



Marginal growth in foreign enrolment in the US buoyed by OPT numbers

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Short on time? Here are the highlights:

- *The total number of international students in the US higher education system rose by 0.05% to reach over 1 million in 2018/19*
- *That increase was driven by the number of students participating in Optional Practical Training placements*
- *International enrolments in undergraduate, graduate, and non-degree programmes in the US declined*
- *Commencements also fell, but not as steeply as in previous years*
- *International students contributed \$44.7 billion to US economy in 2018*

The just-released [2019 Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange](#), published by the Institute of International Education (IIE) in cooperation with the US Department of State, shows that foreign student enrolments in the US exceeded 1 million (1,095,300) in the 2018/19 academic year. This marks a 0.05% total increase over the previous year. International students now make up 5.5% of the total number of students in the US higher education system.

The report draws on data on international enrolments across more than 2,800 US higher education institutions.

Programme enrolments fell by 2.1%

The 1 million-plus total includes both international students enrolled in academic programmes as well as those participating in [Optional Practical Training](#), or OPT, (a programme that allows students to remain in the US after graduating to work for up to three years). Students in both groups contributed to the total enrolment figure of 1,095,300.

The number of students in OPT rose from 203,460 in 2017/18 to 223,085 in 2018/19, a percentage increase of 9.6%. Last year the percentage year-over-year increase in OPT had been 15.8%. The IIE attributes growing student numbers in OPT to the "[policy changes](#) that allow STEM students to remain in the United States on Optional Practical Training opportunities for 36 months after the completion of their studies."

When OPT participants are removed from the total count, the number of international students enrolled in academic programmes in the US actually fell by 2.1% to 872,215. This makes 2018/19 the second year of declining enrolments and a steeper decline than in 2017/18, when programme enrolments had fallen by -1.3%.

In 2018/19, there were 62,340 international students in US non-degree programmes, down -5% from 2017/18; 431,930 in undergraduate programmes (-2.4%); and 377,945 in graduate programmes (-1.3%).

[Inside Higher Ed](#) notes that “Growth in OPT participation for students from many [source] countries continues to prop up the top-level enrolment number even when there are declines or slower rates of growth at undergraduate, graduate or non-degree levels.”

Commencements down but not as steeply

First-time international enrolments (i.e., commencements) were also down -0.9% from the year prior, a change that was nonetheless seen as encouraging news – a “stabilisation” – in the IIE/Education USA livestreamed event devoted to presenting this year’s findings on 18 November 2019. This is because the decrease is less severe than last year’s drop of -6.6% and also improves on the decline registered in 2016/17 (-3%).

Findings from a separate “snapshot” survey across more than 500 institutions on the subject of Fall 2019 enrolments was also released this week by IIE. Half (51%) of these institutions reported declines in international commencements, while 42% reported increases. Only 7% reported no change.

Commencements are an important trend to watch since they offer a glimpse of likely enrolment trends over the next couple of years. Three years of negative growth in commencements will place downward pressure on enrolments in the next few years ahead.

Major source markets

The major sending markets for the US remain China, India, and South Korea. Chinese student numbers increased by 1.7% to 369,550, Indian student numbers went up by 2.9% to 202,015, and South Korean numbers declined by -4.2% to 54,055. The fourth most important sending market for the US, Saudi Arabia sent -16.5% fewer students (37,080) in 2018/19 than in 2017/18. The welcome increase from the Indian market is the result of much higher Indian participation in OPT; Indian enrolments in US graduate schools actually fell by -5.6%.

Otherwise, notable growth came from the following emerging markets: Bangladesh (up 10%), Brazil (+9.8%), Nigeria (+5.8%), and Pakistan (+5.6%).

Strong message that Chinese students are welcome

In a video clip presented at the beginning of the livestreamed IIE/Education USA event, President Donald Trump emphasised that the US welcomes international students and made a special point of saying how valued Chinese students are in particular. He said, “We want to keep it that way. There was a rumour that we were going to close schools to China ... that is so false. I want them coming.”

The president’s remarks come during a time of [increasing tensions](#) between the US and China, and at a time when more than half of admissions directors in [US colleges say they are worried about maintaining international student enrolments](#) in the current academic year.

They also follow a mid-year statement by US Assistant Secretary of State for Education and Cultural Affairs Marie Royce that [the US values](#) “the presence of students from China on our campuses, in

our communities, and in our country.” She noted that Chinese students contributed “15 billion dollars to the US economy in 2018 alone.”

Overall, according to the US Department of Commerce, international students contributed close to US\$45 billion to the American economy in 2018. This value is 5.5% more than in 2017.

Main areas of study

More than half of all international students in the US are studying STEM subjects. Just over 1 in 5 (21.1%) are studying engineering (down -0.8% from the previous year), 18.6% are in math and computer sciences (up 9.4% over the previous year), and 16.6% are in business and management (down -7.1% from the previous year). Math and computer science is now the second-most popular field of study for international students coming to the US, whereas last year it was business and management in second place behind engineering.

More American students abroad

In 2017/18, the most recent year for which there is data, 341,750 American students studied abroad, an increase of 2.7% over the previous year. Top destinations for these students were the UK, Italy, Spain, France, and Germany.

Behind the trends

Asked about what factors are contributing to declining international enrolments in US higher education (apart from OPT), international education expert [Dr Rahul Choudaha](#) told *ICEF Monitor* that,

“While a complex interplay of many factors affect student choice, it is safe to say that challenges related to competition and affordability just snowballed due to unwelcoming immigration policies and visa processes. Many American universities in and around 2016 were already struggling to increase their awareness among prospective students in new markets to overcome slowdown from China, Brazil and Saudi Arabia. For these universities, the new political context created even more challenges to attract international students as they now have to persuade students about the benefits of studying in the US even before they can talk about their own universities.”

Allan E. Goodman, the president and CEO of IIE, attributed the pressure on international enrolments more to the expense of US higher education:

“Everywhere I travel, talking with parents and students, the No. 1 concern they have is about cost. American higher education is expensive – it is more expensive than other countries. I’d say there’s always a mix of factors that go into deciding who will come, where they’ll come, where they’ll go, but overwhelmingly that is what is most on parents’ minds.”

The competitive context

The 0.9% increase of international students in the US higher education system in 2018/19 is modest compared to the gains reported by other major English-speaking destinations this year. For example,

- In [Canada](#), the number of foreign students studying in the country rose 16.25% in 2018, marking a third consecutive year of double-digit growth and an overall increase of 73% in the five years since 2014.
- [Australia](#) is on its way to double-digit growth in international student numbers for 2019, with 720,150 students enrolled across various sectors as of September 2019, a 11% increase over the same time the previous year.
- In [the UK](#), “on time” applications to universities received by January 15 were up marginally but led by a 9% increase in applications from students from outside the European Union. This was driven in large part by a surge from China (+33% over 2018).

For additional background, please see:

- [“US admissions officers increasingly concerned about enrolment targets”](#)
- [“Study reports declining international interest in US business schools”](#)
- [“Chinese students are valued in the US, says US Assistant Secretary of State”](#)

https://monitor.icef.com/2019/11/marginal-growth-in-foreign-enrolment-in-the-us-buoyed-by-opt-numbers/?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter