The impact of COVID-19 on international student enrolments in North America: Comparing Canada and the United States

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Abstract
Both Canada and the United States enrol a significant number of international students. However, in March 2020, both countries closed their borders and increased restrictions to international travel due to COVID-19, which had a direct impact on international students' ability to travel between their home countries and study destinations. This article examines the impact of COVID-19 on international student enrolments by asking two related questions: first, how did government policy address international students' difficult reality in the wake of COVID-19? And, did international student enrolments change as a result? With regard to policy, we find a stark divergence: Canada's federal policies quickly adapted to support international students and ensure they remained eligible for post-graduate work permits, preserving the appeal of Canada as a study destination. Meanwhile, in the US, federal policies for student visas required international students to maintain physical presence, reflecting a more hostile stance towards immigration, characteristic of the Trump administration. Despite these differences, with regard to enrolments, we find largely similar patterns, with COVID resulting in only a small decline in international student enrolments nationwide. A more worrying trend for
INTRODUCTION

The United States (US) and Canada share both the longest physical border in the world and notable similarities with regard to their societies and higher education systems. Both countries are geographically large, predominantly English-speaking settler colonial states in North America with high rates of inbound immigration. They both have federal systems of government and highly decentralized higher education systems, resulting in limited federal government influence over higher education. Additionally, both enrol large numbers of international students.

In March 2020, when the prevalence of COVID-19 began to increase rapidly in North America, both Canada and the United States closed their borders to international travellers, including each other. In this article, we carry out a comparative analysis of higher education policy and secondary data to examine how COVID-19 affected international student enrolments in both countries. First, we trace both the countries’ federal government policies for international student recruitment and enrolment between March 2020 and June 2021. We also examine new data on how international student enrolments have been affected by COVID to explore what types of institutions have been most affected.

Our analysis highlights two important findings: first, the two countries’ federal policies towards international students in the wake of COVID closures reflect a stark contrast. In the United States, federal policies towards international students have been characterized as erratic and even openly antagonistic, leaving both international students and their higher education institutions vulnerable. In contrast, Canada’s federal government issued a number of targeted policies that aimed to support the ability of Canadian higher education institutions to continue enrolling large numbers of international students, whether those students were in Canada or not.

In explaining Canada’s friendly policies, we argue that federal intervention in Canada was justified as a way of preserving Canada’s attractiveness as a study destination, a priority for the country, which relies significantly on revenue from international students. In the US, erratic and unfriendly policies governing international education...
seemed closely related to the Trump administration’s hostile stance towards all forms of immigration. Beyond the Trump administration, the lack of a national policy for higher education internationalization in the United States leaves international education subject to dramatic changes from one administration to another, potentially putting the system in a precarious position to respond to crises, as the pandemic illustrated.

Despite their divergent policy responses, we find largely similar patterns on international student enrolments. At the national level, the short-term impact of COVID on international student enrolments seems to be relatively modest, with both countries experiencing only a slight downtick in overall international student enrolments in 2020, as compared to 2019. A more worrying trend for both countries, however, is that selective institutions have weathered COVID better, while enrolments have been more affected at access-oriented institutions. In Canada, COVID seems to have affected colleges worse than universities. In the US, community colleges have also been hit very hard by overall declines in enrolments. Meanwhile, applications from international students in 2021 at more selective institutions are actually up significantly. In both countries, there is reason to be concerned that selective and prestigious institutions have weathered the COVID storm better, while faculty and staff at access-oriented institutions being hit harder by cuts to student services and lay-offs. We argue that the impact of COVID on international enrolments in both countries has been buffered by the two countries’ long-standing centrality in the global academic system and their desirability as study destinations. Nonetheless, within each country, the impacts are uneven, with less prestigious institutions hit hardest. This raises serious concerns regarding social inclusion and equity of access in higher education in general, given that access-oriented institutions are more likely to enrol students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

2 | INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA

Higher education in Canada and the US share similar founding stories, with a small, sectarian colleges founded throughout the American colonies and Upper Canada (i.e., Ontario). However, throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, almost all sectarian institutions in Canada were converted to provincially supported secular institutions. Meanwhile, while most American states also established public university systems, for a variety of reasons, including their larger endowments and different interpretations of freedom of religion, private colleges and universities continued to flourish in the United States. After the Second World War, much of the research and development funding in the United States was allocated within higher education institutions and highly concentrated within a few research universities (Antonio et al., 2018). Today, there are important differences between Canada and the US’ higher education systems. The US has thousands of bachelor-degree-granting colleges and universities, a steep status hierarchy between institutions, and a long tradition of private higher education. In contrast, higher education in Canada, particularly English-speaking Canada, is characterized by a smaller number of large public universities, with a distinct college sector that focuses on applied and vocational education.

Both Canada and the United States recruit and enrol large numbers of international students, although the proportion of international students varies and in recent years, has reflected divergent trends. In 2020, international students accounted for 23.7% of total enrolments in Canada and 5.5% in the US (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2020b). In Canada, the proportion of international students has increased rapidly over the past decade and is up from roughly 14.0% in 2017 (Statistics Canada, 2021). These recent enrolments have been driven by very large increases in students from India studying in two-year colleges in Ontario and British Columbia.

In contrast, although the US enrolls more than one million international students, international enrolments have plateaued at 5.5% of total enrolments since 2017. Data show that between 2009 and 2017, international student enrolments to the US increased significantly, from 3.4% in 2009 to 5.5% in 2017, with 7%–10% annual growth between 2012 and 2015. However, the number of new international students entering US institutions declined each year after 2016 (IIE, 2020a). These declines coincide with the Trump presidency and may be the result of his administration's hostile policies and rhetoric, which likely negatively affected the US’s attractiveness as a study
destination. Nonetheless, the US continues to enrol over a million international students each year. Figure 1 shows the two countries have been on diverging trends in the number of international student enrolment prior to COVID.

International students in both countries are recognized as an important source of revenue, for institutions directly and their surrounding communities (Bound et al., 2021; Global Affairs Canada [GAC], 2020). In Canada, data suggest international students pay on average five times higher tuition than domestic students (Statistics Canada, 2020). Usher (2020) reports that nationwide, "international student fees grew from $1.5 billion to $6.9 billion (both figures in 2019 dollars), and from 4% to 13% of total system income (colleges and universities combined)" (p. 9). When accounting for all spending, including accommodations and discretionary spending, the Canadian government has estimated that international students added 22.3 billion (CAD) to the Canadian economy in 2018 (GAC, 2020). In the US, a 2018 report found that international students contributed roughly $41 billion (USD) to the US economy (Lu, 2020). While this is roughly double that of Canada, the US economy is more than ten times larger, pointing to the fact that Canada’s higher education system and economy are more heavily dependent on international students.

Given the significance of international students and the disruption of COVID on international travel, there have been concerns about the impact of COVID on international student mobility. Although a growing literature on the impacts of COVID on higher education institutions has emerged over the past year, much of this research has focused on the rapid shift to online and digital learning (see Amemado, 2020; Chan, 2020), impacts on students' well-being (see Bilecen, 2020; Firang, 2020), and institutional support for international students (see Krsmanovic, 2021). While there has been discussions and predictions on the potential impact of COVID-19 on international student mobility (de Wit & Altbach, 2021), less literature has empirically examined COVID’s impact on international student mobility, in part due to a lack of data.

In the absence of official statistics, several professional associations conducted surveys with their members to explore COVID’s impact on international student mobility. For example, the International Association of Universities implemented a cross-national survey of universities from around the world in 2020. The survey finds that 89% of respondents reported that COVID had a detrimental impact on their international enrolments. The authors explain that while the impact varies, “everywhere it has been negative” (Marinoni et al., 2020). Similarly,
in the US, a survey of colleges and universities conducted by the IIE in February of 2020 found that very few students were affected by border closures as most international students remained in the country when COVID erupted or had already returned to the US for their studies (Martell, 2020). Instead, the most pressing issues were with students’ inability to travel back home when campuses were closed and essential services suspended (Martell, 2020). In addition, HEIs’ outreach and recruitment activities were affected (Martell, 2020), which may affect their future enrolments.

Prior research has found that government policies can play an important role in supporting internationalization (Crăciun, 2018; de Wit et al., 2020), and so, in the wake of COVID-19, we would expect federal governments to take concrete actions to maintain international student enrolments in their respective countries. However, studies of government responses to COVID-19, as they relate to international students, have been limited. In this study, we comparatively examine how US and Canadian government policies responded to the COVID crisis regarding international students and then explore international enrolment trends in both countries with newly available data to better understand how COVID affected international student enrolments in both countries.

3 | CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A large literature on international student mobility has examined the factors associated with why students choose to pursue a degree abroad, and the factors associated with their study destinations (Lipura & Collins, 2020). One of the most common conceptual approaches used to examine the issue is known as the ‘push-pull’ framework, which characterizes the decision to pursue a degree abroad as a rational decision based on cost-benefit analysis between circumstances and educational opportunities in one’s home country as compared to their opportunities in the destination country. In this literature, the concept of ‘attractiveness’ or ‘academic popularity’ is used to describe the features of destination countries that make them desirable study destinations. Studies find that many factors affect the attractiveness of a destination, including: the quality of education, cost of living, distance, security, stability of government, amenities, cultural proximity and existing networks of co-nationals, among others (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2016; Lee, 2008). Despite its popularity, this framework has been criticized for portraying the decision to pursue a degree abroad as a “linear, unidirectional Westward mobility”; critical scholars also point to “hegemonic structures and pre-existing power relations in global higher education” that have entrenched a small number of English-speaking countries as highly desirable destinations (Lipura & Collins, 2020, p. 345). In the cases of both Canada and the US, the hegemonic power of English-language credentials, along with perceptions of high-quality education have long made them highly desirable study destinations (Shields, 2013).

Despite their similarities, there are also important differences between the two countries regarding the links between international students and immigration. The promise (or at least possibility) of an accessible immigration pathway for international graduates is a key factor associated with Canada’s attractiveness as an educational destination (Kim & Sondhi, 2019; Sâ & Sabzialieva, 2018). Many international students choose to study in Canada with the hopes of eventually transitioning to the labour market and permanent residency. In contrast, it is very difficult for international students in the US to transition to permanent residency. For almost 20 years, scholars have lamented the fact that the US has been perceived as an unfriendly destination for international students due to xenophobia, high tuition, and difficulties with student visas and limited possibilities for immigration (Lee, 2008). Additionally, a study on the reasons for recent declines in international student enrolments in the US found that difficulties with the visa application process and the social and political environment were the two most-cited reasons, with many students stating that they feel unwelcome, particularly after 2016 (NAFSA, 2020a).
Drawing on the concept of ‘attractiveness,’ in this study, we view both Canada and the US as highly attractive study destinations both before and after COVID due to perceptions of high-quality education. However, central to Canada’s attractiveness is its reputation as being welcoming and offering an immigration pathway; in contrast, the US is viewed as a desirable study destination despite being viewed as generally less welcoming. In the next section, we examine government policy responses to international higher education in the wake of COVID.

4 | THE IMPACT OF COVID ON GOVERNMENT POLICY

4.1 | Canada

Under Canada’s constitutional federation, social policies including both health and education are the responsibility of the provinces, not the federal government. As a result, Canada has been described as perhaps the most decentralized system of higher education in the world (Jones, 2012). Canada has no official federal Ministry or Department of Education and the Canadian federal government’s role in higher education has traditionally been extremely limited, and occurred primarily through research funding.

Over the past few decades, the federal government has also become increasingly involved in international education under responsibilities related to international trade and diplomacy. In 2014, Canada issued its first international education strategy. This strategy was produced by the federal government’s Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development (FATD) during a centre-right majority government led by former Prime Minister Stephen Harper. The strategy was produced by the FATD because Canada has no Ministry or Department of Education or its equivalent. Moreover, for the federal government to even issue a strategy, international education must be mapped onto a domain in which the federal government has legitimate policy-making authority. The focus of the strategy was the economic benefits brought by international students to the Canadian economy, which may reflect both the neoliberal orientation of the Conservative government that produced the strategy and the fact that it had to be mapped onto trade to legitimize federal government involvement. The strategy set out a goal to double the number of international students (both secondary and post-secondary) in Canada to 450,000 by 2022. This goal was achieved in advance in 2017 with 494,525 international students enrolled in Canadian higher education institutions in 2017 (a figure that includes secondary school students) (Canadian Bureau of International Education, 2018).

In 2019, the second iteration of Canada’s federal international education strategy was introduced by Global Affairs Canada, the former Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development. This strategy document was produced by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s government, who first formed government in 2015 with a Liberal majority, and who retained power as a minority government in the 2019. Entitled Building on Our Success, the newer strategy reiterates the importance of recruiting international students, who are characterized as “excellent candidates for permanent residency” who can “help address [Canada’s] current and pending labor market needs” (GAC, 2019). It is worth noting that Canada has maintained a remarkably stable stance that is both pro-international student and pro-immigration for almost two decades, despite a major shift in government from the Conservatives under Stephen Harper (2006–2015) to the Liberal party, under Justin Trudeau (2015–present).

Given the widespread acknowledgement that international students constitute an important source of revenue for the public higher education system, COVID-19 was recognized as an external shock that would severely affect the ability of international students to enter the country for their studies, and required the Canadian governments to address issues related to international students.

Amidst the worsening situation of COVID-19 and its adverse economic impact, the Canadian federal government launched the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) program, providing financial support to those
negatively affected by COVID-19. As the CERB eligibility criteria does not require Canadian citizenship, international students who were physically located in Canada and meet other income-related eligibility criteria could receive some financial support through CERB (Government of Canada [GOC], 2020a). In addition to CERB, the federal government altered limits to international student employment. Typically, international students are only able to work up to 20 h per week while classes are in session. However, between March 2020 and August 2020, the restriction that allow international students to work for a maximum of 20 h per week was lifted until August 31, 2020 in the 10 priority sectors that were related to COVID-19 (GOC, 2020b). These sectors include health care, critical infrastructure, supply of food or other critical goods etc. (GOC, 2020b).

In addition to loosening the restriction on working hours, Canadian federal government also changed the requirements on online courses to facilitate the application for work permits. Previously, 50% of international students’ courses must be completed in person and the length of programme completed online will not count towards the time for work permits. However, as of August 2020, students who are enrolled in programmes that started in the summer or fall semesters of 2020 that lasted between 8 and 12 months would be eligible to apply for a post-graduation work permit, even if they completed the programme online while being outside of Canada (GOC, 2021a). This temporary policy change significantly differs from pre-COVID policies on online classes and seem to reassure the immigration path for international students.

As of January 27, 2021, international students were also eligible for open work permits, which last for up to 18 months and is not job-specific (GOC, 2021b). As the COVID-19 situation continued in Canada throughout 2021, Canadian federal government further confirmed that students can complete 100% of their studies online until December 31, 2021, which will be counted towards the length of their programme in their application for a post-graduation work permit. The latest update as of June 2021 is that international students can travel to Canada if their study permits are approved and their institutions have a COVID-19 readiness plan approved by its province or territory, on the condition that they undergo hotel quarantine upon arrival. This update has allowed a small number of international students to come to Canada and is a positive signal for students.

In short, it is clear that the Canadian federal government acted in ways that are consistent with its long-standing commitment to attract and retain international students. The federal government swiftly changed previous policies on online courses and work permits, in order to retain international students not only in institutions but also to support their immigration path. In their analysis, El Masri and Sabzalieva (2020) argued that the Canadian federal government was willing to change immigration regulations in order to facilitate the retention of international students, who are considered “ideal immigrants” to Canada. Moreover, given the importance of immigration in making Canada a desirable study destination, these practices were also intended to benefit Canadian higher education institutions, by ensuring they remain attractive to prospective international students.

4.2 | The United States

Not unlike the Canadian case, higher education in the US is highly decentralized. Aside from noteworthy legislative actions that have dramatically transformed higher education not more often than once in a generation, such as the Morrill Land-Grant Acts that created most public universities in the country, and the G.I. Bill, that ushered in an era of higher massification (Antonio et al., 2018), state governments and state legislatures tend to be more consequential for higher education institutions than the federal government. While the US has a federal Department of Education and an Office of Postsecondary Education, this agency is usually limited to information sharing. US federal policy is usually restricted to financial aid and to determining the eligibility of research funding, along with the enforcement of the anti-discrimination legislation.

Despite a long history of promoting academic exchange as a means to promote international understanding, liberal internationalism and US political interests after the Second World War (Lebovic, 2019), the lack
of a national policy for international education in the US is frequently discussed within the field. Moreover, since the terrorist attacks of September 11 in the United States, there has been an increasingly ambivalent stance towards international students and towards internationalization in general. This creates a space for dramatic changes from one presidential administration to another also as the perception of the US in other countries shifts. Despite these significant shifts, during the Trump presidential administration, there was an increased sense of securitization (Streitwieser et al., 2020) and rejection of migration characterized by international disputes with specific countries, such as China, or racist xenophobia towards regions of the world considered less attractive. It was within this policy environment that the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded in the US.

Given the decentralized environment described thus far, the response of higher education institutions in the United States to the pandemic is more likely explained by isomorphic pressures (Zapp & Ramirez, 2019), after the first closure of universities, beginning on the West Coast and then swiftly expanding across the country, than by government mandates. To be sure, higher education institutions in the US abided by gubernatorial executive orders and local ordinances setting restrictions and mask mandates, but many colleges and universities moved activities online and limited their in-person activities by their own accord. From the internationalization perspective, the first line of crisis management involved the repatriation of students and staff participating in education abroad and other academic mobility programmes. Almost immediately after, it became evident that international students in the United States would require specialized information and support.

In July 2020, still in the early stages of the pandemic, the US Student Exchange and Visitor Program (SEVP) announced guidance limiting the number of online courses that international students would be allowed to take while remaining in good standing for visa purposes. This happened while the majority of HEIs in the United States were planning to offer courses almost exclusively online, or at least in hybrid formats. The SEVP announcement prompted lawsuits by Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, with many amicus briefs filed by other universities and international education organizations. Eventually, the US federal government abandoned the guidance as a result of the lawsuit, allowing some flexibility. Just a month earlier, the U.S. federal government had suspended entry to the US under H-1B visas and several categories of the J-1 exchange visitor programme. While the government did not eliminate the Optional Practical Training (OPT) programme, as many had feared, these are examples of how immigration policies in the US were utilized against international students (Blanco, 2020). Taken together, these developments sent a clear message that the US had an antagonistic stance towards international students. The largest international education association in the US highlighted that “immigration policies need to be fair in order to help win back the confidence of international students, confidence that has been lagging as shown by three straight academic years of declining new international student enrollment” (NAFSA, 2020b). In other words, the pandemic accelerated the declining trend that was already underway.

In November 2020, Joseph Biden, a Democrat, was elected president, replacing Trump. The Biden administration has sought to reverse many Trump-era policies and his anti-immigrant rhetoric. This shift exemplifies the US’ mercurial approach to policymaking in relation to international students and academic mobility in general. Traditionally, the US has had unwelcoming policies towards immigration and these policies have been applied by extension to international students. This hostility is tempered by higher education institutions that, as we have seen, are willing to bring lawsuit against the federal government to defend international students from arbitrary governmental action. The relatively independent US higher education system exerts a significant amount of influence over the federal government, as also illustrated by the three stages of economic recovery directed towards the postsecondary education sector through the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (parts I, II and III) totalling 14 billion, 21.2 billion and 39.6 billion, respectively, between March 2020 and March 2021.
Turning to our second question, in this section, we examine international student enrolment trends in both countries after COVID, to determine what impact COVID had, if any.

5.1 | Canada

To examine enrolment trends in Canada, we rely on two sources of data: (1) study visas granted by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC); and, (2) institutional enrolment data reported to national university and college associations. These two sources differ somewhat: the first reports the number of people in Canada on a study permit (i.e., student visa) at the end of the calendar year. However, IRCC data only report on the number of study permits, which is significantly higher than enrolments because the family members of students (i.e., spouses and children) are also counted in this indicator, as they are also in Canada on a study permit. IRCC data also include students on short-term exchanges in Canada. In other words, while it does capture data on the number of people physically present in Canada on study permits, it is not a particularly reliable or accurate source of data on degree-seeking international student enrolments in higher education. The second, preferred data source on international student enrolments comes directly from higher education institutions themselves. Each year, Universities Canada and the Colleges and Institutes Canada (CIC) collect enrolment data from their members on enrolments. However, their data are not made publicly available. As a result, detailed analyses are limited to what is publicly reported in media sources.

The data show that the pandemic severely affected the number of international students in Canada on study permits at the end of 2020 decreased significantly from 2019 (see Figure 2). Specifically, the university sector saw around 37% of drop in students arriving in Canada, and the college sector saw around 30% decrease. Canadian institutions rapidly implemented the policy of offering online classes to international students, enabling them to take classes online while in their home countries, or countries of residence. Yet, the physical presence of international students in Canada has long been recognized contributing to Canadian economy, and the absence of a large number of international students likely has a negative impact on Canadian economy.

Turning to examine enrolment data, we see a more muted, but unequal, impact. Canada data report that the enrolments at universities fell by 2.1% on average in 2021 (Alhmidi, 2021) and that around 25% of universities in

![Figure 2: Number of study permits holders in Canada by sector, 2014–2020. Source: IRCC (2021)](image-url)
Canada lost 10% or more of their overall international student enrolments (Alhmidi, 2021). Meanwhile, colleges have been hit worse. According to data from Colleges and Institutes Canada, the number of international students at Canadian colleges declined by 20% to 30% in the 2020–2021 academic year, as compared to 2019–2020. Moreover, "it has varied across the country, and we had larger declines in smaller cities and rural and remote areas" (Alhmidi, 2021).

5.2 The United States

The enrolment outlook in the US is divided. On the one hand, there are very concerning trends about enrolments in general, especially in the community college sector. The latest Term Enrollment Estimate (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021), dated June 2021, is explicit: "postsecondary enrollment dropped by 3.5 percent, or 603,000 students, in spring 2021. This one-year decline is seven times larger than the rate of decline reported in spring 2020... community colleges remain hardest hit" (p. 1). This is a dramatic decline from one year to the next, even higher than the drop experienced in 2020 in the middle of the pandemic. However, it is important to note that the largest decline in enrolments occurred in the community college sector (IIE, 2021), where there are proportionately few international students. Because international students tend to be concentrated in four-year institutions, there is reason to believe that international students accounted for little of the decline of enrolments in Spring 2021.

Moreover, other studies have found that the international education sector has a relatively optimistic perspective (Fischer, 2021). Data from Open Doors, a repository of international student mobility data, which was initially collected in February 2020 and updated in June 2020, finds that the number of international students in the US decreased by only 2.9% in the US undergraduate sector and 0.9% in the US graduate sector, which are relatively small declines (IIE, 2020a). Although data have not been released for Fall 2021, other sources are also reporting many reasons for optimism. Specifically, the number of international applicants to US colleges and universities had increased by about 9% by January 2021, as compared to 2020, according to data from the Common App (Nietzel, 2021). That said, it is noteworthy that such optimism is based on application data and not on enrolment, so there could be a delay of information. While some HEIs in the United States reported significant increases in the number of applications, this will not translate necessarily in actual enrolments, because the same student may be simply applying to a larger number of institutions, or may apply, be admitted, but later unable to obtain a visa or travel to the United States. Additionally, reports show that international students tend to adopt a cautious "hedge their bet" approach, given the complexity and uncertainty in the pandemic, by applying to more than one country (Mitchell, 2021). It is also noteworthy that the sample used by Martell and Baer (2021), while impressive and representative of HEIs that attract significant numbers of international students, included only 16% of respondents from associate’s-level institutions or community colleges, while this is the sector most affected by the declines. The National Student Clearinghouse (2021) report also makes clear that undergraduate students explain the total decline of postsecondary enrolments in the United States, while the institutions reporting the highest gains in applications are doctoral institutions. This is well accounted for in the Martell and Baer (2021) report: "Many doctoral universities noted application increases (59%), while a majority of community colleges reported declines (58%)" (p. 3).

What the two reports and their respective sets of data make clear is that international student enrolments in the US do not mirror the behaviour of the general system. International students are usually concentrated in research institutions, or more generally among 4-year institutions, whereas the United States has seen sharp declines in community colleges. International students are fairly evenly distributed between undergraduate and graduate institutions, while the enrolment declines across the US postsecondary system have concentrated at the undergraduate level. Taken together, this seems to indicate that international enrolments in the US may be...
shielded from the recent declines, and may even lead to making ups for some of the losses. This, of course, is contingent upon the ability to obtain visas and travel as vaccine rollouts continue slowly in many parts of the world, or on the willingness of international students to continue courses online. Relevant for this last point, the Biden administration has announced an extension for guidance that allows distance learning for visa purposes beyond the traditional limits.

6 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our comparative analysis points to perhaps surprising contrast: while Canada and the US have widely divergent policy responses to COVID, their experiences with regard to actual international enrolments have been remarkably similar, at least thus far. In both countries, the nationwide change in year-on-year international student enrolments have only seen relatively small declines. From newly reported data, our best estimates suggest that overall enrolments in Canadian higher education decreased by 2.1% in the university sector, in comparison to a decrease of 2.9% in the US undergraduate sector and 0.9% in the US graduate sector (IIE, 2020a). By all accounts, these numbers are smaller than many had feared. Moreover, when comparing data on enrolments to data on international students' physical presence, which showed large declines, we can infer that, at least in the Canadian case, policies that facilitated international students' ability to pursue their degrees even while outside Canada have likely helped keep enrolments high.

Our findings are corroborated by a 2021 study on education agents' perceptions of the attractiveness of major destination countries including the US and Canada. The study finds that there has been an increased interest in studying in Canada as it has been perceived as open and welcoming because of its good handling of the COVID-19. The study also finds that interest in studying in the US show "signs of a remarkable turnaround" in its most recent round of research in March 2021 (Chew et al., 2021, p. 2).

To make sense of these findings, we argue that being a highly attractive study destination has buffered both countries from even worse effects of COVID on international student enrolments. Despite the disruption caused by COVID, the underlying dynamics that explain the two countries' attractiveness, including the dominance of English, the high-quality of their educational systems, and the status associated with their degrees, have not changed in the wake of COVID. That is to say, as long as the pull factors that attract students to these two countries remain consistent, these two countries are likely to continue to attract international students, despite temporary disruptions or uncertainties. Moreover, as vaccination continues to expand in these two countries, the negative effects of government policies, particularly in the US, may be mitigated.

Interestingly, what has changed in the US is the president. Data from the IIE show that declines in international student enrolments coincide with the four years of the Trump presidency, and applications in 2021 exhibit what some are calling a "Biden bounce" (Nietzel, 2021). While the long-term consequences of COVID on international student enrolments in the US remain to be seen, it may actually be difficult to disentangle the end of COVID with the shift in administrations from Trump to Biden.

On the one hand, our analysis emphasizes the hegemonic and structural factors that shape international student enrolments in North America and suggests that specific federal policies may be less important as an explanatory factor. Yet, this is not to say that government policies do not matter—in fact, it is precisely Canada's reputation as a welcoming country with accessible student-to-immigrant pathways that help make Canada attractive as a study destination. Therefore, responsive policies in the wake of COVID to accommodate the new needs and realities of international students in a COVID was a policy priority in Canada. Moreover, although responsive Canadian policies may have benefitted some international students, we are not suggesting that the Canadian government's policies were made with the best interest of international students in mind. Rather, the responsiveness of the Canadian government intended to protect the country's higher education institutions from the negative effects of the border closure, as stakeholders across the higher education system recognize the country is heavily
dependent on international student revenues. In contrast, the US remained an attractive study destination, despite the Trump administration's unfriendly policies for international students and outright hostility to immigrants. Therefore, while it is not surprising that policies for international students during COVID were unfriendly, they may have a relatively small impact on international student enrolments in the long-term.

A second important finding in both countries is that different types of institutions have widely disparate experiences: the community college sector in both countries seems to be faring worse than the university sector with regard to overall enrolments. In fact, in both countries, there have been reports that admissions to prestigious universities are actually on the rise. The reason for this differential impact is multi-faceted. On the one hand, universities may have better resources to handle the pandemic well. This is perhaps not surprising, as prior research from organization studies consistently finds that organizations with more resources and higher status are typically better positioned to accommodate major disruptions. On the other hand, universities' tuitions tend to be higher than colleges, therefore, universities may attract students that are less sensitive to price and are less affected by the economic impact of the pandemic. Prior research has found that the lower tuition of the college sector is a factor in international students' decision to study there rather than universities (Jafar & Legusov, 2021; Zhang & Hagedorn, 2014). As such, it is possible those who enrol in colleges are more price sensitive than those who study at the university level. While we do not know whether these admissions trends will translate into higher enrolments, the differential impact has raised broader concerns about long-term impact on access-oriented institutions. Nonetheless, it is a worrying trend for the higher education sector as it is an access-oriented institution that has tended to serve those from lower socio-economic groups.

Our study only examines the immediate impact of COVID-19 on international student enrolments; future research should continue to explore how enrolments shift in the long-term, as well as how institutions and government policies adapt. A particularly important issue for the future research will also be the long-term impacts on access-oriented institutions, including whether they affect student support services. In addition, as the pandemic continues to restrict in-person mobility, likely leading to the regionalization of higher education, it will be important to monitor whether relatively minor declines, like the ones we have discussed so far, sustained over a longer period will lead to more significant and durable transformations. It should be noted that our study is limited as it is primarily based on comparative policy analysis and limited secondary data. Future research may continue to monitor the international student enrolment trends as more data become publicly available.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial conflicts of interest to report.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data presented in this study are in the public domain and can be found in online repositories. The names of the repository can be found in the article and reference list. The only data not in the public domain is IRCC (2021), which has to be requested directly from IRCC.

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