

Ottawa, is there a problem? International student numbers, job experiences and pathways to permanent residency

POLICY PREVIEW

SERIES REPORT - 6

By

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The COVID 19 pandemic provides opportunities for policymakers, educational institutions, settlement agencies, and immigrant and ethnic communities to recognize the unique circumstances and vulnerabilities of international students, in particular, those who desire to transition to *permanent residence in Canada*. International students have become an integral part of Canada's postsecondary landscape, an important supply of workers, and a source of substantial revenues that boost the Canadian economy. However, the growing number of international students that wish to become Canadian citizens present urgent challenges concerning the admission of skilled workers and the provision of settlement services. In a public forum the issues related to international student numbers, job experiences and pathways to permanent residency in Canada, six panelists; James McNamee, Senior Director, Strategic Program and Policy sector, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC); Kareem El-Assal, Managing Editor of CIC News and Director of Policy & Digital Strategy, CanadaVisa; Robert Falconer, Researcher, School of Public Policy, University of Calgary; Mikal Skuterud, Professor, University of Waterloo, ON, Canada; Sarom

Rho, Migrant Student Worker Organizer, Migrant Students United, MWAC; and Leah Nord, Senior Director of Workforce Strategies and Inclusive Growth, Canadian Chamber of Commerce examined policies related to international student numbers, job experiences and pathways to permanent residency in Canada.¹ Moderator, Francine Schlosser, Odette Professor in Entrepreneurship and Innovation at the University of Windsor, prompted each panelist to highlight their perspectives on the problems and opportunities associated with the growing number of international students in Canada.

COVID 19, INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS, AND CURRENT INTERNATIONAL STUDENT POLICY

Canada aimed to support international students affected by the COVID 19 pandemic with several new policies, for example, by allowing international students to learn remotely during the pandemic. Remote learning creates disadvantages for international students that may heighten economic disparities between them and domestic students after graduation from Canadian universities and colleges. With extremely limited social interactions with

¹ We are grateful for the assistance with planning and organizing the webinar provided by the BMRC-IRMU International Students Working Group; Profs. M. Walton-Roberts, F. Schlosser, C.

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other students and their instructors, international students struggle to develop a sense of belonging and face additional challenges attending courses in different time zones and in a new language. Social inclusion is a major concern for international students. They worry that completing degree requirements online may diminish the value of Canadian post-secondary education, reducing their ability to compete for jobs in Canada. Studying remotely, students miss opportunities to develop career and social networks and cannot easily gain experience in Canadian workplaces. International students encounter challenges learning and studying in English or French when interactions with instructors and peers are limited. Other communication challenges associated with learning in different time zones, technical *difficulties*, pre-recorded *audio/video lectures*, inability to communicate online with instructors, classmates, and staff due to language barriers, and inability to access many on-campus and off-campus resources may also affect *international students'* educational outcomes and future labour market integration. To combat these disadvantages, Robert Falconer called for policies and programs that will address students' concerns and increase economic equality between international students who desire permanent residence in Canada and their Canadian-born peers.

Sarom Rho reminded the audience that surveys, online information sessions, focus group discussions, and polls have identified international students' five main priorities: 1) expand and simplify pathways to permanent residency for all international students, 2) fix rules around work (for example, remove the time limit on work for study permit holders as they are not able to work more than 20 hours per week during regular school terms), 3) unite families, 4) lower tuition fees for international students, and 5) provide full immigration status to all migrants, refugees, students, workers, and undocumented people and ensure a single-tier immigration system so that all persons have equal rights and protections. While National Occupational Classification (NOC) C and D skill level jobs are essential to sustain the economy, international students with experience in these jobs cannot apply for the Federal Skilled Workers Class or the Canadian Experience Class via Express Entry. Migrant Students United called on policymakers to make post-graduate work permits renewable, to lower the points required to qualify for permanent residence in Express Entry, and to count semi-skilled work (NOC level C) and unskilled work (NOC level D) as relevant Canadian work experience.

In recognition of the challenges facing international students during the pandemic and their value as workers in the Canadian economy, the federal government enhanced international students' access to post-graduation work permits and their pathways to permanent residency. According to James McNamee, Canada now allows international students who study remotely to qualify for a post-graduation work permit (PGWP) (Government of Canada, 2021). Under the new guidelines, international students do not have time deducted from the length of the PGWP for studies they complete outside Canada before April 30, 2021. Even students who have not had an opportunity to study in Canada may qualify for a PGWP. While the work permit changes provide some benefits to international students, Kareem El-Assal argued that they also pose risks. Canada is planning to welcome a large number of future workers who have had few opportunities to practice French or English, to gain professional and social networks, and to acquire Canadian work experience and these omissions may inadvertently disadvantage international students. Without opportunities to live, study and work in Canada, even international students who fulfill the language and work experience requirements may not be as successful in Canada as their counterparts who studied in the country.

For international students who study in Canada, the pandemic has also posed challenges, especially the sudden loss of jobs associated with the pandemic's drastic economic decline that threatens their access to jobs relevant for obtaining permanent residence. International students who have graduated from an accredited post-secondary institution are now able to obtain a one-time only open work permit for up to 18 months to replace an expired PGWP (Government of Canada, 2021). This policy allows international students to become eligible to submit Express Entry profiles. Kareem El-Assal criticized the policy change since it does not address the limited availability of entry-level professional jobs during the pandemic. After eighteen months, many students are unlikely to have the job experience required for the Express Entry Federal Skilled Worker (FSW) program and work experience gained during the pandemic is unlikely to be valued by Canadian employers.

High tuition fees remain an issue for many international students. Since the 2008 recession, many Canadian postsecondary educational institutions have increased international student tuition fees. Between 2007-08 and 2018-19, the total value of tuition fees paid by international students grew from \$1.5 billion to \$6.9 billion (Higher Education Strategy Associates,

2020). Robert Falconer pointed out that international tuition fees have an up and down relationship with government funding (tuition increases to compensate for decreasing government funding) that varies from one province to another. Provincial governments do not regulate tuition fees for international students, allowing postsecondary institutions to charge what the market will bear. Sarom Rho suggested that the federal and provincial governments need to ensure international students pay the same tuition fees as domestic students and have access to all services including health care, housing, jobs, and emergency pandemic benefits.

James McNamee described how international student enrollment in Canada has grown significantly since 2015 when the IRCC integrated students into permanent resident pathways through Express Entry. In 2019, over 642,000 international students enrolled in post-secondary institutions and 58,520 international graduates became Canadian permanent residents (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2020). Due to the travel restrictions and delays in the processing of the student visas and study permit applications during the COVID 19 pandemic, international student enrolments in Canadian public universities and colleges dropped nearly 17% in 2020 (IRCC, 2021).

The IRCC is creating a new pathway to permanent residency for 40,000 international students who have graduated from a Canadian postsecondary institution (CTV News, April 14, 2021). Kareem El-Assal is concerned international graduates who obtain permanent residency during the pandemic when jobs are scarce have uncertain economic prospects. Recent entrants to the job market are often scarred by recessions, suffering lower incomes and less advancement throughout their careers.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND LABOUR MARKET INTEGRATION

Regardless of the class or category in which they enter Canada, labour market integration is key for all immigrants. Many international students apply for a study permit with dual intent to study and to obtain employment and permanent residency. Leah Nord (Senior Director of Workforce Strategies and Inclusive Growth, Canadian Chamber of Commerce) noted that work and study should be separated and each should be clearly defined. She added that “we value international students as a source of potential labour and permanent residents, and we need to make it clear from the very beginning when they apply.”

Co-operative education and work-integrated learning are major aspects of many

Canadian post-secondary education models. They provide students with the opportunity to gain Canadian work experience, while employers test potential new hires. International students who are accepted directly into a program that requires a mandatory co-operative (co-op) term or internship must obtain a work permit at the same time as they obtain a study permit because work visa processing can take up to four months. Students need their work permits in hand in time to start internships and co-op positions. Obtaining a co-op position is often challenging for international students due to work visa processing delays, limited co-op placements, and lack of professional networks. Moreover, much of the mandatory work experience obtained through research assistantships, teaching assistantships, internships, and co-op placements is part-time or temporary and does not count as work experience for immigration purposes. Post-secondary education institutions need to rethink work-integrated learning programs for international students when there is no recognition of the skills and experiences gained through co-op positions and internships during their study program. The complexities of post-graduate work visas also discourage employers from hiring international students and limit their prospects of entering the job market.

Upon graduation, international students are forced to navigate the path to permanent residency through post-graduate work permits without support from their educational institutions. As temporary residents, they do not have access to federally funded settlement services at the exact time when the support is most needed (Schlosser, Lam, Kerr, 2021). Leah Nord emphasized that the services available to international students making the transition to permanent residency are limited and employers often can't or won't assist temporary permit holders along their pathways to permanent residency.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND THE SELECTION PROCESS

According to Mikal Skuterud, Canadian immigration policies and programs need clear goals and targets. Currently, different interest groups, for example, immigrant communities, Canadian workers, and Canadian employers promote their own agenda when discussing immigration. Noting that the Canadian government is trying to achieve more than one objective with its immigration program, he argued that there should be different policy instruments for each objective. The student immigration programs in Canada are unambiguously designed to achieve the government's economic goals. According to Mikal

Skuterud “it is not about the well-being of immigrants or helping immigrants to make them better off, it is about increasing the economic well-being of the people who are already here in Canada.” International students apply for permanent residency mainly through the Express Entry system that uses a points-based system for screening applicants. The point system is derived from a statistical analysis that predicted immigrants' earnings in the first ten years after their landing in Canada. IRCC is selecting people who would maximize their earnings and help to raise Canada’s GDP per capita. With this goal in mind, international students represent a win-win situation for Canada. Canadian-educated immigrants have higher earnings than foreign-educated immigrants and post-secondary institutions benefit from international students’ tuition fees. The aim of Express Entry is to increase Canada’s economic prosperity, not improve the wellbeing of international students.

Mikal Skuterud suggested that if we would like immigration to raise economic growth, we need to do a better job of screening and selecting applicants. Welcoming well-educated, international students seems to be the right policy direction; however, many international students experience integration challenges and have lower than expected economic outcomes. Long before they enter the labour market, two major integration

challenges are often apparent in classrooms: limited English or French language abilities and low grades. Although both factors influence labour market outcomes, grades are not considered in Express Entry.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND MOVING FORWARD

Sarom Rho stated that the pandemic has exposed the vulnerabilities of international students recruited to study in Canada without many basic rights and only limited access to services such as health care, family unification, jobs, and basic labor protections. She recommended that Canadian screening and selection policies should (1) credit part-time as well as full-time educational enrolment, (2) make post-graduate work permits renewable, (3) remove time limitations and industry restrictions on study permits, and (4) lower the points required to qualify for permanent residency. Sarom Rho advocated a single-tier immigration system that offers permanent residency for all who are already in Canada and for everyone who will arrive in the future and ensures equal rights for all. Over 400 groups have endorsed Migrant Students United’s statement demanding full and permanent status for all (www.statusforall.ca).

Leah Nord described Canadian Chamber of Commerce policy resolutions related to international students in the past three years that include the removal of the work permit requirement for work-integrated learning opportunities, ensure international students' eligibility for national summer jobs programs,² and the recognition of all work experience in Canada as qualifications for permanent residency. Moving forward, the government should conduct a labour market analysis with these recommendations in mind.

According to Robert Falconer, international students have a high demand for the limited services offered for temporary residents such as help with crafting resumes, access to language training, support in employer-worker labour disputes, and assistance with permanent residency applications. Although some of the approximately 600,000 international students currently studying in Canada do not wish to remain in Canada, those who use settlement services are more likely to pursue permanent residency. Falconer recommends that policymakers increase government-funded settlement services for international students and make

pre-landing services available to them as is done for other groups of migrants. Moving forward, Canada must rethink the funding model for universities to reduce reliance on international student tuition and ensure sufficient funding from governments, research grants, domestic tuition, and other sources.

Mikal Skuterud argued that IRCC cannot achieve its objectives with a single immigration program. It needs different policy instruments for each objective. The IRCC also needs to consider how to attract the top international students who often leave Canada after graduating to take better job offers elsewhere. The small number of top performers can have huge impacts on innovation, patents, and startups, so policymakers should find ways to attract and retain them in Canada. For example, the government could waive tuition premiums for top performers who work in Canada for a minimum number of years.

Settlement services that support international students are even more important during and after the pandemic (Esses et al., 2021). Kareem El-Assal recommended that the IRCC work with the

effectively transition into the labour market (Government of Canada, 2021).

² International students are not eligible for Canada Summer Jobs, an initiative of the Youth Employment and Skills Strategy that intends to provide flexible and holistic services to support all young Canadians develop the skills and obtain paid work experience to

provinces and territories to expand international students' eligibility for settlement services. He also suggested a reduced work experience requirement to qualify for the Canadian Experience Class during the pandemic. This policy change requires careful evaluation since it may place international students at a disadvantage in a competitive and challenging post-pandemic labour market. It is important to “double down” on employment integration support during and after the pandemic to safeguard the economic prospects of new immigrants in the Canadian economy that emerges from the pandemic.

James McNamee noted that current immigration policies and programs balance competing objectives to support the economy, fulfill Canada's obligations regarding refugee protection, enable family unification, and provide settlement services. During the pandemic, the IRCC has worked with provinces and territories, education institutions, settlement agencies, and other nongovernmental organizations to develop and implement new policies. For example, on February 13, 2021, the IRCC invited 27,332 candidates to apply for permanent residency via Express Entry (Government of Canada, 2021). This dramatic increase in the number of Express Entry invitations was an attempt to find a fast track for talented

individuals to remain in Canada despite the pandemic. Policymakers have tried to respond with resilience and creativity to the unprecedented crisis posed by the pandemic.

The current federal government wants to maintain high levels of immigration and the international student strategy aims to make them a major source of talent in Canada. James McNamee attributes Canada's largely positive experience with immigration to successful immigration policies and the efforts of all levels of government to adapt them to new circumstances. The tremendous challenges facing many international students indicate more needs to be done. New interventions, adequate resources, and access to relevant services are needed to minimize the damage from the pandemic and to avoid future challenges that the pandemic may create for international students.

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