

Decline of international graduate enrolment deepens

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University World News

<http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20181005200448286>

Graduate enrolment of international students at US universities has declined for the second year in a row, according to the Council of Graduate Schools.

While first-time graduate enrolment for US citizens and permanent residents increased 1.1% between Fall 2016 and Fall 2017, first-time graduate enrolment of international students decreased by 3.7%.

This second year of decline in first-time graduate numbers is four times greater than last year's fall of 0.9% and coincides with the tightening of immigration policies under the Trump administration, which took office in January 2017.

CGS President Suzanne Ortega said the decline in international students pursuing graduate education in the US was "worrisome".

"The 3.7% drop in first-time enrolment between Fall 2016 and Fall 2017 is the second consecutive decrease we've seen since 2003. While it is difficult to pinpoint what caused the decline, the current policy climate around US visas and immigration may be a contributing factor."

Rahul Choudaha, Executive Vice President of Global Engagement and Research at Studyportals – an online platform for international students – argued that the reversal of the growth trend shows that the combination of unwelcoming visa and immigration policies and increasing cost of education is making some international graduate students reconsider US as a destination.

"A vast majority of graduate international students are driven by '[value for money](#)' and seek to minimise cost and maximise career opportunities. They are highly sensitive to the changes in the employability opportunities and immigration policies. So, any unfavourable trend towards higher investments or lower prospects of recovering investments hurts student preference for a destination," he told *UWN*.

"Recent [anti-immigrant policy directions and sentiments](#) related to curtailing of H1-B work visa and increasing scrutiny of Optional Practical Training (OPT) is largely responsible for this decline. This is triggering a segment of graduate students to reconsider US as a destination for graduate schools."

The CGS said the five-year (4.7%) and ten-year average annual increase (5.6%) rates for international students remain strong. However, they are down from 7.8% and 7.4%

respectively last year.

However, Choudaha said the decline in international graduate enrolment is very significant for American graduate schools many of whom are already hurting due to decline in domestic enrolment due to demographic and competitive shifts.

“America is a global leader in graduate education and research. Much of it stems from the diversity of people America attracts from around the world to study at its universities and colleges. Any threat to the ability of universities to attract and retain global talent is going to hurt innovation and ultimately the competitiveness of the American higher education and the economy.”

He said the decline is also a “wake-up call for many graduate schools to recognise the importance of proactive and sustainable approaches of growing and diversifying their international student enrolment”.

The data is part of the latest *CGS/GRE Graduate Enrollment & Degrees: 2007-2017* [report](#).

The annual survey shows that growth in first-time graduate enrolment overall remains flat, while the number of graduate applications to US universities has decreased.

Between Fall 2016 and Fall 2017, first-time graduate enrolment dropped by -0.1% and the number of applications for admission to US graduate schools decreased -1.8%.

Although the overall number of applications for admission declined, several broad fields of study saw increases, including business (4.5%), public administration and services (1.9%), education (1.8%), and mathematics and computer sciences (1.7%).

Universities with an R1 Carnegie Classification, or highest research doctoral institutions, saw no negative impacts, posting a 3.0% increase between Fall 2016 and Fall 2017.

“The decrease in application and flat first-time enrolment rates are not unexpected given the robust economy and job market. After years of steady growth, the slow down aligns with typical cycles in the economy,” Ortega said.

Enrolments align with fastest-growing fields

The largest one-year gains in first-time enrolment by broad field of study were in mathematics and computer sciences (3.8%) and business (3.7%) between Fall 2016 and Fall 2017.

The largest five- and ten-year average (2012-2017) percentage changes by broad field were in mathematics and computer sciences (12.8%, 12.1%) and the health sciences (4.0%, 6.9%).

In contrast, the one-year change in first-time graduate enrolment in engineering was -3.8%, compared to -0.9% between Fall 2015-2016; engineering also posted the biggest application decline in the one-year period (-7.3%).

These results are consistent with CGS's *International Graduate Applications and Enrollment: Fall 2017*, indicating that the decline in engineering enrolment is largely driven by a decrease in international students.

Among first-time graduate enrolment in the Fall of 2017 and about 20.3% were international.

International students comprised the largest share of first-time graduate students in mathematics and computer sciences (56.3%), followed closely by engineering (52.9%).

"The continued growth in applications and first-time enrolment in the health sciences indicates graduate education is aligning with the increasing workforce demand for advanced degree holders," said Ortega.

"According to the most recent Bureau of Labor Statistics data on employment projections, many of the fastest growing fields are in mathematics and computer sciences and the health sciences, including physician assistants, occupational therapists, mental health and substance abuse social workers, mathematicians, and computer and information research scientists. These jobs all require at least a master's degree for a typical entry-level position."

Institutions responding to the CGS/GRE Survey of Graduate Enrollment & Degrees for Fall 2017 enrolled more than 1.8 million graduate students. Nearly three-quarters (74.0%) of total graduate enrolment was in master's programmes.

More than one million of those graduate students, or 57.9%, were women. The academic year 2016-17 marked the eighth consecutive year in which women earned the majority of degrees awarded. However, in many STEM fields, men still earned the majority of graduate degrees and certificates.

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