

TRENDS

IN MARITIME HIGHER EDUCATION

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University enrolment during the COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

During the spring and summer of 2020, there was much uncertainty about how the COVID-19 pandemic would affect university enrolment in the Maritimes. By August, many Maritime universities had announced a move to online delivery of programs. It was unclear if students would attend university if most or all their classes were online. Would new direct-from-high-school students delay their studies and take a gap year? Conversely, would some young people decide to start or continue their post-secondary studies because employment prospects were limited?

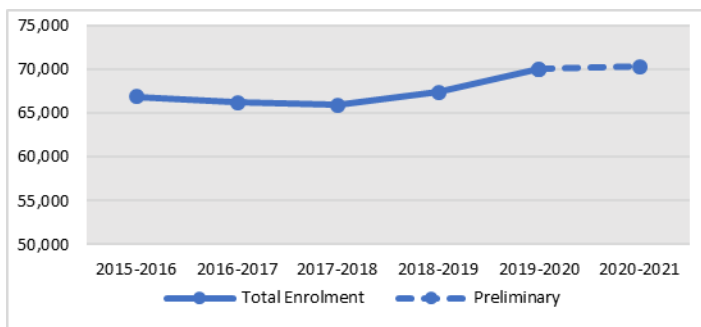
The growth in enrolment in recent years has been mainly due to the increase in the number of international students. In 2019-2020, international students accounted for almost 20% of total university enrolment in the Maritimes. Universities were concerned that global bans on travelling and delays in issuing student visas could have a significant impact on the enrolment of international students.

To help answer these questions, the Commission conducted a special collection of enrolment data from Maritime universities in December 2020 to assess the impact of COVID-19 on 2020-2021 university enrolment. The collection and analyses focused on student origin to understand the impact of the pandemic on the following groups: Atlantic Canadians, international students and Canadian students from the rest of Canada.

Overall university enrolment remains stable.

Preliminary enrolment statistics show that in 2020-2021, 70,331 students were enrolled in Maritime universities showing a slight increase (+0.5%) over the previous year (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Enrolment in Maritime universities

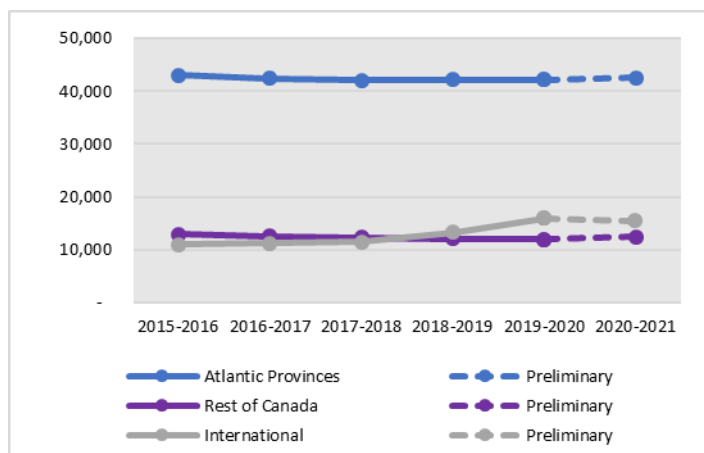


More Canadians, but fewer international students.

In the summer of 2020, because of the low numbers of COVID-19 cases in the Atlantic Provinces (New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador), the four provincial governments formed an “Atlantic travel bubble”. This bubble remained in place until November 2020. Residents of the four provinces could travel freely across Atlantic Canada, while residents from outside the region were required to quarantine for 14 days when entering the Atlantic Provinces. Enrolment of Atlantic Canadians attending Maritime universities increased by 1.1% in 2020-

2021 (Fig. 2). Despite the quarantine requirements, the number of Canadian students from elsewhere in Canada also increased by 3.9% in 2020-2021 after showing a decrease in enrolment every year since 2015-2016.

Figure 2. Enrolment in Maritime universities by student origin



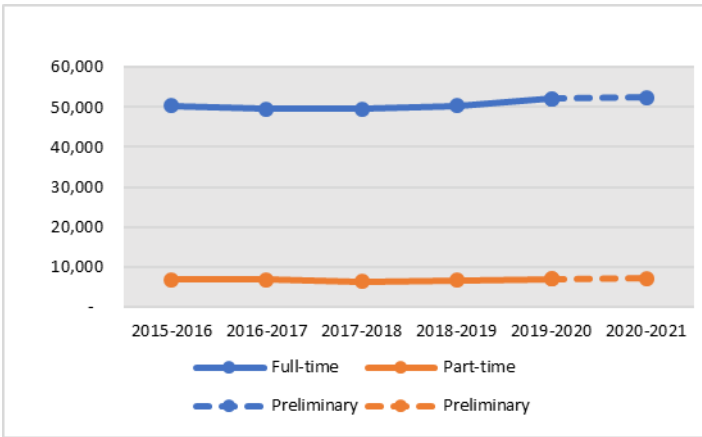
Following double-digit increases in enrolment over the last two years, international student enrolment decreased by 3.8% in 2020-2021. Many universities reported that international students remained in the Maritimes after the 2019-2020 academic year and returned to the same university in Fall 2020. Other international students attended their classes virtually from their home country.

University enrolment during the COVID-19 pandemic

Undergraduate enrolment increased by 0.7%.

Both full-time and part-time undergraduate enrolment increased in 2020-2021 compared to the previous year, by 0.6% and 1.2%, respectively (Fig. 3).

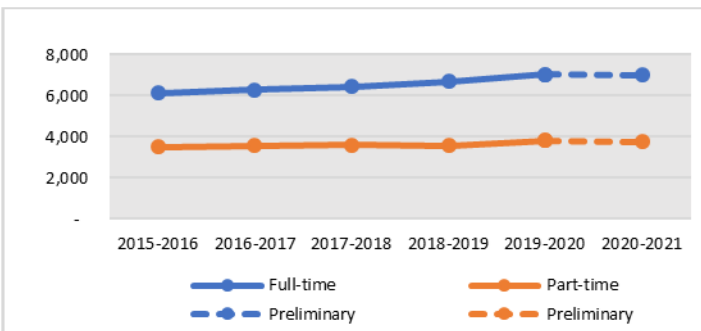
Figure 3. Undergraduate enrolment in Maritime universities by registration status



Graduate enrolment decreased by 0.9%.

Full-time and part-time graduate enrolment decreased in 2020-2021 by 0.7% and 1.3%, respectively (Fig. 4).

Figure 4. Graduate enrolment in Maritime universities by registration status

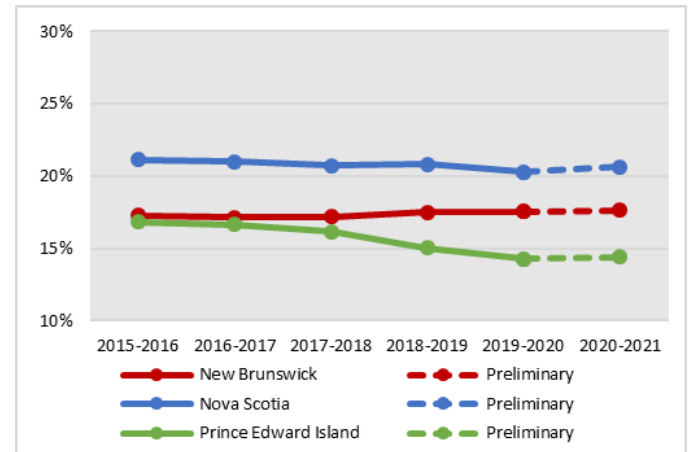


In 2019-2020, half of all graduate students were from outside the Atlantic provinces. The decrease in graduate enrolment observed in 2020-2021 was due to a decrease in the number of Canadian students from outside Atlantic Canada (-1.4%) and international students (-3.8%). In contrast, the enrolment of graduate students from Atlantic Canada increased by 0.9%.

Maritimers study close to home.

The *home province university participation rate* provides a measure of the extent a province's typical university-aged population engages in a university education within their own province. The participation rate of provincial residents increased slightly in all three Maritime provinces in 2020-2021 compared to 2019-2020 (Fig. 5) (+0.1 percentage point (pp) in New Brunswick, +0.1 pp Prince Edward Island and +0.4 pp in Nova Scotia).

Figure 5. Home province participation rate* by province of study



Summary and Implications

University enrolment in Maritime universities remained stable in 2020-2021 despite a dip in international student enrolment. Enrolment of students from the Atlantic provinces and the rest of Canada increased, offsetting the decline in international student numbers. Home province participation rate increased in all three provinces indicating that Maritimers enrolled in universities close to home.

As COVID-19 cases have increased across the world in winter 2021, most university classes remain virtual. Many questions remain about how the rest of the academic year will unfold. The Commission will be collecting detailed data for the 2020-2021 academic year through its annual data collection to further explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student enrolment, persistence and course load.

*Home province participation rate: full-time enrolment of provincial residents divided by the provincial population aged 18-24

Data sources: MPHEC Post-secondary Student Information System (PSIS) final enrolment data (2015-2016 to 2019-2020). Preliminary submissions of enrolment statistics by individual universities (2020-2021). Population estimates, Statistics Canada, table 17-01-0005-01.

Additional statistical tables can be downloaded from: http://www.mphec.ca/media/200898/preliminary-enrolment-statistics_2020-2021.pdf