

CANADA-VIETNAM

The shift of Vietnamese students to Canada marches on

Mark Ashwill 23 March 2019

I placed a gentleman's bet with myself that the number of young Vietnamese studying in Canada would top 20,000 last year. Based on the latest statistics for 2018 released by **Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada**, it looks like I won, much to the dismay of Canada's main friendly competitor for Vietnamese students, the United States of America.

As of the end of last year, there were 20,330 Vietnamese studying at all levels in Canada. This means that Vietnam has taken sole possession of fifth place among sending countries.

Rounding out the top five – in ascending order – are France (22,745), South Korea (24,195), China (142,985), and India (172,625).

As of 31 December 2018, there were 572,415 study permit holders with a valid permit, which means that Canada is the world's third-leading host of international students – after the US and Australia.

Canada ranks fifth among countries that host Vietnamese students – after Japan (72,354), the US (29,788), South Korea (27,061) and Australia (24,094).

At this rate, and if the number of Vietnamese students in the US continues to decline – as is indicated by the number of visas issued in the first three months of the 2019 US government fiscal year – it is possible that Canada will surpass the US in the number of Vietnamese students within its borders in the next few years. Canada now has 68% of the number of Vietnamese students in the US. Take a moment to let these two facts sink in.

Last April, I wrote an article for *University World News* entitled “**Vietnamese students look at the US and head north**” in which I mentioned my penchant for confirming anecdotal evidence with hard data.

As I mentioned at the time, based on 2017 figures, *for the first time ever, there are nearly half as many Vietnamese students in Canada as there are in the US, a country with nine times the population and thousands more educational institutions. Remarkably, Vietnamese students had the highest percentage increase in 2017 at 89%, making Vietnam*

the fastest growing market in Canada.

Here's what the increases look like over a consecutive four-year period: 2015: 4,850; 2016: 7,450; 2017: 13,960; 2018: 20,330.

Vietnam once again recorded the highest one-year increase among the top places of origin at 46%, followed by India with an increase of 40%. The four-year increase in Vietnamese students in Canada was a sizzling 419%.

Last year, the increase in Chinese students from 139,955 to 142,985 was negligible (+2.1%), while the number of Indian students who chose Canada as their overseas study destination jumped from 123,520 to 172,625.

The distribution of international students by province is predictable. More than eight out of 10 international students are in three of the 10 provinces: Ontario: 277,320 (48.45%); British Columbia: 134,270 (23.46%); and Quebec: 70,185 (12.37%).

Other provinces with healthy enrolments included Alberta (29,865), Manitoba (18,725) and Nova Scotia (16,265). (It's worth noting that Ontario, Quebec, British Columbia and Alberta account for 80% of Canada's population.)

Pull factors remain the same

Why is Canada such a hot destination for so many of the world's students, including from Vietnam?

The Canadian government is doing everything right. It recognises the pressing need for well-educated and highly trained immigrants and its immigration policy reflects that priority, unlike the US, which faces similar challenges but chooses to keep its head buried in the sand in the spirit of ignorance is bliss. Canada's population is rapidly greying, with a median age of 40.8 years last year.

This visionary policy, including promoting study in Canada and post-study employment opportunities, seems to be paying off in spades. Canada's population growth is the highest among the G7 countries due mainly to international migration.

One in five Canadians is an immigrant, including many who earned a degree from a Canadian post-secondary institution and many more who began their studies at a Canadian high school.

The other pull factors remain the same, including reasonable cost and uniform high quality, a favourable Canadian dollar exchange rate (CA\$1.32: US\$1), off-campus work opportunities, co-op programmes, abundant post-graduation work and immigration opportunities, French-speaking Quebec for those interested in French language programmes, and Canada's image, embodied by its prime minister, as an open, friendly, tolerant and enlightened country.

More powerful than the armchair and in-country recruitment of Canadian educational institutions and their agents is word-of-mouth advertising. The sharp increases in the number of Vietnamese studying in Canada since 2015 – from 4,850 to 20,330 – at the secondary and post-secondary levels has created a snowball effect, no pun intended.

Virtual reality imitates (and improves) life

There is probably no one entity that reflects Vietnamese parents' and students' love affair with Canada more than a student-run Facebook group called *Hoi du hoc sinh Canada* (Canada Vietnamese International Student Association).

Created in June 2010, when there were only 2,590 Vietnamese students in Canada, this group – with 91,776 members and growing by the day – is a forum where current students and those planning to study in Canada can discuss a range of issues and share experiences.

Since there are 20,330 young Vietnamese in Canada and it's doubtful that every one of them is a member of this group, this means that the vast majority are probably junior high, high school and university students who are seriously considering Canada as an overseas study destination.

Members discuss issues ranging from what to study and where, comparing institutions and cities, to how to prepare for study and life in Canada, to visa and work permit issues.

One member who chose to study at a community college in New Brunswick “in a remote location with few immigrants” because of “low tuition fees” finally had time, after completing the first term of a two-year diploma programme, to tell her story to date.

In a rather lengthy post, she explained why she chose that college, shared study tips, offered advice on how to interact effectively with faculty, how easy it was to get a job, the need to be honest, how important it is to master the local transportation system and also find someone who can give you a ride, if need be, how she was able to adapt to extremely cold winter weather with the proper clothing, what to take and what not to take from Vietnam, etc.

Looking ahead

A steady growth in Vietnamese student enrolment in Canada is likely to continue for the foreseeable future though perhaps at a less torrid pace. After all, Vietnam is not China or India in terms of numbers.

What's clear is that Canada is no longer a second-choice destination for those who were unable to obtain a US student visa. It is quickly coming of age as one of the most desired places to study for over hundreds of thousands of international students, with Vietnam leading the way, at least in terms of recent percentage increases.

One question arising is how many of them will remain in Canada for the long term and how

many will return to Vietnam, or move to a third country, perhaps after an extended period of in-country employment.

Another more general issue is how well-prepared Canadian schools, colleges and universities are in the long-term to ensure that these students have a positive experience, academically, socially and culturally.

What's beyond speculation is that Canada's progressive immigration policy, of which study in Canada is a key component, is a raving success, perhaps even beyond the imaginations of those who formulated it.

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