

Canada's Moment

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Leigh-Ellen Keating, who directs international services for Brock University, in Ontario, just attended a student recruiting fair in Mexico. “The table was flooded with people, which is not historically what I have seen with the Mexican market,” she said. “They just want to go to Canada, and historically I think a lot of them would go to the States.”

“It didn’t hurt,” Keating continued, that the recruitment fair coincided with an anti-Trump rally in front of the hotel where the fair was held. She suspects some of the rally participants might have popped over to check out college options in Canada. President Trump is highly unpopular in Mexico. He kicked off his campaign by [depicting some Mexican immigrants as criminals and rapists](#) and has pledged to deport millions of immigrants who are in the country illegally and build a border wall.

“Mr. Trump, he’s not bad for our recruitment strategy,” Keating said.

At a time when many American universities are reporting declines in applications from international students, some universities north of the border are seeing increases on the magnitude of 20 percent or more. At the University of Waterloo, in Ontario, undergraduate international applications are up by 25 percent and graduate international applications have increased by 41 percent. At McMaster University, also in Ontario, international applications have increased by 34.4 percent compared to the same time last year.

At the University of Toronto, applications from international undergraduate students increased by slightly more than 20 percent this year over last year. Driving the growth are big increases in applications from the U.S. (up 80 percent), India (up 59 percent), Turkey (up 68 percent) and Mexico (up 63 percent, but from a small base). Richard Levin, Toronto’s executive director of enrollment services and the university registrar, attributed the gains in part to the “generalized effect of global events drawing attention to Canada and Toronto in particular as a kind of safe, inclusive, stable space.”

“It’s speculative at this point, and we’ll of course have to wait and see what happens in terms of enrollment, but there’s a lot of change in the world, and when there’s a lot of change, people will look for places that they would feel safe in and included,” Levin said.

Meanwhile, 39 percent of U.S. universities that responded to [a recent survey](#) conducted by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers and several other higher education groups reported declines in international applications for the fall. Enrollment professionals who responded to the survey reported “a great deal of concern” from prospective students and their families about feared changes to visa rules, the possibility that Trump’s executive order barring entry to nationals of six Muslim-majority countries -- [temporarily blocked by the courts](#) -- could be expanded to include other countries, and the “perception that the climate in the U.S. is now less welcoming to individuals from other countries.”

Canada, as one of the countries that competes with the U.S. for its share of the world’s internationally mobile students, could stand to gain if even a small fraction of U.S.-bound students choose to go elsewhere -- or, in the case of students coming from the six countries affected by the travel ban (Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen), if they're forced to. U.S. politics aside, many Canadian universities crack the upper echelons of international rankings, and the country's prominence as a study destination is increasing -- not least because of the opportunities it provides for former international students [to immigrate](#). In November, Canada amended its points-based [Express Entry immigration system](#) to award extra points to graduates of Canadian universities when they apply for permanent residency.

The application increases Canadian universities are reporting for this coming fall come in the context of years of

steady and significant growth in Canadian universities' international enrollments, which increased by 92 percent from 2008 to 2015, according to data from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada published in a report by the Canadian Bureau for International Education. Canada had 353,570 international students in fall 2015, while, for comparison's sake, American colleges and universities collectively [enrolled more than a million](#).

Some of the more than a dozen Canadian universities contacted by *Inside Higher Ed* for this story stressed the context of recent growth in international enrollments and said the application increases they're seeing this year are on par with recent growth rates. Others say they are seeing a "surge" or "spike" and suggest there might be evidence of a "Trump effect," at least when it comes to the increase in applications they're seeing from certain countries -- including from the U.S.

Especially notable given the numbers of students involved, many Canadian universities are also reporting substantial gains in applications from India, which sends more students to the U.S. and to Canada than any country other than China. A shift in the number of Indian students choosing Canada over the U.S. could put a strain on U.S. universities, many of which have counted on increasing numbers of international students to balance their budgets.

At the University of British Columbia, international undergraduate applications are up by 15 percent this year, but Damara Klaassen, the senior director of the university's international student initiative, stressed that was on par with prior year increases. "Apart from more and more people talking about it and wondering whether there is an effect, I'm not seeing any trends that I would attribute to political happenings in the U.S.," Klaassen said. "I don't want to downplay the importance of anything that happens in any one country by any means, but I do think in general this type of conversation underestimates the thoughtful and multiyear approach that international students put into searching for the best fit for their higher education."

Ryerson University, in Toronto, is seeing a 25 percent increase in international undergraduate applications compared to this time last year, which comes on top of a 34 percent increase in international applications the year before that. The university has stepped up its recruitment resources, having "invested considerable resources in 2015 specifically toward increasing our international enrollment in undergraduate programs," according to Marisa Modeski, Ryerson's assistant director for student recruitment.

"I think it's a little bit early to point to a particular influencer in terms of the contribution to application numbers," Modeski said. "We're often asked about 'the Trump effect,' for example: are we seeing an increase because of that or because of Brexit," a reference to the United Kingdom's vote last year to exit the European Union. "Those can certainly be influencers, but I don't think you can point to those as exclusive reasons for the increase in applications. I think you have to holistically look at all the positive things that Canadian universities have to offer."

Some Canadian universities, however, report that the increase in applicants they're seeing this year stands out even against the recent context of international applicant and student growth. At the University of Alberta, international undergraduate applications are up by 28 percent this year. Some of the increases for particular countries are even more striking: applications are up 118 percent from India, 51 percent from the U.S., 35 percent from the United Arab Emirates, 22 percent from Nigeria, 96 percent from Bangladesh and 82 percent from Pakistan. Applications from China also increased, but by a smaller percentage (12 percent).

"This is a surge," said Britta Baron, the vice provost and associate vice president for international at Alberta. Baron cited three possible reasons for the surge, with the caution that this is speculation. "One is the political developments in the United States and in the United Kingdom, and two is the fact that the Canadian dollar is weak." The Canadian dollar is currently worth 75 cents U.S., and the relative weakness of Canada's currency makes its universities a better bargain for many international students.

"Three," Baron, said, "is the fact that Canadian universities over time have stepped up their efforts to recruit."

Alberta has also seen a surge this year in applications from Iran: undergraduate applications from the country

increased from 12 last year to 68 this year, while graduate applications rose from 263 last year to 740 this year -- "and counting," Baron said. Alberta, like a number of other Canadian universities, [waived application fees](#) for citizens from countries affected by Trump's original travel ban, including Iran.

Memorial University, in Newfoundland, also [waived application fees](#) for students from the countries affected by the travel ban -- and for applicants from the U.S. "We wanted to show the students in the United States that Canada was an open, inclusive and welcoming place, and that they should think about turning their eyes northward when they were thinking about their educational possibilities," said Aimée Surprenant, the dean of Memorial's School of Graduate Studies. Memorial's applications from the U.S. have increased by 47 percent, and its applications from Iran -- among the countries affected by the travel ban, the one that sends the largest numbers of students abroad -- have increased by 80 percent. Other Canadian universities have also posted increases in American and Iranian applicants: Concordia University, in Montreal, for example, reports a 77 percent increase in American applicants to its graduate programs, and a 219 percent increase in Iranian graduate applicants.

"Certainly I think that international students like to come to North America," said Memorial's Surprenant. "They think it's a place where they can get a really great education and something that has a lot of prestige back where they come from, and the U.S. has always been the number-one choice for that. But I think that this travel ban has made them look just a little bit farther and cast their net a little bit wider."

As for American students, several Canadian universities reported surges in inquiries and interest from the U.S. after the presidential election -- though, for context, it's worth noting that the number of American students who study in Canada has historically been low and is less than half the number of Canadian students who come to U.S. universities. The University of Saskatchewan reports that traffic from the U.S. to its prospective undergraduate student website increased by 392 percent on Nov. 9, the day after the election, compared to the week prior, while its prospective graduate student website had a 191 percent traffic increase. Lionel Walsh, the assistant vice president for North American recruitment at the University of Windsor, which is located just across the border from Detroit, said the university has nearly doubled its number of applications from the U.S. Windsor's American students pay a special "[U.S. neighbour](#)" tuition rate -- "we put a 'u' in neighbor," Walsh said -- that is lower than the standard international rate.

At McGill University, in Montreal, which has long attracted large numbers of American students, applications from the U.S. have increased by 22 percent, from 4,409 applications for fall 2016 to 5,397 for fall 2017 (the latter figure is as of Feb. 22). McGill also has experienced a big increase in applications from India (up 54 percent) and a smaller but still healthy 18.5 percent increase in the number of applications from China.

Paul Davidson, the president of Universities Canada, said that he's been hearing of application increases across the country. Davidson said "local circumstances" in the U.S. and the U.K. are "making it a little more compelling to consider Canada."

"I think it is an opportunity for Canada," he said. "It's part of a broader context where *The Economist* magazine did a list of the top five cities in the world to live in, and [three of them were in Canada](#). *The New York Times* [identified Canada](#) as the destination for 2017; *The Economist* [put Canada on the cover](#) as being a country that is open and dynamic and diverse. Canadian university presidents would take stacks of copies of *The Economist* with Canada on the cover as they traveled through India and to other Asian countries."

"It's not unrelated," Davidson added, "to the work of our new prime minister [Justin Trudeau], who's been out talking about diversity as a strength and Canada as a place that's open to investment, open to trade and open to people."

Trump, by contrast, has spoken against free trade agreements, attempted to restrict entry for citizens of multiple Muslim-majority countries, and generally propagated an "America first" message. The U.K. has also taken an insular turn with its Brexit vote.

“I do think Canada is having a moment,” Keating, of Brock University, said. “Some of it I think we’re having on our own, and some of it I think we’re having as a result of other people having less cheerful moments. The U.K. and the U.S. are not currently in the best position to be recruiting.”