

# National Foundation for American Policy

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## **New Research: Easier Path To Work in Canada Drawing International Students Away From U.S. Universities**

### **Indian Immigration To Canada Has Quadrupled Since 2013**

**Arlington, Va.** – Highly skilled foreign nationals, including international students, have been choosing Canada over America because it is difficult to gain H-1B status or permanent residence in the United States, and easy to work in temporary status and acquire permanent residence in Canada, according to a National Foundation for American Policy (NFAP) [analysis](#). More favorable immigration policies are a significant factor in Canada attracting international students, particularly students from India.

The study, “International Students in Canada and the United States,” can be found at <https://nfap.com/>.

Canada has no annual limit on high-skilled temporary visas and processes most cases within two weeks. In the United States, gaining H-1B temporary status after graduating from a university has grown increasingly challenging, with most applicants in the annual H-1B lottery rejected, causing many students to leave the country. After graduation, an international student in Canada may gain permanent residence within a few years. In the United States, the per-country limit and low annual limit on employment-based green cards mean highly educated people from India could wait decades to obtain permanent residence. The Trump administration made obtaining H-1B status more difficult and openly discussed imposing new restrictions or eliminating Optional Practical Training for students, which, data indicate, may have discouraged international students from attending U.S. universities.

The research analyzes international student enrollment at U.S. and Canadian universities using multiple sources.

Among the findings in the research:

- The number of Indians immigrating to Canada has more than quadrupled since 2013. Between 2013 and 2023, Indians immigrating to Canada rose from 32,828 to 139,715, an increase of 326%. The rise in Indian students attending Canadian universities fueled the immigration growth.
- International students attending Canadian universities increased from 62,223 in 2000 to 400,521 in 2021, rising by 544%. (The year 2000 refers to the 2000-01 academic year, and 2021 refers to the 2021-22 academic year.) International students have been crucial to Canadian universities. Since 2000, 45% of the growth in enrollment at Canadian universities is due to international students.
- International student enrollment from 2016 through 2019 dropped by 5.6% at U.S. universities, even though it increased by 51.6% at Canadian universities during the same

period. Between 2016 and 2019, the number of Indian international students enrolled in U.S. universities declined by 13% but increased by 182% at Canadian universities.

- In January 2024, the Canadian government announced a two-year cap on new international student permits. The limit does not affect students in master's degree and Ph.D. programs. Along with the new restrictions, the federal government will make it easier for students in graduate programs to work by extending work permits for as long as three years after graduation.
- The surge in Indian students has propelled much of the rise in international students coming to Canada. The number of Indians attending Canadian universities has increased by over 5,000% in the last two decades. Indian enrollment at Canadian universities rose from 2,181 in 2000 to 128,928 in 2021, an increase of 126,747 or 5,811%. The rise in Indian students accounts for 37% of the increased enrollment in international students attending Canadian universities between 2000 and 2021. A diplomatic spat will likely reduce visa issuance to Indian students in the short term.
- Over the past two decades, the number of international students in the United States has also increased, although at a lower rate than the rise in Canada. Between 2000 and 2021, the number of international students enrolled in U.S. universities rose from 526,809 to 763,760, an increase of 236,951 or 45%, compared to the over 500% rise in international students at Canadian universities during the same period.
- In January 2015, Canada adopted the [Express Entry program](#) and favored high-skilled professionals who had experience in Canada as international students or working in temporary status. In June 2017, the Canadian government launched its Global Skills Strategy "to encourage foreign investment in Canada, incentivize companies to open offices in Canada, and attract top foreign talent."
- The difference between Canada and the United States in attracting Indian students is most pronounced pre-pandemic, particularly during the Trump years. Between 2016 and 2019, the number of Indian international students enrolled in U.S. universities declined by 17,184 or 13%, from 129,135 to 111,951. At Canadian universities, the number of Indian international students increased by 75,936 or 182%, from 41,724 to 177,660 between 2016 and 2019.
- Highly skilled Indians can expect to wait potentially decades for employment-based immigrant visas, typically working for years in H-1B temporary status. More than 1.2 million Indians, including dependents, are waiting in the first, second and third employment-based green card categories, according to a National Foundation for American Policy analysis of [USCIS data](#). The low annual limit of 140,000 employment-based green cards, which includes dependents, and the per-country limit, which affects nationals of countries with large populations, have created the long wait times for Indians. Congress has not changed the limits since 1990.
- The pandemic skewed enrollment figures in the United States, but Indian student numbers may have recovered to an extent, with an Indian student enrollment of 130,994 in 2021, similar to 129,135 in 2016. Indian student enrollment in 2022 at U.S. universities (excluding OPT) was 199,861, likely bolstered by lagging enrollment during the Covid-10 pandemic. The average annual level of fall enrollment among Indian students when combining 2020, 2021 and 2022 was 141,612, which was 29,661 or 26% higher than in the fall of 2019.
- Indian graduate students at U.S. universities declined by 28% in computer science (computer and information sciences) and by 35% in engineering between the 2016-17 and 2019-20 academic years.

- Indian graduate students in engineering and computer science continued to decline in 2020, according to a Department of Homeland Security special tabulation of the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) published by the National Science Foundation. Data on graduate student subject areas were unavailable for 2021. In 2022, Indian student graduate-level enrollment in engineering was 33,820, below the 39,470 level of 2016 but much higher than the levels in 2019 (25,470) and 2020 (18,390).
- “Canada is benefiting from a diversion of young Indian tech workers from U.S. destinations, largely because of the challenges of obtaining and renewing H-1B visas and finding a reliable route to U.S. permanent residence,” said Peter Rekai, founder of the Toronto-based immigration law firm Rekai LLP. “The Indian influx to Canada has much to do with doors closing in the United States.” In July 2023, [Canada’s program](#) to lure H-1B visa holders to the country attracted enough applications that it reached the 10,000 limit in less than 48 hours.
- Stagnating U.S. enrollment of international students from China should worry educators and policymakers concerned about the competitiveness of American companies since Chinese students are a vital source of university and employment talent. “Under a new program called Qiming, the government pays signing bonuses of \$420,000 to \$700,000 for top researchers, according to a December 2023 [NFAP study](#). “Some Chinese scientists and engineers have left China for political and economic reasons but are not choosing the United States.”
- The level of Chinese international students in U.S. graduate-level engineering programs was flat between the fall of 2016 and the fall of 2019 and, unlike Indians, declined in 2022. Chinese graduate students in computer science increased between 2016 and 2019 but fell between 2019 and 2022, while Indian graduate students more than doubled. Additional data will provide a clearer picture of Chinese student trends.

U.S. immigration law remains less attractive than Canada’s for international students who wish to work after graduation. That has affected the choices made by international students. The gap between the United States and other countries in attracting international students could grow larger if U.S. immigration policy becomes more restrictive.

#### **About the National Foundation for American Policy**

Established in 2003, the National Foundation for American Policy (NFAP) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, nonpartisan public policy research organization based in Arlington, Virginia focusing on trade, immigration and related issues. The Advisory Board members include Columbia University economist Jagdish Bhagwati, Ohio University economist Richard Vedder, Cornell Law School professor Stephen W. Yale-Loehr and former INS Commissioner James W. Ziglar. Over the past 24 months, NFAP’s research has been written about in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and other major media outlets. The organization’s reports can be found at [www.nfap.com](http://www.nfap.com). Twitter: [@NFAPResearch](https://twitter.com/NFAPResearch)

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