

Catalogue no. 81-595-M  
ISSN 2563-6251  
ISBN 978-0-660-73295-4

## Education, Learning and Training Research Paper Series

# International students in private colleges



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Release date: October 8, 2024



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# International students in private colleges

by Katherine Wall and Juhee Anderson

## Highlights

- Based on the T2202 tax data, in 2021 there were 245 private colleges in Canada.
- Less than 10% of international students in 2021 attended private postsecondary institutions.
- International students made up an estimated 16.9% of students at private colleges, with the proportion being highest in British Columbia (27.9%), Quebec (26.2%) and Ontario (16.9%).
- Nearly 80% of international students at private colleges were concentrated in about 20 private colleges; in all of these, over 75% of the student body was composed of international students.
- International students at these 20 colleges mainly studied in business programs and in programs in the liberal arts and sciences, general studies and humanities.

## Introduction

Until recently, information on students at private colleges in Canada has been limited. Statistics Canada's Postsecondary Student Information System (PSIS) provides comprehensive data on current and recent students at Canadian colleges and universities that receive funding from a provincial or territorial ministry of education.<sup>1</sup> The PSIS does not cover private colleges. Statistics Canada's Census of Population, another major source of education data, does not distinguish between public and private colleges. However, data on private colleges can be found in tax records. This study uses the T2202 Tuition and Enrolment Certificate tax file to determine the number and characteristics of international students studying at private colleges in Canada.

The [T2202 Tuition and Enrolment Certificate](#) file from the Canada Revenue Agency, introduced in 2019, identifies tuition-paying students who were enrolled in programs or courses meeting a minimum duration and course-hour threshold<sup>2</sup> at designated educational institutions (DEIs). DEIs are colleges, universities, other postsecondary institutions, flying schools and other institutions certified by Employment and Social Development Canada (Canada Revenue Agency 2023). The T2202 file is based on mandatory reporting by these educational institutions.

Although the T2202 file covers both private and public institutions, it does not distinguish between them. A [previous Statistics Canada study](#) (Fecteau and Van Bussel 2023a) using the T2202 file defined public institutions as those included in the PSIS (i.e., ones that receive funding from a provincial or territorial ministry of education) and identified them based on their business number. Institutions in the T2202 file whose business number did not match that of an institution that reported to the PSIS were defined as private.<sup>3</sup> The study provided high-level data on private postsecondary institutions at the national and regional levels, including the number of private institutions, number of students at private institutions, average institution size (in terms of number of students enrolled), and age and gender composition of the student body. It also validated the quality of T2202 data through comparisons with integrated data from the PSIS.

This study builds on the previous work by enabling the analysis of international students at private colleges through the integration of T2202 data with the Longitudinal Immigration Database (IMDB), which covers immigrants and non-permanent residents. Additionally, through preliminary coding of a subset of T2202 data on students' program names, this study can provide a better understanding of international students' fields of study at private colleges. It also distinguishes between different types of private postsecondary institutions to focus its analysis on private colleges as opposed to other types of private institutions.

1. PSIS data are available from 2009/2010 for public universities and from 2013/2014 for public colleges.

2. Specifically, the program must last at least three consecutive weeks and include at least 12 hours of courses in a month.

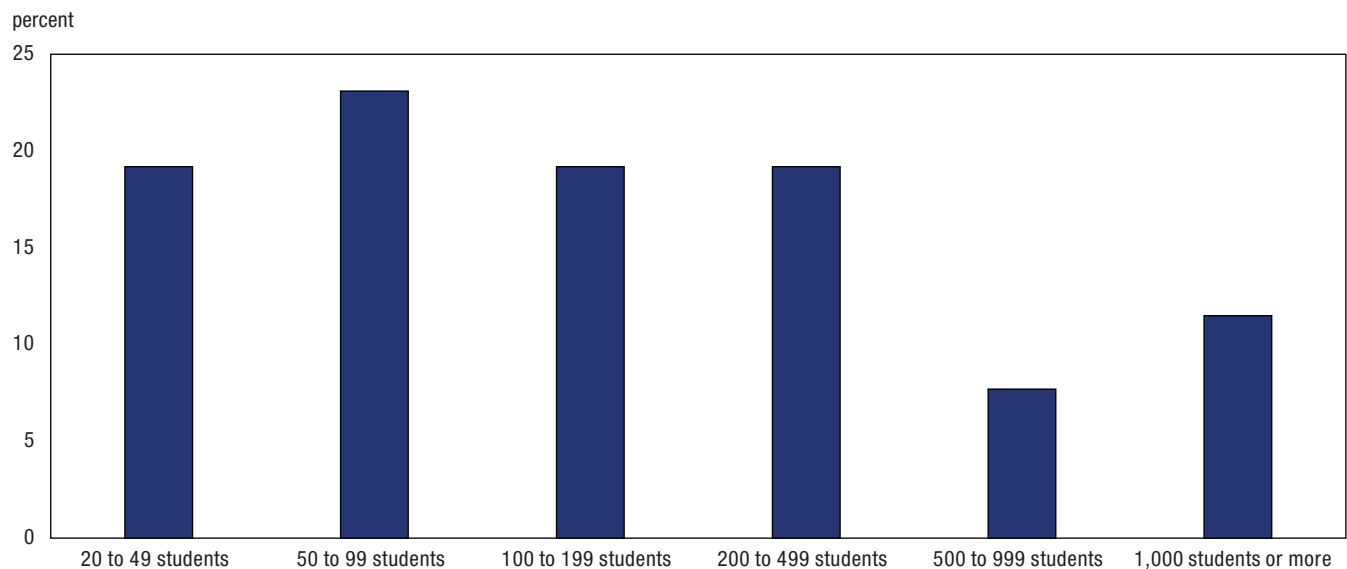
3. The PSIS does not include schools that receive government funding only from ministries other than a ministry of education. This led to some provincially or federally funded institutions such as police or military training colleges being classified as "private."

## Private colleges were more numerous than public colleges in Canada, but they had much smaller student populations

According to the T2202 data, there were approximately 245 private colleges in Canada in 2021, with 98,180 students enrolled in total.<sup>4</sup> Private colleges made up two-thirds of all colleges (66.2%) but accounted for fewer than 1 in 10 college students (7.7%). This is because private colleges were typically small, with a median student body of 130 students and an average student body of 400 students, whereas public colleges had a median size of about 5,000 students and an average of over 9,000. The larger number of private colleges and their smaller size relative to public colleges are consistent with the patterns found in the previous 2023 study on private postsecondary institutions in general (Fecteau and Van Bussel 2023b).

A little over two-fifths of private colleges (42.3%) had under 100 students, and nearly another two-fifths (38.4%) had 100 to 499 students. At the other end of the spectrum, a little over 1 in 10 had 1,000 students or more (Chart 1). In contrast, 75.0% of public colleges had 1,000 or more students.

**Chart 1**  
Distribution of private colleges by number of students enrolled, 2021

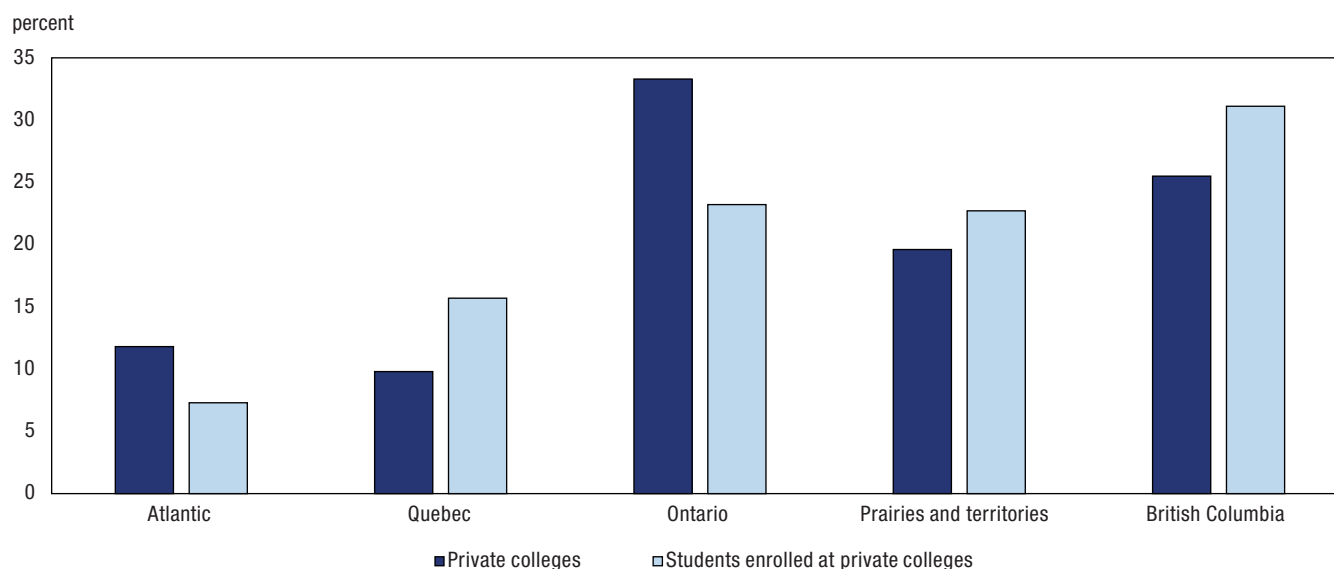


Source: T2202 file, 2021.

The majority of private colleges were located in Ontario (33.3%) and British Columbia (25.5%) (Chart 2). The median number of students per private college was 220 in British Columbia, compared with 100 in Ontario. Because of its larger number of students per private college, British Columbia accounted for a larger share of all private college students (31.1%) than Ontario (23.2%).

4. All counts in this paper are randomly rounded. Because of rounding, components may not add up to the totals.

**Chart 2**  
**Distribution of private colleges and private college students by region, 2021**



Source: T2202 file, 2021.

## Fewer than 4% of international students were enrolled at private colleges

According to the 2021 T2202 file, 3.8% of international students (16,610 students) were enrolled at private colleges, whereas over 90% were enrolled at either public colleges (37.6%, or 166,560) or public universities (53.2%, or 235,370).<sup>5</sup> In comparison, 2.8% of domestic students were enrolled at private colleges.

The proportion of students who were international students was relatively similar between private colleges and public colleges. Based on the integrated T2202-IMDB data, international students made up 16.9% of students at private colleges, compared with 14.2% at public colleges (Chart 3).<sup>6</sup> This differs from PSIS findings for academic years 2020/2021 and 2021/2022, which show international students making up a higher share of public college students (18.7%). One reason for the discrepancy is that some students (particularly domestic students attending part time, and domestic students who were recorded as enrolled in 2021 but not attending in any months) are recorded in the T2202 data but not in the PSIS. Some may be students who were enrolled only briefly, and some may represent data errors in the T2202 data.<sup>7</sup>

## The share of college students who were international students was highest at private colleges in British Columbia and Quebec, as well as in both public and private colleges in Ontario

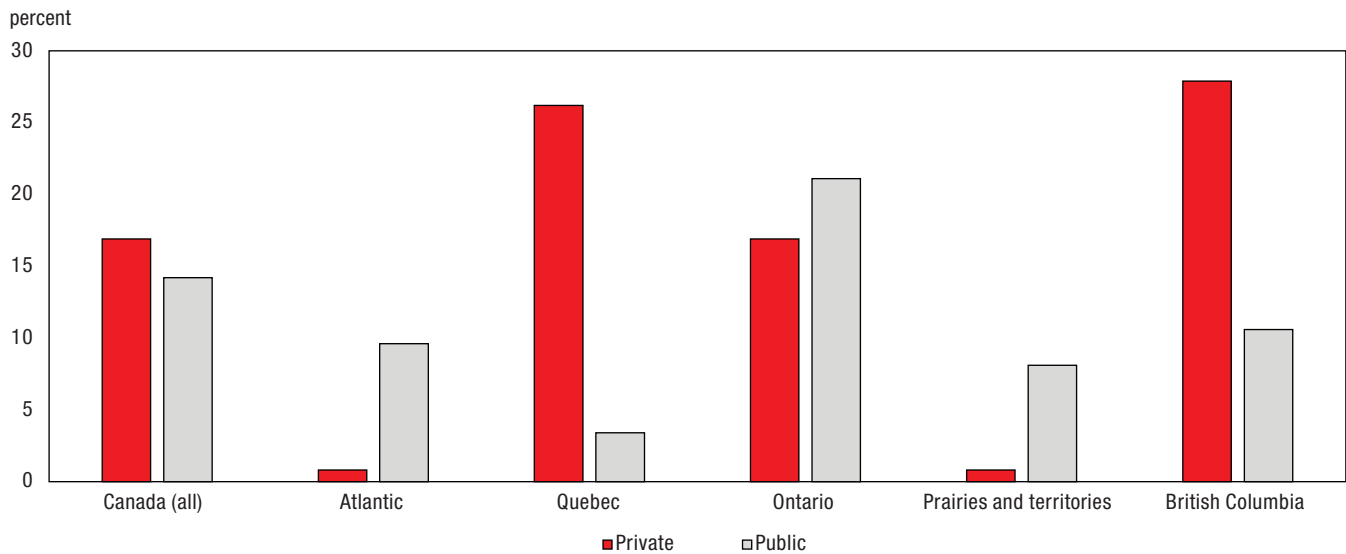
The share of college students who were international students differed substantially by region, for both public and private colleges (Chart 3). The proportion of students who were international students was highest at private colleges in British Columbia (27.9%), Quebec (26.2%) and Ontario (16.9%), as well as at Ontario public colleges (21.1%).

5. Another 2.5% (11,160) were attending private universities, and 2.1% (9,420) were attending private "other postsecondary institutions." See the "Data sources, definitions and methods" section.

6. International students made up 28.0% of students at private universities and 11.8% of students at private "other postsecondary institutions." See the "Data sources, definitions and methods" section.

7. Domestic students at public institutions in the T2202 file were less likely to be found in the PSIS file than international students at public institutions; see the "Data sources, definitions and methods" section.

**Chart 3**  
**Proportion of students at private and public colleges who were international students, by region, 2021**



Source: T2202–Longitudinal Immigration Database integrated file, 2021.

In Ontario, public colleges can have a partnership agreement with a private college, in which the private college delivers some of their programs.<sup>8</sup> Students attending under such partnerships would be recorded in the T2202 file under the name of the public college partner, since students would pay their tuition to the public partner. International students made up a larger share of students at Ontario public colleges that had these partnerships<sup>9</sup> (27.5%) than at Ontario public colleges that did not (18.9%).

## Ontario public colleges accounted for over two-thirds of all international students at colleges

Public colleges accounted for 90.9% of all international students at colleges. Ontario played the largest role, with more than two-thirds (68.0%) of all international students at colleges being at public colleges in Ontario: 23.2% at Ontario colleges that had private partnerships and 44.8% at colleges that did not.

The other 9.1% of international students at colleges were at private colleges, with private colleges in British Columbia (4.6%), Quebec (2.2%) and Ontario (2.1%) accounting for most of them.

## International students at private colleges were highly concentrated in a small number of schools

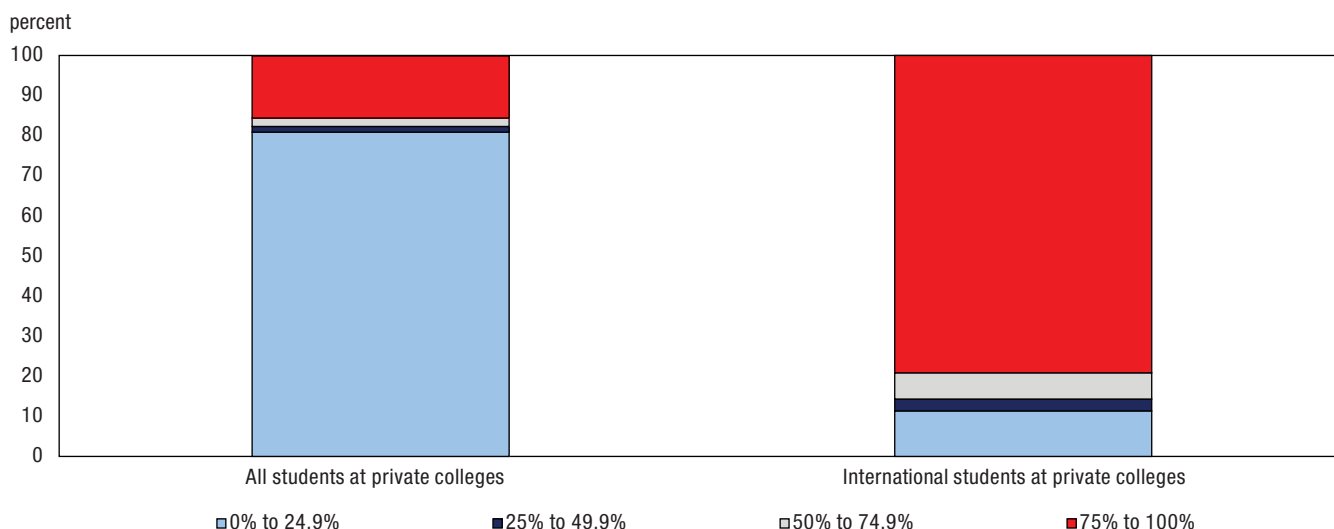
The bulk of international students at private colleges were concentrated in about 20 institutions where international students made up at least 75% of the student body. These institutions will be referred to as “internationally-focused private colleges.” Nearly 8 in 10 international students at private colleges (79.1%) attended internationally-focused private colleges (Chart 4). In contrast, internationally-focused private colleges made up less than 1 in 10 private colleges (8.0%) and accounted for 15.5% of all private college students.<sup>10</sup> Internationally-focused private colleges tended to be larger than other private colleges (but smaller than most public colleges), with a median size of 870 students.

8. [Public College-Private Partnerships: Minister's Binding Policy Directive](#). Ontario public colleges with such an agreement as of June 2021 were identified through the Auditor General of Ontario's report on public colleges (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario 2021, page 18). Some Ontario public colleges partnered with private colleges in other provinces.

9. Most but not all of the public colleges with such a partnership could be identified in the T2202 file.

10. A similar pattern existed at private “other postsecondary institutions” (20 institutions had a student body that was at least 75% international students, and these institutions accounted for 70.2% of international students at private “other postsecondary institutions”).

**Chart 4**  
**Distribution of students at private colleges by proportion of their college's student body who were international students, 2021**



Source: T2202–Longitudinal Immigration Database integrated file, 2021.

International students at public colleges were generally dispersed across a large number of institutions rather than being concentrated in a few. There were very few public colleges or public universities where international students made up the majority of students. Furthermore, at public colleges outside of Ontario, less than 10% of either domestic or international students were at colleges where international students made up more than 25% of the student body. However, in Ontario 37.3% of all students at public colleges, and over half (59.8%) of international students at public colleges, were at colleges where international students made up over 25% of the student body.

## The majority of international students at internationally-focused private colleges and at Ontario public colleges were born in India

India was by far the most common country of birth for international students at private colleges (44.2%) in 2021. More particularly, students from India made up half (50.6%) of international students at internationally-focused private colleges, whereas they accounted for 19.7% of international students at other private colleges.

China was the second most common individual country of birth for international students at private colleges (8.1%).<sup>11</sup> In contrast to international students from India, international students from China made up a smaller share of students at internationally-focused private colleges (6.0%) than at other private colleges (16.5%).

India was the most common country of birth for international students at private colleges in British Columbia (47.7%), Quebec (45.7%) and Ontario (35.3%). However, the second-most common country or region of birth for international students at private colleges differed by province: in British Columbia, it was China (13.4%); in Quebec, it was Northern Africa (32.9%); and in Ontario, it was the Americas (22.1%).

Students from India made up an even larger share of international students at public colleges (55.7%) than at private colleges. This pattern was largely driven by Ontario: students from India made up 80.1% of international students at Ontario public colleges that had a partnership with a private college and 52.4% of international students at other Ontario public colleges, compared with 37.4% of international students at public colleges outside Ontario.

11. In the Standard Classification of Countries and Areas of Interest 2022, China and Hong Kong are reported separately.

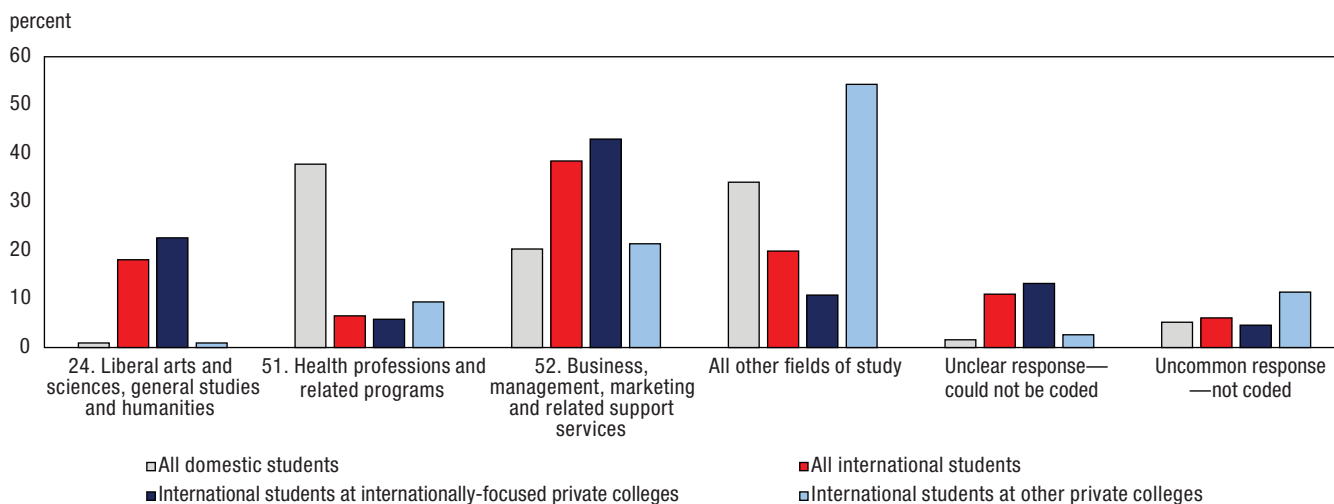
## International students at internationally-focused private colleges mainly studied in business and general programs

Based on preliminary work to code fields of study,<sup>12</sup> the majority of students at private colleges were studying in either health<sup>13</sup> (32.5%) or business<sup>14</sup> (23.3%) programs; no other field of study accounted for over 5% of all private college students. These were also the two predominant fields of study for all students at public colleges.<sup>15</sup>

Fields of study of international students differed from those of other students at private colleges (Chart 5). They were more likely than domestic students to study business (38.5%) and less likely to study health (6.5%) or in programs in the “all other fields of study” category (19.9%). International students were also much more likely than domestic students to study in generically named programs in liberal arts and sciences, general studies and humanities or in programs where the field of study could not be determined because of insufficient information. In Ontario, 79.0% of international students at private colleges studied in business programs.

**Chart 5**

**Field of study distribution of students at private colleges, by international student status and whether the college was internationally-focused, 2021**



Source: T2202—Longitudinal Immigration Database integrated file, 2021.

These trends applied particularly to international students at internationally-focused private colleges (Chart 5). As mentioned before, these private colleges accounted for nearly 80% of all international students at private colleges. International students at these colleges mainly studied in business programs (43.0%); programs in the liberal arts and sciences, general studies and humanities (22.6%); or programs that could not be coded because of unclear or generic names (13.2%).

In contrast, the most common fields of study for international students at private colleges that were not internationally-focused were business (21.4%), visual and performing arts (12.5%; not shown in chart), health (9.4%), and family and consumer sciences/human sciences (8.2%; includes early childhood education; not shown in chart).

T2202 data on the field of study of students at **public** colleges were not coded, since these data already exist in the PSIS. PSIS data on field of study were analyzed for international students who appeared both in the 2021 T2202 file and in either the 2020/2021 or the 2021/2022 PSIS file. Most of these students were enrolled in public colleges in Ontario (76.3%) or British Columbia (10.0%).

12. Field of study findings should be interpreted with caution, because certain fields of study may be overrepresented within the responses that were not coded or that could not be coded, leading to the prevalence of these fields being understated by the analysis. See the “Data sources, definitions and methods” section.

13. Throughout this section, “health” refers to Classification of Instructional Programs series “51. Health professions and related programs”.

14. Throughout this section, “business” refers to Classification of Instructional Programs series “52. Business, management, marketing and related support services”.

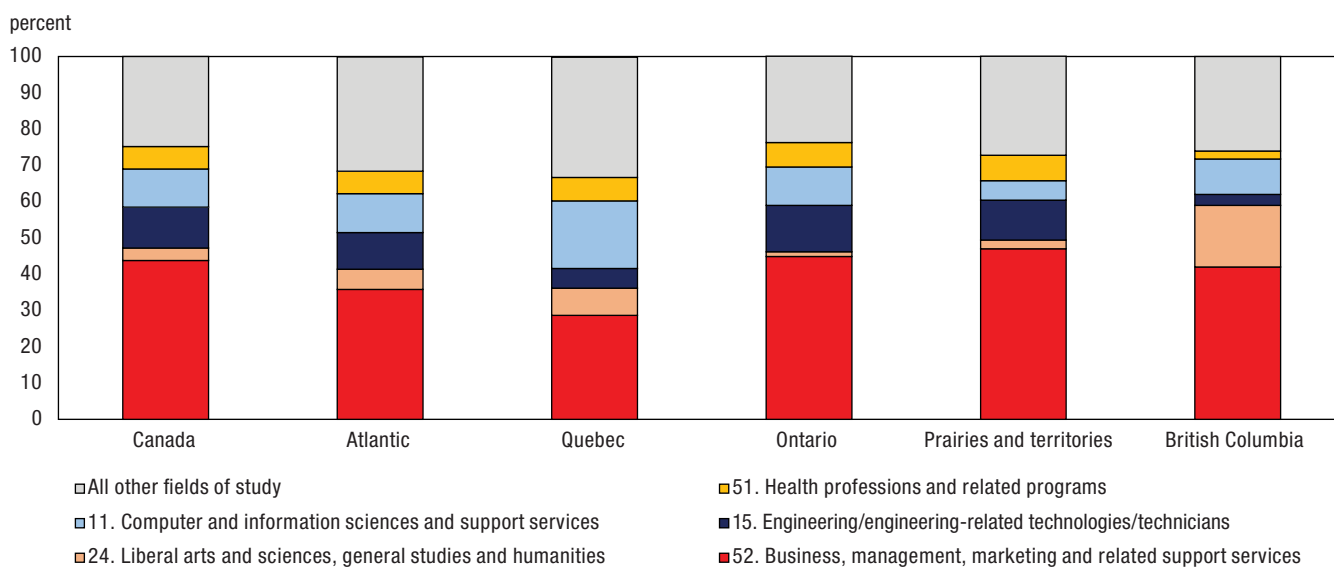
15. PSIS table 37-10-0182-02, [Postsecondary enrolments, by detailed field of study](#).



As was the case at private colleges, business programs were common (43.8%) among international students at public colleges (Chart 6). Within regions, the share of international students at public colleges who studied business ranged from 28.7% in Quebec to 47.0% in the Prairies and territories. It was 44.9% in Ontario and was slightly higher at public colleges in Ontario that had a partnership with a private college (50.2%) than at public colleges in Ontario that did not (42.3%). In British Columbia, the second most common field of study for international students at public colleges was liberal arts and sciences, general studies and humanities (17.0%).

**Chart 6**

**Field of study distribution of international students at public colleges, nationally and by region, 2021**



Source: Postsecondary Student Information System, 2020/2021 and 2021/2022.

However, fields of study of international students at public colleges were more varied than at private colleges. Apart from business, two common fields of study for international students at public colleges were engineering/engineering-related technologies/technicians (11.3%) and computer and information sciences and support services (10.5%). Computer and information sciences and support services was particularly common among international students at public colleges in Quebec (18.6%).

## Conclusion

The rising numbers of international students in Canada's post-secondary education institutions has been a topic of increasing interest. Using the T2202 Tuition and Enrolment Certificate, the current study provides insight into the patterns of postsecondary participation of international students, particularly in private colleges. As of 2021, the large majority of international students were enrolled in public universities and public colleges. Furthermore, the ratio of domestic students to international students differed little between private and public colleges.

That said, international students at private colleges were very concentrated in a small number of institutions. Nearly 80% of all international students at private colleges were enrolled in around 20 internationally-focused private colleges—that is, private colleges where most of the student body (over 75%) were international students. Approximately two-thirds of programs taken by international students at such institutions were in business or in liberal arts and sciences, general studies and humanities. Additionally, about half (50.6%) of international students at these internationally-focused private colleges were from India.

The study was also able to identify patterns among public colleges in Ontario that had partnerships with private colleges, whereby the public college paid a private college to deliver some of its courses. At public colleges with these partnerships, 27.5% of students were international students (four-fifths of whom were from India), compared with 18.9% of students at Ontario public colleges without such partnerships, and less than 12% of students at public colleges in every other region of Canada.

A potential area of future research is integrating T2202–IMDB data with tax files to analyze post-schooling labour market outcomes of private college students. Other potential areas include tuition fees of domestic and international students at private colleges compared with public colleges, and more detailed and complete coding of fields of study for students at private colleges.

## Definitions, data sources and methods

### Data sources

The primary data sources were the T2202 Tuition and Enrolment Certificate file for the calendar year 2021, and the Longitudinal Immigration Database (IMDB) covering immigrants and non-permanent residents from 1980 to 2021.

The T2202 file for 2021 had 3.86 million records. Of these records, approximately 312,000 were duplicates (for example, because of students attending more than one institution in a given year), and 205,000 did not have enough information to determine whether they were duplicates. Removing these records left 3.3 million records, each representing a unique student. This is consistent with the patterns reported by Fecteau and Van Bussel (2023a).

The cleaned T2202 data were integrated with the IMDB. Out of the 3.3 million students in the cleaned T2202 file, 35.4% were found in the IMDB as either immigrants or non-permanent residents.

The quality of the integration was assessed by comparing the status of public-institution students (international or domestic) in the T2202–IMDB file with their status in the Postsecondary Student Information System (PSIS). This comparison found a high degree of consistency. First, 94.9% of international students at public colleges in the T2202 file (calendar year 2021) were linked to the PSIS (academic years 2020/2021 and 2021/2022), as were 89.0% of domestic students at public colleges. Second, out of the students at public institutions who were present in both the T2202 file and the PSIS, 97.5% of those identified as international students by the T2202–IMDB file were also listed as international students in the PSIS, and 98.4% of T2202–IMDB students identified as domestic students were also listed as domestic students in the PSIS.

### Methodology

The methodology is largely the same as that used by Fecteau and Van Bussel (2023a), except that it uses the T2202 data for 2021, whereas the previous study used the data from 2020. A number of modifications were made to the methodology, detailed below.

Institutions with fewer than 20 students were excluded. This reduced the number of private colleges by 50 (16.9%), but the number of students at private colleges by only 0.5%. This was done to reduce the risk of the data being affected by reporting errors or irregularities that can occur in administrative data (for example, the same institution being reported under multiple different business numbers).

When a student had multiple different records in the T2202 file, only one record per student was retained, and records for enrolment at a college were selected preferentially. Fecteau and Van Bussel (2023a) randomly selected the record to be retained.

Measures for specifying the region of Canada in which a college was located differed from the previous study. In most cases, colleges were recorded as being located in the region where the majority of their students lived, based on students' mailing addresses. If no one region accounted for the majority of students, then the college's region was based on its stated province of location in the T2202 institution-level file. The regions were the Atlantic provinces, Quebec, Ontario, the Prairie provinces and the territories, and British Columbia. The territories were grouped together with the Prairie provinces because of the small sample size, to protect confidentiality.

When a postsecondary institution's type (college, university, other postsecondary institution, flying school, or institution certified by Employment and Social Development Canada [ESDC]) was reported inconsistently in the T2202 file, it was assigned a single type based on the institution type that was reported for the largest number of students at the institution. The institution type for **public** postsecondary institutions was reassigned based on their institution type in the PSIS, to increase comparability between T2202 and PSIS data for public institutions.

The bulk of the paper's analysis was restricted to colleges; other private educational institutions were excluded. Private colleges made up a little over one-quarter of private educational institutions (26.5%), and students at private colleges made up a little over one-quarter (26.1%) of students at private educational institutions. Private "other postsecondary institutions" and private institutions certified by ESDC constituted the majority of private institutions in the T2202 file (63.2% of institutions and 61.9% of students). These institutions were generally small, with the majority (54.1% of other postsecondary institutions and 52.1% of institutions certified by ESDC) having fewer than 100 students listed in the T2202 file.<sup>16</sup> Students at institutions certified by ESDC are only included on the T2202 file when they are taking courses to "get or improve skills in an occupation."<sup>17</sup>

### Field of study coding

The program name field in the T2202 file was used as a basis for assigning numeric codes representing major fields of study from the Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) 2021.

The initial stage of the coding, which followed standard methods, involved automated coding based on matches between the program name field and a reference file. This enabled the field of study to be coded for 43.2% of students at private colleges.

Following this, a non-standard method was used to code the field of study for most of the remaining private college students. This was done to be able to provide general information on field of study in a rapid and efficient manner; full coding according to standard practices would require much more time and was outside the scope of this study. The main method used was to identify text strings or combinations of text strings that occurred in common program names within a given field of study, and not in program names in any other field of study. Following this, the coding was reviewed by an expert on field of study coding, and corrections were made based on the review. This methodology was only feasible because students at private colleges represented a small proportion (under 5%) of the overall T2202 file.

Rather than coding to the most detailed six-digit level of the CIP, fields of study were coded only to the two-digit level (e.g., business, health). Only the more common responses (i.e., ones that applied to large numbers of students or used common keywords) were coded; 5.4% of records for students at private colleges were not assigned a CIP code because of uncommon responses. An additional 3.2% of records could not be coded to the CIP because the program name provided was too generic.

Results should be interpreted with caution, because certain fields of study may be overrepresented within the responses that were not coded or that could not be coded, leading to the prevalence of these fields being understated by the analysis.

### Definitions

**Public college:** A college with the same business number (an identifying number for a business, recorded on Statistics Canada's Business Register) as an institution listed in the PSIS. The PSIS covers institutions that are partially or entirely funded by a ministry of education (including private not-for-profit institutions).

**Private college:** A college that does not have the same business number as an institution listed in the PSIS, including those that receive funding from government departments other than a ministry of education. Some schools affiliated with public colleges and universities are classified as private because they have a different business number from the PSIS-listed institution.

16. Institutions may have had additional students who did not qualify for the T2202, for example because the students were enrolled in very brief courses.

17. [Guide for Designated Educational Institutions - Filing the T2202, Tuition and Enrolment Certificate and Summary](#)

**Internationally-focused private college:** A private college where at least 75% of students are international students.

**International student:** In this article, an international student is defined as a person in the 2021 T2202 file who was also found in the IMDB but had not obtained Canadian citizenship or permanent residency as of 2021, and who had a valid study permit at any time in 2021. It is possible for students in the T2202 file to be living outside Canada while enrolled in a Canadian institution, for example, if engaged in online learning.

**Domestic student:** In this article, a domestic student is defined as a person in the 2021 T2202 file who was not found in the IMDB, or who was recorded in the IMDB as an immigrant who had obtained Canadian citizenship or permanent residency as of 2021. It is possible for students in the T2202 file to be living outside Canada while enrolled in a Canadian institution, for example, if engaged in online learning.

**Non-permanent resident:** For the purposes of the T2202 analysis, a non-permanent resident is defined as a person who appeared in the IMDB but had not obtained Canadian citizenship or permanent residency as of 2021. Non-permanent residents include both international students and people with other types of permits (e.g., temporary workers, asylum seekers). Most non-permanent residents recorded in the T2202 file had a valid study permit in 2021 (93.3%) and therefore were international students.

**Immigrant:** For the purposes of the T2202 analysis, an immigrant is defined as a person who appeared in the IMDB and had obtained Canadian citizenship or permanent residency as of 2021.

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