

Robert Asselin, CEO U15 Canada
Presentation to the Standing Committee on Citizenship and
Immigration
September 25, 2025

Madam Chair, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

My name is Robert Asselin, and I serve as CEO of U15 Canada — Canada's 15 leading research universities. Together, our institutions conduct more than 75% of all university research in Canada, enroll 70% of the country's full-time doctoral students, and generate much of the nation's innovation — from patents to private-sector research contracts. Collectively, our universities are a national strategic asset: anchors of talent, research, and innovation.

International students — especially graduate students — are essential to this mission. They bring skills and ideas that make Canada more innovative and more productive, thereby strengthening both our economy and our communities.

Graduate-level international students represent a crucial pool of highly skilled talent. More than half of those who pursued a master's or doctoral degree in the 2000s became permanent residents of Canada within a decade. Yet Canada ranks only 25th among OECD countries in the proportion of advanced degrees. We cannot afford to turn away top talent.

We recognize that changes to immigration policy were necessary. But treating all international students the same — a one-size-fits-all approach — has created uncertainty, damaged Canada's reputation, and reduced international enrollment.

At U15 universities, the share of international students has been stable at 18–20% since 2018. But for the first time in decades, we are now seeing steep declines. First-year international bachelor's enrollments have dropped 19%. Graduate and doctoral programs are also seeing major reductions — particularly in engineering, computer science, health, and life sciences.

These are precisely the fields that underpin Canada's future economy and security. In graduate computer engineering programs, enrollment has dropped by more than 20% in a single year. This is the talent we need to build nuclear reactors, advance AI supercomputing, and strengthen our defense industrial base.

Because graduate students play such a central role as research assistants, these declines are already eroding the capacity of Canada's research ecosystem to deliver the discoveries and innovations our society and businesses depend on.

Including graduate students in study-permit caps has weakened Canada's research capacity at the very moment when sovereignty and competitiveness demand the opposite. Even the Speech from the Throne emphasized the importance of attracting the best and brightest.

We therefore recommend three steps:

1. Rebuild Canada's reputation by sending a clear signal that we welcome top global talent, including timely processing of study permits.
2. Exempt graduate students from study-permit caps.
3. Target bad actors while supporting institutions that uphold the highest standards through a distinctions-based approach that recognizes excellence.

In a world where ideas, talent, and technology define prosperity and security, our ability to attract and retain the brightest minds will determine our future. If we send the wrong signal now, we risk losing a generation of talent to our competitors — and with it, the innovations and industries that will shape the 21st century. If we act with urgency and clarity, however, Canada can cement its reputation as a global destination for excellence in research and discovery. This is not just about universities. It is about our economy and our security. .We must choose ambition.