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Is it a Trump Bump, Spike, or Plateau? India's Changing Interest in Canadian Versus U.S. Universities

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ABSTRACT

This article assesses changing interest from India in Canadian versus U.S. universities since the 2016 U.S. presidential election, as measured by search activity reports from Google Trends. The findings indicate a rise in Indian interest toward Canadian versus U.S. universities was underway before the election. After controlling for this trend effect, there remains widespread evidence of a substantial shift in interest toward Canadian universities with search activity rising 70%–85% for Canadian versus U.S. universities in the postelection period. This shift in interest toward Canadian universities shows no sign of dissipating. Canadian universities are likely to make further enrollment gains of Indian students versus U.S. counterparts in upcoming recruiting classes.

Keywords: enrollment management, foreign students, higher education marketing, student recruitment

In this research brief, we examine weekly Google search activity within India on Canadian universities and compare it to United States universities to assess what impact the Trump administration has had on shifting India's interest away from U.S. institutions and toward Canadian Universities. This work has been motivated by the substantial growth in recent decades in international students studying in both Canada and the US, and the importance of students from India to both nations. Sa and Sabzalieva (2018) documented that from 2000 to 2014, international student enrollment grew 48% in the US, and a much faster 226% in Canada. By 2017–2018, India accounted for 196,271 students in the US, behind only China at 363,341

(Institute of International Education [IIE], 2018b). A Fall 2018 survey found 71.8% of U.S. institutions are somewhat or very concerned about maintaining their enrollment of Indian students (IIE, 2018a), which is consistent with the 9.6% decline in total new U.S. international student enrollment from 2015–2016 to 2017–2018 (IIE, 2018b).

Canada is well positioned to attract Indian students away from U.S. universities. As noted by several authors, Canada's visa-to-work eligibility-to-citizenship process is much more straightforward than in the US (Garcia & Villarreal, 2014; Gopal, 2016; Hegarty, 2014; Sa & Sabzalieva, 2018). While Canada has made several changes to streamline international students' application processes and visa eligibility, the U.S. has tightened its access (Gopal, 2016), and these trends have been underway prior to the Trump presidency. In 2014, the Government of Canada released its new International Educational Strategy in which India was identified as one of six key source markets for Canada's *Global Market Action Plan* aimed at increasing Canada's international students from 239,111 to over 450,000 from 2011 to 2022 (Government of Canada, 2014).

While it is plausible that rising interest by Indian students in Canadian versus U.S. universities has been underway for several years, the Trump administration's rhetoric and policy also has been notably hostile to immigration for work or education. The administration's actions targeting Muslim students have been particularly severe (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017). As Muslims represent 14% of India's population, this further shifts preferences toward Canadian universities. As explained in the following section, we utilized Google Trends data in our analysis, which provides much more timely assessments of shifts in interest than waiting for lagged releases of annual college enrollment data.

METHODS

Each of the 26 Canadian universities ranked in the 2018 World University Rankings by Times Higher Education (https://www.timeshighereducation.com) were analyzed as search terms in India using Google Trends (https://trends.google.com) with search activity reported for 24 universities. For each Canadian university, four similarly ranked U.S. universities were selected. No U.S. university was used more than once so 96 (24 × 4) unique Canadian–U.S. university pairings were created using the following process. Starting with the highest ranked Canadian university, we selected the two closest U.S. universities ranked above and two closest U.S. universities ranked below the Canadian university. We then selected the next ranked Canadian university and repeated the process, but did not reuse any U.S. universities. If needed, we went to the third closest U.S. university, and repeated this process as necessary. Once below the top 200 ranked universities, the data placed is in groups of 50–200 schools so we randomly selected U.S. universities in the same group as the Canadian university. If insufficient numbers of U.S. matches were in a group, we randomly selected U.S. matches from the group above or below.

For each of the pairings, a Google Trends search was run simultaneously on both the Canadian and the U.S. university. This search data is reported as index values with 100 for the university and week that had the highest search activity. All other

values for both universities are shown as their percent of that max value. These search activity values are given for the past 5 years with weekly data at the time of download. Therefore, this study has weekly search activity data for 96 pairings for the weeks between February 24, 2013 and February 11, 2018: 260 observations per pairing. For each pairing, the relative search activity variable is computed as:

Search = Canadian University Search Value / U.S. University Search Value

This variable was analyzed for each pairing. If we simply tested for differences in average value of the search ratio before and after the presidential election, and there were an underlying positive trend across the 5 years, then findings of more interest in Canadian universities relative to U.S. universities within India for the postelection period might be incorrectly attributed to President Trump's election rather than to simply a continuation of trend. To account for potential trend effects, we instead estimated 96 separate regressions using the equation:

$$Search = b_0 + b_1 \times Trend + b_2 \times ElectDum$$

Where Trend is weekly trend term from 1, 2, … 260

ElectDum = 1 for week of 2016 presidential election or later; = 0 if before election

The regression allows for both the existence of a trend for the relative interest in Canadian versus U.S. universities within India, and a possible shift postelection in the trend line as the pre-election intercept is b_0 and the postelection intercept is $b_0 + b_2$. If b_2 is positive and statistically significant, then there is evidence of a shift in interest toward Canadian universities independent of the trend.

RESULTS

The authors are happy to provide full results from the 96 regressions upon request, but here the key findings are summarized. Using a trend variable in tests for shifts in relative search activity is merited. The b_1 coefficient on trend is never negative and is positive and statistically significant ($p < .10$) for 39 of the 96 pairings. Rising interest within India in Canadian universities relative to U.S. universities was underway prior to the 2016 U.S. presidential election. There is widespread evidence of a postelection upward shift in interest favoring Canadian universities compared to U.S. universities. The shift coefficient b_2 is positive and significant ($p < .10$) 60 times, but negative and significant only three times. Rising relative interest in Canadian universities is strongest for the highest ranked universities. As seen in Table 1, for the six Canadian schools ranked in the Top 200, b_2 is positive and significant ($p < .10$) in 21 of the 24 pairings (87.5%) and never negative and significant. For the four schools in the 201–250 ranking group, b_2 is positive and significant 12 of 16 times (75%) and significantly negative just once. For the 14 schools ranked in groups between 251–800, however, b_2 is positive and significant for 27 of 56 pairings (48%) and significantly negative twice.

Table 1: Tests for Shift in Relative Search Activity Canadian versus U.S. Universities

	R_2	b_0	b_1	b_2	$\frac{(b_0+b_2)}{b_0}$
U of Toronto (22) vs					
Northwestern U (20)	0.26	2.05	−0.001	1.61***	1.79
U of Michigan (21)	0.34	0.96	0.000	0.64***	1.67
Carnegie Mellon U (24)	0.33	1.78	0.002	1.13***	1.63
U of Washington (25)	0.15	1.51	0.002*	0.43***	1.29
U of British Columbia (34) vs					
U of California San Diego (31)	0.15	2.48	0.014***	1.58*	1.64
Georgia Inst. Tech (33)	0.19	1.64	0.013***	2.43***	2.48
U of Wisconsin Madison	0.11	3.14	0.005	2.20***	1.70
U of Illinois Urbana (37)	0.07	2.60	0.006*	0.62	1.24
McGill U (42) vs					
U of Texas Austin (49)	0.26	1.18	0.004**	1.43***	2.21
Brown U (50)	0.12	0.93	0.002**	0.23	1.24
Washington U (51)	0.11	4.21	0.014	3.39**	1.80
U California Santa Barbara (53)	0.13	3.29	0.022**	2.75*	1.84
McMaster U (78) vs					
Ohio State U (70)	0.29	0.34	0.000	0.43***	2.26
Pennsylvania State U (77)	0.12	0.99	−0.001	1.09***	2.11
Michigan State U (83)	0.18	0.40	0.000	0.41***	2.02
Rice U (86)	0.07	0.64	−0.001	0.48***	1.75
U of Montreal (108) vs					
U of Pittsburgh (100)	0.07	0.26	0.009***	−0.57	-1.18
Vanderbilt U (105)	0.11	0.72	0.001	0.82***	2.15
U of Virginia (113)	0.29	0.16	0.001***	0.24***	2.54
Indiana U (117)	0.28	0.10	0.000***	0.11***	2.14
U of Alberta (119) vs					
Georgetown U (123)	0.08	4.05	−0.003	2.76***	1.68
Arizona State U (126)	0.25	0.59	0.001	0.40***	1.68

	R_2	b_0	b_1	b_2	(b_0+b_2) b_0
U of Florida (143)	0.41	0.38	0.001**	0.32***	1.84
U of Notre Dame (150)	0.13	4.65	0.006	3.52***	1.76

Note. University ranking in parentheses; ***$p < .01$, **$p < .05$. *$p < .10$, asterisks not shown for b_0 as $p < .10$ 86 of 96 times. Other Canadian universities by ranking analyzed were: (201–250) Calgary, Ottawa, Waterloo, Western; (251–300) Dalhousie, Laval, Queen's, Simon Fraser; (301–350) Victoria; (351–400) York; (401–500) Manitoba, Saskatchewan; (501–600) Carleton, Concordia, Memorial; (601–800) Northern BC, Regina, Windsor.

To assess how large the typical shift in interest was toward Canadian universities, we examined values for $(b_0 + b_2)/b_0$, which gives the shift in intercept value scaled by initial intercept. Across all 96 regressions $(b_0 + b_2)/b_0$ has an average value of 2.0 and median of 1.71. Across just the 63 regressions with significant b_2 values, there is an average value of 2.34 and a median of 1.84. Using the median values, there has been an approximate rise in search activity of 70%–85% for Canadian universities relative to U.S. universities (given 1.71 and 1.84) even after controlling for a rising trend effect.

To investigate if these large shifts in search activity toward Canadian universities are persisting or dissipating, we matched the first 16 postelection weeks to the last 16 weekly observations in the data set which were 1 year later. We then tested for differences in average value of the Canada/U.S. search activity ratio between the two periods. If the "Trump bump" is dissipating, then we should reject the null of equal average values in favor of lower values in the later period. The null, however, was rejected only once in the 96 pairings in favor of a lower value in the later period. For 66 of the 96 pairings, the null cannot be rejected, which is consistent with the notion of a Trump plateau, an initial shift in interest toward Canadian universities that is persisting. Also note that for 29 of the 96 pairings, the null was rejected in favor of a higher value in later periods, results indicative of both a Trump bump and ongoing increases in Indian search activity favoring Canadian over U.S. universities. Again, complete results are available from the authors upon request.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

We found evidence of a widespread shift in India's interest in Canadian universities relative to U.S. universities following the 2016 U.S. presidential election, even after controlling for ongoing trends in that direction. The typical rise in searches for Canadian versus similarly ranked U.S. universities was 70%–85%. Given the emphasis on research universities in the study's sample, these findings are consistent with Cantwell (2015), who argued that U.S. research and doctoral universities are more exposed to shifts in international student enrollment. We found the shift toward Canadian universities was most pronounced for higher ranking schools, consistent with prior reviews of the research literature (Cantwell, 2015; Garcia & Villarreal, 2014) that concluded reputational rankings significantly influence international

students' choices. Ergo, it is reasonable to find the greatest evidence of interest switching among these schools.

Overall, there is no evidence that the favorable shift in interest toward Canadian universities has abated as we move further past the 2016 election. For 96 pairings, only one had significantly lower search values for Canadian versus U.S. universities 1 year out from the immediate postelection period. This indicates Canadian universities are likely to make further gains compared with U.S. universities in the enrollment of students from India in the 2018–2019 academic year and beyond. The methods used in this research brief can be applied to many other types of comparisons between identified pairs of schools based on other factors. We encourage others to explore using search data changes over time to assess the impact of various policy changes or economic shocks upon their selected institutions of interest.

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