International Students and COVID-19: Experiences, Policies, and Options

POLICY PREVIEW

SERIES REPORT-4

By Nahid Sultana*, Francine Schlosser**and Valerie Preston***

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*Nahid Sultana is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Odette School of Business at the University of Windsor and Windsor City Network Coordinator for the BMRC-IRMU Partnership.
** Francine Schlosser is the Odette Professor in Entrepreneurship and Innovation at the Odette School of Business, University of Windsor.
***Valerie Preston is Professor of Geography at York University and Principal Investigator for the BMRC-IMRU Partnership.

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International students are an integral part of Canadian education institutions and the government's annual immigration targets. In 2019, 642,480 international students at all levels studied in Canada, and most of them desire to start careers and pursue permanent residency in Canada after graduation (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2020a). A recent public forum organized by the *Building Migrant Resilience in Cities- Immigration et résilience en milieu urbain* (BMRC-IRMU) Partnership investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international students and the educational institutions where they study. Panelists; Chris Busch, Acting Associate Vice-President, University of Windsor; Larissa Bezo, President and CEO of Canadian Bureau for International Education; Nathaniel Veltkamp, Manager of International Recruitment & Project Development at St. Clair College; and Ankit Tripathi, international student representative for the Canadian Federation of Students, discussed how COVID-19 had affected international students, immediate institutional responses and the pandemic's potential impacts on post-graduate careers and permanent residency pathways.

The current pandemic has translated into a major education crisis, disrupting educational services in Canada and abroad with profound impacts on international students' physical and mental well-being and their career and settlement plans. As Larissa Bezo (President & CEO of CBIE) pointed out, all students have been affected by the COVID 19 pandemic; however, its implications are more severe for

international students, who were often in vulnerable situations before the pandemic.

MAJOR CHALLENGES

From a policy perspective, Canada is one of a few OECD countries to respond to the COVID situation by providing increased flexibility with respect to post-graduation work permits and pathways to permanent residency. This flexibility allowed international students to remain on campus and return to Canadian educational institutions (OECD, 2020). However, Ankit Tripathi (International Students Representative) indicated that it is important for international students to be considered in policymaking at their educational institutions and by all levels of government. For example, as part of the COVID-19 Economic Response Plan, much of the Canadian government's direct financial support to students and recent graduates excluded international students (Government of Canada, 2020) who were also not eligible for Tri-council funding. The housing crisis with its low vacancy rates also challenged international students during this unprecedented time. As Ankit Tripathi stated, "Canada wants us here, but their actions speak differently."

For institutions of higher education, a major challenge is to rethink course delivery so it works for Canadian students and international students who are often living abroad. In response to COVID-19, post-secondary institutions moved quickly to online education that required different pedagogical approaches. Chris Busch (the Acting Associate Vice-President of the

University of Windsor) and Nathaniel Veltkamp (Manager of International Recruitment & Project Development at St. Clair College) described how online learning had changed the education system. From a technological standpoint, online learning is feasible although it creates additional risk and vulnerability in the learning environment and questions about the quality of education. Accessing courses online that are scheduled for Ontario students, engaging with applied curriculum in an online environment, and accessing campus resources, such as the library, labs and virtual machines online, requires significant bandwidth that is not always available in many parts of the world. In addition, international students now face additional travel restrictions, border closings, isolation abroad, immigration uncertainty, and quarantine requirements associated with the pandemic.

UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND THE SUPPORT SYSTEM

Different forms of outreach including surveys and webinars have documented the unique circumstances of international students. Chris Busch suggested that "the ideology of treating all students equally needs to be challenged, and the pandemic definitely has done that confirming the unique challenges that international students face." Larissa Bezo reflected that the vulnerabilities of international students existed prior to the pandemic, but the pandemic has highlighted these vulnerabilities that now warrant more attention.

In recognition of the challenges facing international students, educational institutions enhanced the flexibility of their policies and procedures. Chris Busch described how the University of Windsor provided significant support to deal with the mental and physical well-being and financial issues facing international students. For example, by September, the university had spent $1,200,000 on additional financial support. At St. Clair College, Nathaniel Veltkamp described an individualized case-by-case approach to address international students' concerns. Different offices in the college are working together to tackle the shifting challenges confronting international students and the college is working closely with IRCC to provide up-to-date information to students coming into Canada.

Chris Busch and Nathaniel Veltkamp described the institutional supports for international students that were introduced in the Fall. They included providing meals and other necessities, checking on student's mental health and physical well-being, free accommodations during quarantine, 24-hour access to medical and mental health services, mandatory testing, referrals to mental health services in the community, professional advice, and appointments with career advisors. Throughout the Fall semester, other community agencies, such as New Canadians' Centre of Excellence (NCCE), offered workshops for international students to help them prepare to come to Canada and cope effectively with the current uncertainty. Despite these supports, Chris Busch pointed to various weaknesses in the responses; highlighting the difficulties of tracking the residential locations of international students in Canada

and abroad and responding to their diverse needs.

COVID-19 AND POST-GRADUATION PATHWAYS

Requirements that students study in Canada to qualify for post-graduate work permits and pathways to permanent residency have been loosened during the pandemic. For example, to obtain a post-graduate work permit after graduating with a Canadian diploma or degree, up to fifty percent of an international student's courses can be taken online while they live outside Canada. Ankit Tripathi raised concerns about international students' ability to finish their degree requirements online and the value of Canadian degrees when students are missing networking and social opportunities, job experience in Canadian workplaces, and exposure to Canadian culture. According to Ankit Tripathi, the Canadian government is not addressing these questions about career and permanent residency pathways after graduation. Chris Busch noted, "institutions still struggle to provide support to international students on the immigration and settlement piece, and there is a significant gap between the role of institutions and settlement agencies and the community partnerships." In his opinion, partnerships between external organizations and educational institutions are essential so that with academic success, international students can transition into the workforce and contribute to Canadian society.

Larissa Bezo emphasized the need to create more job opportunities for international students. Noting that more than 700 chapters of the Chamber of Commerce passed a resolution recognizing international students' importance and value, she suggested institutions of higher education work more closely with employers to shape career pathways as part of the recovery process. Nathaniel Veltkamp described a pilot project in Chatham Kent, where international students are nominated for the provincial nominee program when their skills match a local job vacancy. He suggested that the initiative may be an effective way to help international student graduates obtain relevant jobs commensurate with their educational qualifications, clearing a pathway to parament residency.

Canada still remains one of the leading study destinations among potential international students during the COVID crisis (IDP, 2020). However, panelists acknowledged that the responses from the Canadian government and Canadian educational institutions to international students during the pandemic may harm Canada's reputation as a good place for higher education and future permanent residency. Governments, communities, and campuses must continue to respond flexibly and creatively to the unprecedented and shifting challenges facing international students. Creating a space where international students can voice their concerns and influence decisions and the decision-making process is a crucial step to ensuring their academic and settlement success.

For more information about the panel and upcoming events, please contact bmrcirmu@yorku.ca