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# Canada's steady climb

Canada's international education market is continuing to grow at a steady pace, with more and more universities and colleges implementing international marketing campaigns to attract international students. **GILLIAN EVANS** reports.

Just over 70,000 visa students were enrolled at Canadian universities and colleges in 2006/07, according to the report, *Trends in Higher Education*, published by the Association of Universities and Colleges in Canada (AUCC). An indication of the importance of the international student market to Canada is the fact that visa students make up around seven per cent of full-time undergraduate students there – in comparison, they make up only two per cent in the USA.

Although overall visa student numbers in 2006/07 were up by only three per cent compared with 2005/06, the Canadian market has come a long way since 1996, when the number of international undergraduate students plummeted to 25,600 after reaching a high of 30,000 in 1990. The report puts the market's success over the past 10 years down to a number of factors, including the development of sophisticated international marketing strategies by universities and colleges; the general trend towards international education experiences; changes in immigration policy; and agreements with other countries to attract international students.

At the University of Alberta, in Edmonton, AB, Julia Jones, Marketing Supervisor, believes their "increased efforts in international marketing and recruitment" resulted in an 11 per cent increase in new international student registrations in 2006. This year's preliminary figures are even more positive: by August, new registrations had risen by 39 per cent over the previous year.

May Yao, International Student Recruiter at Simon Fraser University - SFU Student Services, Burnaby, BC, reports that their overseas applications have been increasing steadily in recent years. "This," she explains, "is due to various factors, including the growing strength of the Canadian economy, increased awareness of higher education in Canada [with its] favourable tuition and living costs, [and the fact that Canada is] a safe country." She adds that Vancouver is also gaining more international exposure, as the 2010 Winter Olympics will be held there.

However, not all institutions have fared so well. At Laurentian University in Sudbury, ONT, International Recruitment and Admissions Manager, Michelle Belanger, reports that their international student numbers actually fell slightly in 2007, and she puts this down to "growing competition among international education opportunities [in] Australia, Singapore, etc".

This is also noted in the AUCC report, which states, "Competing countries' success in attracting and retaining international students impacts Canada's visa student numbers. For example, Malaysia, which in 1981 was the second-largest source of international students for Canadian campuses, fell to 20th by 2004 as the number of Malaysian students choosing to study in Australia grew. Various agreements promoting mobility between Australia and Malaysia resulted in a shift in the movement of Malaysian students to Australia, where Malaysia is now their second-largest source of international students."

For Canadian educators, China – which, according to AUCC, has been in number-one position since 2001 – continues to lead the market, taking a 23 per cent market share in 2004/05, followed at some distance



by the USA, then France and India. However, many sources report a diversification of the top student nationalities in recent years. For example, Belanger states, "Chinese [was our top nationality in 2007], as was also the case in 2006. However, Laurentian is growing more diverse, with students from over 55 countries [and] growing student populations from Indonesia, France, India, the USA, the Caribbean, South Korea, Japan and North Africa."

As always, difficulty in gaining visa acceptance has blocked some markets from delivering their true potential. "Visa issues do remain a concern for accepted students from Nigeria, Nepal and Pakistan, with low visa approval rates, for various reasons [such as] intent to return to the home country [and] financial issues, etc," relates Belanger.

Yao says that they have experienced visa problems with students from India, Africa, China and Vietnam. "The visa process can often be quite lengthy in these countries," she adds.

Despite the visa problems for some nationalities, many industry sources are quietly confident that the Canadian international education market will grow. Pam Fligel, International Recruitment and Admissions Officer at the University of Northern British Columbia in Prince George, BC, where student numbers stagnated in 2007 at 2006 levels, ventures, "We hope to see a slight increase [in international student enrolments]. We have a number of students coming from Saudi Arabia to complete the English language studies programme over the 2007 year, and then move into academic studies next year."

Jones is more upbeat in her outlook for the University of Alberta. "We are forecasting a 40 per cent growth in new international undergraduate registrations over last year," she says, "and we forecast that we will maintain this growth, leading towards 15 per cent international undergraduate body by 2012." ■

## Subject matter

At Simon Fraser University (SFU) in Burnaby, BC, huge demand for business courses has led the university to expand its provision through its new School for International Studies. May Yao, International Student Recruiter at SFU explains, "The programme is designed primarily for students with a background or interest in fields such as political science, history, economics, geography, sociology and anthropology. Students

are able to specialise in international issues through a curriculum that provides for integrated training and experience concerning the complex and challenging issues that are central to global affairs."

The burgeoning demand for business programmes is also noted in AUCC's report, *Trends in Higher Education*, which reveals that in 2004, the most popular fields of study among international students were business, management and public administration, accounting for 21 per cent of enrolments. This, according to the report,

was followed by social and behavioural sciences and law with 15 per cent, and architecture, engineering and related technologies with 14 per cent.

However, the fastest growth rates between 1996 and 2004 have been in enrolments for physical and life science programmes, which, at bachelor's level, increased fivefold during this period. At master's level, the number of visa students enrolled in mathematics, computer and information sciences almost tripled during this timeframe.