

# Drop in students who come to the US to study could affect higher education and jobs

November 29 2021, by David L. Di Maria



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Driven largely by the global pandemic, the number of international

students enrolled at U.S. colleges and universities fell by 15%—or 161,401 students—from 2019 to 2020. However, early data for 2021 indicate the number might bounce back soon. This is according to [new data](#) from the Institute of International Education and the U.S. State Department.

As a [university administrator who specializes in international higher education](#), I see six important takeaways to consider.

## 1. A record decrease

While [a drop was expected](#) due to the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 global pandemic, which included [international travel restrictions](#) and [suspension of U.S. visa services](#), the number of international students in the U.S. has actually been declining since 2016.

The decrease in 2020, however, is the [largest on record](#) based on data dating back to 1948.

Enrollments are down across all fields of study at both the [undergraduate and graduate levels](#), which fell by 14.2% and 12.1%, respectively. Meanwhile, more than half of all international students come from just two countries: China and India. About 1 in 3 international students in the U.S. are from China, and about 1 in 5 are from India. For context, the third-most represented nation is South Korea, which accounts for about 1 out of every 25 international students in the U.S.

## 2. A rebound is evident, but it may not last

While the overall number of international students dropped in fall 2020, a [preliminary snapshot](#) points to a 68% increase in the number of students beginning their studies in fall 2021 compared with a year earlier. This increase, which cannot be confirmed until a more

comprehensive census is released in 2022, suggests a possible rebound is occurring.

Nonetheless, it is important to understand that the rebound reflected in these data undoubtedly includes some of the [nearly 40,000](#) international students who were admitted for fall 2020 but had to defer their studies due to the pandemic.

Given that most admission offers may be [deferred for only one year](#), it is reasonable to assume that fall 2020 deferrals helped fuel fall 2021 gains. So any increase in 2021 could be a temporary spike and not necessarily a sign that international student enrollments will reverse their downward trend.

### **3. Other nations' losses may be the US' gains**

Another factor fueling the reported surge in new international enrollments within the U.S. for fall 2021 is that the U.S. experienced less competition from abroad.

In addition to a [delayed vaccine rollout](#) across countries in Europe, some nations have been entirely off-limits since the start of the pandemic. For instance, [China](#) and [Australia](#), the world's [fourth- and fifth-most popular study destinations](#), respectively, have both remained closed to international students since the start of the pandemic, causing students who would otherwise have traveled to these countries to [switch destinations](#) in pursuit of in-person learning.

In August 2021, Australia reported [more than 200,000 fewer international students](#) than a year earlier, before the pandemic began. While Australia will allow international students to return starting on Dec. 1, 2021, it [remains uncertain](#) when China might reopen its borders to students.

#### **4. Less funding for STEM graduate programs**

Many U.S. universities would find it difficult to maintain graduate programs in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, or STEM, without international students. This is made clear by a 2021 report showing that international students [constitute the majority of full-time graduate students in many STEM fields](#). For example, at the graduate level, international students are 82% of all petroleum engineering students, 74% of all electrical engineering students and 72% of all computer and information sciences students.

While some might think these figures mean U.S. students are being crowded out, [research reveals](#) that international student enrollment actually helps increase U.S. enrollment. Consider that international students pay [higher tuition](#) than their U.S. classmates, which helps pay for enrolling more American students.

#### **5. Fewer US jobs**

Beyond usually paying a higher tuition, international students [spend money](#) off campus as well. In fact, they spend on just about everything that U.S. students do, from apartments and transportation to insurance and technology. In much of the country, local and state sales taxes are paid on top of these purchases.

These dollars add up to the point that for every three international students, one U.S. job is [created or supported](#) by their spending. The 2020 enrollment drop-off means [109,679, or 26.4%, fewer U.S. jobs](#) were supported by international students in 2020 than in 2019.

#### **6. Fewer highly skilled workers**

International students who work internships or get practical training also

serve as a [valuable pool of talent](#) for U.S. employers [struggling to hire workers](#) in highly skilled areas, such as science and engineering.

According to the [U.S. Chambers of Commerce](#), the shortage of highly [skilled workers](#) is a key factor holding back economic recovery from the effects of the pandemic. A healthy talent pool in the U.S. also has implications for global competitiveness, as other nations, such as [China](#) and [Russia](#), aim to increase their scientific and technological capabilities.

## **National concern**

Economics aside, international students make many other valuable contributions to the U.S. These include [increasing cultural diversity](#) on college campuses, [enhancing learning in the classroom](#) and promoting [positive diplomatic relations](#) with other countries. While the U.S. remains the [world's top choice](#) for international students, it [continues to lose ground](#) to other nations vying to attract foreign talent.

Consider that from 2000 to 2020 the U.S. share of the world's international students [fell from 28% to 20%](#). How could this be? Unlike the next four most popular destinations, the [United Kingdom](#), [Canada](#), [China](#) and [Australia](#), the U.S. lacks a national strategy for recruiting and retaining [international students](#).

Earlier in 2021, the Biden-Harris administration signaled that may be changing. Specifically, the U.S. secretaries of education and state released a [Joint Statement on Principles in Support of International Education](#). In that statement, they committed to a number of actions, such as implementing new policies and procedures aimed at ensuring the U.S. remains the top destination for global talent.

More recently, several major U.S. higher education associations [called for a national strategy](#) to reverse the international enrollment decline.

While it is still too early to predict if a unified strategy would actually reverse international [student](#) enrollment declines at U.S. colleges and universities, the [idea of a coordinated national approach](#) could help position the U.S. to compete for the world's best and brightest minds.

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