International Student Recruitment at Université Laval

Brief presented to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration as part of its study of recruitment and acceptance rates of foreign students

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Portrait of international students at Université Laval

Université Laval primarily recruits francophone international students

Université Laval attracts international students from 132 countries, representing 15% of our student population.

Like all French-language universities in Quebec, Université Laval mainly welcomes students from francophone countries or countries where French is widely spoken. In fall 2020, more than two-thirds of newly enrolled applicants reported having French as their native language at the time of application. English-language universities mostly attract students whose native language is English or a language other than French.

Université Laval recruits most of its international students from countries in La Francophonie. Nearly three out of four international students enrolled at Université Laval are from France, sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa.

Figure 1: Native language of new students enrolled in Quebec universities in fall 2020
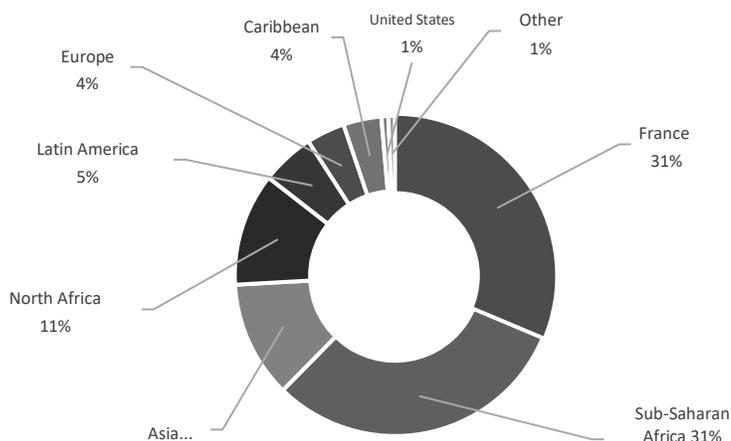
	French	English	Other
French-language universities	**73%**	**2%**	**24%**
Université Laval	67%	1%	32%
Montréal (UdeM, HEC, Polytechnique)	74%	4%	22%
Université de Sherbrooke	73%	1%	27%
Université du Québec	75%	1%	23%
English-language universities	**17%**	**25%**	**57%**
McGill University	18%	28%	55%
Concordia University	17%	22%	61%
Bishop's University	17%	30%	52%
Total	**53%**	**11%**	**36%**

Source: Bureau de coopération interuniversitaire, Cube attraction

African students' growing interest in studying at Université Laval

At Université Laval, countries in sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa represent a growing recruitment pool. The number of international students from these countries has more than doubled since fall 2012. In comparison, the increase of French students, traditionally the largest contingent of international students at Université Laval, has not been as strong, and students from sub-Saharan Africa have now caught up to them in number.

Figure 2: International student enrolment, fall 2021

Caribbean 4%
United States 1%
Other 1%
Europe 4%
Latin America 5%
France 31%
North Africa 11%
Asia…
Sub-Saharan Africa 31%

Source: Registrar's Office, Université Laval

Figure 3: New enrolments in the fall semester
North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa and France

Source: Registrar's Office, Université Laval
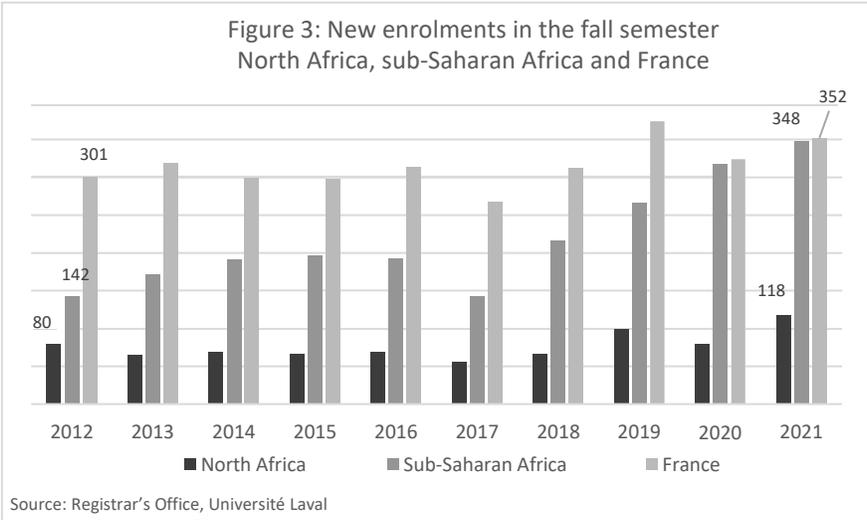
Admission applications from sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa are high both in number and in quality. In fall 2021, more than 1,500 applicants from these two regions were admitted to a program and accepted Université Laval's offer of admission. However, enrolment growth was lower than the growth in admissions. Only 32% of applicants from sub-Saharan Africa and 24% of those from North Africa who were accepted and who accepted their admission offer were able to enrol at Université Laval. By comparison, this rate is significantly higher (70%) for French applicants. In short, an African student whose record can admit them to a Canadian university and who wants to come to our institution may well be unable to enrol.

Figure 4: Accepted offers and new enrolments for fall semesters
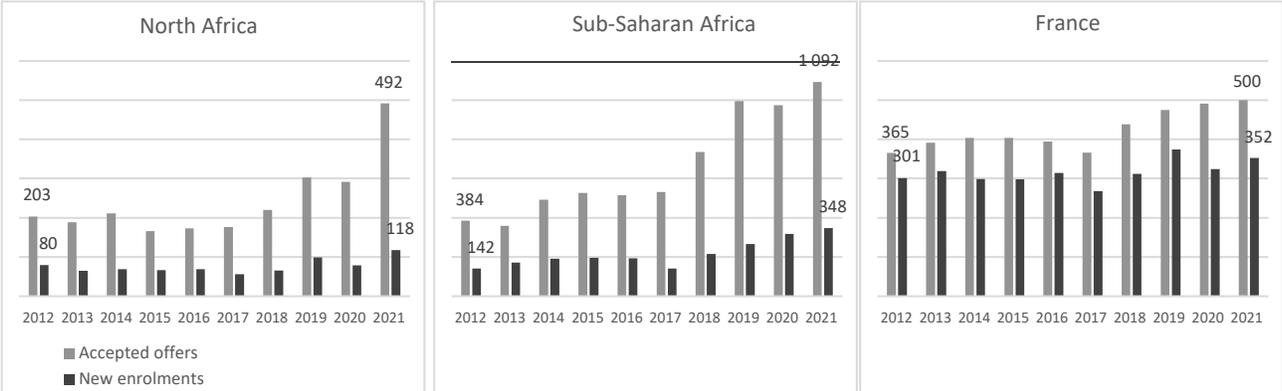
Source: Registrar's Office, Université Laval

Different recruitment pools for French-language and English-language higher education

The distribution of international students by origin varies based on the institutions' language of instruction. Quebec's French-language universities mainly attract international applicants from France, sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa. These students represented 49%, 20% and 9%, respectively, of new enrolments in the fall 2020 session.

At Université Laval, international students come mainly from these three regions of the world. By comparison, there are fewer French students (35%), while the number of students from sub-Saharan Africa (26%) is higher than that of French-language universities.

English-language universities have a very different international student population makeup. More than half of the international students are from Asia (51%). French and American students are the second-largest (17%) and third-largest (15%) groups. African students (sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa) make up only 8% of newly enrolled international students. However, Asian students have higher admission-enrolment conversion rates than those from the African continent, placing English-language universities in a more favourable position than French-language universities for international recruitment.

Figure 5: Origin of international students in French-language and English-language universities in Quebec, fall 2020
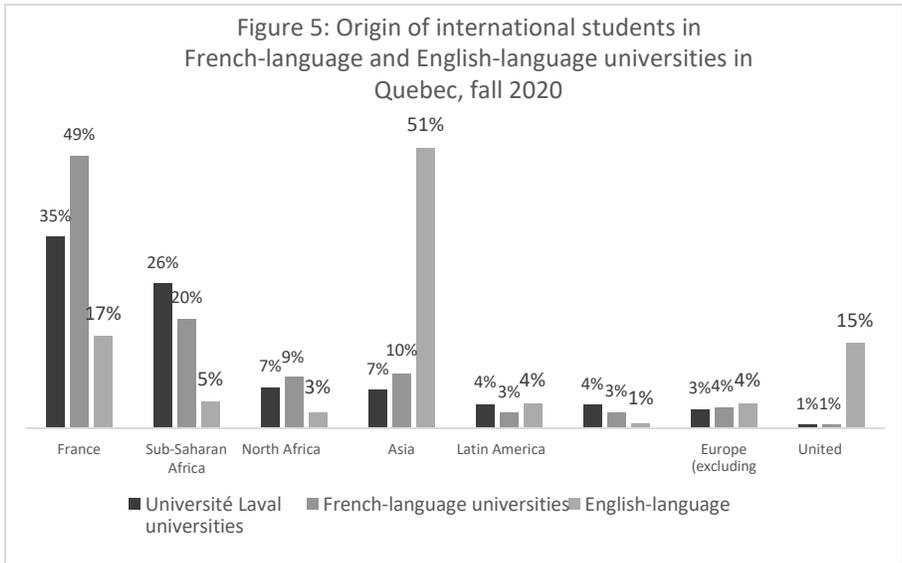
Getting a study permit: an obstacle course

Getting a study permit is more difficult for applicants from African countries

At Université Laval, the number of enrolments from sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa out of the total number of applications for admission accepted by these applicants is 33% and 27%, respectively.

For those two regions of the world, we can see that these low ratios are similar to study permit approval rates. Only 20% of students from sub-Saharan Africa and 29% from North Africa obtained this legal authorization to study in Canada in 2020.

In comparison, two-thirds of French applicants who accepted an offer of admission enrolled, while nearly all study permit applications were approved by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC).

In sum, four out of five students from sub-Saharan Africa who were admitted to a program of study at Université Laval were denied a study permit by IRCC in 2020. This is nearly three out of four North African students. As a result, the vast majority of African students accepted into a program of study at Université Laval cannot begin their studies. This situation has a direct impact on the volume of international student populations at Université Laval.


Figure 6: International student admission
at Université Laval (fall 2020) and study permit approval rate (2020)

Legend:
■ Proportion of international students enrolled at Université Laval
■ Accepted offers to enrolment in ULaval
■ Study permit approval rate

Source: Registrar's Office, Université Laval, IRCC
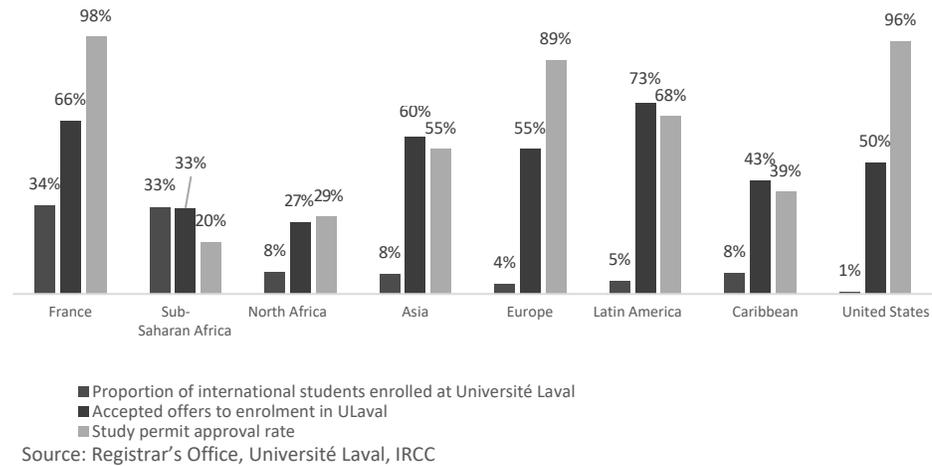
On the other hand, applicants from Asia and the United States make up the majority (66%) of international student populations of Quebec English-language universities and have much higher study permit approval rates—55% and 96%, respectively—in 2020.

Study permit approval rates are in free fall for African applicants

Overall, approval rates for Canadian study permits have been declining since 2012 for all countries. This trend is particularly noticeable in the major Université Laval markets. Between 2012 and 2020, approval rates for applicants from sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa have dropped from 48% to 20% and 61% to 29%, while for other regions, the rates have remained slightly more stable or have seen less pronounced declines. For example, approval rates for students from Asia, who are mainly enrolled in English-language universities in Quebec, went from 69% in 2012 to 55% in 2020. Despite the dip in the past year, the likelihood of obtaining a study permit is much higher than it is for African students.

Figure 7: Evolution of study permit approval rates in Canada by global region

Source: IRCC
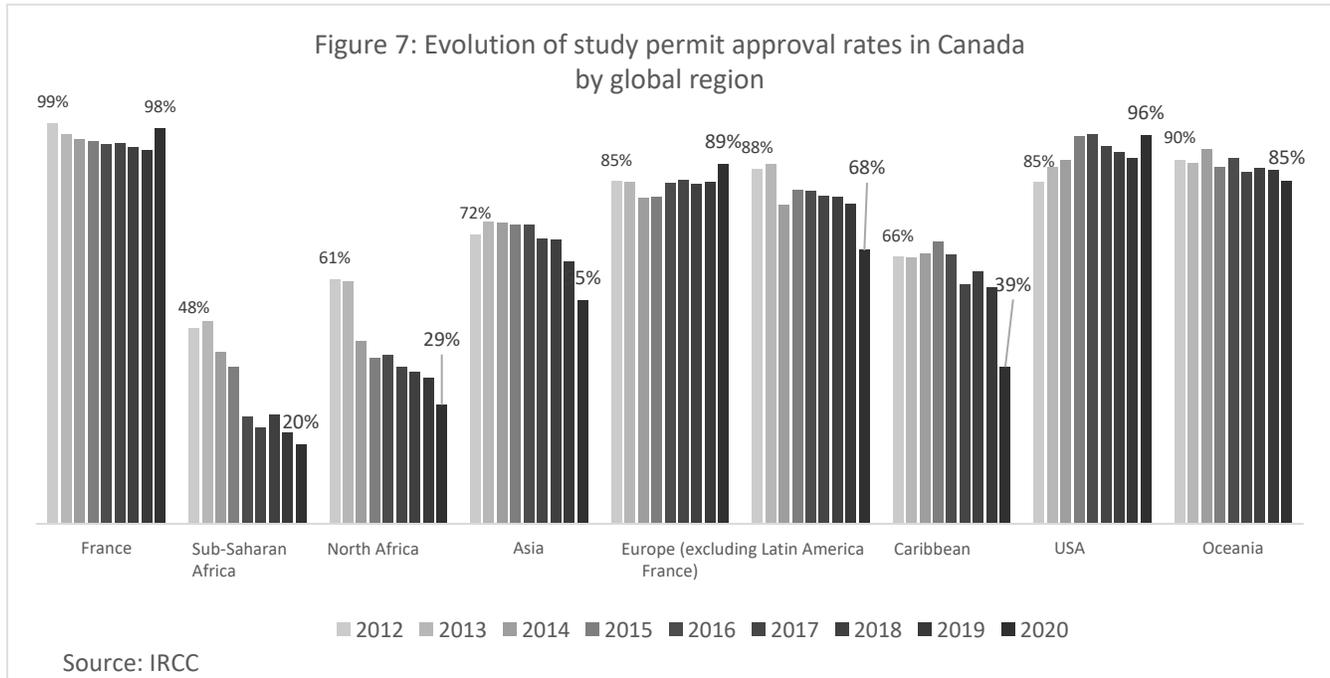
Various grounds for refusal

According to data obtained by IRCC through the *Access to Information Act*, the most common grounds for refusal are in relation to section 216(1)(b) of the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations*, which stipulate that the student must demonstrate that they will leave Canada at the end of their studies. These grounds for refusal are stated in a number of reasons coded by the immigration officer into the Chinook IT system implemented in 2018. According to data obtained by IRCC (Figure 8), applicants were unable to demonstrate that their primary intention was to come to Canada to study, that their financial assets were in their home countries, that the student's plan was not to join family abroad, that the proposed studies were not different from their current job, and that they had already travelled in the past. It is up to the student to convince the immigration officers of their intent to return at the end of their studies by providing all the evidence needed to assess their file.

However, the new computerized immigration application processing system implemented in 2018[1] is suspected of being the cause of the skyrocketing refusal rates of study permit applications. A lack of transparency in immigration officers' decisions, short processing times for each case and doubt that files are reviewed in full are all problems that have been criticized by immigration lawyers and that IRCC is asked to clarify.

At Université Laval, this process affects more than 1,000 African students each year who are refused their study permits on these grounds, despite their admission to fall sessions based on strict admission criteria.

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[1] Sarah R. Champagne, Un outil informatique mis en cause dans la hausse des refus de permis d'études, November 26, 2021, *Le Devoir*. https://www.ledevoir.com/societe/650031/immigration-un-outil-informatique-mis-en-cause-dans-la-hausse-des-refus-de-permis-d-etudes?utm_source=infolettre-2021-11-26&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=infolettre-quotidienne [Accessed December 10, 2021]

Moreover, with 80% of students from sub-Saharan Africa denied their study permits, it is reasonable to question the representations made about their real motivations. Higher education in sub-Saharan Africa is booming, and students in mobility programs contribute to skills strengthening and socioeconomic development in their countries. In that region of the world, population growth is such that young people who aspire to higher education must carry out their plans abroad.

Finally, efforts to be convincing in their intentions to return to their home country contradict federal government incentives to keep international graduates in Canada.[2] According to statements from our regulated immigration counsellors, it is very difficult to recruit students with promises of federal programs that promote the path to permanent residence after their studies while they have to convince authorities of their intention to return to their home country at the end of their studies.

Figure 8: Reasons for refusal of study permits by IRCC

	North Africa	Sub-Saharan Africa	Latin America	Asia	Caribbean	United States	Europe (excl. France)	France	Oceania	Other	Overall total
Study permit R216 (1)	**77%**	**74%**	**61%**	**63%**	**54%**	**49%**	**70%**	**55%**	**54%**	**64%**	**67%**
R216(1)(b) *Purpose*	29%	23%	20%	41%	16%	28%	27%	20%	42%	25%	33%
R216(1)(b) *Current Employment*	20%	14%	6%	6%	6%	4%	16%	17%	2%	15%	10%
R216(1)(b) *Assets*	14%	17%	12%	8%	17%	13%	12%	11%	4%	9%	11%
R216(1)(b) *Family Ties*	7%	12%	16%	6%	10%	3%	9%	3%	5%	10%	8%
R216(1)(b) *Travel History*	6%	7%	7%	2%	4%	0%	6%	4%	1%	4%	4%
Financial resources R220	**5%**	**9%**	**13%**	**5%**	**27%**	**11%**	**5%**	**3%**	**3%**	**6%**	**7%**
R220(a) Ability to pay tuition fees	4%	7%	6%	3%	14%	6%	3%	2%	1%	3%	4%
R220(b) Ability to maintain themselves and any family members	1%	2%	7%	2%	13%	5%	2%	1%	1%	3%	2%
Other reasons (2% or less)	18%	17%	26%	33%	20%	41%	25%	42%	43%	30%	26%

Source: IRCC, information disclosed under the *Access to Information Act*, February 8, 2022.

Biometrics requirements

Since 2018, study permit applicants must provide their biometrics by going to a visa application centre (VAC) authorized by the Canadian government. Although there are 162 centres located in 114 countries, some parts of the world are not served by these centres, which actually cover vast areas. This means that many students have to travel long distances to finalize their immigration paperwork. Limited access to these points of service is an additional obstacle to obtaining a study permit.

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[2]IRCC, New pathway to permanent residency for over 90,000 essential temporary workers and international graduates, April 14, 2021, https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2021/04/new-pathway-to-permanent-residency-for-over-90000-essential-temporary-workers-and-international-graduates.html [Accessed April 15, 2021]

Admitted to Université Laval but not enrolled: immigration red tape to blame

In an internal consultation, we asked international students admitted to our university about what prevented them from enrolling. They told us that they had been unable to complete their immigration process on time (40%). One-third (38%) said that their study permit had been refused.[3]

Consequences

Immigration policies as a lever for international recruitment

Welcoming international students is a way to tap into a rapidly growing pool of global talent. Between 1998 and 2018, the number of students in higher education mobility programs increased 4.8% per year on average.[4] Difficulties in obtaining a study permit make Canada less competitive in La Francophonie in comparison to French-speaking European countries, which more often than not become the alternative for African international students who find themselves shut out here.

In the field of international recruitment, France is an interesting model that seeks to simplify students' arrival by facilitating access to a study visa.[5] In doing so, it has risen to the top of the list of countries that welcome international students from La Francophonie.[6] Several other countries are also undertaking reforms to reduce migration barriers.[7]

Unfair competition with English-language institutions in Quebec and Canada

Quebec's French-language and English-language universities recruit international students in different markets and, from this perspective, do not compete with each other. However, given the significant differences in study permit approval rates by country of origin, they are not on equal footing in the effort they must make to attract international students.

Impact of the presence of international students on research capacity development and training programs

With their ever-increasing presence in the student population, ranging from 50% to 80% in some graduate programs, international students are a critical mass for maintaining training programs. They are also key players in the development of cutting-edge research at Université Laval. The difficulties they face in studying with us are a hindrance to the development of training, research and innovation. This is an issue that compromises the development of the critical mass needed to compete with other research infrastructure while contributing to the development of new centres of excellence, starting new businesses and attracting others. As a result, Quebec's competitiveness in innovation is compromised.

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[3]OAIF, 2021, Université Laval, Survey of foreign applicants admitted but not enrolled and foreign applicants who withdrew, April 2021.
[4]OECD, 2020, Education at a Glance 2020, OECD Indicators, https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/ [Accessed October 20, 2021]
[5]Campus France, 2018, Bienvenue en France, Choose France, https://www.campusfrance.org/en/choose-france-strategie-attractivite-etudiants-internationaux-bienvenue-en-france [Accessed March 25, 2019]
[6]Campus France, 2021, 10 ans de mobilité en chiffres, https://www.campusfrance.org/en/node/303994 [Accessed November 25, 2021]
[7]Campus France, 2019, Mobilités et coopérations universitaires en Afrique subsaharienne, https://www.campusfrance.org/en/node/303295 [Accessed January 9, 2020]

At Université Laval, at least 25 research centres in the areas of health, natural sciences and engineering are able to continue their activities thanks to the contributions of international students. In addition, international students attending this institution are actively involved in the development of niches and centres of excellence in the Quebec City area.

Direct economic impact of international students for Quebec City and the surrounding area

Through their presence in Canada, international students are creating a positive economic impact on the Canadian economy. This impact was valued at $1.8 billion in Quebec in 2016,[8] including $150 million per year for the Quebec City area, according to CIRANO.[9] It should be noted that among international students in higher education in the Quebec City area, 64% of them chose Université Laval.[10]

Potential solutions

Our university considers itself an impact university, so we want to be part of the solution. Here are a few paths forward:

1. Review international student selection criteria and processes;
2. Make the study permit application process more transparent;
3. Reduce application processing times;
4. Increase access to quality advisory services, legal services and the number of points of contact;
5. Improve access to visa application centres for biometrics collection;
6. Allow more flexibility for the evidence used to establish that an applicant meets the financial criteria;
7. Develop a distinctive brand resembling the proposals of the Canadian Bureau for International Education's working committee that focused on this.

We must stop wasting talent and harming Canada's reputation in Africa as a place to receive a university education. Canada needs to help the world and Africa by providing access to high-quality university education that changes lives and transforms societies.

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[8] Global Affairs Canada, 2017, Economic impact of international education in Canada – 2017 update. https://www.international.gc.ca/education/report-rapport/impact-2017/index.aspx?lang=eng [Accessed September 26, 2017]

[9] Joëlle Chatel-DeRepentigny, Claude Montmarquette, François Vaillancourt, 2011, Les étudiants internationaux au Québec : état des lieux, impacts économiques et politiques publiques, CIRANO, https://www.cirano.qc.ca/pdf/publication/2011s-71.pdf [Accessed February 6, 2022]

[10] Léger, 2020, *Étude sur la rétention des étudiants internationaux à Québec – Volet quantitatif,* published January 2020, conducted on behalf of Québec International.

Appendix

Presentation of the OIAF at Université Laval

The Office of International Affairs and La Francophonie (OIAF) is led by the Office of the Vice Rector, External and International Affairs and Health at Université Laval. It is tasked with strategic development and management of internationalization issues in pursuit of the following goals: stepping up international student recruitment; developing and strengthening international strategic partnerships; and integrating scholarship students with international partner institutions.