

# TRENDS

## IN MARITIME HIGHER EDUCATION

Volume 20, Number 2

March 2023

### The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Degree Progression

#### Introduction

In March 2020, government-imposed quarantines and social distancing practices to limit the spread of COVID-19 disrupted post-secondary education worldwide. These restrictions forced Maritime universities to respond quickly by cancelling in-person classes and moving to emergency online learning. By August 2020, case numbers of COVID-19 remained low in the region, and Atlantic Canada was considered one of the safest places in North America.

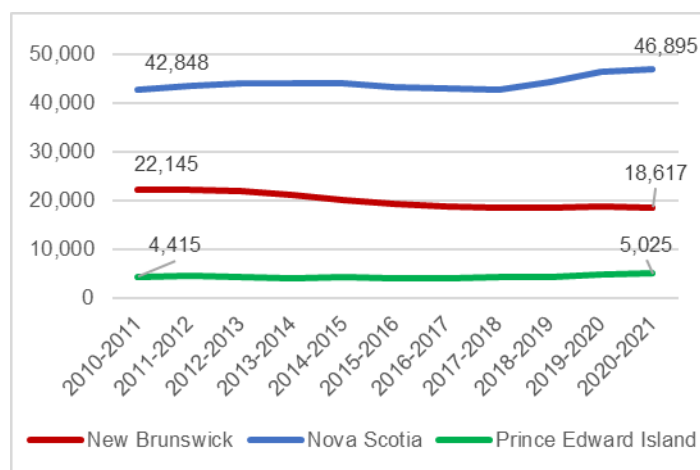
During the 2020-2021 academic year, Maritime universities offered the majority of their programs online, but some also continued to offer in-person classes. The increase in online or hybrid offerings provided access to Maritime university programs from anywhere in the world, but many students also opted to attend classes in person and move to the region if they could. Students coming from outside the Atlantic provinces were required to self-isolate when they first arrived in the region. International students faced both travel restrictions and difficulties in obtaining study permits.

The Commission has recently established measures of term-to-term student progression that provide more granular information than an annual snapshot of student enrolment. In this publication we explore the patterns of enrolment and persistence in Maritime universities over the 2020-2021 academic year, from spring 2020 to winter 2021, to gain an understanding of the potential impact of COVID-19 on future enrolment, persistence and degree completion patterns in the region.

#### Enrolment in Maritime Universities

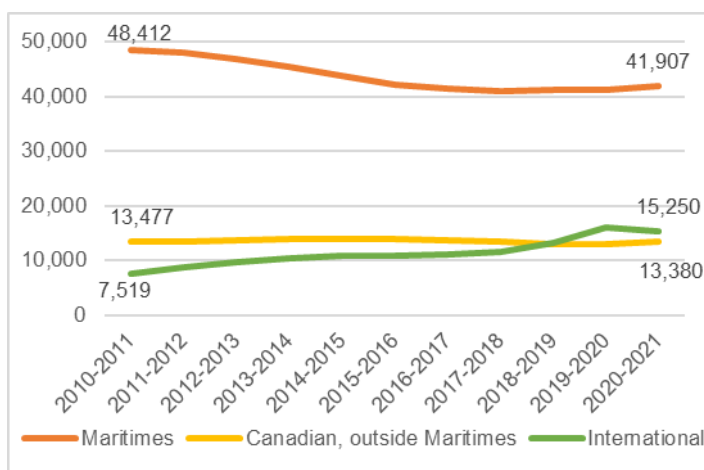
Official enrolment statistics for each academic year are measured in the fall term. If a student is enrolled full-time or part-time in the fall term they are reported under this registration status for the academic year, even though they may have taken fewer courses or withdrawn in the winter term.

**Total enrolment by province of university, 2010-2011 to 2020-2021**



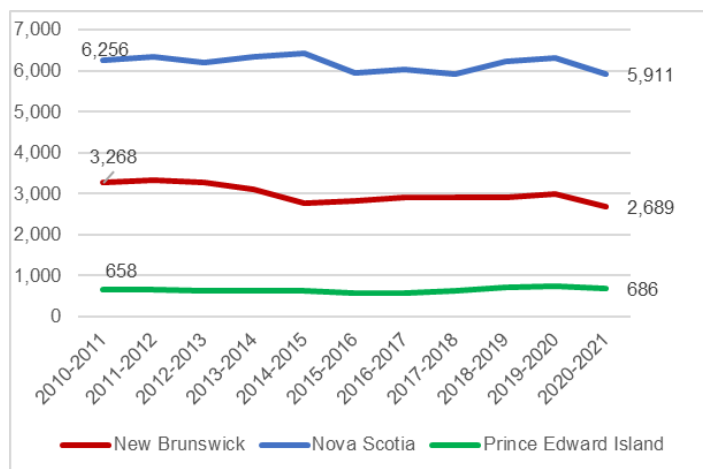
Overall enrolment in Maritime universities remained stable in fall 2020, increasing by 0.9% over the previous year. Enrolment decreased by 1.0% in New Brunswick, and increased by 1.1% in Nova Scotia, and 5.7% in Prince Edward Island.

**Total enrolment by status in Canada and region of origin, 2010-2011 to 2020-2021**



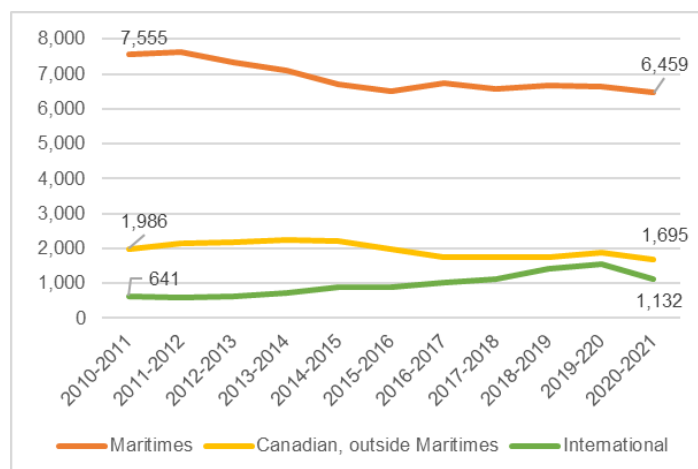
Following nine years of declining enrolment, the number of Canadian students increased in 2020-2021. Enrolment from the Maritime provinces increased by 1.9% and enrolment of Canadians from outside the Maritimes increased by 3.7%. After more than a decade of year-over-year increases, international enrolment decreased by 4.1% in 2020-2021.

**First-time first-year<sup>1</sup> enrolment by province of study, 2010-2011 to 2020-2021**



The largest drop in enrolment in 2020-2021 was of first-time first-year students. Their enrolment was the lowest observed over the past two decades, dropping by almost 8% compared to 2019-2020. The enrolment of first-year students decreased by 10% in New Brunswick, 6% in Nova Scotia, and 7% in Prince Edward Island.

**First-time first-year enrolment by status in Canada and region of origin, 2010-2011 to 2020-2021**

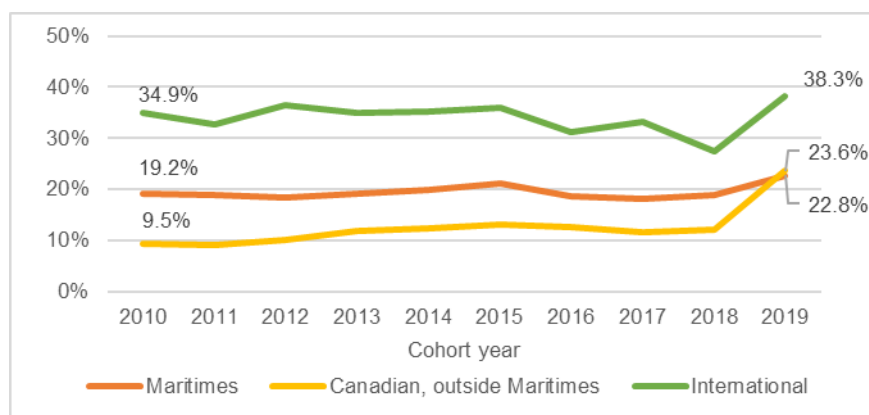


Enrolment of first-time first-year students from all regions decreased in fall 2020. The number of international students dropped by 27.1% over one year, while the number of Canadian students from outside the Maritimes decreased by 9.4%, and the number of students from the Maritimes decreased by 3.6%. The university participation rate of recent high school graduates decreased in all three provinces indicating that students from the Maritimes were delaying their entry into university.<sup>2</sup>

### Degree Progression in Maritime Universities

Measures of degree progression are based on a cohort of all first-time first-year students enrolled full-time or part-time in the fall term of the cohort year in a direct-entry undergraduate program. These measures look at the persistence of students who started an undergraduate program of study before 2020 and re-enrolled in spring/summer 2020 or fall 2020. Winter term persistence provides a measure of the percentage of first-time first-year students who enrolled in their program in fall 2020 and persisted in winter 2021.

**Fall to spring/summer persistence after the first year of study at the system level<sup>3</sup>, by status in Canada and region of origin**



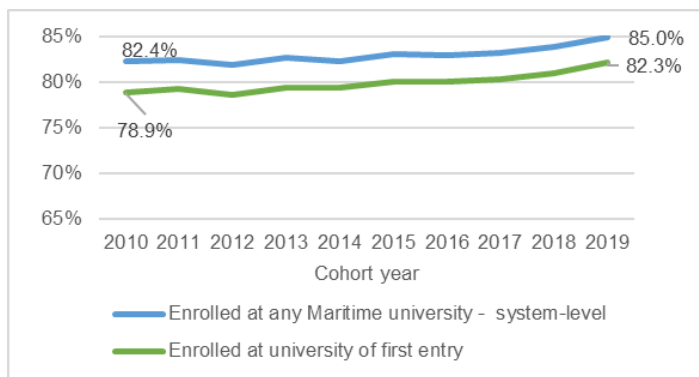
One in four first-time first-year students enrolled in courses in the spring or summer 2020 terms after their first year of study. Enrolment in spring/summer courses in 2020 increased significantly, especially for students from outside the Maritimes. The increase in the availability of online courses coupled with limited options for young people, such as summer jobs, likely played a role in increasing student enrolment.

<sup>1</sup> Enrolled at the university for the first time in a direct entry undergraduate program, aged 19 years or younger

<sup>2</sup> Table 7: Direct Entry Rate of Resident High School Students. MPHEC. *University Participation (2006-2007 to 2020-2021)*, February 2022.  
<http://www.mphec.ca/media/209272/University-Participation-2006-2007-to-2020-2021-.pdf>

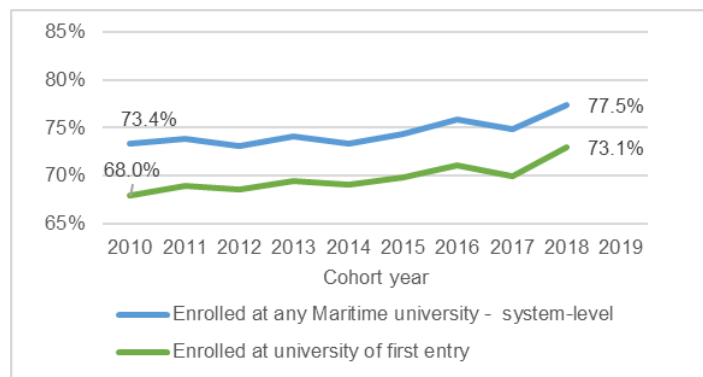
<sup>3</sup> re-enrolled at any Maritime university.

### Persistence after one year at the university of first entry and at the system level



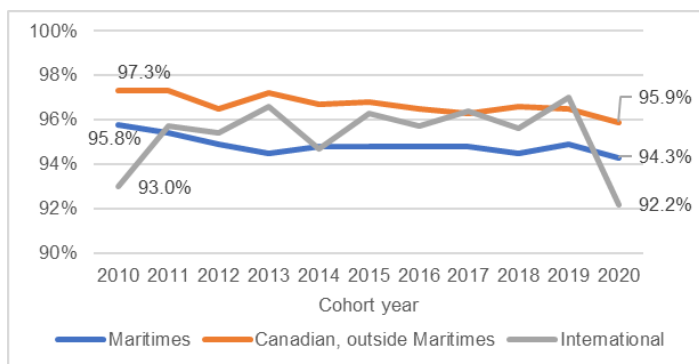
Eighty-five percent of students enrolling for the first time in 2019 returned for a second year of study in fall 2020. Student persistence after one year (fall-to-fall persistence), has increased gradually over the years, but the increase of 1 percentage point in the system-level persistence between the 2018 and 2019 cohort is the most significant year-to-year increase in the last 20 years.

### Persistence after two years<sup>4</sup> at the university of first entry and at the system level



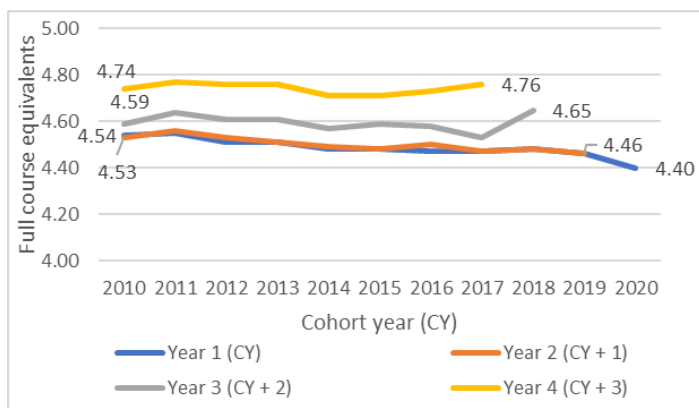
Persistence after two years has also increased over time. The 2018 cohort was completing its second year of study in 2019-2020. The percentage of a cohort re-enrolling in a Maritime university (system level) after two years jumped from 74.9% to 77.5%, for the 2017 and 2018 cohort respectively.

### Fall to winter persistence of first-time first-year students at the system level, by status in Canada and region of origin



In general, fall-to-winter persistence of first-time first-year students is well-above 90%. In winter 2021, there was a small but significant drop (-1.1 percentage point) in the overall fall-to-winter persistence of the 2020 cohort compared to the previous cohort. The decrease in fall-to-winter persistence was most significant for international students, which decreased from 97.0% in 2019-2020, to 92.2% in 2020-2021.

### Average annual course load in selected programs<sup>5</sup> at the system level, by year of study



Different cohorts of students showed different trends in the average student course load in 2020-2021. The 2020 cohort of first-year students was not only smaller, but students took, on average, a lighter course load (4.40 Full Course Equivalents [FCE]). The average student course load in 2020-2021 for the 2019 cohort (second-year students) also decreased slightly to 4.46 FCE, but the average student course load increased for the 2018 and 2017 cohorts (third- and fourth-year students, respectively).

<sup>4</sup> The cohort for the persistence rate after two years excludes diploma and certificate programs in engineering at associated universities and diplomas in health sciences.

<sup>5</sup> Only direct-entry bachelor programs with an average annual course load of 5.0 full course equivalents in the Humanities, arts, and social sciences, Sciences and mathematics, and Commerce and administration are included.

## Summary and Implications

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an important impact on university student enrolment and persistence patterns in the Maritime provinces. Although overall enrolment numbers remained relatively stable in 2020-2021 (+0.9%), there was a large drop in first-year enrolment. International enrolment in the Maritimes was most impacted decreasing by 4.1%. National numbers<sup>6</sup> show similar trends in overall university enrolment which increased by 2.1% in 2020-2021, compared to 2019-2020. International student enrolment in Canada decreased by 1.8% over the same period. Enrolment numbers for 2021-2022 show that overall enrolment in Maritime universities has increased by 1.9% compared to 2020-2021, but international enrolment has not fully recovered to pre-pandemic numbers.

In 2021-2022 enrolment of first-time first-year students increased by 12.3% overall compared to 2020-2021 (+2.5% in New Brunswick, +16.8% in Nova Scotia and +12.2% in Prince Edward Island). Part of the increase was due to a one-time bump in Nova Scotia high school graduates in spring 2021<sup>7</sup>. The number of first-year students from the Maritimes increased by 9% overall (New Brunswick -1%, Nova Scotia +16.4%, Prince Edward Island +6.2%), the number of first-year Canadians from outside the Maritimes increased by 32%, and the number of first-year international students increased by 3.3%.

Fall-to-fall persistence increased in 2020-2021. Students who were enrolled in their first or second year of study in 2019-2020 came back in larger numbers in fall 2020. Student attrition in university usually occurs during the first two years of study, and students who enroll in a third year have an 89% chance of completing a degree within eight years of first enrolling. The increase in the persistence of students in 2020-2021 may lead to higher graduation rates for the 2018 and 2019 cohorts.

Changes to academic policies due to COVID-19 around academic probation and suspensions may explain these data. More leniency in rules may have led to the increase in persistence rates observed in fall 2020. Similarly, changes in policies that allowed students to drop courses later in the fall term 2020 without academic penalty could have had an impact on student course load. If a student withdrew from a course without an academic penalty, this course would not be included in the annual course load.

The drop in the average course load of first-year students indicates that the 2020 cohort could take longer to complete a degree than previous cohorts. However, the trend over time points to increasing enrolment in the spring/summer terms, and an increase in annual course loads in the third and fourth years of study, which can allow students to make up for lighter course loads in the first and second years of their degree.

## Data source

The MPHEC Post-secondary Student Information System database.

## Additional Resources

- ° MPHEC. *Annual Digest: University Enrolment 2020-2021*. Trends in Maritime Higher Education, Volume 19, Number 1. January 2022.
- ° MPHEC. *Annual Digest: University Enrolment 2021-2022*. Trends in Maritime Higher Education, Volume 20, Number 1. January 2023.
- ° MPHEC. *Student Progression in the Maritime University System: Persistence and Graduation*. Statistical Tables and Methodology. May 2022.
- ° MPHEC. *Student Progression in the Maritime University System: Course Load, Term-to-Term Persistence, and Stop-outs*. Statistical Tables and Methodology. January 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Statistics Canada. Table 37-10-0086-01 Postsecondary enrolments, by status of student in Canada, country of citizenship and gender

<sup>7</sup> In 2008 the entry age for grade primary changed in Nova Scotia resulting in a larger high school graduating class in 2021.