

News in focus



Residents of Ottawa held a vigil for people killed when a Ukraine International Airlines jet crashed in Iran.

CANADIAN UNIVERSITIES MOURN RESEARCHERS WHO DIED IN IRAN PLANE CRASH

Victims include two computer scientists returning from their wedding in Iran and a student about to begin his PhD.

By Nidhi Subbaraman

Canadian universities are mourning more than two dozen faculty members and students who died when Ukraine International Airlines flight PS752 crashed in Iran on 8 January.

One hundred and seventy-six people were killed when the Boeing 737-800 crashed shortly after take-off from Tehran. At least 57 victims were Canadian, and, according to the country's prime minister, Justin Trudeau, 138 people on the flight were en route to Canada.

"What happened yesterday was a tragedy, a tragedy that shocked not only Canada but the world," Trudeau said at a news conference on 9 January, calling for a "thorough investigation" into the causes of the crash. Initial reports from the United States and Canada pointed to an Iranian surface-to-air missile.

On 11 January, Iran's military announced that it had unintentionally shot down the plane. "The Islamic Republic of Iran deeply regrets this disastrous mistake," Iran's President Hassan Rouhani said on Twitter.

Across Canada, universities lowered flags to half mast and planned gatherings to honour

the dead. "I want to express my heartfelt grief. Words simply cannot express the loss I know we all are feeling," David Turpin, president and vice-chancellor at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, wrote on 8 January. About 50 people attended a vigil at the Alberta Legislature Building on 8 January, lighting candles and placing photos on the steps, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation reported.

University of Alberta engineers Pedram Mousavi and Mojgan Daneshmand and their two young daughters were among those who died. "They were big deals," says James Hogan, a materials engineer at Alberta.

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Hogan lost a graduate student, Amir Saeedinia, who was travelling from Iran to begin his PhD in Hogan's lab. "He worked very hard to create this opportunity for himself. This was just a start for him in Canada – he was coming to join the group today."

On 9 January, the university identified seven other community members who were listed as passengers. They include Arash Pourzarabi and Pouneh Gorji, graduate students in computer science who were returning to Canada after their wedding in Iran. Turpin said that university flags would be lowered to half mast to remember the victims, and a memorial service would be held.

'We are all heartbroken'

Peyman Servati, an electrical engineer at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, said on Twitter that he was "so so devastated" by the deaths of Mousavi, Daneshmand and their daughters – his "smart and kind friends".

The University of Toronto announced that flags at its three campuses would fly at half mast in memory of at least six students who were expected to have been on the plane. "We are all heartbroken," university president Meric Gertler said in a statement.

At least five University of Windsor community members were also listed as passengers, the Ontario university said in a statement. They included Hamidreza Setareh Kokab, who had begun studying for a PhD in mechanical engineering last January in Jill Urbanic's lab. "He would have been successful in both academia and industry. We lost a bright light," says Urbanic. Kokab's wife Samira Bashiri, a biology research assistant, also died on the flight.

At Western University in London, Ontario, about 250 people gathered on 8 January to remember 4 students who were killed in the crash. And the University of Waterloo confirmed that two of its students had died.

Flags at the University of Guelph were lowered to mourn for two university graduate students: Ghanimat Azhdari of the Department of Geography, Environment and Geomatics, and Milad Ghasemi Ariani of the Department of Marketing and Consumer Studies.

"Milad had just started his PhD with us in the fall, so much hope, gone," said Statia Elliot, a marketing academic at the University of Guelph, on Twitter. "My heart goes out to family and friends."

Faisal Moola, an ecologist at the University of Guelph, said that it had been an "awful 48 hours for our students and faculty". "Ghanimat was such a proud member of the Qashqai Indigenous tribe in Iran and spoke with such love for her people and her ancestral territories," he wrote on Facebook. "She was a powerful and passionate young leader in defence of Indigenous Peoples across the planet and her life's work continues."



SIGRID GOMBERT/CULTURA/SPL

Chinese scientists are encouraged to study abroad and then return home.

CHINESE ACADEMICS WHO WORK ABROAD ARE SLOWER TO WIN HONOUR

Local networks help to speed researchers to highly prestigious Changjiang scholarship.

By Hepeng Jia

Does working in a foreign country enhance the career of a Chinese scientist? For years, China has been encouraging researchers to study abroad and then bring their expertise home. But a study finds that returnees take longer than peers who remained in China to win one of the country's highest scientific honours.

Of the roughly 1,500 Chinese nationals awarded a Changjiang scholarship in the sciences between 1999 and 2015, those who received a PhD from a foreign university had held their doctorate for 25% longer – about an extra 2.3 years – when they won the scholarship than those who earned their PhD in China. That's the finding of a study led by Tang Li, a public-policy researcher at Fudan University in Shanghai, China.

The prestigious Changjiang scholarship is awarded by the Chinese Ministry of Education. It comes with a yearly stipend of 200,000 yuan (US\$29,000) and is seen as more important than a salary or even individual professorships in terms of conferring respect among peers and indicating scientific achievement.

International mobility has been shown to boost scientists' skills and networks and, once academics return to their homelands, to

increase the country's international expertise and exposure to global research practices. Institutions need to better recognize the benefits of international training and reward it, Tang says. But the results of the study, published last year, suggest that the advantages of overseas training might not be well recognized (F. Li and L. Tang *Sci. Public Policy* **46**, 518–529; 2019). The researchers also report that local connections help academics obtain

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the honour faster, and that this could explain why returnees are at a disadvantage.

Over the past decade, numerous national recruitment programmes have attracted Chinese-born academics back to the country from foreign institutions, often with promises of higher salaries and research funding. The best known, the Thousand Talents Plan, has come under scrutiny in the United States in the past year for potentially being a threat to US research and intellectual property. Academics returning to China from leading international