

VALUE

BEYOND DOLLARS



**International Students
and the Future of Canada's
Post-Secondary Education System**



CASA
Canadian Alliance of
Student Associations

ACAE
Alliance canadienne des
associations étudiantes

Value Beyond Dollars:

International Students and the Future of Canada's Post-Secondary Education System

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Foreword

My journey in Canada began over a decade ago, as a young 16-year-old individual arriving in the Waterloo Region. Beyond the anticipated cold weather, I embarked on a journey of personal and academic growth in a country whose education system was highly esteemed by my parents back in Nigeria. The welcoming nature of Canadians, a trait well-known even then, made me feel at home from the start.

My experience in Canada has been a profound learning journey, extending beyond academic pursuits into personal and professional realms. Through numerous part-time jobs and volunteer opportunities, I explored the entrepreneurial space, connecting with individuals from diverse walks of life. This journey has strengthened my passion for understanding people and serving them. I've been fortunate to be surrounded by advocates of servant leadership, especially in my work with Conestoga Students Inc (CSI).

This journey has provided me with a new perspective on the invaluable contributions immigrants, particularly international students, bring to Canada. Many of these individuals are highly skilled, hardworking, and respectful, arriving with dreams of contributing to both society and the economy. Whether pursuing programs in healthcare, information technology, business, social work, the trades, or engaging in graduate studies, international students are driven by a desire to benefit the society they aspire to call home. A significant number of them go on to establish businesses that propel the Canadian economy forward.

However, the challenges international students face in Canada cannot be ignored. CSI has been a staunch advocate for addressing housing issues in our region, crucial given the impact of skyrocketing rent prices across the country. Students have approached us with concerns about job opportunities, a vital aspect of their educational and professional experience. Barriers such as the lack of Canadian experience and an insufficient supply of opportunities in students' communities have been identified. The common theme is that affordability has become a major challenge for international students, and we can do more to support them, just as they support us.

At Conestoga Students Inc., it is our distinct pleasure to support this research paper. In unison with our colleagues nationwide, we understand that the value of international students extends far beyond their financial contributions to Canada's GDP. It encompasses our continuous evolution as a nation that values diverse perspectives and individuals. It involves the cultivation of a rich culture and community as we warmly welcome new residents. It acknowledges the invaluable skills and unwavering diligence that international students bring, enriching our various industries as we aspire to be a nation filled with talent, innovation, creativity, and passionate citizens.

I look forward to the continued growth and enrichment of Canada through the diversity of its people.

» Nelson Chukwuma
President of Conestoga Students Inc.



CASA Principles

CASA advocates for a post-secondary education system that is accessible, affordable, innovative and of the highest quality. Students and post secondary institutions are increasingly recognizing that a key component of an innovative and top quality education is interconnectedness with the world. One of the most widespread, immediate, and impactful means of enhancing interconnectedness is welcoming international students to study in Canada.

International students contribute in diverse and meaningful ways to the quality of education on their campuses, to the strength of the Canadian economy and to all aspects of Canadian culture and society. As such, it is imperative that, like other students, they too receive the supports they need to thrive during their studies.

Our Vision for International Students

CASA believes that international students are invaluable members of postsecondary communities. International students directly contribute billions of dollars to the Canadian economy, and as highly skilled and educated individuals, many go on to become contributing members of the Canadian workforce across all sectors of the economy.¹ International students enrich dialogues on campus, offer essential cross-cultural perspectives, and encourage a wider awareness of pressing national and international issues.

CASA would like to see concrete actions designed to ensure that international students experience a truly high quality education in a welcoming and inclusive environment. CASA holds the following core beliefs about the international student experience in Canada:

- » International students add immeasurably to the campus experience of all students and to the quality of post-secondary education in Canada;
- » International students contribute value to the Canadian economy and to Canada's diversity and culture as a whole. International students should be encouraged, supported and valued throughout their studies in Canada and should receive the highest quality educational experience possible;
- » Supports should be available to ensure that qualified international students from diverse economic backgrounds can study in Canada;
- » The procedures, paperwork and forms required to study in Canada should be consistent, accessible and simple to navigate;
- » As potential permanent residents and citizens, post-secondary institutions and governments in Canada must fully value the skills and experiences international students bring to Canada, and gain while studying in Canada.

Introduction

Context: A Growing Focus on Attracting International Students to Canada

Over the last half century, Canada has built a strong global reputation as a premier destination for immigration and multiculturalism.² Immigration has not only countered Canada's aging demographics and fuelled economic growth, but has also further supplemented Canada's post-secondary education system. Canada's skilled immigrants are younger, more educated, and have stronger earning potential.³ As a result, the federal government has increased Canada's immigration numbers in recent years.

Canada's Immigration Strategy aims to build on this trend by increasing the number of immigrants to 500,000 per year by 2025,⁴ and international students represent a critical element of this strategy. Since the mid-2000s, the number of international students studying in Canada has grown significantly, up from nearly 40,000 in the late 1990s to nearly 420,000 in 2020/21.⁵ In order to supplement this growth, the number of study permits issued annually has also significantly increased in recent years, up from 400,600 (in 2019) to 551,405 (in 2022)⁶ as shown by Chart 1.⁷ As of December 31, 2022, there were 807,750 international students with valid study permits, an all-time high record number, as shown by Figure 1.^{8 9}

The rapid rise in international students in Canada has also been driven by post-secondary institutions (PSI), who have increasingly become reliant on higher international student tuition fees to supplement stagnant provincial transfers and declining revenues.¹¹ Provincial government transfers to PSIs have stayed relatively constant since 2010, resulting in a 21% drop in provincial transfers per-student, on average, since 2008-09.¹² This decline in per-student funding is ultimately the result of provincial expenditures remaining relatively constant while enrolments having increased significantly.¹³

With international student tuition having increased 40.2% over the past five years to a staggering \$38,081 per year in 2023/24,¹⁴ there is a very lucrative incentive for PSIs to increase international enrolments, particularly with annual tuition increases exceeding well beyond many domestic tuition caps of two to five percent.

Currently international students account for 17.6% of university students and 22% of college enrolments in Canadian post-secondary institutions.¹⁵ While international students account for a total of 235,422 university enrolments (10.2% annual increase) and 153,360 college enrolments (19.5% annual increase),¹⁶ in 2019/20, domestic student enrolments actually decreased by 0.9%.¹⁷

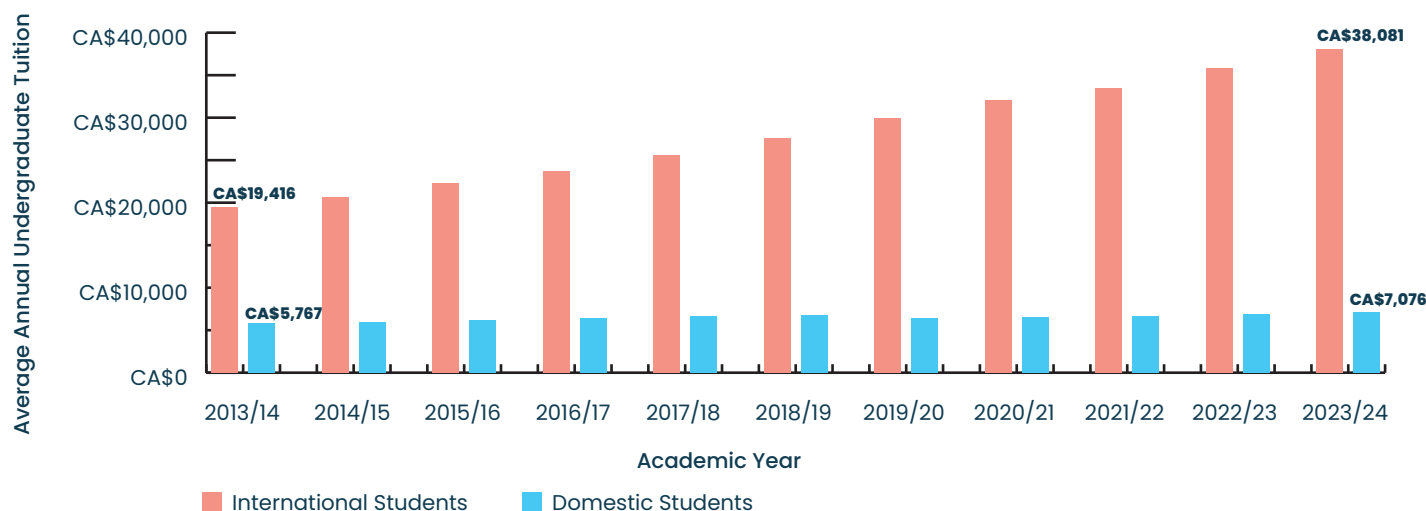
Figure 1 – Total Number of International Students with Valid Study Permits per Year



* Figure 1 – Note that figures in red are projections provided by IRCC statistics, and are factored into their latest immigration plans.¹⁰

Source: Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, 2023. <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Z4Xp8tGetbtddIDZ-jO031XTCBP6e5CAj/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=103349192393860536893&rtopof=true&sd=true>

Figure 2 – Average Annual Undergraduate Tuition in Canada, by Student Demographic Group



Source: Statistics Canada, "Canadian and international tuition fees by level of study (current dollars)", <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/tl/tbl/en/tv.action?pid=3710004501&cubeTimeFrame.startYear=2013+%2F+2014&cubeTimeFrame.endYear=2023+%2F+2024&referencePeriods=20130101%2C20230101>

In particular, this trend is most prominent in Canada's Atlantic provinces, where international enrolments in both full-time and part-time programs have seen the largest proportional growth across Atlantic universities.¹⁸ According to the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission (MPHEC), the number of international students attending Maritime universities has increased 103% in the last decade, while a simultaneous decrease in the numbers of domestic students was registered at the same institutions.¹⁹ This includes a 126% increase in Nova Scotia, 210% increase in Prince Edward Island, and 22% increase in New Brunswick.²⁰

More broadly, Universities Canada noted that: "today almost all institutions in Canada and around the world engage to some degree in activities aimed at forging global connections and building global competencies among their students, faculty and administrative units. Developing such activities at many levels within universities is now a central part of institutional planning, structures and programming – a phenomenon known as the internationalization of higher education."²¹

However, as a result of such rapid growth, there has been a great amount of backlash towards international students and the federal government surrounding international student numbers. In the summer of 2023, it was announced that the federal government was exploring implementing a cap on international students as a means of addressing challenges in the housing market.²² While this has yet to be implemented, it continues to be a policy area that CASA is monitoring, and one that raises concerns for international students.

The Benefits of International Students Studying in Canada

International students bring significant cultural, social, and economic benefits to Canada²³, while enriching the educational experiences of the entire student population on Canadian post-secondary campuses. A diverse post-secondary experience is instrumental in preparing Canada's students to work in an increasingly interdependent global community. International students contribute greatly to the exchange of ideas, expertise, research, and scholarship, while introducing diverse perspectives and unique solutions to the key issues of the day. A study of domestic student responses to international students found the majority of those surveyed "reported that their perspective about the world had been enriched since making international friends (or in many cases, acquaintances) at school" and "that the growing international student presence has led to increased cross-cultural sensitivity and awareness among students on campus."²⁴

International students, moreover, are prospective ambassadors who can be more than just a voice for Canada abroad (sharing Canadian interests, culture and values). They also strengthen international collaboration in higher education, research, trade, and diplomacy. **According to Statistics Canada, 3 in 5 international students who were employed during their program or after graduation become landed immigrants within 10 years, representing over 833,000 permanent residents and Canadian citizens since 2010 that now play important roles in the labour force, key industries, and the broader economy.**²⁵

International student contributions to the economy come in a variety of forms and benefit diverse sectors, from expenses directly related to education and purchasing consumer goods to the tourism dollars spent when family and friends visit.²⁶ Available data from Statistics Canada reveals broad economic benefits stemming directly from the presence of international students on, and off, Canadian campuses. **International students contribute \$22.3 billion in economic benefit, 27 supporting 218,500 jobs, as well as adding \$3.7 billion in tax revenue.**^{28 29} In fact, the federal government cites that the economic benefit of international students is “greater than exports of auto parts, lumber or aircraft.”³⁰

“I do plan to stay in the country if I qualify for permanent residence in Canada as I can see the future for myself here in Canada, and getting permanent employment with excellent benefits.”⁷¹

International student attending college in New Brunswick, enrolled 1 to 2 years

For international students who go on to secure Post Graduate Work Permits (PGWP), this economic benefit is even more pronounced, with 3 in 4 reporting annual T4 earnings, numbers which have grown more than 13 times in size since 2008.³¹ Such economic contributions are widely recognized in countries that attract large numbers of international students. In the United States, for example, international students represent an estimated \$32 billion economic contribution to the American economy.^{32 33} In Australia the contribution is approximately \$29 billion³⁴, while in the United Kingdom it is estimated at £58 billion.³⁵

In addition to the money they inject into the Canadian economy, international students who decide to stay in Canada after their studies are essential to addressing the ongoing and increasingly imperative issue of a skilled worker shortage in Canada. **Both during and after their studies, international students play an important role in sustaining and reinvigorating the Canadian labour market.** International student labour market participation has increased tenfold over the past two decades.³⁶

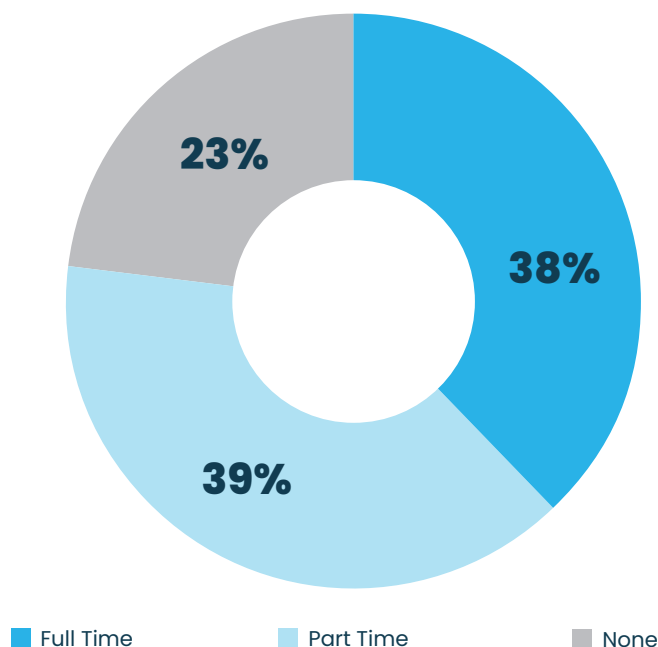
The post-secondary education sector is increasingly investing in, and focusing on, work-integrated learning (WIL) as a core dimension of the

educational experience. In the past, these types of experiences were mostly available to students in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields – fields which often have clear market equivalents. However, more recently there has been focused efforts to provide more students, regardless of field of study, with an opportunity to apply their academic skills in a workplace setting.

“Working in Canada helps me understand the work culture and the market. Also paying rent and bills is a driving factor to work.”⁷¹

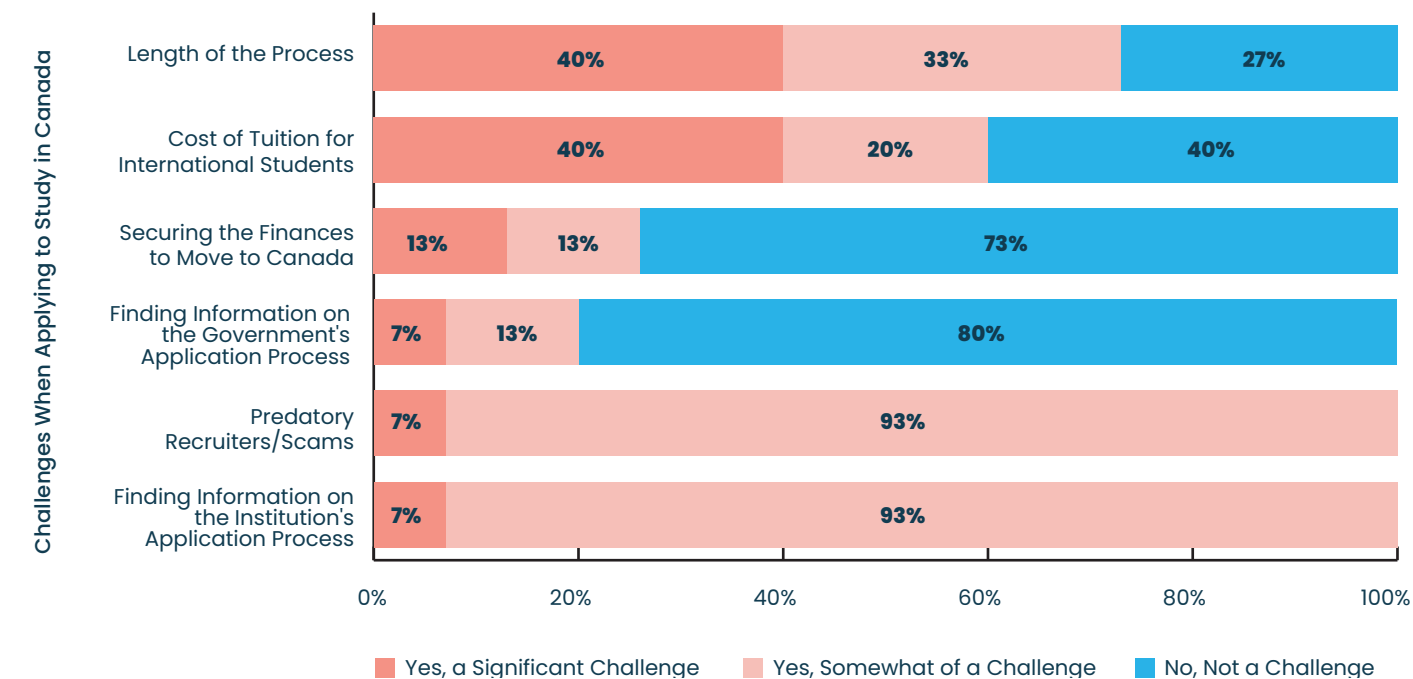
International student attending college in British Columbia, enrolled 1 to 2 years

Figure 3– International Students by Level of Candian Work Experience



Despite the growing importance placed on work-integrated learning, international students face additional barriers to accessing these opportunities. Previously, if the WIL opportunity was not deemed an essential part of an international student’s academic program, they were required to apply for a separate permit in order to pursue the program.³⁷ However, with the temporary lifting of the working hours cap, this requirement has also been temporarily lifted.³⁸ If this cap on working hours is reinstated, international students will once again face significant barriers to WIL opportunities, and significant processing delays

Figure 4 – International Student Challenges When Applying to Study in Canada



for permits.³⁹ Processing wait times can create a significant barrier for students who may not have WIL opportunities lined up at the time of applying, as these opportunities may no longer exist or be filled by the time permits have been processed, or international students may not be aware of the significant wait times for processing these applications and thus apply too late to receive approval in time for their opportunity to start.

found that among the class of 2018, “among those employed, median earnings were \$52,000 for those who participated in WIL, compared to \$45,000 for those who did not participate in WIL.”⁴² As such, due to the barriers international students face with respect to accessing WIL opportunities, international students have lower employment rates and lower median earnings than their domestic counterparts.⁴³

“The federal government should work on the backlog in applications because it takes so long for people to hear back from the immigration office.”

International Student at the University of Prince Edward Island⁴⁰, enrolled 2 to 3 years

However, one of the key benefits to WIL is that it exposes students to employers within their community, and enables students to find employment within their field of study. A 2020 Statistics Canada report highlights that of the graduating class of 2015, 88.4% of those who participated in work-integrated learning have a job that is somewhat or closely related to their field of study, compared to 71% that did not participate in a WIL opportunity.⁴¹ Furthermore, the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission (MPHEC)

Figure 5 – International Students Working in Canada by Labour Sector

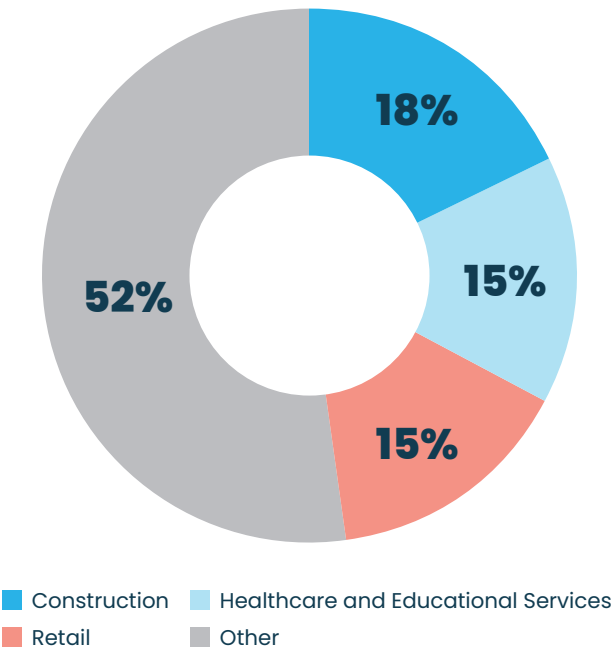
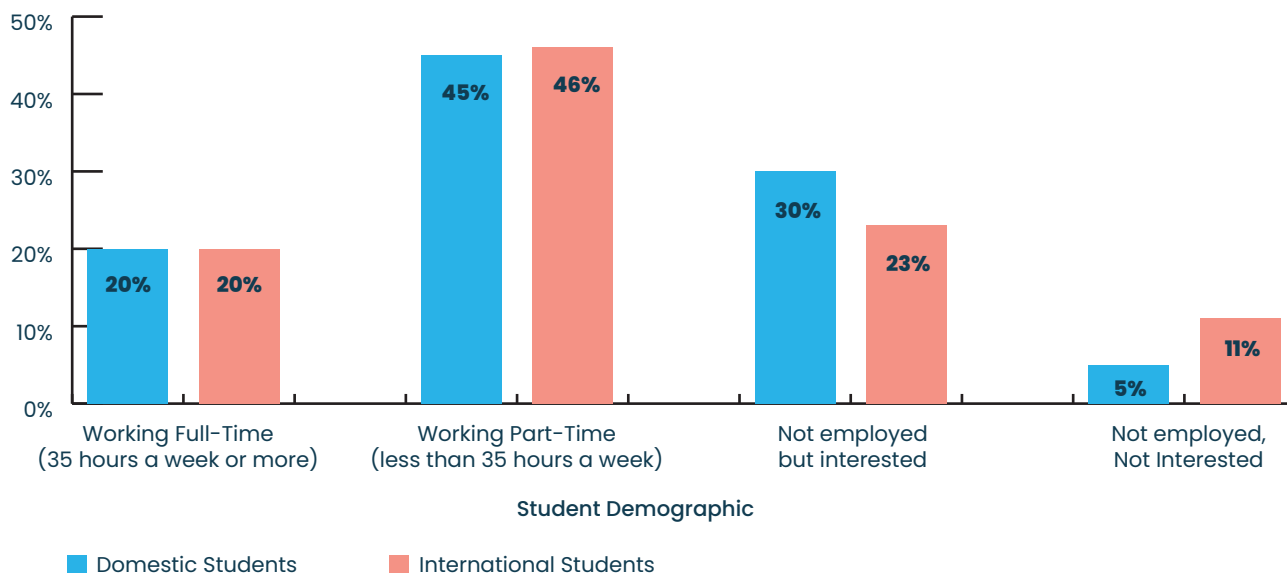


Figure 6 – Employment Status by Student Demographic Group

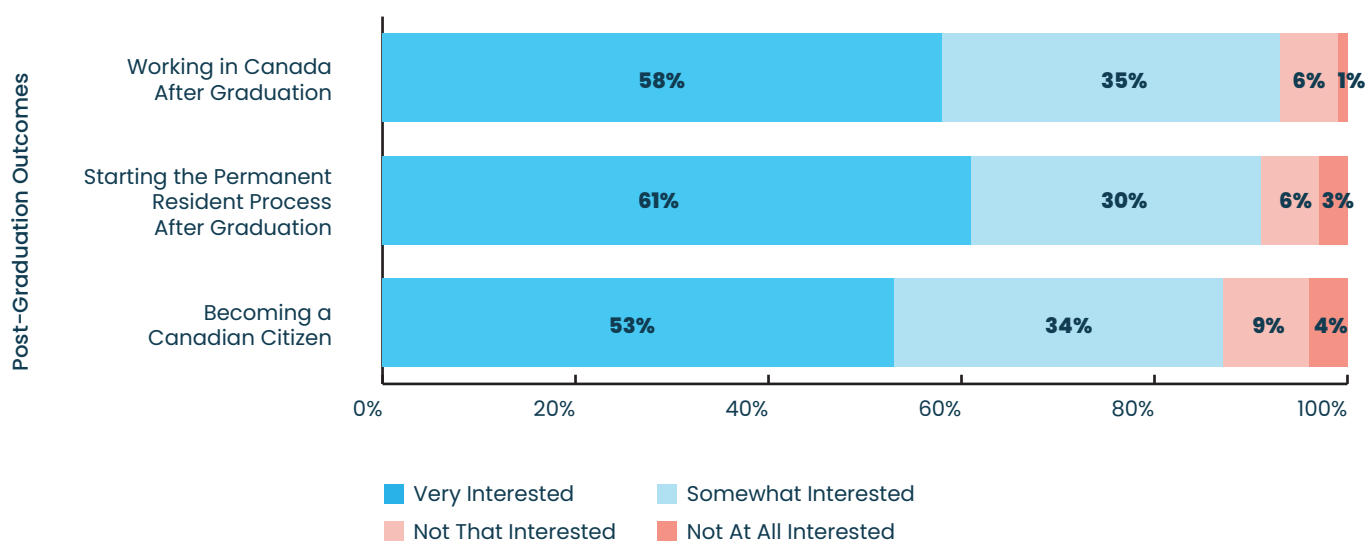


According to the latest 2023 Abacus Data survey results, the vast majority (77%) of international students have either part-time or full-time Canadian work experience, with employment strongly concentrated in high demand sectors, including construction (18%), healthcare and educational services (15%), and retail (15%).⁴⁴ The majority of international students either worked full-time (20%) or part-time (45%) jobs during the 2022/23 academic year, and 50% worked full-time jobs, and 24% worked part-time during the summer.⁴⁵

“Canada’s growing shortage of highly skilled labour is becoming desperate,” the Chamber of Commerce has argued, “threatening our ability to

keep up in a global-knowledge-based economy.”⁴⁶ This issue will only become more acute as baby boomers retire and as the number of retirees is predicted to surpass newcomers entering the workforce. Recognizing this, the Advisory Group on Canada’s International Education Strategy states that “International students also help address the shortage of skilled labour that diminish Canada’s long-term capacity for research and innovation...”⁴⁷ **Abacus Data results for 2023 not only indicate that three-quarters of international students have Canadian work experience, but that 92% have a strong interest in working in Canada post-graduation, with the majority of students intending to apply for a Post-Graduation Work Permit (PGWP) or permanent residency upon graduation.**⁴⁸

Figure 7 – International Students Interest in Post-Graduation Outcomes by Ranking



The Challenges Faced by International Students

While an increasing emphasis is being placed on recruiting international students, and while the wide-ranging benefits of international students to Canada are clear, a significant gap separates this rhetoric from the actual experiences of international students. Canada sits behind several leading OECD countries, including the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Germany, in its popularity as a destination for international study.⁴⁹ According to the Canadian Chamber of Commerce: “international education is a microcosm of the global competition for talent. It is a competition that is fought on the basis of a country’s educational reputation, the opportunity to immigrate, and the timeliness of entry.”⁵⁰ Clearly, attracting more international students is directly tied to the ability of Canadian post-secondary institutions, as well as provincial and federal levels of government, to make the case for Canada as an appealing, respected, and top quality destination for academic pursuits and career development.

While branding campaigns are often the focus, there is a more straightforward way to appeal to

international students: by ensuring that those who study in Canada truly experience an education of the highest quality in a welcoming, supportive, and inclusive environment wherein they are fully appreciated and valued. Post-secondary institutions have a responsibility to deliver a quality and innovative academic experience to all students, including the significant number of international students pursuing studies across Canada. In 2022, there were 807,750 international students studying in Canada.⁵¹ **Despite the high number of enrolments, the tuition these students pay, and the widespread contributions they make to their campuses and communities, international students encounter significant problems while studying in Canada.**

As the numbers of international students in Canada have grown, concerns have arisen that the goal of improving Canada’s rank as a destination for post-secondary education is less about the intrinsic value of attracting more diverse perspectives and improving connectivity than it is about extracting revenues from the tuition international students pay. Tuition fees for all post-secondary students have risen in recent decades across the board, and this is particularly true for international students at the undergraduate level. **With international student undergraduate tuition having increased 40.2%**

Figure 8 – Tuition Costs for International Students Over the Past Decade (Undergraduate-Level)

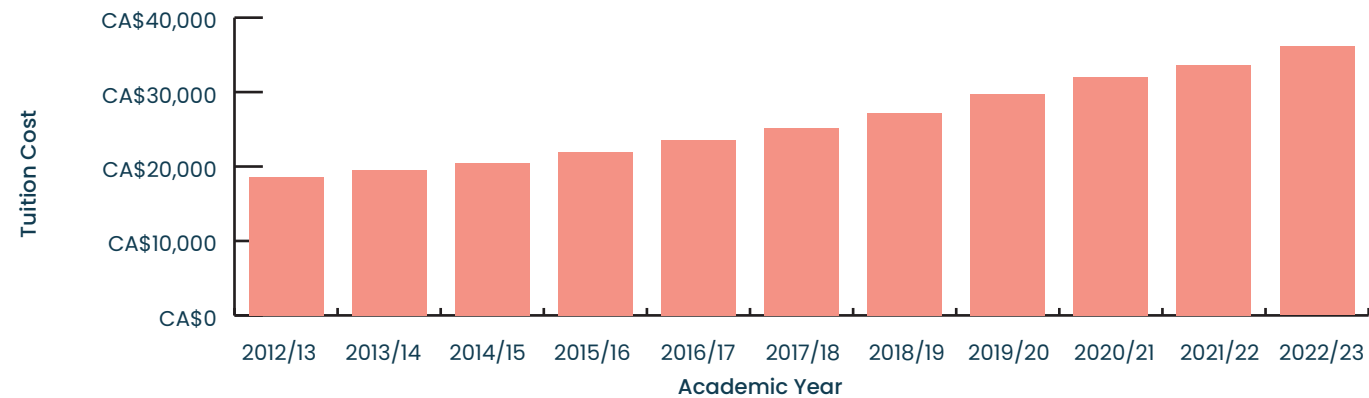
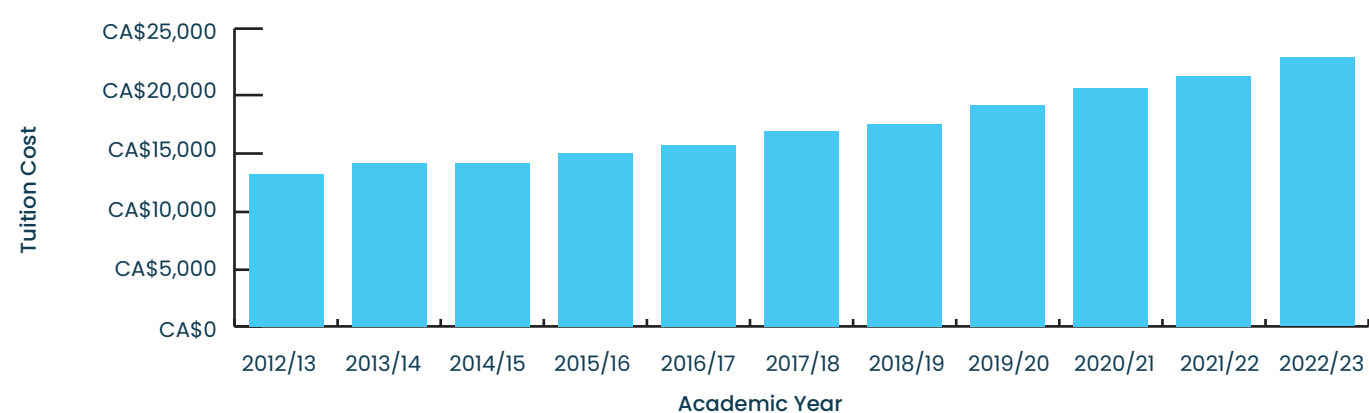


Figure 9 – Tuition Costs for International Students Over the Past Decade (Graduate-Level)



over the past five years to a staggering \$38,081 per year in 2023/24,⁵² this provides a very lucrative incentive for institutions to increase enrolments, particularly with annual tuition increases far higher than many domestic tuition caps.

"The tuition and living costs are so high, which makes it impossible not to work."⁷¹

International student attending college in British Columbia, enrolled 1 to 2 years

Caps on domestic tuition annual increases are widely used by many provinces across the country, ostensibly to protect Canadian students from fee exploitation.

Provinces with a Domestic Tuition Cap include:

- » **British Columbia (2%)**⁵³
- » **Alberta (2%)**⁵⁴
- » **Saskatchewan (5%)**⁵⁵
- » **Manitoba (5%)**⁵⁶
- » **Ontario (5%, among certain programs)**⁵⁷

When compared with these domestic tuition caps, international student fees have grown significantly over the past decade. Year-on-year increases have risen above even the highest domestic tuition caps every year over the last decade.⁵⁸

The growing pressure on institutions to recruit more and more international students has unfortunately led to many instances of exploitation. Given the intensely competitive recruitment environment, education agents ("agents") have emerged to oversee the recruitment practices for nearly 80% of institutions across Canada, according to the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada.⁵⁹ Agents ostensibly offer education advising services to students/parents for a fee and/or a commission paid by the institution (predominantly smaller, private institutions and career colleges). **According to Abacus Data results, for those with no family or friend connections in Canada, 1 in 3 international students mentioned using an agent or recruiter to assist them with the application process.**

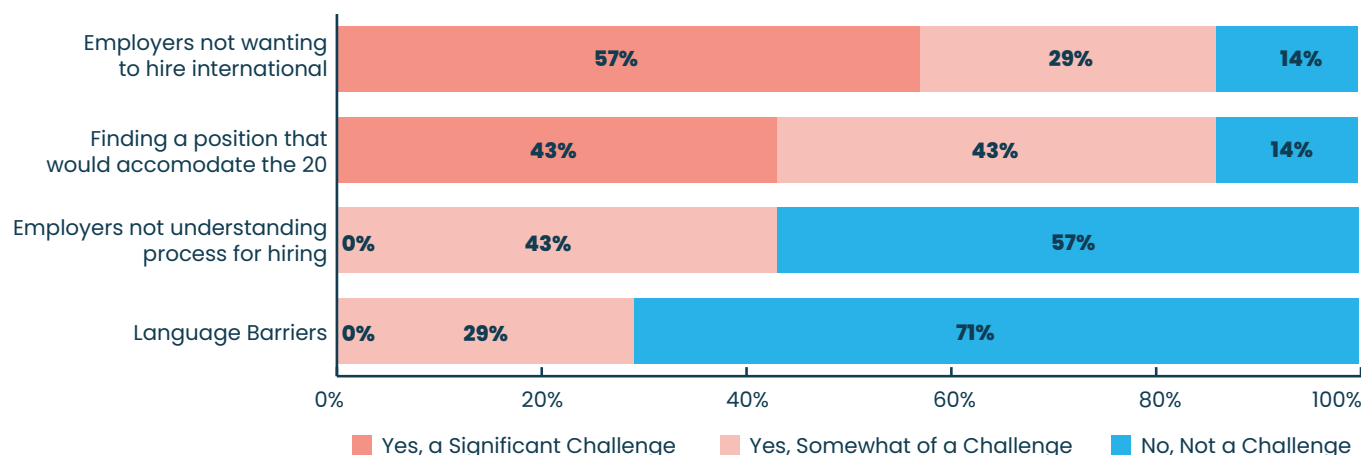
Unfortunately, regulation and oversight of agents varies widely across the country, and while some

agents are required to meet strict ethics standards, some institutions do not provide any agent oversight mechanisms or have any agent-training resources in place, leaving potential students vulnerable to agent misconduct and exploitation. **Many media outlets have reported heinous incidents of exploitation over the past several years, including fake Canadian college admission letters,⁶⁰ rescinded admission offers,⁶¹ targeted exploitation schemes,⁶² and acceptance letter scams⁶³ that have had severely damaging physical and psychological impacts on thousands of international students across Canada.** The most infamous case to date involves 700 international students from Jalandhar, India facing immediate deportation orders for using admission offer letters (provided by an agent) that were later determined to be fake, and falsified without the knowledge or approval of the students.⁶⁴ The Toronto Star, which originally broke the story on March 18, 2023, indicated of the situation that: "There is a mushrooming of these hundreds of ghost or fraudulent consultants."⁶⁵

In fact, these cases of misconduct have been so widespread that the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship announced an emergency task force responsible for analyzing "every individual case that is the subject of a removal order on the basis of fraudulent letters of acceptance"⁶⁶ ⁶⁷ on June 14 2023.⁶⁸ The 2023 Fall Economic Statement further echoed the federal government's intention to protect international students from these fraudulent entities, even introducing a new framework to entice designated learning institutions to provide housing and other supports for international students.⁶⁹ Besides the increased risks of exploitation by education agents, intensive international student recruitment has also subjected many international students to worsening housing and financial situations, which has had significant impacts on their physical and mental health outcomes.

Overall, Canadian post-secondary institutions' increasing dependence on international tuition fees to replace declining provincial public funding not only impacts the accessibility of higher education for students as post-secondary becomes more expensive, but exposes international students to many additional physical, mental, and socio-economic concerns. Other countries who attract a significant number of international students have voiced concerns about relying on the tuition they pay to cover broader institutional funding needs. As Universities UK reports, for example, "[t]he higher education sector as a whole now sources around one-eighth of its income from international students' tuition fees. Stagnating or fluctuating demand from prospective students overseas can therefore leave institutions vulnerable or affect their ability to plan

Figure 10 –International Student Challenges for Finding a Job in Canada (2023)



strategically in the long-term.”⁷⁰ **CASA is concerned by the significant increases to international student tuition year over year, especially the unpredictability of these increases and the lack of focus on the quality of the educational experience or comprehensiveness of the supports offered to students.**

“I think many stages of the process need more explanation and clarification. For example, for the Visa process, the required documents were unclear, and everyone put different types of documents which was a great confusion for many students.”⁷¹

International Student attending College in British Columbia, enrolled 1 to 2 years

Also concerning are the specific challenges international students face when seeking to obtain the documents necessary to begin their studies in Canada. Students encounter obstacles and a lack of clarity in the application process when obtaining visas for themselves and, in instances when they come to study in Canada as members of families, for spouses and common-law partners. Additionally, a lack of funding opportunities prevents the enrolment of international students who might have lots to offer the overall quality of post-secondary education in Canada, but who come from lower income backgrounds.

Furthermore, once in Canada, international students face social and academic barriers.⁷² Many international students encounter difficulties integrating into their campus and community environment. This is especially concerning given

that many international students will make decisions about whether to stay and work in Canada following graduation based on their study experiences. International students also encounter challenges when seeking to work while studying in Canada, and when aiming to stay and work in Canada following graduation.

These barriers expand into employment barriers as well. 86% of international students reported that finding a job which will accommodate the 20-hour-per-week cap was their top challenge to finding employment.⁷³ It is evident that as a result of the historical cap on international student working hours, international students are facing challenges to accessing work opportunities in Canada that are critical to their integration into Canada post-graduation.⁷⁴

Furthermore, many international students come to Canada having held jobs in their home countries; oftentimes, their work experience is discredited as not being ‘Canadian work experience’ or experience in Canadian labour markets. This poses barriers for many international students, who are then required to undergo ‘upskilling’ to receive credentials suitable to federal and provincial standards, or may be required to take on entry-level positions to demonstrate skills that they already have.

By failing to recognize and value international students’ pre-existing skills, credentials, and experience, it is plausible that we are leaving a great deal of untapped economic and cultural potential on the table – which is likely to have lasting impacts on retention of international students post-graduation, as well as economic outcomes of these international students.

CASA advocates for several policies aimed at improving quality of life and education for international students and recent graduates.

CASA Policies on International Students

1. Investing in the Quality of the International Student Experience

Principles

The Canadian government and post-secondary institutions in Canada are increasingly focused on attracting international students to study in Canada. It is the responsibility of the government and post-secondary institutions to ensure that these same students have a positive and high quality experience, through the provision of appropriate programs and services and clear visa and study permit processes.

Concerns

International students continue to face social and academic barriers while pursuing their education in Canada.⁷⁵ One recent study found that in addition to experiences of “culture shock” and challenges around language, “[m]any international students did not ‘feel at home’ in Canada because they not only faced difficulties making friends but in some cases they also encountered discrimination.”⁷⁶

Too often, orientation programs and student services are inadequate in helping international students transition to their new environment and in facilitating their full participation in academic, social, and campus life. Support services, such as academic writing centres, counseling services, and trained international student advisors, can considerably enrich the international student experience. Post-secondary institutions and the federal government both have a responsibility to meet the needs of international students by providing services to ensure a positive integration into the Canadian academic landscape. While many domestic students report positive experiences related to international students on their campuses, one study also noted “that the values of internationalization are still in many ways adopted only superficially by Canadian students, and require strengthening.”⁷⁷ Internationalization programming on campuses would therefore create a more welcoming and supportive environment and higher quality education for all students.

Many international students also encounter frustrating experiences while seeking to obtain necessary visas and study permits. This is particularly true for the numerous international students who come to study in Canada with families. The

average age of international students is higher than domestic students in Canada.⁷⁸ Spouses and common-law partners of international students are eligible to apply for “open work permits.” However, partners from countries which require a Temporary Residence Visa often encounter significant difficulties in obtaining these documents. For many spouses and partners, it is unclear whether it is best to apply for a work permit prior to arriving in Canada, or after arriving in Canada as a visitor.

This has been worsened by bad actors who are exploiting Canada’s international education strategy. In 2023, it was reported that hundreds of international students were at risk of deportation as a result of receiving fraudulent acceptance letters from a private education agent.⁷⁹



A lack of clarity in the application process creates anxiety and subsequent difficulty for those international students who sometimes must study alone in Canada, without the support of their spouse or partner. This is problematic for the many international students whose studies in Canada span multiple years. It is also an obstacle in the way of helping international students feel at home in Canada and therefore more likely to remain after graduation. Amongst international students in a University of British Columbia study most interested in staying in Canada, a significant proportion “are living in Canada with their partner, with their children, or have plans to bring their families to Canada in the near future.”⁸⁰

Recommendations

The federal government and post-secondary institutions have a responsibility to respond to the needs of international students by providing quality services to ensure a positive integration into the Canadian academic landscape. This can be achieved through the following steps:

- » **Earmark internationalization funding from the Government of Canada for international student support services and improved transition programs for international students**
- » **Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada clarify the application process to help spouses and partners of international students understand whether they are best served in applying for a work permit from outside or inside Canada**
- » **Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada prioritize Temporary Residence Visa and work permit applications of the spouses and partners of international students**

2. Recognizing International Student Excellence and Need

Principles:

CASA advocates for an accessible and affordable post-secondary education system that is innovative and of the highest quality. Given that an innovative and high quality education depends on attracting talented students, embracing inclusivity, and forging global linkages, it is essential that Canada take measures to recognize and support international student excellence and need.

Concerns:

The high cost and unpredictability of tuition increases, particularly when compared with domestic students, makes it difficult for international students to budget for the duration of their entire program of study. Beyond ineligibility for the Canada Student Financial Assistance (CSFA) program, there is a noticeable absence of scholarships, bursaries, and other forms of student financial assistance to help international students afford the costs of studying in Canada. Federally-funded opportunities for international students are heavily concentrated around graduate studies, and while post-secondary institutions

and student government organizations offer only a small handful of scholarships and bursaries to international students, their value has negligible impacts on the increasing costs associated with international tuition and the growing number of international students.

These concerns combined have contributed greatly to Canada falling behind other countries in the support offered to international students.

The goal of attracting international students is surely linked to a desire to ensure that the best and brightest international students study, and hopefully choose to continue to live and work, in Canada. However, as Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) explains, “the vast majority of international students come from upper-middle and high-income backgrounds, indicating that studying in Canada is not an option for most international students from low-income backgrounds.”⁸¹

Around the world, refugees are denied the opportunity to pursue higher education. Canada has a proud history of welcoming refugees from around the world on humanitarian grounds through the Student Refugee Program of the World University Service of Canada (WUSC). An effective model for supporting access to higher education and refugee resettlement, WUSC has coordinated with Canadian universities and university students to sponsor over 2,000 student refugees from 39 countries since 1978.⁸² More can be done to widen this program’s reach moving forward.

The lack of financial aid options is also a problem for competitiveness. Many other countries are also looking to attract international students, and their efforts often include scholarships that allow them to better showcase their institutions as centres of excellence in learning and research. The European Union, for example, established the Erasmus Mundus scholarship program for graduate students, with a budget of 655 million euros benefitting over 35,000 students and staff.⁸³ The Canadian government has begun to take some steps to better fund international graduate students. The Vanier scholarships program, targeted at top students in the world, supports up to 500 Canadian and international doctoral students each year, awarding \$50,000 per year for up to three years.⁸⁴ However, as this program awards a maximum of 166 new scholarships per year, this program benefits only a miniscule fraction of international students.

Recommendations:

Greater accessibility for international students from all economic backgrounds can be facilitated through the following measures:

- » **The Government of Canada establish a series of federal grants, bursaries, scholarships and fellowships of merit and need for international students**
- » **The Government of Canada provide financial support to student-refugee programs combining both higher education and refugee resettlement**
- » **The Government of Canada provide financial support to help the expansion of student-refugee programs to include graduate-level sponsorships**

3. Removing Barriers to Work for International Students

Principles

Balancing work with study has long served a twofold purpose for students: it offers a means of covering some of the ever-growing costs of a post-secondary education, and it is an opportunity to develop workplace skills to complement one's studies.⁸⁵

For international students, the ability to work, whether on- or off-campus, is also an opportunity to adapt to a new community and make invaluable contacts and friendships. It is a vital means of enriching the international student experience in Canada, and of enriching the diversity of the communities that surround post-secondary campuses.

Concerns

Until the turn of this century, Canada held the dubious distinction of being one of the very few international study destinations that prohibited international students from working off-campus.⁸⁶ Following a pilot program offering a work permit to international students at select institutions in Alberta, the Government of Canada formalized this work permit option in 2006. As a result, international students were allowed to work up to 20 hours per week while in-study and up to 40 hours per week during study breaks.⁸⁷ This initiative was warmly welcomed by post-secondary institutions and students alike.

As of June 2014, international students have been able to work off-campus under their study permits (without requiring a separate permit), subject to the hour limitations described above.⁸⁸ However, from November 15, 2022 through to April 30, 2024 – the federal government is running a pilot program which temporarily lifts the cap on international student working hours.⁸⁹

Despite the elimination of the separate work permit requirement, getting a job is not always as straightforward as it should be, especially as an international student. An international student's study permit must clearly state that he or she is eligible to work in Canada in order for the student to obtain a Social Insurance Number (SIN) from Service Canada – a basic requirement to work in Canada. Unfortunately, the required statement that a student is eligible to work in Canada is sometimes overlooked when study permits are processed by the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA). Correcting the wording on a study permit can often take months, and such delays in obtaining a SIN inevitably jeopardize employment opportunities. This delay is especially concerning for graduate students, for whom research and teaching assistantships are often required.

A related concern is that part-time international students remain ineligible to work.⁹⁰ This not only hinders their ability to support themselves financially, but also to participate in their community, build connections, and develop essential workplace skills and networks. The current restrictions lead many international students to pursue internship and co-op opportunities with international employers, meaning Canada risks losing out on their skills and talent.

A final issue is the requirement of international students to obtain a work permit – separate from their study permit – to participate in co-op terms, internships, and other work-integrated learning opportunities⁹¹. Experiential learning is a key aspect of many program curriculums. Such opportunities are also linked to improved employment outcomes and are growing in popularity across post-secondary institutions as a result⁹². The Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission (MPHEC) found that both post-graduate employment rates and post-graduate earnings were 15% higher among those who participated in work-integrated learning experiences during their studies.⁹³ Additionally, the MPHEC report found that “63% of the graduates who participated in WIL reported that their job was somewhat or to a great extent related to their 2018 degree, compared to 39% for those who did not participate in WIL.”⁹⁴

Furthermore, in a recent survey conducted in collaboration with Abacus Data, it was found that 25% of international student respondents reported 'poor' or 'very poor' experiences with the process of finding a job.⁹⁵ Among the reasons for this are challenges surrounding acquiring the required paperwork and permits, as well as employers' willingness to work with international students in accommodating working hour limits.

Given this, it would be sensible for experiential learning to fall under an international student's study permit, without the need to obtain a separate work permit. This would benefit all international students, and especially graduate students who could bring their specialized knowledge and expertise to Canadian employers through research internships. It would also help to ensure that international students are better prepared to translate their degree into a job in their field of study, helping offset labour market demands in those areas.

Recommendations

Removing barriers to work will help make Canada a leading destination for international students by improving their quality of life and the opportunities available to them. It will also help meet the growing need for more highly skilled workers. Linking international students with employment opportunities throughout their studies will help those who wish to stay in Canada obtain employment following the completion of their studies. The following steps would improve the work experience of international students:

- » **The Canada Border Services Agency and Service Canada coordinate to ensure all study permits have consistent conditions and those who are eligible to work can seamlessly obtain a Social Insurance Number without delay.**
- » **Service Canada improve processing times so that applications are processed within a reasonable timeline.**
- » **The Government of Canada expand eligibility for off-campus employment to international students studying part-time.**

» **The Government of Canada modify the conditions for study permits to allow international students to participate in co-op terms and internships that are integrated into a program of study without requiring a separate work permit.**

» **The Government of Canada allow graduate students to conduct up to one year of full-time, off-campus elective internship or co-op work experience.**

4. The Post-Graduation Experience and Pathways to Citizenship

Principles

Canada's relationship with international students should not end at graduation. These students become international colleagues, trade partners, allies, friends, permanent residents, and citizens. A frequently articulated purpose for attracting international students is that many will want to continue living and working in Canada. Their knowledge, qualifications, and skillsets are needed to help grow Canada's economy. Employment opportunities are also a major draw for international students. In Australia, a study found that international students prioritized "[f]avourable job opportunities" when choosing where to study.⁹⁶

To meet the stated objective of encouraging more international students to remain in Canada following graduation as permanent residents and citizens, their pathways to citizenship must be clear and easy to navigate.

Concerns

The majority of international students share a desire to stay and work in Canada after graduation but feel that government policy has yet to demonstrate a genuine appreciation of what they contributed to Canada during their studies.

According to our Abacus Data survey results, 92% of international students were interested in working in Canada after graduation, and 87% were interested in becoming Canadian citizens.⁹⁷ However, international student graduates from Canadian post-secondary have just 90 days to secure employment and apply for a work permit. This is far too short, given that the average unemployed period for those seeking work has ranged from 4.5 to over 5 months in recent years.⁹⁸

In addition, rules around who international students can speak to for immigration advice are currently too restrictive. While rules around consulting third party advisors were implemented in 2011 with the goal of preventing fraud, the result has been to limit the ability of international students to seek advice from post-secondary institution staff about the immigration process as universities are subject to the provisions of Article 91 of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act.⁹⁹ Given that many international students already have trusting relationships with staff members at their institutions, this creates an unnecessary hurdle. It also imposes high costs when they can only receive advice from an “authorized representative.”

Additionally, many highly skilled international students and recent graduates have found it difficult, if not impossible, to earn enough points in the Express Entry system to be invited to apply for permanent residency. Introduced in 2015, Express Entry was intended to simplify the path to permanent resident status. Applicants are assigned points based on skills, work experience, language ability, education and other details. Until recent years, no points were awarded for having studied and earned educational qualifications specifically in Canada. One of the highest possible sources of points, meanwhile, was a Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA). International students and recent graduates found it exceedingly difficult to get an LMIA.¹⁰⁰

In November 2016, the government introduced promising changes to Express Entry. Earning an educational credential at a Canadian designated learning institution (DLI) will now be assigned an added points value, while the value of the LMIA has been reduced. Even with these changes, however, it is notable that the work and volunteer experiences that international students obtain while under a temporary post-graduation work permit still do not count for additional Express Entry points.

The Provincial Nominee Program (PNP) allows provinces and territories to nominate people for permanent residence, with the goal of meeting the labour needs of certain sectors of their economy. Each province determines their own criteria for making permanent residence nominations, and not all PNPs assign priority or weight to the attainment of a Canadian degree by international students.¹⁰¹

Many international students who stay in Canada following their studies possess the skills and creativity needed to help build Canada’s economy. The significant costs associated with starting a new business, however, are daunting. Supporting international graduates through

their Canadian institutions could help student graduates to establish their own businesses and encourage more international students to stay in Canada, while also contributing to economic growth and recruitment.

Recommendations

Beyond changes to the Express Entry program, which CASA supports, several other reforms would help smooth the pathway to permanent resident status and citizenship for international students. It is crucial for the Government of Canada to recognize the immense social, cultural, and economic contributions international students make to their campuses and communities while in Canada, and their tremendous potential to continue to do so after graduation. CASA recommends:

- » **The Government of Canada extend the post-graduate job-search period from 90 days to 6 months, thereby eliminating the need for the burdensome “bridge” extension study permit.**
- » **The Government of Canada count time spent in Canada as an international student towards citizenship eligibility**
- » **Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada award LMIA exempt job offers (e.g. those obtained while holding a post-graduation work permit) 600 EE points.**
- » **Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada award Express Entry points for volunteer and community service positions to international students in recognition of the cultural integration and social value these experiences bring to Canadian communities**
- » **Provincial governments in Canada expand Provincial Nominee Programs (PNP) to include international students with a Canadian degree**

5. Expanding PhD Graduate Fast-Track Residency through the Express Entry System

Principles

Advanced graduate degrees, including masters and PhDs are drivers of a more innovative knowledge economy. As the Science, Technology

and Innovative Council has put it, “[t]he number of doctoral degrees is... an indicator of the labour force potential to engage in cutting-edge research and training the next generation.”¹⁰² Despite this, only approximately 11% of Canadians have a master’s or doctoral degree, compared to a slightly higher 14% average among other OECD members¹⁰³. As the Science, Technology and Innovation Council has explained, “with a limited population and thus a relatively small pool of domestic talent, Canada needs to be competitive in connecting with the “best and the brightest” throughout the world.”¹⁰⁴ A key way of doing so is to attract international PhD students to pursue doctoral programs in Canada, and then hopefully, to remain in Canada following completion of their studies.

Concerns

While the goal of encouraging international PhD students to study and stay in Canada is clear, the actual systems in place to make this possible leave much to be desired.

The Express Entry program is intended to ease the path to permanent residence for skilled immigrants by awarding points for various factors, including age, education, skills, work experience, and language abilities. Those with most points are invited to apply for permanent residence. The previous section details significant problems all international students encounter when interacting with this system. In particular, international PhD students encounter several specific obstacles with Express Entry. Within the Express Entry are more specific immigration programs, such as for the Federal Skilled Worker Program, the Federal Skilled Trades Program, and the Canadian Experience Class. PhD Graduates are most likely to qualify for Express Entry under the Federal Skilled Worker Program (FSWP).¹⁰⁵

International graduate students, who graduate from Canadian institutions, have shown themselves (through years of study) to adapt to life and work in Canada, and have obtained unique and sought-after skills through completion of graduate level programs. If the goal of the Express Entry system is to identify skilled immigrants with the highest chance of thriving in Canada, value should be assigned to previous experience living and working in Canada during graduate studies.

While the recent changes to Express Entry will help, PhD students are still not able to count university employment experience, including teaching and research assistantships, as work

experience in their applications. There is also no specific stream for applying to Express Entry via FSWP as a master’s graduate, even though international students who obtain master’s level degrees have also demonstrated their ability to adapt to and succeed in Canada.

Finally, reports from PhD students seeking entry through the program indicate that the application process is ambiguous and often contradictory. The forms to fill out are confusing, program requirements lack consistency, and letters from the ministry provide little clarity on matters such as application denials. Students must either pay thousands of dollars in legal fees to seek advice and appeal decisions, or are simply left wondering why their application was denied and how they can remedy the situation. Improved consistency and flexibility for qualified international students to transition to permanent residency status will ensure Canada’s education system maintains and builds upon its global reputation for excellence.

Recommendations

More can be done to help international students who obtain graduate degrees in Canada become permanent residents and citizens. CASA advocates several practical policies to improve Express Entry options for graduate students, including:

- » **Revise the Express Entry point system to award points for a wider variety of factors that are predictors of economic success for skilled immigrants. This includes counting university employment (i.e. teaching and research assistantships, co-operative education, field studies, internships) and volunteer and/or community positions that demonstrate social integration into Canadian communities**
- » **Increase the number of highly-skilled newcomers admitted to Canada under FSWP**
- » **Expand Express Entry by conceiving a new stream to include master’s students, and by creating a separate cap applicable to master’s students**
- » **Clarify and standardize all procedures, including official forms, throughout the FSWP application process**

SUMMARY

of recommended changes

In summary, CASA recognizes that international students are important members of campus communities who, just like domestic students, expect and deserve an education of the highest quality. As post-secondary institutions and provincial and federal governments focus on attracting more international students to Canada, it is imperative that they follow their words with actions to remove barriers to success and facilitate truly positive experiences. Measures to improve the international student experience in Canada include:

1 Improving Paperwork and Processes

- Earmark internationalization funding from the Government of Canada for international student support services and improved transition programs for international students
- Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada clarify the application process to help spouses and partners of international students understand whether they are best served in applying for a work permit from outside or inside Canada
- Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada prioritize Temporary Residence Visa and work permit applications of the spouses and partners of international students

2 Investing in Better Social and Financial Supports

- The Government of Canada establish a series of federal grants, bursaries, scholarships and fellowships of merit and need for international students
- The Government of Canada provide financial support to student-refugee programs combining both higher education and refugee resettlement
- The Government of Canada provide financial support to help the expansion of student-refugee programs to include graduate-level sponsorships

3 Enhancing Work Opportunities

- The Canada Border Services Agency and Service Canada coordinate to ensure all study permits have consistent conditions and those who are eligible to work can seamlessly obtain a Social Insurance Number without delay.
- Service Canada improve processing times so that applications are processed within a reasonable timeline.
- The Government of Canada expand eligibility for off-campus employment to international students studying part-time.
- The Government of Canada modify the conditions for study permits to allow international students to participate in co-op terms and internships that are integrated into a program of study without requiring a separate work permit.
- The Government of Canada allow graduate students to conduct up to one year of full-time, off-campus elective internship or co-op work experience.

4 Streamlining Pathways to Citizenship

- The Government of Canada extend the post-graduate job-search period from 90 days to 6 months, thereby eliminating the need for the burdensome “bridge” extension study permit
- The Government of Canada count time spent in Canada as an international student towards citizenship eligibility
- Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada award LMIA exempt job offers (e.g. those obtained while holding a post-graduation work permit) 600 EE points.
- Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada award Express Entry points for volunteer and community service positions to international students in recognition of the cultural integration and social value these experiences bring to Canadian communities
- Provincial governments in Canada expand Provincial Nominee Programs (PNP) to include international students with a Canadian degree
- Revise the Express Entry point system to award points for a wider variety of factors that are predictors of economic success for skilled immigrants. This includes counting university employment (i.e. teaching and research assistantships, co-operative education, field studies, internships) and volunteer and/or community positions that demonstrate social integration into Canadian communities
- Increase the number of highly-skilled new comers admitted to Canada under FSWP
- Expand Express Entry by conceiving a new stream to include master’s students, and by creating a separate cap applicable to master’s students
- Clarify and standardize all procedures, including official forms, throughout the FSWP application process

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About CASA

The Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) is a non-partisan, not-for-profit advocacy organisation representing students at 25 student associations across the country. Through our partnership with the Quebec Student Union/Union étudiante du Québec (UEQ), CASA represents 365,000 students across Canada. CASA advocates for accessible, affordable, innovative, and high quality post-secondary education in Canada. For over 25 years, CASA has done so successfully through policy and research development, awareness campaigns, government relations efforts, and partnerships with other stakeholders in the education sector. Part of this work is ensuring that conversations surrounding post-secondary education are undertaken with the most up-to-date information and with direct feedback from students and other leading advocacy stakeholders across the country.

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Together, we represent 365 000 students across Canada.