

DECLINING INTERNATIONAL STUDENT NUMBERS

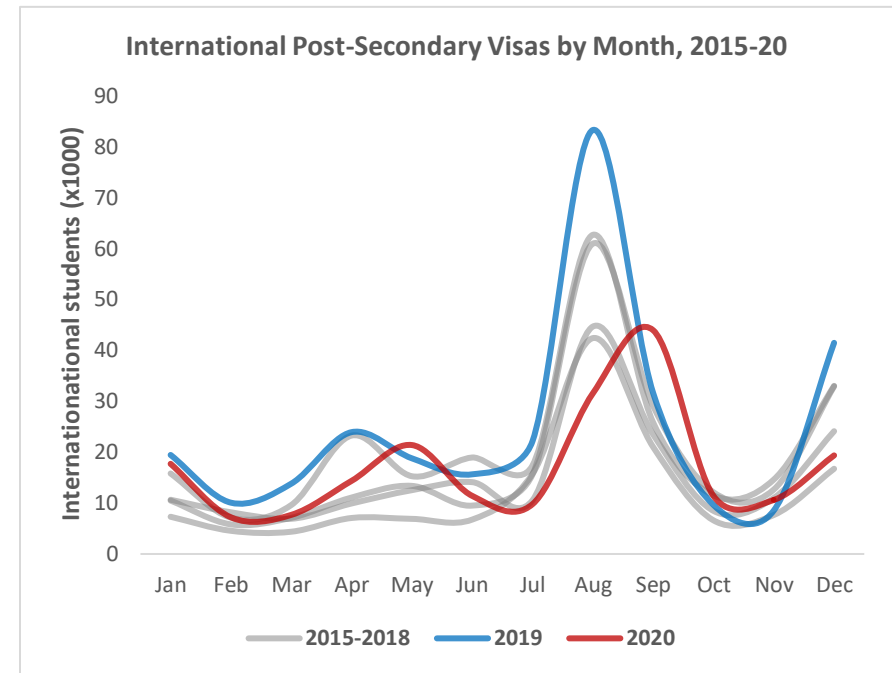
The number of international students arriving in Canada fell by 28 percent in 2020. Those remaining in their home countries face barriers to learning.

COVID-19 has flattened the scholastic curve. In this paper, we present data on the reduction in study permits granted to international students for Canadian universities, colleges, and technical schools. The figure on the right shows the number of new study permits granted for 2015-2020. The red line shows the arrival of students for 2020, blue for the 2019 year, and grey for 2015-2018. In previous years, August marked the peak in new arrivals, with students beginning the Fall semester. This year, a combination of [travel restrictions](#), [online learning](#), and [fear of travel](#) have restricted the entry of students, or encouraged them to stay home. This has shifted the August peak into September, and reduced arrivals by 31 percent in 2020 compared to 2019.

International students comprise 14 percent of all post-secondary students in Canada. The proportion of international students varies by program and study level, rising to 20 percent among STEM students, and almost 50 percent among graduate students.

The reduction in arrivals has meant 92 thousand fewer students on campus for 2020 compared to 2019. Some will have chosen to remain home and study online, while others may have foregone admission. Existing data does not yet reveal how a drop in arrivals impacts registrations. Both possibilities have serious implications. For students abroad, [isolation](#) from peers and instructors, [language barriers](#), and [time zones](#) may negatively impact their short- and long-term scholastic outcomes.

For universities, a decline in international student arrivals may come with a [drop in revenues](#). International students represent 14 percent of students but pay 40 percent of all university tuition. While some may shift to remote learning, others may simply drop out. A decline in international student enrolment could result in tuition losses of \$1.1 to 1.6 billion. Addressing the financial impact to a drop in enrolment may entail cuts to university budgets, greater public funding, or raising fees on existing students.



Sources: IRCC Open Government Record ID 90115b00-f9b8-49e8-afa3-b4cff8facaee;

In the wider economy, industries reliant on new graduates for their labour pool may face shortages, particularly in STEM (Science, technology, engineering, and math). Within STEM programs, international students represent [20 percent](#) of all students – 17 percent at the bachelor level, 41 percent at the master's, and 50 percent in doctoral programs. In other majors, international students only represent 12 percent of the student body, but upwards of 35 percent at the doctoral level.

Public policies that facilitate the safe arrival of students, help them maintain their immigration status, and consider the extraordinary learning circumstances will benefit students, universities, and the wider Canadian economy. At the societal level, vaccination campaigns and revised learning spaces will help address the above goals and ensure an expeditious return to classrooms for both domestic and international students.