

How to support international students in Canada – OCASIED Network

POLICY PREVIEW

SERIES REPORT -5

By

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The COVID 19 pandemic has caused tremendous stress and uncertainty among international students regarding their studies, careers, and pathways to permanent residency in Canada. Many of the current challenges facing international students existed prior to the pandemic, but the pandemic has highlighted these vulnerabilities, as well as the limitations of educational institutions' responses to these challenges. International students have been severely affected by the crisis and, more than ever, require different types of support from the institutions where they study, as well as from settlement agencies, community organizations, and governments at all levels. A recent public forum organized by the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) and *Building Migrant Resilience in Cities- Immigration et résilience en milieu urbain* (BMRC-IRMU) Partnership investigated international students' access to services during the era of COVID. Panelists included Armin Boroumand, Coordinator, The International Students Department, Centre Social D'Aide Aux Immigrants (CSAI); Rahila Mushtaq, General Manager, International Student Connect, COSTI Immigrant Services; Sarom Rho, Migrant Student Worker Organizer, Migrant Students United (MSU); and David Cashaback, Senior Director, Settlement and Integration Policy at Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). Each discussed the services provided by their organizations, international students' access to services and students' difficulties making

the transition from temporary to permanent residence in Canada.

Canada has facilitated international students' remote learning during the pandemic (Government of Canada, 2021; OECD, 2020). Besides, the federal government has revised rules regarding temporary work permits for international students. For example, while students are staying outside of Canada, they will still be able to get a post-graduation work permit (PGWP) if they have a study permit and have already been approved for a study permit (Government of Canada, 2021). Also, students who applied for a study permit before starting their study program in the spring, summer or fall 2020 semester, or are planning to apply for a study permit before starting their study program in the January 2021 semester will be eligible for the PGWP (Government of Canada, 2021). Under the new guidelines, international students would not have time deducted from the length of the PGWP for studies they complete outside Canada until April 30, 2021. Many organizations are working hard to keep abreast of international students' needs so they can assist them during this unprecedented time. Sarom Rho (Migrant Student Worker Organizer, Migrant Students United and Rahila Mushtaq (General Manager, International Student Connect, COSTI Immigrant Services) described how they have been conducting surveys, focus groups, and information sessions to determine international students' needs and priorities since the pandemic began. They continue to

work closely with educational institutions and settlement agencies across the province to address these needs.

COVID 19 AND ORGANIZATIONS' RESPONSES TO INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

During the summer and fall sessions of 2020, organizations sought to help international students manage financial turmoil, accommodation crisis, remote learning, and social isolation. Sharing her experience as a migrant student worker organizer, Sarom Rho pointed out that inadequate health care and income support are the two biggest issues for current and former international students. Students who are moving between provinces, waiting for full-time jobs, or who have post-graduate work permits are not eligible for provincial health insurance. During the pandemic, universal coverage of provincial health insurance should be instituted as an essential public health measure.

Uncertainty around employment and anxieties about permanent residency go hand in hand for international students. Armin Boroumand (Coordinator, the International Students Department, CSAI) and Sarom Rho mentioned that, with campuses closed, many international students lost on-campus jobs. Many students cannot afford the costs of returning to their home country and fear the uncertainty associated with re-establishing temporary residency in Canada. Those who stay in

Canada have limited employment options due to temporary visas and lack of active social insurance numbers. With little income, many international students are using foodbanks and seeking help from faith organizations. Canada's COVID-19 Economic Response Plan excludes international students from much of the government's direct financial support to students and recent graduates (Government of Canada, 2020). Since 2019, the Ministry of Immigration, Francisation and Integration in Quebec has made temporary workers and international students eligible for services traditionally offered to permanent residents since July 2019. Armin Boroumand noted that the additional funding helped CSAI set up a food bank during the pandemic; however, community organizations have very few programs to address students' concerns, especially their financial issues.

Students are also concerned that they will not accumulate enough work hours to satisfy permanent residency requirements. Senior Director, David Cashaback, (Settlement and Integration Policy at Immigration, IRCC) described how much of the effort of the IRCC since March has focused on working with provinces and the education sector to provide some certainty around study permits, processing schedules, and post-graduate work permits to ensure that prospective international students continue their Canadian studies. Recognizing that current work permit restrictions pose a huge challenge to international students, Sarom Rho stated, "international students are now

organizing in every province and territories and calling for immediate changes to work permit renewals, and Migrant Students United is supporting this campaign.”

THE CHALLENGES OF ORGANIZATIONS TO PROVIDE SUPPORTS

The provincial and federal governments do not fund all the services that immigrant-serving agencies offer to international students. In Quebec, provincial funding allowed CSAI to help international students through the Personalized Accompaniment Program, assisting them with applications for post-graduate work permits and permanent residence. However, several other services such as referrals to a psychologist for assistance with psychosocial issues, arrival services at airports, and appointments to develop action plans concerning settlement and francization needs are not compensated by the Quebec government or had to be suspended because of the pandemic. Community organizations are facing extreme difficulties supporting students, especially those who are studying from abroad, would like to renew work permits, do not currently have an address in Quebec, or who wish to change schools or programs.

Recognizing the importance of providing timely and accurate information during the pandemic, Despite working with 22 colleges and universities across Ontario for the last six years, Rahila Mushtaq pointed out that the biggest challenge for CONNECT is to

provide timely information to international students about the services and resources available to them. There are significant gaps between education institutions, settlement agencies, and the community network that limit students’ access to services and resources. David Cashaback pointed out that sometimes students may not know what supports are available and where to find them, and in other cases, the system may be overburdened and service providers and education institutions are ill-equipped to serve international students. He added that the pandemic is an opportunity to consider ways to make sure that the settlement agencies and post-secondary institutions are sharing information, resources and best practices to develop a more holistic understanding of the need and experiences of international students and leveraging the infrastructures that are in place. Since different provinces have different levels of support for international students, IRCC is trying to learn what is being done in each province in order to figure out what additional resources and services are needed.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Panelists called for more government involvement in addressing the need for international students. Armin Boroumand pointed to the contradictions and discrepancies between IRCC and the Canadian Border Services Agency because students are provided with different information about coming into Canada and getting permission to study here. He

emphasized that the federal government needs to pay attention to this problem so students who have the authorization to come to Canada do not find themselves denied entry to Canada. Rahila Mushtaq anticipated an increased need for mental health services for international students. She also suggested that access to federally-funded settlement services should be expanded to international students who have completed their studies and met their post-graduation permit requirements.

David Cashaback noted that IRCC is working with provinces and territories, education institutions, and relevant agencies to understand what is going on and how to communicate with international students so that prospective students do not face disruptions and disappointment while coming to Canada. Regarding students' concerns about expiring permits of international students, IRCC is reviewing this issue with information from the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE). David Cashaback added that CBIE has been working in the area of mental health and is aware of the distinct requirements of international students. Students' eligibility for federally-funded settlement services is a huge issue and a long-standing request from immigrant-serving agencies and international students, themselves. David Cashaback emphasized that IRCC is very open to the conversation and eager to work with all partners.

It is important for Canada to remain as one of the top destinations of choice for international students (IDP, 2020). However, the pandemic has forced many international students studying in Canada to live in uncomfortable and difficult conditions, creating additional needs for services and supports. There is no doubt that they would benefit from prompt decisions and more attention from federal and provincial levels of government. Adequate information has been collected about their needs and desires, so now is the time for governments, educational institutions, settlement agencies, and community organizations to collaborate and synchronize their policies and programs for international students. Collaboration and coordination are essential during the pandemic with its rapidly changing circumstances and they will accelerate the post-pandemic recovery. International students account for substantial revenues (contribute \$21.6 billion in 2018) that boost the Canadian economy (Government of Canada, 2019). Ensuring their success as students and workers during a pandemic will only benefit Canadian society.

The full recording of this event is available [here](#).

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