



Universities Canada's submission to the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration: International Student Program and study permits

The International Student Program is at a critical juncture. The integrity of the system has been questioned, and public trust has been shaken. It is time to focus on recovery and on building a sustainable, accountable system that strengthens opportunities for Canadian students while ensuring Canada continues to attract and retain the talent, we need to secure our future and grow our economy.

Our universities are where that talent is shaped, where Canadians train as doctors, engineers, scientists and teachers, and where international students bring fresh perspectives and specialized talents. Canadian students make up the vast majority of our campus population, representing 82 per cent of enrollment. The International Student Program operates within a system that overwhelmingly serves domestic learners, with international students complementing and strengthening that core. (See Annex 2 for enrollment trends.)

International students don't replace Canadian students; they study alongside them, expanding our talent pipeline in critical fields. When six million Canadians don't have a family doctor, when housing projects stall for lack of engineers, when cyber threats demand more specialists, it becomes clear we need both: a strong pipeline of Canadian graduates and carefully selected global talent.

It's important to recognize that international students follow diverse pathways after graduation. While some choose to stay and contribute their skills to Canada's workforce, many return to their home countries, becoming ambassadors for Canadian education and values. These alumni create lasting connections that benefit Canada through enhanced trade relationships, research collaborations, and diplomatic ties. Whether they stay or return home, international students strengthen Canada's global influence and economic prospects.

Canada's success depends on resetting its approach and achieving the right balance. Universities Canada is ready to work with government to rebuild trust, safeguard and expand opportunities for Canadian students and ensure Canada has the skilled talent, from here at home and around the world, to meet the challenges ahead.

Boosting Canadian talent

Universities are deeply committed to Canadian student success. Every year, we educate 1.5 million young people who go on to become doctors, teachers, engineers, scientists and leaders in every sector of our society. Last year Universities Canada's own Scholarships and Partnerships Canada provided close to \$18 million in scholarships supporting 7,000 Canadian students. Beyond scholarships, our member universities have increased supports for Canadian students, with per-student spending on services rising 39 per cent since 2010. These include vital mental health resources such as peer counselling and access to trained professionals (see Annex 1).

But after more than a decade of provincial underfunding — combined with frozen or limited increases to tuition fees — university budgets are shrinking. When international enrolment drops, it directly affects affordability and availability of programs for Canadians, leading to fewer course options, larger classes and higher costs.





These pressures threaten sustainability, yet universities continue to innovate and adapt. Like every sector, we are navigating major changes: expanding programs in high-demand fields, scaling up work-integrated learning and incorporating AI into classrooms. In labs across the country, Canadian students, researchers and professors — often working alongside international colleagues — are advancing discovery and innovation. These achievements show that Canada can lead when it invests in the right talent.

The success of Canadian learners depends on stable institutions. And that stability depends, in part, on managing international enrolment responsibly. If done right, it strengthens opportunities for Canadians.

In addition to teaching students, universities are driving discovery. Canada's next major technological or societal breakthrough — in AI, health care or clean energy — will likely come from our campuses. Twenty-five years ago, artificial intelligence was a niche research area, pursued by a handful of Canadian universities. Today, it is transforming entire economies and redefining global competitiveness. Tomorrow's breakthroughs will come from similarly bold, long-term research efforts — many of which are supported by international students and some of which are led by them.

The challenges

Right now, the systems meant to ensure Canada's leadership in talent development are failing on both fronts. For Canadian students, declining revenues and frozen tuition fees have put affordability and program availability at risk.

For international students, policy uncertainty has damaged Canada's brand and made it harder to attract top talent. Prospective students now cite these issues as reasons to look elsewhere, leaving institutions unable to fill the spaces allotted under the cap.

Students and researchers who still want to choose Canada despite this are caught in a broken processing system. Canada is falling behind competitors such as the U.K., Australia and New Zealand, where visas are approved in a matter of 2-4 weeks. By contrast, as of October 2025, the average processing time for a new study permit from key or emerging markets was 10 weeks — a delay that directly undermines Canada's competitiveness and the sector's ability to diversify their international student population. If Canada wants

A smarter, more predictable system

The way forward is clear. Universities Canada and our regional partners are calling for three steps:

- 1. Streamline visa processing** — to ensure Canada can attract and retain global talent and quickly integrate skilled graduates into the workforce. We are calling for a fair, transparent and predictable process that gives priority to responsible institutions — those with strong admissions standards, ethical recruitment practices and robust student supports.
- 2. Establish a national ministerial roundtable on talent, skills and immigration** — a permanent forum that brings governments, private sector and representatives from the post-secondary sector together to align policy with national and regional needs. Recent policy changes underscore the risks of acting in silos and the value of early collaboration across sectors. The roundtable is intended to immediately support and accelerate ongoing work by providing practical input that helps the government execute on its talent, skills and immigration priorities, while recognizing the impacts of these policies vary by region.





- 3. Restore Canada's brand** — through clear, consistent communication and decisive federal leadership that shows Canada remains open to top talent, while upholding integrity and putting domestic students first.

Building tomorrow's talent, today

Canada's nation-building priorities — housing, health care, security and infrastructure — depend on people. International students are not just visitors. They contribute billions to our economy, strengthen our research and expand innovation capacity in fields from artificial intelligence to low-carbon construction to medical science.

Our long-term prosperity is tied to our ability to nurture talent. We need a system that is accountable, agile, competitive and forward-looking. This means carefully balancing the development of domestic talent with the attraction of global talent that complements and strengthens our workforce. We need to focus on what matters: student success, system integrity and long-term impact.

Universities are ready to work with government to rebuild trust and deliver a system Canadians can be proud of — one that protects opportunities for domestic students, attracts global talent and secures Canada's future prosperity and competitiveness.

About Universities Canada:

Universities Canada is the national voice for Canada's universities, representing 97 institutions that educate over 1.4 million students and employ 400,000 people. Through teaching, research, and community engagement, Canada's universities transform lives, strengthen communities, and address some of the world's most pressing challenges. Canadian universities are vital stabilizers and catalysts within their communities.



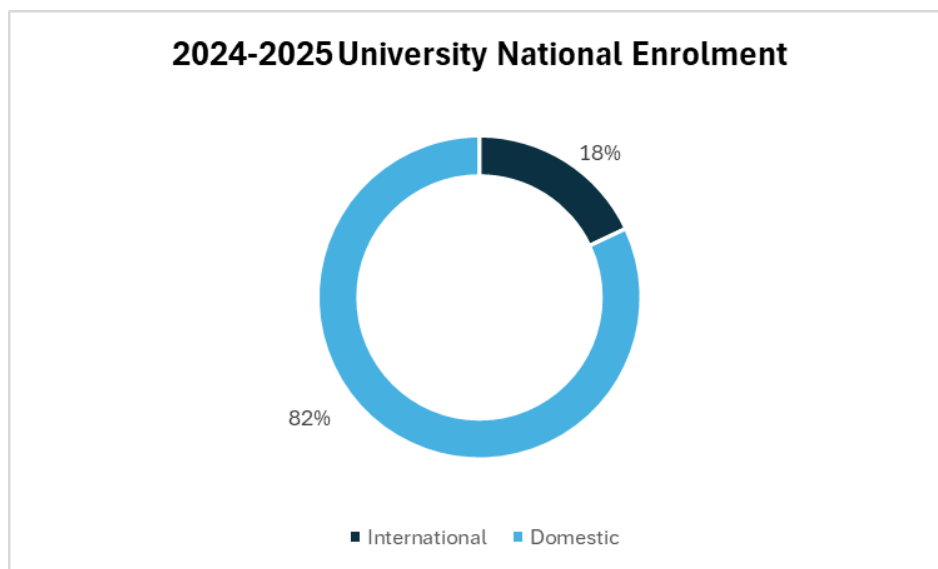


Annex 1: Supporting Canadian Students

Universities Canada's member institutions provide dedicated supports for all aspects of student life. Between 2010 and 2023, the amount spent on services per full time equivalent domestic student increased by 39%, from \$1,918 to \$2,667.¹ Most importantly, they provide critical mental health supports from peer to peer counselling programs to access to mental health nurses and trained counsellors.

In terms of graduation outcomes, the median income for a student two years post graduation with a bachelor's degree is \$59,600. This is a difference of \$14,400 compared to those with a diploma and after five years the gap increases to \$17,200.

Annex 2: Domestic vs International University Enrolment Trends



¹This figure has been adjusted to constant dollars using Statistics Canada Table 384-0039 – (gross domestic product at market prices, 2017 = 100). For nominal dollars, student services per domestic FTE grew from \$1954 to \$3234, an increase of 87%.