

---

# COVID-19 IS CHANGING OUR WORLD: IT'S TIME TO RETHINK INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

Roopa Desai Trilokekar, Leesa Wheelahan, and Julia M. Wright | February 16, 2021

*Roopa Desai Trilokekar is Associate Professor, Post Secondary Education, Faculty of Education at York University*

*Leesa Wheelahan is the William G. Davis Chair in Community College Leadership at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto*

*Julia M. Wright is the George Munro Professor in Literature and Rhetoric in English at Dalhousie University*

Since the onset of the pandemic, our governments and higher education institutions have been gravely concerned about the effect on enrolments. In October, [Statistics Canada warned](#) of significant revenue losses to the post-secondary sector across Canada because of the pandemic's effects on international enrolments in particular. Early data on 2020-21 suggests more of a mixed bag: nationally, part-time enrolments are up and international enrolments are variable. Larger, urban universities seem to be faring better, while a number of colleges and smaller universities in less densely populated regions are facing difficulties, including [Laurentian University](#). International enrollment losses hit the bottom line the hardest because international tuition fees are so much higher than domestic fees and also because our dependence on them has grown significantly.

International enrolments have become a numbers game for the post-secondary sector: number of international students recruited times high international tuition fee differentials, less recruiting costs. We have come to embrace this approach so wholeheartedly that we seldom question its long-term implications, not least because international enrolment growth has helped colleges and universities partially offset declining public investment in higher education and research. International students have also boosted local economies and been a boon to immigration. The COVID-19 period should give us pause to ask ourselves some important questions.

Why have international students come to Canada in such high numbers, given global opportunities? In the twentieth century, Canada built an enviable post-secondary system with a level of academic credibility that makes it competitive. More recently, the recruitment of international students has been helped by aggressive marketing approaches, together with the fall-out from education and immigration policies in countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom. In particular the so-called "Trump bump," caused by closed-door policies in the United States, increased inflows of international students to Canada.

The post-pandemic international education market will not look like 2019. Many students will face increased financial barriers to mobility because of the economic effects of the pandemic, while rising interest in research and recovery is driving global changes in higher education. The UK updated its "International Education Strategy," including additional funding, earlier this month. [Japan is establishing a US\\$96bn "university fund"](#) to reverse research declines and "bridge the funding gap between the country's universities and those elsewhere." Pro-education and immigration policies under the new Biden administration will also likely reduce Canada's competitive advantage.

---

Canada's hold on its international enrolments was precarious enough before COVID-19. Consider, for example, the Asian economic crisis in the 1990s. The more recent diplomatic spat between Canada-Saudi Arabia saw the withdrawal of over 6,000 Saudi students and a loss of over \$140 million in revenue for Canadian institutions. Geopolitical tensions between Canada and China could have larger repercussions.

Despite this longstanding volatility, Canada's colleges and universities have become highly dependent on international enrolments. As the previously mentioned Statistics Canada document noted, most institutions now rely heavily on international student tuition for their operating budgets: they generated about 40% of university tuition revenues in 2017/18. The University of Toronto, to take just one example, receives a larger portion of its budget from international students than from provincial grants or domestic tuition. For a number of institutions, COVID-19 has meant a substantial reduction in international student revenue, primarily from tuition but also from residence fees, food services, and so on. Even small declines in enrolments have a big impact that is felt across institutions from staffing to course availability to planning.

In viewing international students purely as sources of revenue or "cash cows," moreover, we have overlooked the heterogeneity within this population and their specific contexts, including vulnerabilities that we have been discussing for years under the heading of equity, diversity, and inclusion. International students face different challenges based on country of origin, family status, gender and other characteristics on issues ranging from time-zone constraints, increased travel restrictions and decreased travel options, immigration and visa issues, funding issues, adaptability to online instruction, communication with faculty, advisors and peers, mental health and isolation issues, and instances of xenophobia or harassment. We should now add to that list unequal access to vaccines in their home countries, potentially impacting enrolments into 2021-22. Institutions committed to principles of equity, diversity, inclusion, and dedicated, as fundamental to their mission, to supporting students, must be concerned with how COVID-19 impacts student sub-groups, domestic and international.

Our policy mantra that international students are our ideal immigrants means that we encourage international students to apply for Canadian permanent residence. Undoubtedly international students find this to be an attractive feature as over 60% want to stay in Canada. We need to better recognize that the relationships we build with international students are long term, with future residents and citizens of Canada, as well as, in the case of graduate students especially, potential global partners across a range of sectors, including research. Instead, our current relationship with international students is transactional and extractive, with damaging implications for the integration of new Canadians as well as Canada's international reputation.

During this pandemic, many international students are cash-strapped because of the financial hardships faced by their parents and/or because they have been unexpectedly laid off from on-campus and part-time jobs, and are ineligible for the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). Additionally, they are struggling with the challenges of understanding and accessing changing immigration regulations, complicated further by delays in visa and study permit processing, as well as other hurdles, such as finding a job to obtain a work permit or seek permanent residency. These immigration and financial problems have increased stress levels yet there has been inadequate attention paid to the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health and general well-being of international students. While both the government and institutions have pivoted with new program options and supports, the same level of insight and accompanying supports have not been offered to international students as Canadian students.

---

We should not go back to “business as usual.” Instead of using international students to fill gaps in public investment, we need to work towards a more stable post-secondary sector in which all students, domestic and international, can be better supported. Canada’s future long-term success in international education will depend on the experiences we provide the students who we host. More broadly, Canada’s international credibility as an inclusive and just society committed to playing a positive role on the world stage, including in research and education, depends on better serving our international students as integral parts of our academic and local communities.

*This article initially appeared in the Globe and Mail on February 16, 2021.*