

Dreams of better life can come with a cost

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FULL TEXT

When Romina Avila and her husband Arturo Castaneyra decided to leave behind the growing violence in Mexico for a better life elsewhere, the couple set their sights on Canada and its colleges - an increasingly popular ticket for immigration.

By enrolling as international students at the college level - a more affordable alternative to university - they could acquire Canadian education credentials, postgraduate work permits and job experience to boost their chances for permanent residence, a feat Avila's two older sisters and their spouses had previously accomplished.

"Everyone is looking for the same thing: Enrol in a college, get your one-year work experience and apply for permanent residence," says Avila, a 32-year-old Mexico City native, who came to Canada with her husband in 2014, a year after Canada launched an aggressive campaign to double its annual number of international students to 450,000 by 2022.

That target has long been surpassed.

In 2018, there were 570,000 study-permit holders in Canada - three-quarters enrolled in post-secondary education. The federal government estimated their spending, including tuition, amounted to \$21.6 billion and supported 170,000 Canadian jobs.

Canada ranks fourth in the world among top destinations for international education, just behind the United States, the United Kingdom and China, having recently nudged ahead of Australia and France. A survey last year by the non-profit Canadian Bureau for International Education found that 60 per cent of international students planned to apply for permanent residence and 75 per cent said being able to work here after their studies was key to their decision to choose Canada.

A joint investigation by the Toronto Star and the St. Catharines Standard looked at the exponential growth of international students in Canada, especially in colleges.

This influx has prompted concerns about whether international education has become an immigration shortcut, a default migrant workers' program and a money-making business rather than primarily an opportunity for higher learning.

"The policy creates vulnerability, maybe not intentionally, but the way the policy was designed and enacted is what it's producing," says Wilfrid Laurier University professor Margaret Walton-Roberts, whose research focuses on international student migration. "There's this desire to use this (education) stream to get permanent residence. All the way along, there are a lot of people who have an interest in making money out of this group, including the Canadian government.

"It's been used by the government to prop up the post-secondary education sector. We kind of think of (international students) as cash cows."

Colleges Ontario, an industry group representing the province's 24 publicly funded colleges, says the push for international education has been driven by labour and skills shortages as a result of the country's low birth rate and aging population. Colleges, it says, are better positioned to deal with the changing needs of the job market, with their historical focus on practical, shorter-term skills training and established networks with local employers. Several years ago, Sang Woo Jo, 28, of South Korea, decided he wanted to immigrate to Canada and work as an auto technician. The best way to do that, he figured, was with a student visa.

Jo already had experience, having worked in Seoul for four years as a mechanic for the automaker Renault. But he didn't know the English words for car parts and basic maintenance tasks, such as oil changes and tire rotations. He arrived in 2017 and this spring wrapped up a two-year motive power co-op program at Niagara College, which trains auto mechanics.

"I will never go back to Korea," he says. "I would really love to stay here ... Good people, good country and good pay here in Canada, very good career here."

After graduating, Jo landed a gig at Audi in Newmarket - a three-year work visa allows him to stay and work.

That's not surprising for Wayne Toth, co-ordinator of motive power at Niagara College - a program with about 300 students, more than half of them international, mostly from China, Korea, India and the Caribbean.

"There's a huge demand for skilled trades, especially in automotive," Toth says. "A lot of (our students) are securing full-time positions when they graduate. There's a huge number of seasoned technicians that are coming up for retirement."

And, he says, by the nature of being already far from home, international students tend to be more willing to relocate for work, which makes them good matches for employers.

Niagara College says it routinely gets calls from local businesses, such as Fallsview casino, wineries and personal support worker agencies, seeking graduates.

"In the last year, we've seen a big uptick in requests," says Shawna Luey, associate director of the college's international student services. "We're liaising more and more with employers and people in the community that hadn't necessarily thought about international graduates as ongoing members of their greater community."

Canada's immigration department awards points to applicants under the skilled immigrant program based on attributes such as age, education, language proficiency and work experience. As part of Ottawa's economic plan, the government tweaked the point grid and began rewarding applicants with bonus points if they have a degree, diploma or certificate from a Canadian publicly funded academic institution (up to 30 points) and work experience in Canada in an occupation with a staff shortage (up to 80 points.)

Andrei Evangelista of the Philippines tried twice to immigrate to Canada: in 2010 as a skilled worker and in 2014 as a live-in caregiver, but was refused both times. After working as a nurse abroad for nearly a decade, he enrolled in the postgraduate gerontology program at Niagara College in Welland and arrived in 2018.

He worked part time as a personal support worker, and as a cashier at Walmart, earning in a day what he earned in a week back home.

"My goal was to be out of the Philippines and get a better paying job," says Evangelista, who just completed his one-year diploma program this spring and started a full-time job at a nursing home in Halifax on a postgraduate work permit. He plans to apply for permanent residence after he earns the Canadian experience to meet the point threshold for immigration.

In 2016, about 30,000 former international students became permanent residents in Canada. In 2018, that number almost doubled to 54,000, according to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada.

Last year, Immigration Minister Ahmed Hussen announced a new program to expedite student visa applications for those from China, India, the Philippines and Vietnam by fast-tracking processing from months to just 20 days. The four countries made up 60 per cent of Canada's international student population in 2018. In July, the program was expanded to Pakistan, and to Morocco and Senegal this month.

"International students make significant contributions to the schools and the colleges and the universities and the communities in which they reside. The diverse perspectives that they bring to our classrooms enrich the educational experiences of Canadian students," Hussen says.

"International students are the ideal future Canadians," he adds. "That's because they have Canadian post-secondary education and, in many cases, Canadian work experience. They also speak one, if not both, of our official languages. All of which is a recipe for a newcomer's success in Canada."

York University education professor Roopa Desai Trilokekar, whose research focuses on international education, says there's no doubt most international students enrolled in our colleges have their eyes set on immigration.

"Today's international education is a business. Our education (quality) can suffer if we bend too much to an open market," cautions Trilokekar, who attended university in the United States in the 1970s as a visa student from India before immigrating to Canada in 1996. "If we don't have enough check and balance, it's going to open a different can of worms."

Australia began an aggressive campaign to recruit international students in the early 2000s and saw its international enrolment peak in 2009. That growth slowed down after a series of attacks on international students from India amid rising racial tension.

In a comparative research study, Trilokekar and co-author Zainab Kizilbash, identified a number of challenges in Australia's education and immigration systems, including unethical recruitment and graduation practices as well as lower admission standards.

"They encouraged the admission of non-genuine students who were looking for backdoor entry into Australia's workforce," the study says. "In addition to distorting Australia's international education sector, these practices also negatively affected the integrity of its migration program."

Canada has already taken a page from Australia's experience by introducing a list of designated learning institutions for prospective students and limiting post-graduation permits to those who attend publicly funded universities and colleges, which are under more stringent government monitoring.

Even if you get an acceptance from a Canadian school, it still doesn't mean Canada will let you in. In fact, last year, more than a third of student-visa applicants were turned away for a variety of reasons, such as failing to convince an immigration officer their main intent was to pursue their studies.

Immigration officials also require schools to submit a compliance report twice a year that verifies the academic and enrolment status of international students at their institutions. Cases are referred for further review if a student is suspended, asks for a leave, defers enrolment or has poor attendance.

According to the immigration department, the number of study permits revoked has tripled from 1,538 in 2016 to 5,502 in 2018, with 1,048 students stripped of their student status in the first two months of this year alone. A similar trend was reported in the number of study permit extensions being refused for students failing to meet their obligations and graduation timeline.

International students can lose their study permits if they get caught working more than the 20 hours a week permitted by the federal government. The opportunity to work during the academic year was introduced as a way to help students pay for their studies and earn Canadian work experience for immigration.

Critics, however, say international students have increasingly joined the revolving door of migrant workers, mostly to fill low-paying jobs in Canada.

"They come, live and work here mostly in low-wage retail, labour and factory jobs, sometimes through temp agencies. They are no different from other migrant workers, except for the added component and costs of the actual studies," says Syed Hussan of Toronto-based Migrant Workers Alliance for Change, a national advocacy coalition of migrant workers, grassroots organizations, unions, faith groups, activists and researchers.

Migrant workers' advocates say they first heard from international students around 2016. They raised issues such as owed wages and wage theft as well as complaints about workplace abuse and exploitation. The advocates initially referred them to unions and settlement services, but came to the realization there's a "total absence of any meaningful services and advocacy" for this overlooked group.

The migrant workers' alliance then reached out directly to international students and, since then, more than 1,800 people have reported a range of issues from labour standards, to housing, wages and immigration.

"Migrant students don't have many rights to access to begin with and there is a complete lack of information about their rights in Canada," Syed Hussan says. "The point is the immigration system is designed to create and reinforce temporary status with the promise for a better life. And everyone is taking advantage of these students. Many of them end up doing low-wage work and later being forced to leave."

In canvassing international students about their employment experience, alliance members uncovered some troubling incidents:

A group of six 17-year-olds from Brazil enrolled in a six-month language program say they were sent to clean offices in Toronto and Mississauga in the evening - without pay - as part of a "language training on-site practicum." A Pakistani student, who completed a two-year post-grad diploma in computer programming and was on a postgraduate work permit, says his employer had him deposit his paycheques, then forced him to withdraw the money and hand it back over in exchange for a reference letter for his permanent residence application.

Two students from India say they were hired to load trucks at a warehouse and split \$350 in wages for the 25 hours they each put in on the job every week. The hourly rate amounted to just \$7.

Minister Hussen says the government takes the integrity of the international education system very seriously, but he believes these cases are a minority and blames the problem on unscrupulous recruiters who mislead and misinform students.

"The vast majority of international students are fine. They come, they know the rules and abide by them. They have a great experience," Hussen says in an interview.

"The story of international students has been a very positive story.

"They make great contributions to our economy and amazing contributions to our classrooms. Some of them choose to stay and become permanent residents and help us fill unfilled jobs and bring much-needed skills to Canada."

Fred Gibbons, president of Northern College in Timmins, says international students have become an increasingly important source of labour in smaller communities at businesses such as Home Depot, Canadian Tire, local grocers and the service industry.

"They're doing the part-time jobs that many of our kids don't want to do anymore and in many respects there aren't the kids around to do the jobs anymore," Gibbons says.

"They're being embraced by the employers.

"They're saying these students show up on time, they're polite, they're punctual, they're reliable."

Former international student Varunpreet Singh, a student co-ordinator with the migrant workers alliance, says international students are vulnerable to exploitation because of Canada's increasingly "temporary" immigration system, which brings in migrants on temporary status with the promise of permanent residence through a myriad of confusing pathways.

"What's most challenging is these students are so afraid to come out and share their experiences. They have invested so much in the process with the hope of staying. There is so much pressure on them to succeed," says Singh, 27, who enrolled in George Brown College in 2014 before completing a master's degree in architecture at University of Calgary two years ago. He became a permanent resident in February.

"The blame is not just on the employers who pay these students below minimum wage and exploit them, but on the system that allows the abuse to take place."

Last year, Ireland rolled out a scheme to offer amnesty to former international students who had overstayed and gone underground after finishing their studies and failing to secure permanent residence. "Offering permanent residence upon arrival is the only solution to these problems," Singh suggests.

Victoria Esses, director of the Centre for Research on Migration and Ethnic Relations at Western University, says international students make ideal immigrants because theoretically they are already acculturated and have better English skills and an education more familiar to Canadian employers. "You don't have to be a PhD to be a skilled immigrant," Esses says. "The thing that we need to pay attention to is how we are integrating international students. Being isolated in a classroom or in residence (from Canadian students) is not going to help them integrate."

While schools tend to focus on international students' initial orientation upon arrival, Esses says they require continuous support throughout their studies and in the transition into the labour market and permanent residence. One of the challenges in integrating international students is, as temporary residents of Canada, they are not eligible for immigrant settlement services, and universities and colleges can only provide limited support beyond their academic and social needs.

Phoram Ghelani, a former international student from India, says many families like his have to borrow money to enable their children to study in Canada and, once here, the students must work to pay their own bills and sometimes even support their families back home.

"To us, immigration and international education are the same thing. We don't see any difference," says Ghelani, who came to Toronto from Rajkot City in India's Gujarat state for the one-year hospitality and tourism operations management program at Humber College in 2014, after finishing an undergraduate degree in commerce from Saurashtra University.

"Even if we only get a sh---y job here, we still make more money than doing a decent job in India. Canada's economy runs on immigrants and immigration. The product it sells is immigration, permanent residence," adds the 25-year-old, who worked as a chef with his one-year post-grad work permit and was granted permanent residence in December. He now works as a banking adviser. Critics say if Canada increases enrolment without investing in support for international students, the quality of education will suffer and the whole international education system will become, by default, simply a way to earn money and permanent residence.

"Is it right?" Laurier's Walton-Roberts asks. "Not if people are not getting something of value out of the process. So what's the thing of value that they want? Is the thing of value they want permanent residence or a particular education? If they are getting it and if the college process is the means to get there, the question to ask is, is that a problem?"

Avila, the George Brown graduate from Mexico, says although she initially came to Canada with her husband for the ultimate purpose of immigration, she had grown to love the community worker program she enrolled in.

"We do feel we are used as cash cows to subsidize the Canadian education system. We do feel we have no rights as international students. I didn't want to go back to school, but this is the best way to immigrate to Canada," says Avila, who has an undergraduate degree in psychology from Mexico.

"The college experience does make it easier to find a job and meet people and network in Canada. I'm here because of international education. It does open the door for me."

DETAILS

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