A NEW ERA FOR CANADA'S INTERNATIONAL STUDENT PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

Attracting international students to Canada is a priority for the Government of Canada. In recent years, Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) has worked closely with provinces and territories, educational associations, and educational institutions to introduce initiatives that make Canada a more attractive destination for international students and facilitate students' ability to transition to permanent residence. Most recently, CIC and provincial/territorial ministries of immigration and education have begun discussions on important changes to the International Student Program, with a view to enhancing program integrity and improving Canada's standing as a destination of choice for international students seeking a quality education.

INTRODUCTION

The growing demand for international education, worldwide competition for talent, and the increasing ease of global migration are intensifying global competition for international students. National governments are, in response, developing strategies and nationally coordinated marketing campaigns to attract international students.

From a Government of Canada perspective, attracting international students is a priority. It's easy to see why. International students bring a number of academic, financial and strategic benefits to Canada. They enrich the academic environment by bringing new perspectives, conducting research, and offering domestic students opportunities to enhance their intercultural competencies. After returning to their home countries, many of these students serve as unofficial ambassadors.

From an economic perspective, international students bring a number of direct benefits to Canada, including to provinces, municipalities and educational institutions. A recent report commissioned by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) found that international students contribute approximately $6.5B to the Canadian economy through tuition fees and other expenses related to living in Canada.[1] Perhaps even more important is that students who choose to stay in Canada after graduation represent a pool of skilled workers who can potentially contribute to the Canadian labour market. Research shows that former international students with Canadian work experience earn approximately $10,000 more than those immigrants with no Canadian education or work experience, and surpass the Canadian earnings average within one year of immigration.[2]

In many ways, international students are ideal: they possess a Canadian credential, are proficient in at least one official language, and many have obtained Canadian professional or technical work experience before seeking permanent residence in Canada. In recent years, these factors have affected a shift from thinking about international students as temporary residents to a pool of highly qualified candidates for permanent residency.

THE CANADIAN LANDSCAPE AND RECENT GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

Canada has been welcoming international students for decades. Between 1989 and 2009 the number of international students in Canada has more than doubled, putting Canada on the map as a major player in the international education sector.[3] According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), in 2005 Canada ranked seventh in the world as the top choice for study destinations with three percent of the world share of international students.[4] Canada's share of the international student movement continues to grow. Numbers of international students in Canada are driven by demand for education in Canada, a demand which fuels an average growth rate of approximately eight percent per year. The number of total international students residing in Canada in 2009 has grown to over 196,000, representing a 10 percent increase over 2008. In terms of international student entries, from 2008 to 2009 the number of international students who entered Canada grew by seven percent to over 85,000, resulting in the highest number of international students ever admitted to Canada.[5]

In recent years, the Government of Canada has made various efforts to increase Canada's international student population. Industry Canada introduced the Vanier Scholarship in September 2008 to attract and retain world-class Canadian and international doctoral students in Canada. Also in 2008, DFAIT, in partnership with the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, launched the "Imagine Education in/au Canada" brand in an effort to develop an international education marketing campaign to promote Canada as a destination of choice for post-secondary students. With this new international brand in place, the education sector in Canada is better placed to communicate a more consistent message internationally with respect to education in Canada, in contrast to what has traditionally been a scattered and fragmented approach to promoting Canadian education abroad.

Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) has also been working, with the support of provinces and territories, to improve both the policy and operational aspects related to study and work programs for international students. Most recently, CIC has introduced a number of new and more flexible work permit programs that allow international students to work both during their terms of study and after graduation. Key features include the ability for students to work for any employer in any occupation and without the need to secure a job offer before applying for a work permit. In 2006 CIC introduced the Off-Campus Work Permit Program, which allows international students to apply for an open work permit to work part-time during their regular academic sessions and full-time during scheduled breaks. Further, CIC also introduced changes to the Post-Graduation Work Permit Program in 2008 to allow full-time students who have graduated with a diploma, degree or certificate from an eligible Canadian post-secondary institution, to apply for an open work permit, for up to a maximum of three years. In 2009 CIC issued over 43,000 work permits to international students through these programs.

Additionally, CIC introduced the Canadian Experience Class (CEC) in September 2008, which allows graduates of provincially recognized universities, community colleges and CEGEPs, and degree holders from provincially recognized private institutions, to apply for permanent residence if they have obtained one year of professional or technical work experience in Canada after graduation.

Taking advantage of work opportunities at an early stage is important for international students, particularly if they are considering immigrating to Canada permanently. Immigration streams to Canada like the CEC and some Provincial Nominee Programs require international students to have obtained Canadian work experience in order to meet eligibility requirements. The combination of changes to work permit programs and new channels for permanent immigration are resulting in increases in the number of students who are choosing to immigrate permanently to Canada. In 2009, the number of former students who immigrated permanently to Canada grew to almost 13,000 compared to just over 8,000 five years ago, and a growing number of those students immigrated after having obtained post-graduation work. The majority of international students who transitioned to permanent residence entered through the Skilled Worker Category, Provincial Nominee Programs, the CEC, and the Family Class.

Finally, CIC has recently introduced a range of online services, including online applications for students to apply for study permit extensions and work permits in Canada. In early 2011, CIC will also be introducing a pilot project for students in select visa-exempt countries to apply for their initial study permits online.

INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Canada has often been criticised for lacking a national or strategic policy on international education, in contrast to competitor countries like Australia, the UK and the U.S. One key difference between Canada and leading countries is that the latter spend a considerable amount on international education promotion. Australia, for example, spends approximately $34 million per year on marketing post-secondary education, while Canada, in comparison, has a $1 million national budget for promotion activities abroad. Additionally, these countries (with the exception of the U.S.) use a coordinated approach to promote international education abroad and recruit international students.

Another noteworthy difference is that unlike Canada, leading countries have implemented comprehensive program integrity frameworks around their international student programs. These frameworks include fairly rigorous requirements that educational institutions must meet in order to host international students, as well as requirements for schools to report on student attendance and academic standing. For these countries, the combination of strong program integrity frameworks and substantial funding for promotion and student recruitment activities have led to positive growth in international student intake.

Canada also faces unique challenges in the international education arena. It is a complex landscape given the plethora of players at both the national and provincial/territorial levels and their various mandates and jurisdictional areas of responsibility. At the federal level, DFAIT is responsible for the coordination of education promotion abroad. CIC, in cooperation with Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) is responsible for the policies governing study and work programs for international students, as well as managing the entry of foreign nationals into Canada for study and work

purposes (also known as Canada's International Student Program). There are also a number of interested national-level organizations outside government. At the provincial/territorial government level, provinces and territories share jurisdiction for immigration with the federal government but have full jurisdiction over education, including the regulation and oversight of educational institutions and their promotion abroad.

Despite having complete jurisdiction for education, provinces and territories do not currently have a comprehensive formal role in the management and delivery of Canada's International Student Program, including in the selection or monitoring of educational institutions that recruit and accept international students. Under the current framework, study permits are issued to students destined to any institution offering educational or training courses, whether or not it is regulated by a provincial/territorial Ministry of Education. While most educational institutions in Canada are reputable and offer high quality programs, the current framework has allowed international students to attend unregulated schools, some of which engage in questionable activities. These activities can range from recruiting international students for programs or work opportunities that they are not equipped or authorized to deliver, to providing fraudulent documentation for the purposes of facilitating the acquisition of study permits. These types of activities can have a negative impact on Canada's reputation abroad. In 2006, for example, the Chinese Education Ministry issued a public warning about substandard programs, lax regulation and lack of support for victimized students at some of Canada's private colleges. More recently, there has been a smattering of school closures across the country for very similar reasons.

LOOKING AHEAD

There is increasing recognition of the importance of coordination both across federal government departments, and between federal and provincial/territorial governments. In August 2010, the Council of the Federation (a body consisting of Canada's Premiers) issued a communiqué stating that: "Promoting Canada as an education destination of choice is vital for building global connections and attracting the best and brightest talent from around the world." Premiers directed provincial/territorial Ministers of Education to work with provincial and territorial Ministers of Immigration to develop an international education marketing action plan by March 2011. Just two months earlier, federal and provincial/territorial Ministers of Immigration committed to "work together to ensure that Canada continues to improve its standing as a destination of choice for international students seeking a quality education."

In support of this latter mandate, CIC and provincial/territorial ministries of immigration and education are currently in the early stages of discussing important changes to Canada's International Student Program, with the objectives of improving program integrity, clarifying federal and provincial/territorial roles in the management and delivery of the program, and strengthening the provincial/territorial role in areas that fall within their jurisdiction. The idea is that, moving forward, provinces and territories will be responsible for identifying the educational institutions that are eligible—or not—to host international students. Additionally, in line with other countries, CIC is proposing program changes that will require students to study after arrival in Canada. Under the current Canadian framework, international students must only show intent to study at the time of a study permit application; there is currently no requirement for them to be registered at an institution or to attend classes during their authorized stay in Canada.

The changes being discussed by federal and provincial/territorial governments build on changes that were recently put in place by the Canadian Mission in India to overhaul their approach to study permit processing. For the past two years, the Canadian Mission in New Delhi has partnered with a group of Canadian colleges, identified by the Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC), to create the Student Partners Program (SPP). The main goal of the SPP is to increase the approval rate for those students destined to participating colleges, while ensuring program integrity and minimizing immigration violations. To enhance program integrity, the SPP requires applicants to submit mandatory, verifiable documents on language skills and financial support. An information feedback agreement with member colleges is also in place to monitor whether students actually show up to study at their college.

Since the introduction of the SPP and the implementation of program integrity measures, overall outcomes for Indian students destined to participating community colleges have improved significantly. In 2009, over 3,000 study permits were issued to SPP applicants. The approval rate increased to 79% compared to an approval rate of just 35% for 2008 applicants destined to SPP colleges, and Study Permits issued to SPP member colleges more than triple 2008 totals.

CONCLUSION

Experience in Canada through initiatives like the SPP, as well as internationally, suggest that changes to Canada's International Student Program to improve program integrity would yield correspondingly positive outcomes, including: reducing fraud in the international student movement, strengthening the overall management of the International Student Program, and improving Canada's image as a study

destination. It is also expected to improve the overall level of service provided to applicants, through faster processing times and higher approval rates for students destined to authorized institutions.

Ultimately, the objective is that these changes will increase Canada's competitiveness in the international education sector and support federal and provincial/territorial Ministers of Immigration in their quest to improve Canada's standing as a destination of choice for international students seeking a quality education. Moving forward, ongoing collaboration and coordination will be integral to ensuring that both federal and provincial/territorial policies and initiatives are consistent with these broader objectives.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] Roslyn Kunin & Associates, Inc., "Economic Impact of International Education in Canada" (July 2009), 24-25.

[2] Citizenship and Immigration Canada, *Immigration Database.*

[3] Citizenship and Immigration Canada, *Facts and Figures.*

[4] Canada ranks after the U.S. (26%), UK (12%), Germany (10%), France (9%), Australia (6%) and Japan (5%).

[5] Citizenship and Immigration Canada, *Facts and Figures.*

Canadian Issues
Temporary Foreign Workers Issue

This edition of Canadian Issues/Thèmes Canadiens focuses on temporary foreign workers (TFWs) in Canada. It examines research and statistics related to TFWs across Canada to provide an analytical profile of this group of immigrants. Additionally, it looks at the federal and provincial policy tools in place to promote and regulate temporary migration to Canada. Finally, it explores the social, economic, health, safety and legal issues arising from TFW programs in Canada and provides future directions for research and policy development.

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