

Removing Caps on International Students' Paid Work: A Silver Bullet?

POLICY PREVIEW

By

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INTRODUCTION

Canada's intake of international students is on the rise with enrollment increasing 210 percent from 2008/09 to 2018/19 (Statistics Canada, 2020). International students have become key to the Canadian economy, workforce, and higher education institutions' (HEIs) revenue. Canada's federal government hopes that current labour shortages, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, can be remedied with a new pilot program that "temporarily" removes the 20-work hours per week limit for international students. With over 620,000 international students in Canada in 2021, removing the cap on work hours offers to dramatically increase the potential workforce. Questions remain regarding how the policy will affect international students' finances, academic performance, mental health, eligibility for permanent residency (PR), career paths, and importantly, impacts on labour markets. An expert panel moderated by Professor. Margaret Walton-Roberts, including Arun Thangaraj, (then) Associate Deputy Minister, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada; Dr. Randall Martin, Executive Director, BC Council of International Education; Bipin Kumar, International Students Representative, Canadian Federation of Students; Dr. Kathryn Dennler, Research Associate, The Conference Board of Canada; Myriam Mekni, Executive Director, Catholic Centre for Immigrants, Ottawa; Dr. Mikal Skuterud, University of

Waterloo; and Dr.utama Ghosh, Toronto Metropolitan University convened to discuss these questions.

GOVERNEMENT CONTEXT

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Canadian government introduced policies to enhance and sustain the country's appeal as a global destination for international students: the annual intake of international students rose, study and work permits were extended, and the number of students granted PR grew. Arun Thangaraj suggested that removing limits on the number of hours international students are permitted to work while in Canada would also help the Canadian labour market and remedy the financial stress facing international students due to high tuition fees and living costs. The pilot also aims to provide international students with more opportunities to familiarize themselves with the Canadian labour market, while they gain work experience that can facilitate their employment post-graduation.

DATA AND INFORMATION SCARCITY

How well does expanding international students' work hours resolve students' financial strains as well as address Canadian labour shortages? Although some international students will welcome the opportunity to work more hours, panelists agreed it is difficult to say how many students will increase their work hours in

response to this policy change. There is currently insufficient information on international student employment to assess the policy change. While 50 percent of international students in 2014 had T4 earnings, there is little information about their wages, work hours, and occupations. Panelists emphasized the large gap in labour force data concerning international students and indicated that additional information would be required. Kathryn Dennler and Mikal Skuterud pointed to the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) as potential sources of useful information about international students' labour force activity.

WHO IS THE PILOT WORKING FOR?

The pilot is based on the premise that allowing international students to work more hours will address current labour shortages. The pilot is also intended to reduce international students' vulnerability in the labour market by removing limits on work hours that currently force some to work longer hours 'informally', thereby exposing them to predatory employers. However, panelists noted that even in the formal economy, many international students work in precarious, underpaid entry level positions in the food, accommodation, and retail sectors. Although information gaps make prediction very difficult, panelists were not convinced that lifting limits on work hours would improve international students' employment conditions. They concurred that employers were unlikely to

significantly improve international students' employment conditions and would continue to benefit from the pool of students willing to work precarious and underpaid jobs.

Even with the ability to work full-time, international students still need to pay unregulated tuition fees that are often two to three times higher than domestic fees. The pilot offers international students the chance to work more hours, potentially reducing financial stress. However, the policy does not address the impacts of unregulated international tuition fees, the requirement to be enrolled full-time, and the limited support services on- and off-campus that still face many international students.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS

The panelists agreed that many international students will likely utilize the opportunity to secure paid employment for more than 20-hours a week. However, it is unclear how students' academic performance and mental health will be affected. According to the panelists, working and studying fulltime may have several adverse consequences for international students including lengthening the durations of students' programs, harming their mental, physical, and emotional health, and distracting them from academic responsibilities. These increased stressors may be exacerbated by international students' limited access to the supports and services available to permanent residents. As temporary residents, international students are not eligible for many public services and

rely on supports and services provided through the higher education institutions (HEIs) where they are enrolled. Despite the growing tuition fees that HEIs receive from international students, panelists noted that students find that the supports provided by HEIs are inadequate. According to Arun Thangaraj, high tuition fees mean the onus is on HEIs to ensure that international students receive high-quality education as well as necessary supports.

DOES THE PILOT HELP INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS ACHIEVE PERMANENT RESIDENCY?

Will the labour market engagement of international students be relevant to their Post Grad Work Permit (PGWP) application and help them qualify for PR? PGWPs allow international students who graduate from designated learning institutions to work in any field. This is an essential step towards making an application for PR, however the type of work completed as an international student may not offer an effective pathway to PR. According to several panelists, many students' jobs are not relevant to their previous education and/or the jobs are considered low-skilled, disqualifying the students for PR. For many students, the stress associated with being a temporary migrant continues into the PGWP phase. The prospect of PR attracts international students to Canada, although Statistics Canada data show that only a minority (roughly 30 percent) of international students became permanent residents within

ten years of graduating (Crossman et al., 2022). The same report states that international students who are employed in higher-earning jobs (during their studies or on PGWPs) are more likely to achieve PR (Crossman et al., 2022). In view of these trends, will the pilot help students achieve PR?

The pilot program aims to provide international students with opportunities to familiarize themselves with the Canadian labour market and employers, but the policy does not necessarily improve PR eligibility. Accommodation/food services and wholesale/retail trade are the top two sectors employing international students, even though experience in these sectors is rarely rewarded by current immigration policies. Lifting the limits on international students' work hours does not align students' PR expectations, their labour market experiences, and the work requirements for PR status. The pilot also does not address the disparity between uncapped international student recruitment and the capped number of students admitted annually as permanent residents. Predatory student recruitment, unrealistic academic and employment expectations, unregulated tuition fees, and international students' limited eligibility for services remain under the pilot.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MOVING FORWARD

Panelists discussed how to ensure the pilot could benefit international students,

proposing four main recommendations. First, regulations need to hold HEIs accountable for international student recruitment, education, and workplace placement. The current failure to regulate international student tuition and enrollment has created untenable experiences for many international students. Randall Martin and Kathryn Dennler recommended that reforms focus on who benefits from international student migration, specifically, higher education institutions that are accredited provincially and territorially. Provincial regulations are needed to control predatory recruitment practices by HEIs. Colleges and universities should also be required to enhance international student supports, possibly by directing a fixed percentage of international tuition fees to services and supports. Improved enforcement including the ultimate penalty of restricting access to the international student recruitment pool is also required to ensure that HEIs provide high-quality education and adequate supports to international students enabling them to complete their studies successfully and find jobs relevant to their qualifications. Although higher education is a provincial jurisdiction, federal control over the annual number of international student visas creates opportunities for federal, provincial, and territorial cooperation around these policy issues.

Second, one measure of the pilot's success is its impact on international students' pathways to permanent residency after working and studying full-time.

Myriam Mekni and Bipin Kumar emphasized that ideally, the pilot would improve international students' ability to acquire PR. Although the pilot effectively gives international students unlimited ability to work, the jobs held by international students rarely enhance their chances of obtaining PR. Federal immigration policies should permit all employment to be counted as experience for the purpose of PR applications from otherwise eligible international students.

Third, panelists agreed that support services for international students are inadequate, and too often, they rely on community agencies that have limited resources to serve them. Services and supports are needed to mitigate the stresses that international students and their families navigate daily. Panelists called for changes in rules that restrict eligibility for federally funded settlement services and supports to permanent residents. Adequate and coordinated infrastructure and tools to help international students successfully overcome the challenges of employment, immigration, education, and everyday life are needed.

Finally, Mikal Skuterud and Kathryn Dennler suggested that more information about international students' labour market contributions is needed. The effectiveness of the pilot can only be assessed with more detailed information about international students' labour market activities. Qualitative information, along with survey data from associations such as CBIE and

World Education Services, and the Labour Force Survey are needed to develop a detailed and accurate picture of international student involvement in the labour market.

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

For more information about the webinar, the authors of this policy preview, or upcoming events, please contact bmrcirmu@yorku.ca.

References

Crossman, E., Choi, Y., Lu, Y., & Hou, F. (2022). International students as a source of labour supply: A summary of recent trends. *Statistics Canada*, doi: 10.25318/36280001202200300001

Statistics Canada. (2020). *International student enrolments in Canadian universities and colleges by field of study, 2008/2009 and 2018/2019* [Table 3]. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/201125/t003e-eng.htm>