

Canadian universities see surge of international students

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REPORTER

Canadian universities will welcome unprecedented numbers of international students this fall, with some institutions seeing jumps of 25 per cent or more in admissions of students from abroad, evidence that Canada is increasingly seen as a tolerant, stable destination in a world beset by political uncertainty, the schools said.

Applications from international students were up by double digits this year, with record levels of interest from American students. Many observers had suggested that the election of Donald Trump was a reason. But until this month, when many foreign students must respond to admission offers, it was not clear how that interest would translate into enrolment.

“We have a rising tide of isolationism and exclusion in Europe, in the United States, and people are looking to Canada,” said David Turpin, the president of the University of Alberta. “We will have these incredible students who will be educated in Canada, and in many, many cases go back home and build linkages that are crucial for our future development,” he said.

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At the University of Alberta, the percentage of international students who have accepted admission offers has increased by 27 per cent from last year. The school has also seen an increase of approximately 82 per cent in applications from graduate students from abroad.

Numbers are similar across the country. The University of Toronto, which has been recruiting students in the U.S. this past year, has doubled the percentage of American students who accept an offer. At Queen’s University in Kingston, Ont., acceptances by international students are up 40 per cent. Even smaller institutions, such as Brock University in St. Catharines, are expecting more than a third more international students to arrive in the fall term.

Some prominent Canadian universities are in the midst of ambitious internationalization drives, including recruiting globally recognized researchers and professors. At the University of British Columbia, for example, money from an increase to international student fees is targeted toward the creation of the President’s Excellence Chairs Program. Six research areas will see a substantial boost in research heft, with each chair receiving as much as \$10-million to \$15-million to set up research labs or teams.

Those positions are in addition to the university responding to inquiries from professors from abroad.

“There has been very significant interest from scholars from around the world in moving to UBC,” said Santa Ono, UBC’s president. “There have been faculty members who have contacted us after the closing date of a search for a faculty member asking us to extend it; we have been approached by faculty members wishing to relocate to Canada,” he said.

While the university benefits from this new talent, Dr. Ono said he is concerned about the political trends that may be driving professors to Canada.

“I don’t look at it as a chance to capitalize on geopolitical changes, but actually what can we do to stabilize the situation globally,” he said.

It is not clear if professors and researchers are being drawn to Canada as an intellectual refuge or by competitive offers, others cautioned.

“Some number of people over the years have always expressed that Canada may be a middle ground between the United States and Europe,” said Ravin Balakrishnan, the chair of computer science at the University of Toronto. The department has recruited about 20 new professors over the past two years, Dr. Balakrishnan said. “We have a lot of the positives of the tech-savvy and energy of the U.S., but some of the safety net of European countries. Maybe that has been enhanced due to world events,” he said.

Research-funding packages and the opportunity to work with other professors at the beginning of their careers have been more important draws in attracting new hires, he added.

Still, some of the explanation for Canadian universities’ increased success in attracting international students lies in anxieties over changes elsewhere. In Britain, for example, the Conservative government has said it will not exempt international students from caps on migration numbers.

As a result, the number of international student applications to Britain from India, which is one of the largest sources of overseas students to the U.K., is dropping quickly.

In contrast, Canadians are reporting increases of 25 to 75 per cent in expected enrolments from Indian students.

The rise in international admissions does not impact the number of spots available for domestic students, administrators emphasized.

“International students do not displace domestic students. It helps globalize the institution so that everybody, regardless of whether they grew up in Edmonton or Toronto, can meet and interact with people from around the world,” Dr. Turpin said.

And in some cases, the rise in international students will plug budget gaps that postsecondary institutions in Ontario and the Maritimes are experiencing as a result of declining domestic enrolment.

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