FROM INTERNATIONAL STUDENT TO PERMANENT RESIDENT: POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Canada is intensifying efforts to attract international students as a potential source of skilled immigrants. While there are significant advantages to this strategy and real benefits to be achieved, there are some cautionary notes that must be kept in mind to prevent unintended negative consequences. It is time to take stock and evaluate new and emerging policies, programs and strategies to ensure that they achieve the desired results.

Until recently, Canada did not view international students as future citizens. On the contrary, in order to obtain a visa to study in Canada, applicants had to demonstrate that they had no intention of remaining in the country. International students were not allowed to work off-campus and had to leave the country if they wanted to apply for permanent residence. Today governments and post-secondary institutions actively encourage international students to come to Canada to study, work and apply for permanent residence from within the country.

The main reason for this change in approach is the view that international students comprise a pool of skilled, educated and young "potential immigrants" who could successfully integrate and contribute to Canada's economy. While there appear to be many benefits to this new direction, there are some cautionary notes that need to be considered carefully in order to ensure that the desired objectives are met and that new problems are not created.

POLICY SHIFTS

The initial impetus for change came from provinces seeking to attract and retain immigrants to regions other than Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver which tend to receive the bulk of immigration to Canada. Provincial nominee programs, which began to emerge in the early nineties, have been used in part as a vehicle to expedite immigration for international students to meet regional needs. Because people attending post-secondary institutions gain exposure and connections to the community, the expectation was that some students would want to remain in the location where they studied and would have a head start in their settlement and integration.

Subsequent changes occurred at the federal level. The first federal change was to reduce work restrictions for international students. Previously, they could work on campus but were not entitled to obtain work permits for off-campus work, nor could they work in Canada after their educational program was completed. Changes to these policies allowed international students to work off-campus part time during the term or as part of a coop program, full time during breaks, and for up to three years after graduation. This helped them to gain Canadian work experience that would be of great assistance if they ultimately applied to immigrate to Canada, either under the Federal Skilled Worker Program or a provincial nominee program.

The second federal change was to create the Canadian Experience Class in 2008. This new class of economic immigrants allows qualifying international students and highly skilled temporary workers to apply for permanent residence from within Canada.

BENEFITS AND ISSUES

The three shifts – provincial nominee programs, expansion of work opportunities, and the Canadian Experience Class – represent an exciting opportunity to attract young people to immigrate to Canada. Because international students have been educated here, they can

more easily have their academic credentials recognized by Canadian employers. The fact that they have studied in English or French should also help them to develop language skills acceptable to employers. Their employment in Canadian workplaces and campuses enables them to build networks and social capital and to gain Canadian work experience and references, all of which can help them to integrate well on a long-term basis.

The new policy directions also help Canada to compete with other immigrant destination countries - such as Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States - that permit some international students to make the transition to permanent residence. Canadian universities, colleges and private vocational schools benefit by increasing their profile on the world stage and their ability to generate revenue from higher tuition fees charged to international students.

International students enhance the diversity of the post-secondary population, thereby enriching the educational experience for all students. At the graduate level, they also contribute to research and innovation on-campus.

Increasing the number of international students and allowing them to work off campus during and after their programs provide economic benefits and needed labour to local communities. In 2009, the Canadian Bureau for International Education found that international students contribute approximately 6.5 billion dollars to the Canadian economy (Tapley 2010).

In order to gain the desired benefits from the new directions and to prevent unintended negative consequences, several issues of potential concern need to be considered carefully by policy makers:

1. Educational market distortions
2. Immigrant success
3. Impact on domestic students
4. Consistency and transparency
5. Data to support good policy outcomes

EDUCATIONAL MARKET DISTORTIONS

The new policies may lead some people who are interested in immigrating to Canada to apply for student visas as a quick way to get into the country. The questions may change from: "Which education program do I want to pursue and which institution offers the best program for me?" to "Which program in which province will give me the best chance of obtaining quick permanent residence in Canada?" This would be an unintended consequence, since the International Student Program was never intended as a way to circumvent the Federal Skilled Workers Program.

Most international students can still be expected to be motivated by educational aspirations, particularly at publicly funded post-secondary educational institutions. Even people wanting a quick route to immigration are entitled to quality education for the fees they pay, especially since the quality of the education will be a factor in determining their success in the workforce should they remain in Canada. There is a danger, however, that policies designed to attract more international students may lead some education providers to tailor their programs to offer the minimum required to qualify for the Canadian Experience Class or provincial nominee programs.

Early experiences in Australia and Canada indicate that some private vocational schools may target international students to increase profits while providing little educational benefit. Adequate monitoring systems and enforcement mechanisms need to be in place to prevent the market from moving in directions that would exploit international students.

Data indicate that most international students enrol in university programs (Tapley 2010). However there is continuing growth in other post-secondary programs, including private vocational schools. Substantial growth in enrolment of international students outside publicly funded community colleges and universities should be closely monitored.

IMMIGRANT SUCCESS

One of the main reasons for the recent policy shifts is that international students are seen as potential immigrants who may be able to succeed better than other immigrant cohorts. Early indications are that this is not necessarily true. Education in Canada may not be as important as work experience as a predictor of success, especially if the area of study is not of high quality or geared toward developing skills in demand. In Australia, for example, permanent residents who were former international students generally had lower annual salaries, weekly wages and job satisfaction than immigrants selected offshore (Hawthorne 2008).

The recent evaluation of the Federal Skilled Worker Program indicates that having studied in Canada for at least two years prior to migration, without also having Canadian work experience, is associated with lower earnings of approximately six percent (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Evaluation 2010, 46). On the other hand, skilled workers with both Canadian education and work experience earn approximately $10,000 more per year than other skilled workers (Tapley 2010).

If Canada continues to attract international students and to facilitate their transition to permanent residence, supports for successful integration must be available from the start. International students who intend to stay in Canada have different settlement and integration needs than those who plan to return to their home countries.

However, they are not entitled to federally funded language or settlement services while students. Nor is it clear whether educational institutions have the capacity to provide the needed support services, including language training. Universities and colleges in some provinces are not funded by governments on the same per capita basis for international students as they are for domestic students, and there is no requirement for them to use the differential tuition fees paid by international students to provide special supports to them. Without common standards, a clarification of roles and responsibilities for supporting this group, and adequate funding, Canada may end up with a patchwork of settlement services for international students across the country, depending on the institution at which they are studying.

IMPACT ON DOMESTIC STUDENTS

In recent years, domestic students (including immigrants and their children) have been pursuing post-secondary education at increasing rates. In a knowledge-based economy and in times of economic uncertainty, domestic students tend to pursue post-secondary education even more and to stay in school longer. At the same time, governments and educational institutions are working hard to attract more international students. This could create competition for spaces between domestic and international students, particularly in large urban centres or in institutions that lack resources to expand. If the public perceives international students as taking spaces away, or increasing class size, this could lead to negative attitudes towards them. It is therefore important to look at the post-secondary population as a whole by examining the impact of policies on both international and domestic students, rather than looking at each group in isolation.

CONSISTENCY AND TRANSPARENCY

The Canadian Experience Class and the various provincial nominee programs differ significantly in their criteria for selecting immigrants from the international student population. As the examples below indicate, the result is a system that can be difficult for international students to understand and to navigate as prospective immigrants.

Graduation status. Applicants under CEC must have graduated from their Canadian educational program. Some provincial nominee programs allow applications in the final stages of the student's program.

Minimum length of education program. CEC requires a full time two-year program or a one-year masters program with an additional prior year of education in Canada. Provincial nominee requirements range from one to two years.

Eligible program or institution. CEC recognizes any program in a publicly funded or private educational institution recognized by a province. Some provincial nominee programs accept only graduates from institutions in their provinces. Others accept only Master's or PhD level degrees or only graduates in certain fields of study.

Canadian work experience. CEC requires one year of full time Canadian work experience post-graduation at specified levels within two years prior to application. In provincial nominee programs, the required work experience varies in terms of duration (from none to six months), location (in the province of application or anywhere in Canada), remuneration (paid or unpaid), timing (during or after the course of study; within two to five years preceding the application), nature (full time or part time, with a continuing employer or not), and National Occupation Category (NOC) level (specified or unspecified).

Job offer. CEC does not require applicants to have a job offer from a Canadian employer. Provincial nominee programs range from requiring no job offer to requiring a full time, permanent job offer. They may also specify whether the job must be related to the field of study, whether the job must be at a specific NOC level, and whether it must be in a designated occupation.

Language skills. CEC requires language test results to demonstrate that a specified level has been reached. Provincial nominee programs range from requiring no language test to requiring specific test results.

Residence. CEC applicants must intend to live anywhere in Canada except Quebec. Provincial nominee programs may require applicants to state their intention to live in the recruiting province, even though this is unenforceable after permanent residence is granted given the mobility provisions in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. In some cases applicants must show their connection to the province through family and friends.

This wide range of criteria makes it difficult for people to sort through their options. It would therefore be beneficial to have more consistent criteria across the country, while respecting regional differences. This would provide an opportunity for provincial nominee programs to build on evidence about which factors are the best predictors of success, such as Canadian work experience and higher level degrees.

DATA TO SUPPORT GOOD POLICY OUTCOMES

It is clear that the number of international students coming to Canada is on the rise. In fact, the number is up in every province. Entries to Canada increased by 23% between 2000 (69,092) and 2009 (85,140). These entries

have contributed to a 72% increase in Canada's stock of international students, from 114,046 in December 2000 to 196,138 in December 2009 (Citizenship and Immigration, Facts and Figures 2009).

There is very little information, however, about why the numbers are rising and what factors constitute the biggest draw for international students. One factor could be the policy changes allowing work off-campus and after graduation. When international students are able to work, it is easier to pay the higher tuition, save money, and send funds back home. It could also be that enhanced government or institutional recruitment activities are having the desired effect, or that individuals are turning more to Canada due to the tightening of US security provisions. Policies allowing application for permanent residence to take place from within the country may also be a motivating factor.

It is not clear which of these or other factors contribute to the increasing numbers of international students coming to Canada. Such information is necessary to assess and refine policies designed to attract international students, especially since there is a desire by governments to increase the numbers even more. Canada currently ranks eighth among destination countries for international students in post-secondary education, and governments want to improve that standing (Kennedy 2010). At the provincial level, Ontario has indicated its plans to increase post-secondary international students by 50% over the next five years, from 57,535 in 2009 to approximately 86,000. Quebec's goal is to increase the number of international students in universities and colleges by 10% for the years 2008-2011. Alberta has set a goal of 2% growth and achieved an increase of 15% since 2008 (World Education Services 2010).

In addition to attracting more international students, Canada has seen an increase in the number who become permanent residents, through all immigration channels (PNP, CEC, Family Class and Federal Skilled Worker), from 5,486 in 2003 to 12,929 in 2009. The most dramatic growth is the number of international students admitted as provincial nominees: from 540 in 2005 to 1,232 in 2008. Between 2005 and 2008, the number of international students, spouses and dependents admitted through the PNPs grew by 128% nationally (Citizenship and Immigration, Facts and Figures 2009).

While the increase has not been as dramatic in the Canadian Experience Class, most people taking advantage of that program are international students and not the high end temporary foreign workers. Since implementation in 2008, over 5,000 have applied through the student stream of the CEC, and over 3,000 have been admitted as of June 30, 2010. The approval rate for 2010 has gone up to 86% for the student stream (Tapley 2010).

Although many international students are becoming permanent residents, very little information exists about what motivates them to make the transition and how they fare over the medium to long term. For example, how successful is Canada, or the province that recruited them, in retaining them? Do they find suitable employment? Do the differences in criteria among the Canadian Experience Class and the provincial nominee programs result in different retention or employment outcomes? Answers to these questions are of vital importance to form the foundation of policies, programs and strategies that will promote immigrant success.

CONCLUSION

There appear to be many positive impacts of attracting international students to Canada and helping to facilitate their transition to permanent residence. However, care should be taken to ensure that educational market distortions do not develop in response to the demand for a "quicker route to immigration"; that settlement services are designed and delivered to meet the needs of students who intend to remain in Canada; that programs are managed and communicated in a way that does not create negative attitudes toward international students; and that the CEC and provincial nominee programs become more transparent and consistent, while respecting differing provincial needs.

Strong partnerships among post-secondary institutions, governments, employers and settlement organizations will help to ensure sound policy and program development and successful education and integration outcomes. However, the benefits will accrue only if there is good data to support current and future efforts. As Canada attempts to attract more international students, and as increasing numbers of international students make the transition to permanent residence, it is time to take stock and evaluate new and emerging policies, programs and strategies to ensure that they achieve the desired results.

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Newcomers' Experiences of Housing and Homelessness in Canada



Metropolis has collaborated with the Canadian Studies Association to produce the Fall 2010 volume of Canadian Issues/Thèmes canadiens on Newcomers' Experiences of Housing and Homelessness in Canada (Guest Editor, Carlos Teixeira, with a contribution from Barry Halliday).

The result is a vital compilation of findings by over 35 authors who examine the housing and homelessness experiences of Canadian immigrants and refugees. The authors look at the availability of affordable housing, factors that increase the risk of homelessness, strategies that immigrants and refugees employ to lower this risk, as well as the health effects of precarious housing including the benefits for mental health of building a "home" in the broadest sense.

Detailed data on these and other aspects of newcomers' housing and homelessness is drawn from research conducted across the country, including cities, towns, and suburban areas. The volume is a rich source of policy relevant analysis with important recommendations for new planning and policy directions.

Metropolis a collaboré avec l'Association d'études canadiennes en vue de produire l'édition de l'automne 2010 de Canadian Issues/Thèmes canadiens intitulée « Les expériences des nouveaux arrivants en matière de logement et d'itinérance au Canada » (avec la participation de Barry Halliday et de Carlos Teixeira, rédacteur invité).

Il s'agit d'une compilation indispensable de résultats de 35 auteurs qui se sont penchés sur les expériences des immigrants et des réfugiés canadiens en matière de logement et d'itinérance. Les auteurs examinent la possibilité de trouver un logement à prix abordable, les facteurs qui font accroître les risques d'itinérance, les stratégies que les immigrants et les réfugiés emploient en vue d'atténuer ces risques, de même que les effets des logements précaires sur la santé, dont les bienfaits de l'établissement d'un « foyer », au sens large, sur la santé mentale.

Des données détaillées à ce sujet et sur d'autres aspects du logement et l'itinérance pour les nouveaux arrivants découlent de recherches effectuées partout dans le pays, notamment dans les cités, les villes et les banlieues. L'édition est une riche source d'analyse sur le plan des politiques, qui contient des recommandations importantes sur la planification et les orientations stratégiques.

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