region has a small population and a high error, the formula accounts for the size of the population so that the error is not heavily weighted. The lower the WMAPE, the more reliable the estimates.

Conclusion

The objective of the study was to assess the feasibility of producing preliminary estimates of the international student population using administrative data. Amid tightened immigration policies and a general transformation of international student mobility, the results show that this approach is not only viable, but also effective in quickly detecting structural changes.

The study seems to confirm a clear reversal of the upward trend observed in recent years in the international student population in Canada. As of the 2024/2025 academic year, a significant decrease in the size of new student cohorts is estimated at almost all levels of study and in all regions. Over two years, this would represent a decline of more than 50% in the number of new enrollments at the national level. The results also seem to indicate a general decrease in student volumes and a rebalancing of their geographical distribution.

Although these results are reliable, they must be interpreted with certain limitations in mind. The reference periods and program classifications differ between PSIS data and study permit data, which excludes some program categories; nevertheless, the study covers nearly 95% of international students in public postsecondary education. The lack of information on the field of study on study permits also requires relying on assumptions based on historical trends. Lastly, the estimates are based on the assumption of constant persistence rates and on adjustment factors sensitive to recent regulatory changes, particularly the new mechanisms introduced in the International Student Program for tracking international students (IRCC, 2024c).

Given the federal measures in force until 2027 and the expected departure of particularly large cohorts from recent years, a steady decline in the number of international students is anticipated in Canada, particularly in Ontario, where the effects should be among the largest. Lastly, it is important to note that the estimates presented in this study are preliminary and will be revised as new data from the PSIS become available.

Appendix

Table 3
Weighted mean absolute percentage error of international student estimates for the 2023/2024 academic year

	Level of study				
	College	Bachelor's	Master's	Doctoral	University
Region	percent				
Atlantic	4.2	8.5	7.1	7.6	7.6
Quebec	16.1	3.9	7.3	6.5	3.2
Ontario	3.2	8.3	4.1	2.7	7.9
Prairies	18.0	4.4	7.6	4.5	4.7
British Columbia	6.6	2.8	14.1	2.3	4.6
Canada	2.0	5.2	4.2	3.4	4.5

Source: Authors' calculations

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