



# International Students in Canada

A U G U S T 2 0 1 8

**I**nternational students in Canada support the excellence and innovation of Canada's education and cultural landscape, and are a vital building block for internationalization at Canadian institutions and in Canadian society.

The following brief uses open<sup>1</sup> as well as specially obtained data to provide a snapshot of international students in Canada in 2017, illuminating key trends with regard to level of study, province or territory of study and country of citizenship of international students in Canada.

## INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY

As shown in figure 1, in 2017 there were 494,525 international students in Canada at all levels of study<sup>2,3,4</sup>. This represents a 17% increase over the previous year, and a 34% increase between 2014 and 2017.

Due to varied and evolving push and pull factors, international students are choosing Canada as their study destination in unprecedented numbers. Uncertainty and higher cost

in traditional top receiving countries as well as lack of access to stable and quality education in their countries of citizenship have compelled a growing number of students to seek alternative study destinations. Canada continues to be perceived globally as a country of welcome and stability in addition to

Figure 1: International students in Canada by year, all levels of study (2014-2017)

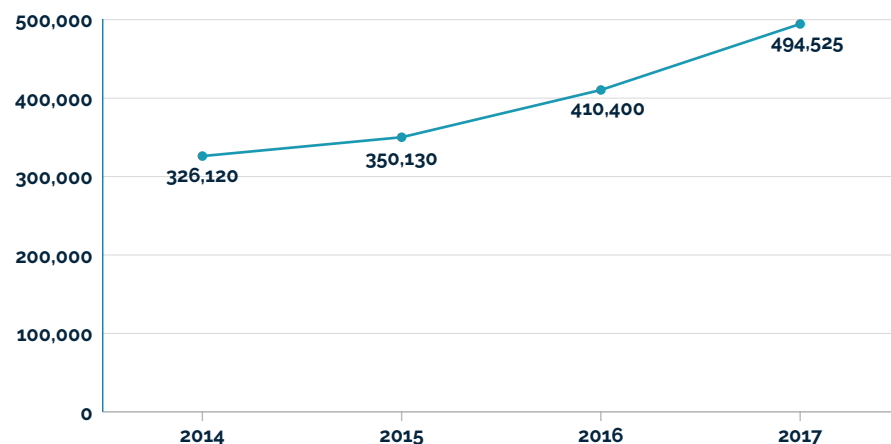
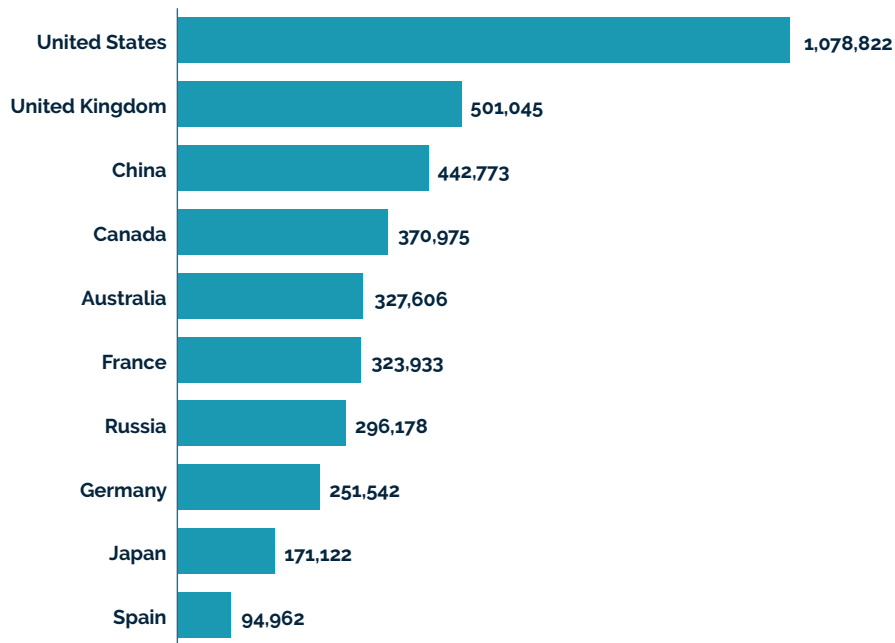


Figure 2: Top higher education host destinations worldwide (2017)

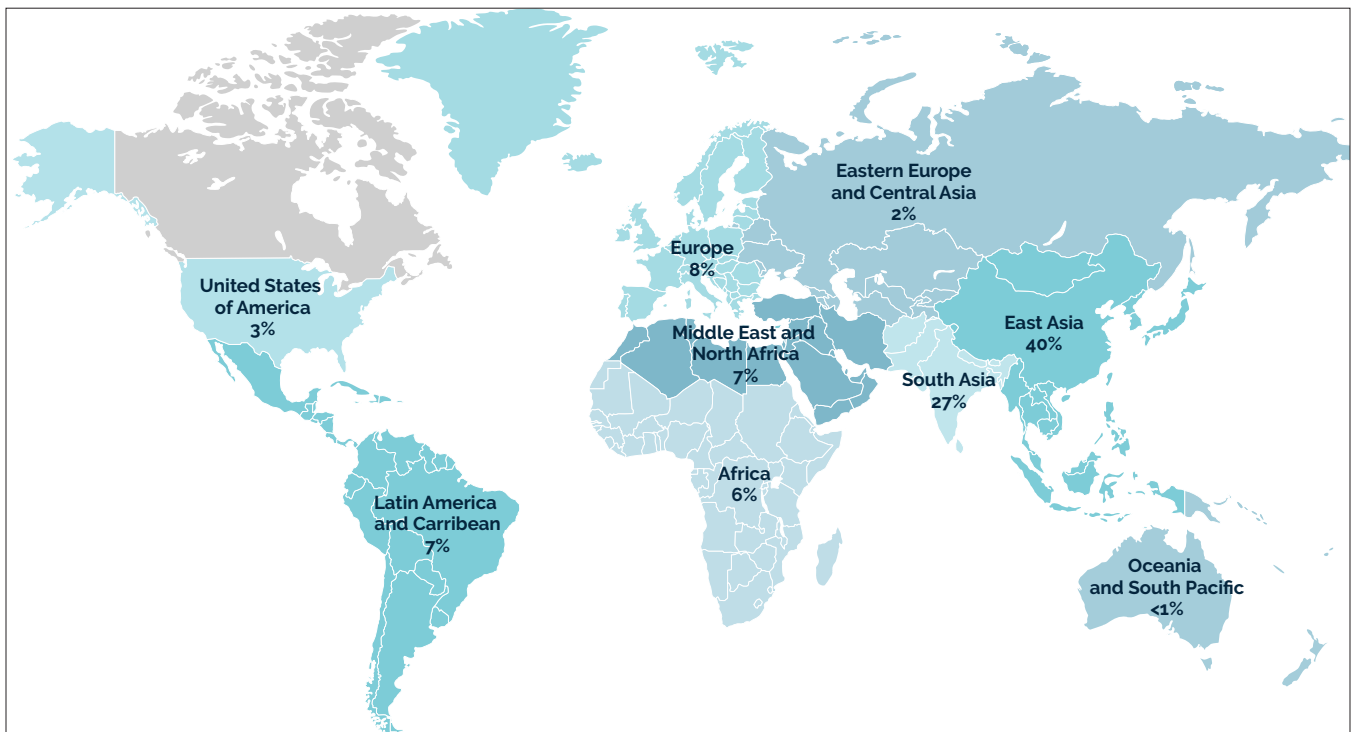


Source: Project Atlas, 2017

offering quality and affordable education<sup>5</sup>, making Canada an attractive choice for prospective international students.

Project Atlas details top study destinations of international students worldwide in 2017, bringing Canada's market position into clearer view (see Figure 2). While Canada's top two competitors for international students are the United States and United Kingdom, Canada competes more directly with Australia and France as an international study destination. In 2017, for the first time, Canada leapt ahead of both Australia and France for total market

Figure 3: Regional origin of international students in Canada (2017)



share and now hosts the fourth highest number of international students<sup>6</sup>.

## CITIZENSHIP OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

In keeping with global trends, just under half (40%) of international students pursuing studies in Canada come from East Asia. Proportionally, the regional origin of international students has remained stable with two exceptions: Since 2015, the proportion of international students from South Asia has grown considerably from 16% to 27%, while the proportion from East Asia has declined by 7%. See figure 3 for a breakdown of international students in Canada by region of origin<sup>7</sup>.

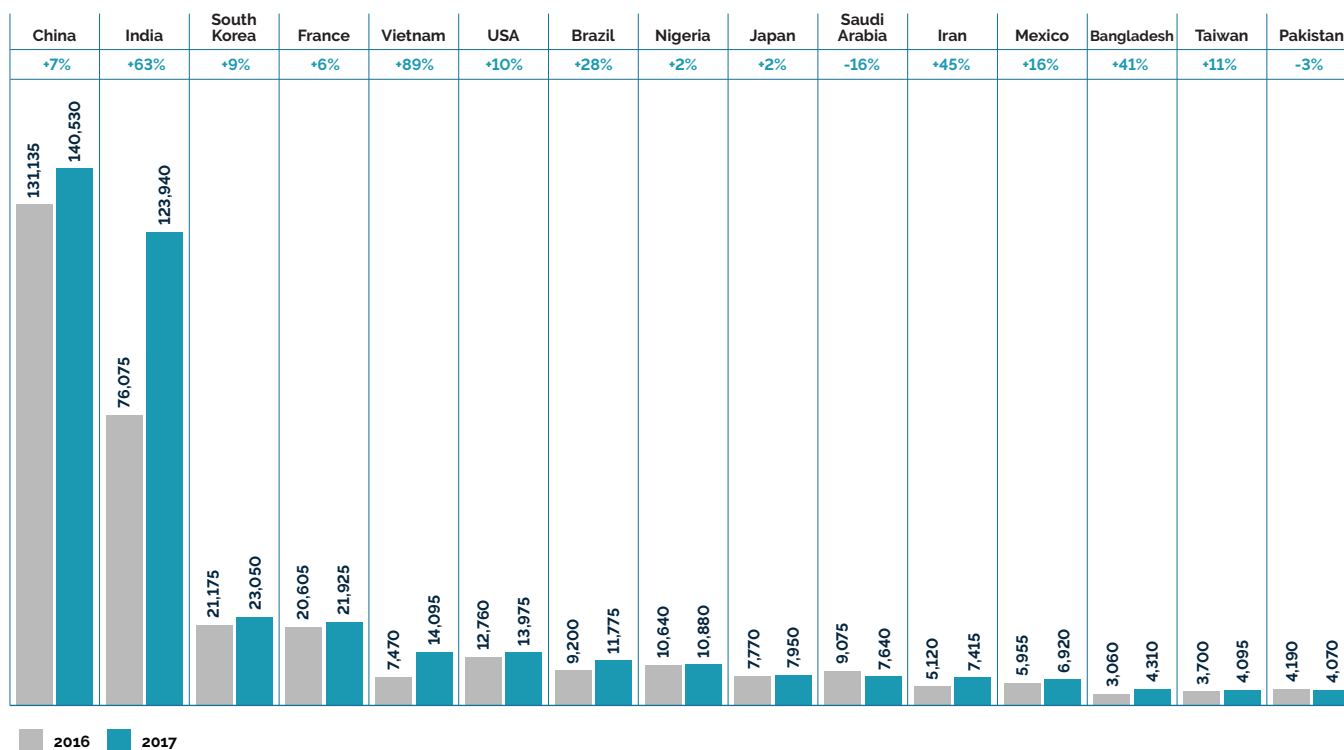
As a top host of international students, Canada has one of the most diverse international student populations with 186 nations represented in 2017. However this diversity has declined in recent years with now 65% of all international students in Canada originating from the top five countries of citizenship: China, India, South Korea, France and Vietnam.

There are a number of noteworthy changes in terms of the top 15 countries of

**Figure 4: International students in Canada, top 30 countries of citizenship (2017)**

Country of citizenship	Percentage	2017
China	28%	140,530
India	25%	123,940
South Korea	5%	23,050
France	4%	21,925
Vietnam	3%	14,095
United States of America	3%	13,975
Brazil	2%	11,775
Nigeria	2%	10,880
Japan	2%	7,950
Saudi Arabia	2%	7,640
Iran	2%	7,415
Mexico	1%	6,920
Bangladesh	1%	4,310
Taiwan	1%	4,095
Pakistan	1%	4,070
Hong Kong	1%	3,990
Philippines	1%	3,950
Turkey	1%	3,855
United Kingdom	1%	3,470
Colombia	1%	2,870
Ukraine	1%	2,820
Morocco	1%	2,795
Germany	1%	2,715
Russia	<1%	2,625
Jamaica	<1%	2,335
Egypt	<1%	2,210
Italy	<1%	1,945
Tunisia	<1%	1,875
Cameroon	<1%	1,870
Spain	<1%	1,835

Figure 5: International students in Canada, top 15 countries of citizenship (2016, 2017)



citizenship of international students from 2016–2017 (see Figure 5). Bangladesh and Taiwan are new to the top 15 while the United Kingdom and Hong Kong are no longer in the top 15. Of the top 15 countries of citizenship Vietnam has seen the most dramatic growth, almost doubling in just one year from 7,470 to 14,095 students in Canada. As we will see later in this paper this dramatic growth is most prevalent at the secondary and college levels. The number of students from Saudi Arabia is declining, with 1,435 fewer students in Canada in 2017 over 2016.

## WHERE IN CANADA ARE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS?

Figure 6 shows the number and percent of international students in Canadian provinces and territories. With 84% of international students enrolled in Ontario, British Columbia and Quebec these three provinces have consistently hosted the largest number of inbound students. While all regions of Canada have seen growth in the number of international students they are hosting, proportionally both Ontario and Manitoba have shown the most

year-over-year growth with Ontario gaining four points to 48% and Manitoba gaining one point to 4%. The proportion of international students in Canada who are studying in Quebec has declined slightly from 14% to 12%.

Throughout 2017 Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal together hosted 55% of all international students who were studying in Canada. All of the top 15 host census metropolitan areas saw the number of international students grow over the previous year. However, the most marked growth

Figure 6: Number and percent of international students in Canada, by province/territory (2017)

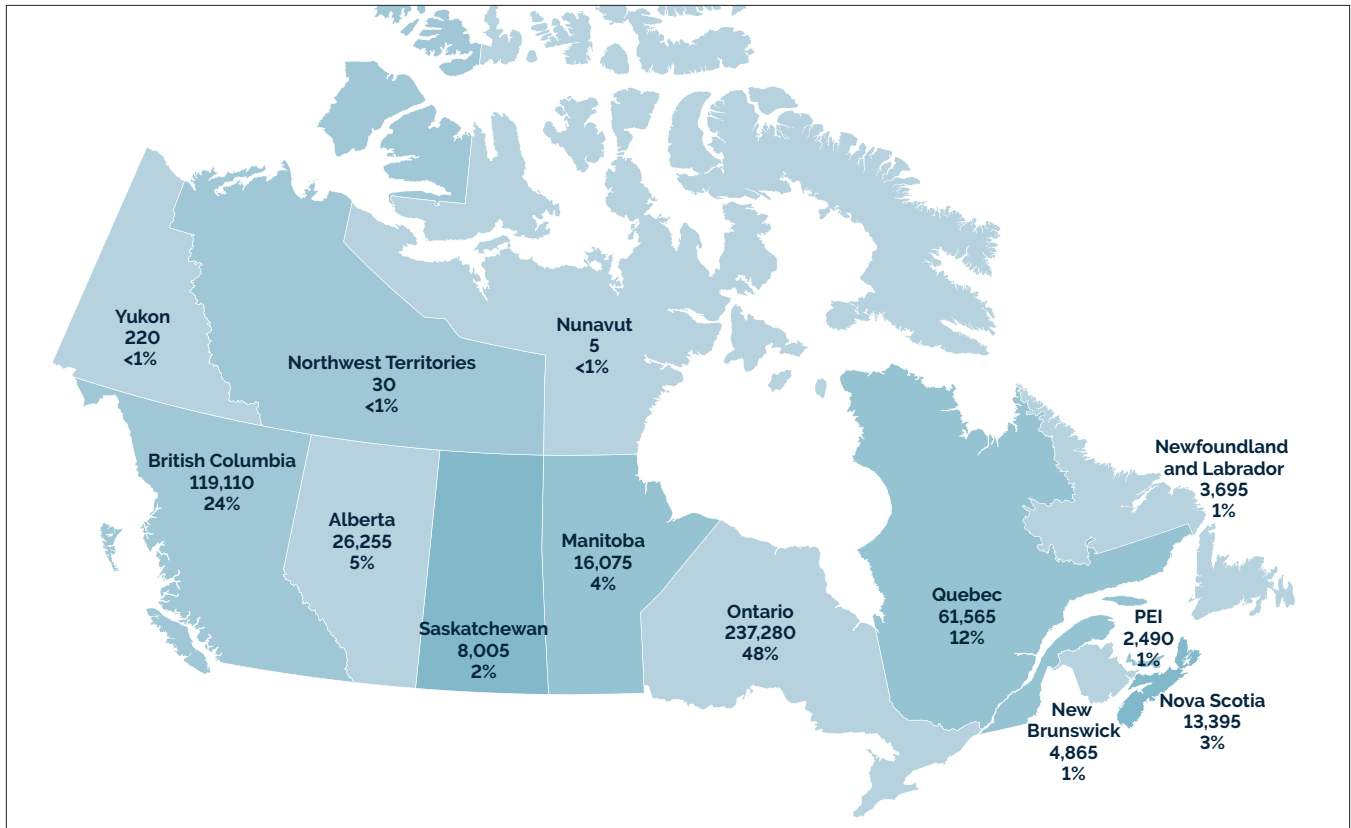
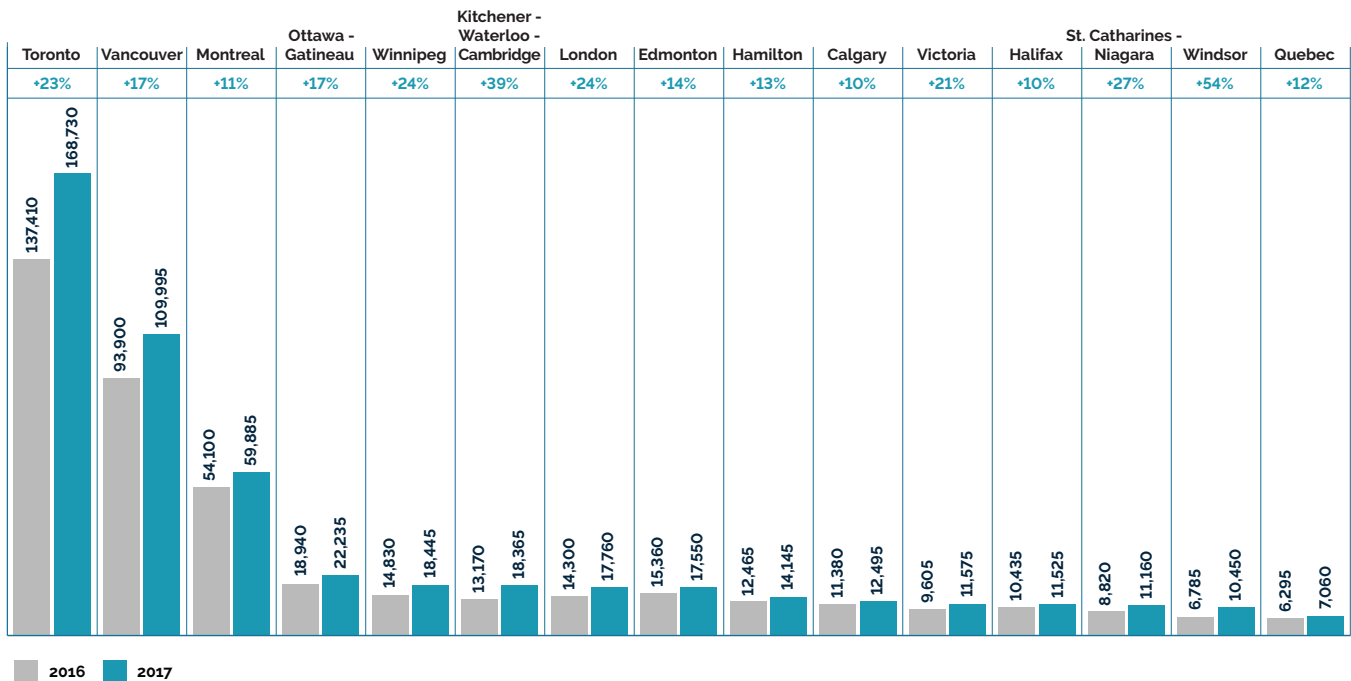


Figure 7: Top 15 host census metropolitan areas of international students in Canada (2016, 2017)



occurred outside of Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal in Windsor (+54%), Kitchener – Cambridge – Waterloo (+39%) and St. Catharines – Niagara (+27%).

## LEVEL OF STUDY

In 2017, 75% of international students in Canada were pursuing post-secondary studies of which 57% were

studying in a university program, 41% were studying in a college program and 2% in CEGEP. Students at the primary and secondary levels made up 15% of all international students in Canada while 10% were pursuing other studies. The proportion of international students at each level has remained relatively unchanged since 2015. See Figures 8–10 for breakdowns of the level of

study of international students in Canada in 2017.

At the university level, India has overtaken France as the second most common country of citizenship of international students.

At the college level, the number of international students from India has dramatically grown year-over-year from 52,020

**Figure 8: Level of study of international students in Canada (2017)**

Level of study	
Post-secondary	370,710
Secondary or less	71,350
Other studies	50,025
Total study permit holders	492,085

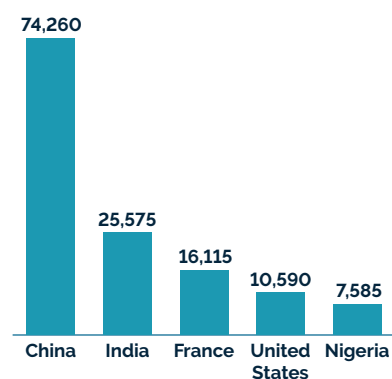
**Figure 9: Composition of international students at secondary or less levels in Canada (2017)**

Level of study	
Primary	15,190
Secondary	56,160
Total secondary or less	71,350

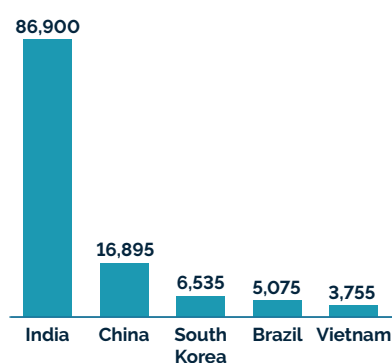
**Figure 10: Composition of international students at post-secondary levels in Canada (2017)**

Level of study	
CEGEP	6,415
College	151,380
University	211,795
Others	1,120
Total post-secondary	370,710

**Figure 11: Top countries of citizenship, international students in Canadian university programs (2017)**



**Figure 12: Top countries of citizenship, international students in Canadian college programs (2017)**



to 86,900 students in Canada, representing a growth rate of 67%.

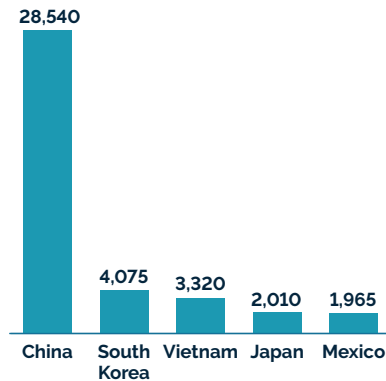
At the secondary level, Vietnam is now the third most common country of citizenship of international students, more than doubling (+107%) in just one year.

South Korea is the top source country for primary students; however, the number of primary level students from Brazil is noteworthy, growing by 63% between 2016 and 2017 to become the fourth most common country of citizenship for this level of study.

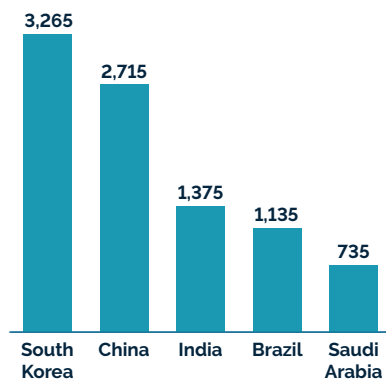
## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The benefits of studying internationally are many and well known. At the individual level they include potential for increased cultural awareness and understanding, improved employment prospects and enhanced language skills. The forces that compel students to pursue an international education remain diverse and strong and it is likely that

**Figure 13: Top countries of citizenship, international students in Canadian secondary programs (2017)**



**Figure 14: Top countries of citizenship, international students in Canadian primary programs (2017)**



for the foreseeable future more and more students will recognize the value and seize the opportunity to pursue

education outside of their home country.

As we saw in this paper, the data from 2017 reveal that students are increasingly looking to Canada as a study destination of choice, with top pull factors consistently being the strong reputation of the Canadian education system, a society that is generally tolerant and non-discriminatory, and Canada's reputation as a safe country<sup>8</sup>. These pull factors may be more powerful than ever before in the global context. In 2017 the Government of Canada's International Education Strategy goal of receiving 450,000 international students by 2022<sup>9</sup> was surpassed five years early. This is an achievement that brings with it great opportunities but also challenges. As the national voice of international education, CBIE is well-positioned to serve its members and other stakeholders in facilitating and lending insights into the next chapter for Canada as a host of international students.

## CBIE RESEARCH IN BRIEF

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 Visit the Government of Canada's [Open Data Portal](#) for more information.
- 2 CBIE uses Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) data in this chapter unless otherwise stated. Student numbers are based on valid study permits and work permits. Students in Canada for less than six months are not required to hold a study permit and are therefore not counted. This includes many language school students and exchange students.
- 3 Note that 2017 data provided by IRCC is preliminary and may be adjusted in future data sets.
- 4 Due to privacy considerations, IRCC data is subjected to random rounding. Under this method, all figures in the table are randomly rounded either up or down to multiples of 5. As a result of random rounding, data may not sum up to the totals indicated.
- 5 CBIE, [The Student's Voice](#), 2018.
- 6 [Project Atlas](#) uses higher education data as provided by representative governments and non-profit agencies from participating countries.
- 7 Regions are designated using World Bank classifications, with one notable exception: East Asia and Oceania and South Pacific are disaggregated.
- 8 CBIE, [The Student's Voice](#), 2018.
- 9 Global Affairs Canada, [Harnessing our knowledge advantage to drive innovation and prosperity](#). Accessed 20/07/2018.