

**Submission to the Standing  
Committee on Citizenship and  
Immigration: Study on the  
recruitment and acceptance  
rates of foreign students**

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## **About us**

The Mitchell Institute for Education and Health Policy at Victoria University is one of the Australia's leading education and health policy think tanks and trusted thought leaders. Our focus is on improving our education and health systems so more Australians can engage with and benefit from these services, supporting a healthier, fairer and more productive society.

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## **Cover image**

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## Overview

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Committee on the work it is undertaking on the recruitment and acceptance rates of foreign students. This submission focuses on some of the enormous challenges the international education sector has faced due to the pandemic. This submission highlights the following:

- Canada's international education sector has fared relatively well throughout the pandemic. Canada has not experienced the same falls in new international students as countries, especially Australia and New Zealand. By the end of 2021, the number of international students choosing Canada as a study destination is at its highest levels since at least 2015.
- Many countries have a large proportion of students from certain countries due to historical, community and language reasons. For Canada, this means students from Francophone countries often select Canada as a study destination.
- It is important to understand the connection between international education and migration policy. Increasingly education has a role in facilitating migration outcomes. This can create incentives for institutions and individuals that undermine the purpose of the migration system. Understanding the role and responsibilities of an education institution in modern migration regimes can help governments maintain the integrity of the system in a fair and reasonable manner.

## **The pandemic has disrupted normal enrolment patterns across the globe but affected countries differently**

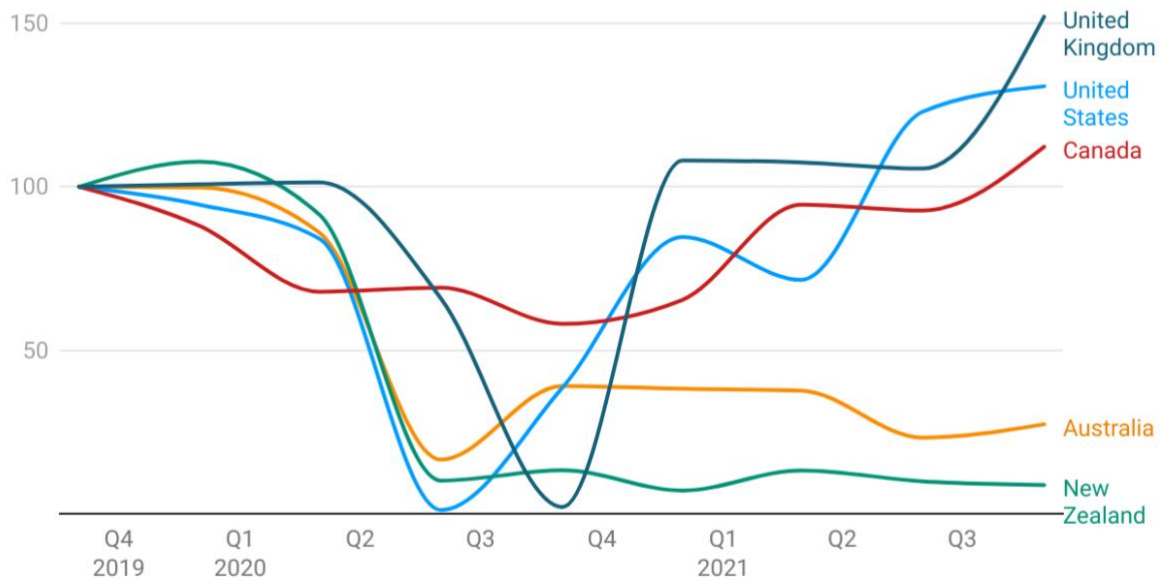
International education is an industry that relies on the movement of people across borders. The pandemic has caused enormous disruption to those involved in the international sector, largely due to the restrictions on international travel.

One way of showing this disruption is to look at new international student visas. International students usually require a visa before they commence their studies and changes in international student visa approvals can highlight the extent to which normal patterns have changed.

Figure 1 below shows new international student visas by quarter in five major destination countries - Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States. This figure uses an index where the September 2019 is equal to 100. This figure shows seasonally adjusted data. Using seasonally adjusted data makes it possible to explore changes while controlling for peaks and troughs that usually occur throughout the year.

**Figure 1: All countries had a significant fall in international students in 2020, but those without closed borders had a quicker recovery**

Change in new international student visa by country (September 2019 = 100)



Source: Hurley, Hildebrandt, and Brisbane (2021)

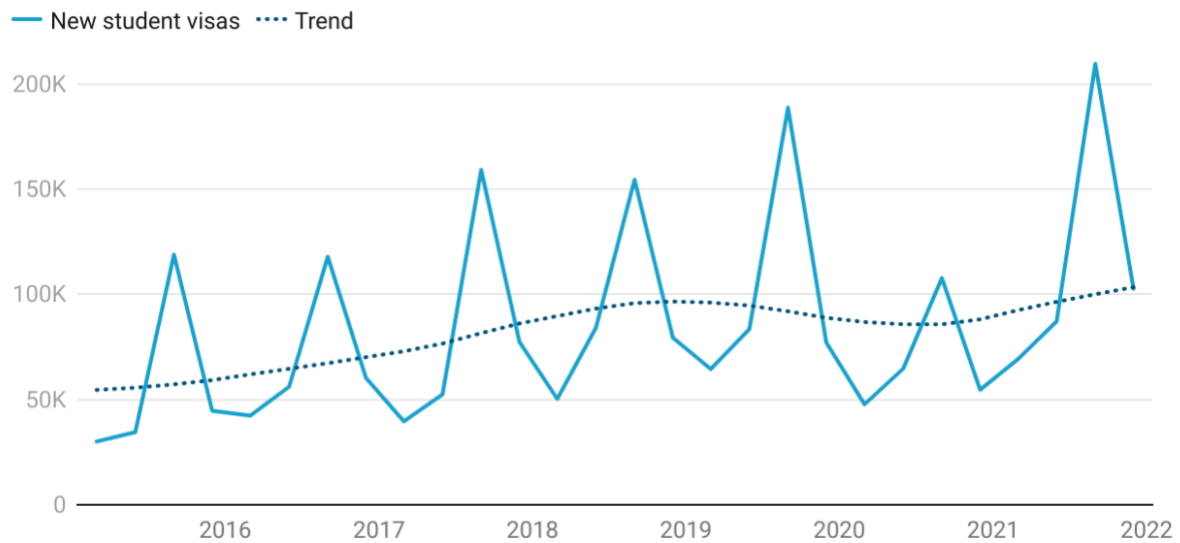
This figure shows that there was a significant drop for all countries in new visa approvals in the second and third quarter of 2020 except for Canada, which had a smaller decline throughout 2020. The drop in the middle part of 2020 coincided with the first wave of the pandemic in the northern hemisphere. By the final quarter of 2020, visa approvals had increased in the US and UK.

As the above figure shows, Canada has been relatively successful in maintaining a pipeline of international students throughout the pandemic. Like the United Kingdom and the United States, new international student visas are at record levels.

Figure 2 below highlights this rebound. It shows the total number of international student visas (or 'study permits' as they can be referred to) granted by quarter in Canada/ Also shown is the trend, which appears as a dotted line.

## Figure 2: New international students to Canada have returned to their pre-pandemic trend

Approved international student visas to Canada (actual and trend) by quarter



Source: Mitchell Institute analysis of IRCC (2021) data.

This figure shows that international student visas have been trending upwards since 2015. There was a fall in 2020-2021 coinciding with the pandemic. However, the upward trend has resumed and new international student visas are at record levels.

## Destination countries often have specialisations in certain source markets

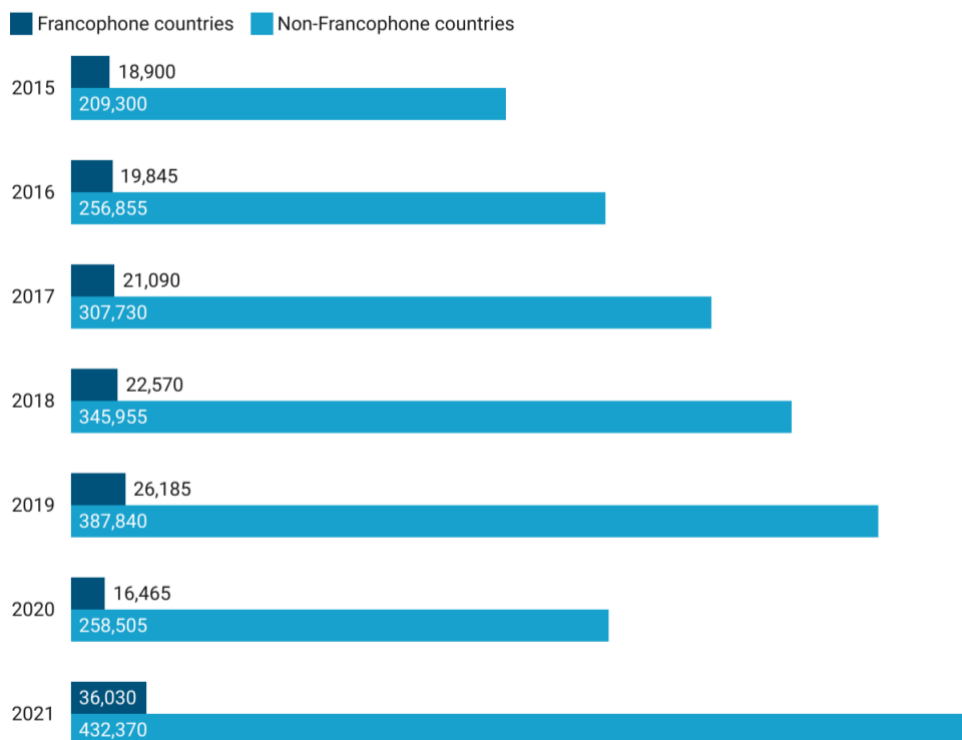
In the international education sector, it is common for historical, community and language connections to manifest themselves in larger international student cohorts from certain source countries.

For instance, students from Commonwealth countries often enrol in higher numbers in other Commonwealth countries. Students can select a destination based on the communities already living in the country. An Australian example is Nepalese students who are the third largest international student cohort in Australia.

Canada has a relatively high population of international students from Francophone countries. The figure below explores this in more detail. It shows the number of new international student visas to Canada from Francophone countries and non-Francophone countries in each calendar year from 2015.

### Figure 3: New student visas from Francophone and non-Francophone countries have more than doubled since 2015

New international student visas to Canada granted by calendar



Source: Mitchell Institute analysis of IRCC (2021) data.

This figure shows that new international student visas have increased for students from both Francophone and non-Francophone countries. In 2021 new international students from Francophone and non-Francophone countries were about twice 2015 levels.

The biggest increase in Francophone international students has come from France. In 2021, French international students in Canada made up about 58% of new international student visa holders from Francophone countries, followed by the Ivory Coast (6%) and Cameroon (5%).

While French international students dominate the number of visa approvals from Francophone countries, the proportion of students from African Francophone countries is increasing. Based on media reports, students from African Francophone countries are subject to high visa refusal rates suggesting they have the potential to be a bigger cohort.

To explore some of the reasons why some countries have higher refusal rates than others, it is important to understand the role of international education in modern migration regimes.

## Understanding the role of international education in modern migration regimes

International education plays an increasingly important role in managing the movement of people across borders. Characteristic features of modern migration trends include:

- a) **The diversification of migration experiences.** The greater number of people crossing borders means that there is a greater range of migration experiences, especially temporary migration experiences. International education fits within this diversification of experiences by offering an individual the ability to migrate temporarily, usually for a period of between six months to five years, in a way that they would not have been able to do without an education visa. For instance, an education visa will allow a longer stay and greater access to the labour market than a working holiday visa. In this way, international education is increasingly a bridge between short-term migration experiences and permanent migration.
- b) **The emergence of migration management.** Increasingly governments seek to place more rules and structure around migration in order to manage the movement of people across borders. Points-based systems for migration are an example of this trend (Oelgemöller, 2017; Pottie-Sherman, 2013). There is also the emergence of established pathways to permanent migration. Examples of this include students with 'dual intent' (meaning a student who has the dual intent of studying and migrating permanently after their study) and two-step migration (where graduates are first selected for a job on a temporary visa before becoming eligible to apply for permanent migration (Hawthorne, 2010)).
- c) **The use of third parties in the migration process.** Government immigration departments have a responsibility to ensure that they are issuing visas to people who meet the aim and intent of migration policy objectives. Governments increasingly rely on third party organisations to assist with this process. Examples include language tests (such as IELTS), health assessments and education qualifications.

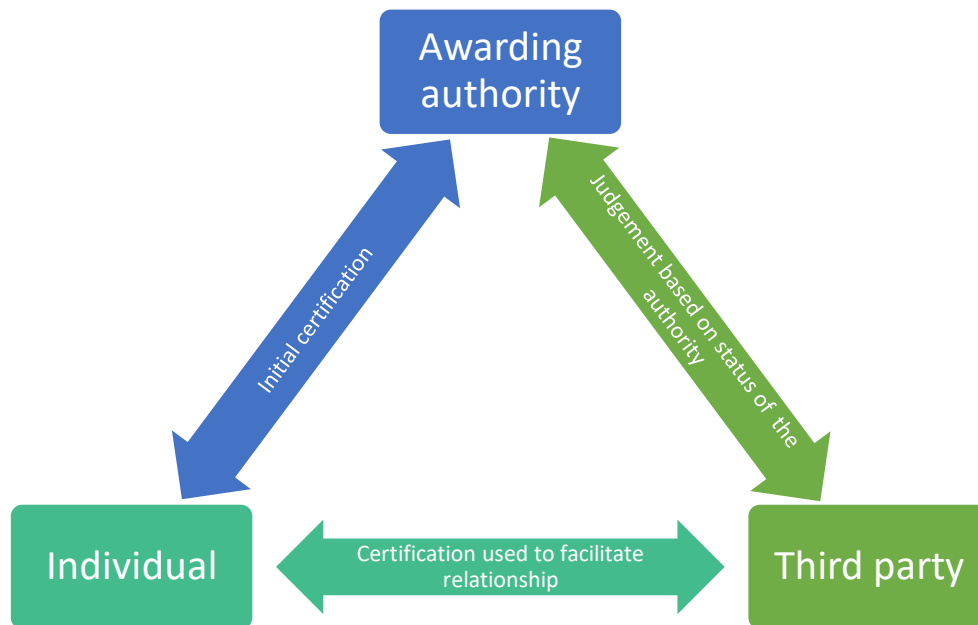
The use of education institutions in the migration process means that almost all education and skill visa applications will require some form of educational documentation. This extends the role of education as a form of currency used to identify the relative worth of an individual and to facilitate a relationship.

Education functions like a currency by creating a three-pointed arrangement between the student, the education institution (or the awarding authority on behalf of the institution) and a third party. The institution provides a form of certification, verifying the veracity of a claim by an individual that the third party uses to have confidence when establishing a relationship.

For instance, a university certifies someone has finished a degree and produces a token in the form of a certificate that the graduate presents to an employer to facilitate an employment contract. Another example is the use of a certificate that graduates present to a regulatory body to facilitate the granting of an occupational licence.

**Figure 4: As a form of currency, education facilitates an exchange between an individual and a third party based on the status of the awarding authority**

Overview of three-pointed arrangement created by education systems



In the research literature, there are several ways to characterise this use of education, including education as:

- A 'signal', which employers use to establish trust in the productivity of future employees (Spence, 1973, 2002);
- A sorting and filtering device, used to rank individuals of unknown provenance (Arrow, 1973; Bills, 2003);
- A 'positional good', which individuals use to gain a benefit relative to others (Hirsch, 1978).

Importantly, the three-pointed arrangement has its basis in credit and trust. (The word credential has its etymological origins in the Latin word *credere*, meaning to trust or to believe.) This means that education institutions help a third party to have some form of trust in an individual of unknown provenance, and enables an individual to gain some form of credit that they can use in exchange for a benefit.

Establishing trust in the migration realm is extremely important. Governments need to have confidence that the person to whom they are granting a visa has a legitimate claim, and education institutions play a vital role in establishing that confidence.

This happens in permanent skilled migration, when an individual submits their credentials as evidence that they meet a skill requirement. And it happens in the granting of an education visa, when governments use the status of the institution to verify the claim by an individual that they are a genuine student.

Consequently, education institutions become extremely important in migration decisions and effectively act as gatekeepers. The value of what they offer becomes twofold. The first is as



an institution offering teaching and learning. The second is as an institution that enables an individual to access a visa.

If there are weaknesses in how the education institution is managing these dual roles, then the integrity of the migration system becomes threatened. There can be incentives for institutions to offer poor quality education experiences if they are able to use their status as gatekeepers to drive enrolments and profits.

It is also very important to note that the three-pointed arrangement outlined above is not neutral – it can carry with it all the injustices, discrimination and biases that come with any form of value judgement. Individuals from some countries might have the benefit of having their documents more easily recognised by a third party. Indeed, there is a large literature describing how individuals from Western countries often find it easier to have their education qualifications recognised, effectively entrenching discrimination behind a veneer of a neutral and meritocratic assessment process (Guo, 2009, 2015; Guo & Shan, 2013; Papadopoulos, 2017; Sweetman, McDonald, & Hawthorne, 2015).

The lack of documentation, or incomplete documentation, does not mean an individual does not have a valid claim. But it does mean that it can be harder for governments to establish the trust in the individual they need in order to issue a visa. It also means that governments have to work with other players in the migration system to ensure that individuals are not discriminated against, while balancing the requirement to maintain the integrity and purpose of the migration system.

The sudden disruptions to international education and migration created by the pandemic have shone a light on administrative and systemic weaknesses and inequities across the system that require further attention as the international education sector looks to rebuild following the pandemic.

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